

CHAPTER XIV THE PROFESSOR IS ANNOYED

Josie O'Gorman, after resigning from the Liberty Girls, became--so she calmly stated--a "loafer." She wandered around the streets of Dorfield in a seemingly aimless manner, shopped at the stores without buying, visited the houses of all sorts of people, on all sorts of gossipy errands, interviewed lawyers, bankers and others in an inconsequential way that amused some and annoyed others, and conducted herself so singularly that even Mary Louise was puzzled by her actions.

But Josie said to Mary Louise: "My, what a lot I'm learning! There's nothing more interesting--or more startling--or, sometimes, more repulsive--than human nature."

"Have you learned anything about the German spy plot?" questioned Mary Louise eagerly.

"Not yet. My quest resembles a cart-wheel. I go all around the outer rim first, and mark the spokes when I come to them. Then I follow each spoke toward the center. They'll all converge to the hub, you know, and when I've reached the hub, with all my spokes of knowledge radiating from it, I'm in perfect control of the whole situation."

"Oh. How far are you from the hub, Josie?"

"I'm still marking the spokes, Mary Louise."

"Are there many of them?"

"More than I suspected."

"Well, I realize, dear, that you'll tell me nothing until you are ready to confide in me; but please remember, Josie, how impatient I am and how I long to bring the traitors to justice."

"I won't forget, Mary Louise. We're partners in this case and perhaps I shall ask your help, before long. Some of my spokes may be blinds and until I know something positive there's no use in worrying you with confidences which are merely surmises."

Soon after this conversation Mary Louise found herself, as head of the Liberty Girls, in an embarrassing position. Professor Dyer returned from Chicago on an evening train and early next morning was at the Shop even before its doors were opened, impatiently awaiting the arrival of Mary Louise.

"There has been a mistake," he said to her, hastily, as she smilingly greeted him; "in my absence Mrs. Dyer has thoughtlessly given you some old furniture, which I value highly. It was wife's blunder, of course, but I want back two of the articles and I'm willing to pay your Shop as much for them as you could get elsewhere."

"Oh, I'm awfully sorry, Professor," said the girl, really distressed, as she unlocked the Shop door. "Come in, please. Mrs. Dyer told our girls to go into the attic and help themselves to anything they wanted. We've done splendidly with the old furniture, and fenders, and brassware, but I hope the two articles you prize are still unsold. If so, you shall not pay us for them, but we will deliver them to your house immediately."

He did not reply, for already he was searching through the accumulation of odds and ends with which the store-room was stocked.

"Perhaps I can help you," suggested Mary Louise.

He turned to her, seeming to hesitate.

"One was a chair; a chair with spindle legs and a high back, richly carved. It is made of black oak, I believe."

"Oh, I remember that well," said the girl. "Mrs. Charleworth bought it from us."

"Mrs. Charleworth? Well, perhaps she will return it to me. I know the lady slightly and will explain that I did not wish to part with it." Still his eyes were roving around the room, and his interest in the chair seemed somewhat perfunctory. "The other piece of furniture was a sort of escritoire, set on a square pedestal that had a carved base of lions' feet." His voice had grown eager now, although he strove to render it calm, and there was a ring of anxiety in his words.

Mary Louise felt relieved as she said assuringly:

"That, at least, I can promise you will be returned. My friend, Josie O'Gorman, bought it and had it sent to our house, where she is visiting. As soon as some of the girls come here to relieve me, I'll take you home with me and have Uncle Eben carry the desk to your house in our motor car. It isn't so very big, and Uncle Eben can manage it easily."

The tense look on the man's face relaxed. It evident that Professor Dyer was greatly relieved.

"Thank you," he said; "I'd like to get it back as soon as possible."

But when, half an hour later, they arrived at the Hathaway residence, and met Josie just preparing to go out, the latter said with a bewildered look in her blue eyes: "The old desk? Why, I sent that home to Washington days ago!"

"You did?" Mary Louise was quite surprised. "Why, you said nothing to me about that, Josie."

"I didn't mention it because I'd no idea you were interested. Daddy loves old things, and I sent it home so he would have it on his return. By freight. You are away at the Shop all day, you know, so I asked Uncle Eben to get me a big box, which he brought to my room. The desk fitted it nicely. I nailed on the cover myself, and Uncle Eben took it to the freight office for me. See; here's the receipt, in my pocket-book."

She unfolded a paper and held it out to Professor Dyer, who read it with a queer look on his face. It was, indeed, a freight receipt for "one piece of furniture, boxed," to be shipped to John O'Gorman, Washington, D. C. The sender was described as "Miss J. O'Gorman, Dorfield." There was no questioning Josie's veracity, but she called the black servant to substantiate her story.

"Yes, Miss Josie," said Uncle Eben, "I done took de box to de freight office an' got de receipt, lak yo' tol' me. Tuesday, it were; las' Tuesday."

Professor Dyer was thoughtful.

"You say your father is away from home at present?" he asked.

"Yes; he's abroad."

"Do you suppose the freight office in Washington would deliver the box to me, on your order?"

"I'm afraid not," said Josie, "It's consigned to John O'Gorman, and only John O'Gorman can sign for its receipt."

Again the Professor reflected. He seemed considerably disturbed.

"What is the business of John O'Gorman, your father?" he presently inquired.

"He's a member of the government's secret service," Josie replied, watching his face.

The professor's eyes widened; he stood a moment as if turned to stone. Then he gave a little, forced laugh and said:

"I'm obliged to make a trip to Washington, on business, and I thought perhaps I'd pick up the--ah--the box, there, and ship to Dorfield. The old desk isn't valuable, except--except that it's--ah--antique and--unusual. I'd like to get it back and I'll return to you the money you paid for it, and the freight charges. If you'll write a note to the railway company, saying the box was wrongly addressed and asking that it be delivered to my order, I think I can get it."

Josie agreed to this at once. She wrote the note and also gave Professor Dyer the freight receipt. But she refused to take his money.

"There might be some hitch," she explained. "If you get the box, and it reaches Dorfield safely, then I'll accept the return of my money; but railroads are unreliable affairs and have queer rules, so let's wait and see what happens."

The Professor assured her, however, that there was no doubt of his getting the box, but he would wait to pay her, if she preferred to let the matter rest. When he had gone away--seeming far more cheerful than when he came--Mary Louise said to Josie:

"This is a very unfortunate and embarrassing affair, all around. I'm so sorry we took that furniture from Mrs. Dyer before her husband came home and gave his consent. It is very embarrassing."

"I'm glad, for my part," was the reply. Josie's blue eyes were shining innocently and her smile was very sweet. Mary Louise regarded her suspiciously.

"What is it, Josie!" she demanded. "What has that old desk to do with--with--"

"The German spy plot? Just wait and see, Mary Louise."

"You won't tell me?"

"Not now, dear."

"But why did you ship the thing to Washington, if it is likely to prove a valuable clue?"

"Why ask questions that I can't answer? See here, Mary Louise: it isn't wise, or even safe, for me to tell you anything just yet. What I know frightens me--even me! Can't you wait and--trust me?"

"Oh, of course," responded Mary Louise in a disappointed voice. "But I fail to understand what Professor Dyer's old desk can possibly have to do with our quest."

Josie laughed.

"It used to belong to the Dudley-Markhams."

"The Dudley-Markhams! Great heavens, But--see here--they left Dorfield long before this war started, and so--"

"I'm going out," was Josie's inconsequent remark. "Do you think those are rain clouds, Mary Louise? I hate to drag around an umbrella if it's not needed."