

CHAPTER XVI MRS. CHARLEWORTH

When Mary Louise reached home that evening she was surprised to find a note from Josie which said:

"I've decided to change my boarding place for a week or so, although I shall miss Aunt Sally's cooking and a lot of other comforts. But this is business. If you meet me in the street, don't recognize me unless I'm quite alone. We've quarrelled, if anyone asks you. Pretty soon we'll make up again and be friends. Of course, you'll realize I'm working on our case, which grows interesting. So keep mum and behave."

"I wish I knew where she's gone," was Mary Louise's anxious comment, as she showed the note to Gran'pa Jim.

"Don't worry, my dear," advised the colonel. "Josie possesses the rare faculty of being able to take care of herself under all circumstances. Had she not been so peculiarly trained by her detective father I would feel it a duty to search for her, but she is not like other girls and wouldn't thank us for interfering, I'm sure."

"I can't see the necessity of her being so mysterious about it," declared the girl. "Josie ought to know I'm worthy of her confidence. And she said, just the other day, that we're partners."

"You must be the silent partner, then," said her grandfather, smiling at her vexed expression. "Josie is also worthy of confidence. She may blunder, but if so, she'll blunder cleverly. I advise you to be patient with her."

"Well, I'll try, Gran'pa. When we see her again she will probably know something important," said Mary Louise resignedly.

As for little, red-headed Josie O'Gorman, she walked into the office of the Mansion House that afternoon, lugging a battered suit-case borrowed from Aunt Sally, and asked the clerk at the desk for weekly rates for room and board. The clerk spoke to Mr. Boyle, the proprietor, who examined the girl critically.

"Where are you from?" he asked.

"New York," answered Josie. "I'm a newspaper woman, but the war cost me my job, because the papers are all obliged to cut down their forces. So I came here to get work."

"The war affects Dorfield, too, and we've only two papers," said the man. "But your business isn't my business, in any event. I suppose you can pay in advance?"

"For a week, anyhow," she returned; "perhaps two weeks: If the papers can't use me, I'll try for some other work."

"Know anybody here?"

"I know Colonel Hathaway, but I'm not on good terms with his granddaughter, Mary Louise. We had a fight over the war. Give me a quiet room, not too high up. This place looks like a fire-trap."

As she spoke, she signed her name on the register and opened her purse.

Boyle looked over his keyboard.

"Give me 47, if you can," said Josie carelessly. She had swiftly run her eye over the hotel register. "Forty-seven is always my lucky number."

"It's taken," said the clerk.

"Well, 43 is the next best," asserted Josie. "I made forty-three dollars the last week I was in New York. Is 43 taken, also?"

"No," said Boyle, "but I can do better by you. Forty-three is a small room and has only onewindow."

"Just the thing!" declared Josie. "I hate big rooms."

He assigned her to room 43 and after she had paid a week in advance a bellboy showed her to the tiny apartment and carried her suitcase.

"Number 45'll be vacant in a day or two," remarked the boy, as he unlocked her door. "Kauffman has it now, but he won't stay long. He's a suspender drummer and comes about every month--sometimes oftener--and always has 45. When he goes, I'll let you know, so you can speak for it. Forty-five is one of our best rooms."

"Thank you," said Josie, and tipped him a quarter.

As she opened her suitcase and settled herself in the room, she reflected on the meeting in Kasker's store which had led her to make this queer move.

"A fool for luck, they say," she muttered. "I wonder what intuition induced me to interview Jake Kasker. The clothing merchant isn't a bad fellow," she continued to herself, looking over the notes she had made on her tablets. "He didn't make a

single disloyal speech. Hates the war, and I can't blame him for that, but wants to fight it to a finish. Now, the other man--Kauffman--hates the war, too, but he did not make any remark that was especially objectionable; but that man's face betrayed more than his words, and some of his words puzzled me. Kauffman said, at two different times, that the war would make him money. There's only one way a man like him can make money out of the war, and that is--by serving the Kaiser. I suppose he thought we wouldn't catch that idea, or he'd been more careful what he said. All criminals are reckless in little ways; that's how they betray themselves and give us a chance to catch them. However, I haven't caught this fellow yet, and he's tricky enough to give me a long chase unless I act boldly and get my evidence before he suspects I'm on his trail. That must be my programme--to act quickly and lose no time."

Kauffman saw her when she entered the hotel dining room for dinner that evening, and he walked straight over to her table and sat down opposite her.

"Met again!" he said with his broad smile. "You selling something?"

"Brains," returned Josie composedly.

"Good! Did Jake Kasker buy any of you?"

"I've all my stock on hand, sir. I'm a newspaper woman--special writer or advertising expert. Quit New York last week and came on here."

"Wasn't New York good enough for you?" he asked, after ordering his dinner of the waitress.

"I'm too independent to suit the metropolitan journals. I couldn't endorse their gumshoe policies. For instance, they wanted me to eulogize President Wilson and his cabinet, rave over the beauties of the war and denounce any congressman or private individual who dares think for himself," explained Josie, eating her soup the while. "So--I'm looking for another job."

Kauffman maintained silence, studying the bill-of-fare. When he was served he busied himself eating, but between the slits of his half-closed eyes he regarded the girl furtively from, time to time. His talkative mood had curiously evaporated. He was thoughtful. Only when Josie was preparing to leave the table did he resume the conversation.

"What did you think of Jake Kasker's kind of patriotism?" he asked.

"Oh; the clothing man? I didn't pay much attention. Never met Kasker before, you know. Isn't he like most of the rabble, thinking what he's told to think and saying what he's told to say?"

She waited for a reply, but none was forthcoming. Even this clever lead did not get a rise out of Abe Kauffman. Indeed, he seemed to suspect a trap, for when she rose and walked out of the dining room she noticed that his smile had grown ironical.

On reaching her room through the dimly lighted passage, Josie refrained from turning on her own lights, but she threw open her one little window and leaned out. The window faced a narrow, unlighted alley at the rear of the hotel. One window of Room 45, next to her, opened on an iron fire-escape that reached to within a few feet of the ground. Josie smiled, withdrew her head and sat in the dark of her room for hours, with a patience possible only through long training.

At ten o'clock Kauffman entered his room. She could distinctly hear him moving about. A little later he went away, walking boldly down the corridor to the elevator.

Josie rose and slipped on her hat and coat.

Leaving the hotel, Kauffman made his way down the street to Broadway, Dorfield's main thoroughfare. He wore a soft hat and carried a cane. The few people he passed paid no attention to him. Steadily proceeding, he left the business district and after a while turned abruptly to the right.

This was one of the principal residence sections of the city. Kauffman turned the various corners with a confidence that denoted his perfect acquaintance with the route. But presently his pace slowed and he came to a halt opposite an imposing mansion set far back in ample grounds, beautifully cared for and filled with rare shrubbery.

Only for a moment, however, did the man hesitate--just long enough to cast a glance up and down the deserted street, which was fairly well lighted. No one being in sight, he stepped from the sidewalk to the lawn, and keeping the grass under his feet, noiselessly made his way through the shrubbery to the south side of the residence. Here a conservatory formed a wing which jutted into the grounds.

The German softly approached, mounted the three steps leading to a glass door, and rapped upon the sash in a peculiar manner. Almost immediately the door was opened by a woman, who beckoned him in. The conservatory was unlighted save by a mellow drift that filtered through the plants from a doorway beyond, leading to the main house.

From behind the concealment of a thick bush Josie O'Gorman had noted the woman's form but was unable to see her face. The girl happened to know the house, however. It was the residence of Dorfield's social leader, Mrs. Charleworth.

Josie squatted behind that bush for nearly half an hour. Then the glass door opened and Kauffman stepped out.

"By the way," he said in a low voice, "it's just as well we didn't take Kasker in with us. He's a loud-mouthed fool. I've tested him and find he blats out everything he knows."

"We do not need him, since I've decided to finance the affair," returned the woman, and Josie recognized her voice. It was the great Mrs. Charleworth herself. Mrs. Charleworth, in secret conference with Abe Kauffman, the suspender salesman!

Then Josie experienced another surprise. A second man stepped through the shadowy doorway, joining Kauffman on the steps.

"It seems to me," said this last person, "that there is danger in numbers. Of course, that's your affair, Kauffman, and none of my business, but if I'm to help you pull it off, I'd rather there wouldn't be too many of us. It's a ticklish thing, at the best, and--"

"Shut up!" growled Kauffman, suspiciously peering around him into the darkness. "The less we talk in the open, the better."

"That is true. Good night," said the woman, and went in, closing the door behind her.

"I think I will light a cigar," said Kauffman.

"Wait until you are in the street," cautioned the other.

They walked on the grass, avoiding the paths and keeping in the darkest places. Finally they emerged upon the sidewalk, and finding the coast clear, traveled on side by side.

At times they conversed in low tones, so low that the little red-headed girl, dodging through the parkings in their wake, could not overhear the words they spoke. But as they approached the more frequented part of the town, they separated, Kauffman turning into Broadway and the other continuing along a side street.

Josie O'Gorman followed the latter person. He was tall and thin and stooped a trifle. She had been unable, so far, to see his face. He seemed, from the turnings

he made, to be skirting the business section rather than pass directly through it. So the girl took a chance, darted down one street and around the corner of another, and then slipped into a dim doorway near which hung an electric street-light.

She listened eagerly and soon was rewarded by a sound of footsteps. The man she was shadowing leisurely approached, passed under the light and continued on his way, failing to note the motionless form of the girl in the doorway.

Josie gave a little laugh.

"You're a puzzling proposition, Professor," she whispered to herself, "and you came near fooling me very properly. For I imagined you were on your way to Washington, and here you've mixed up with another important job!"