

CHAPTER XXII A SLIGHT MISTAKE

From the edge of the town to the steel works the road led through a common, overgrown with brush and weeds. There was no moon and although the distance was not great it was a lonely, dark and "creepy" place. As soon as the girl saw Kauffman take the road to the works she decided to get there before he could do so. Knowing well she could not be seen, she branched off through the brush, and finding her way by instinct rather than sight, ran swiftly in a half circle over the fields and struck the road again considerably in advance of the more deliberate Kauffman.

She now set off at her swiftest run and on reaching the manager's office, in the front of the main building, perceived that it was lighted.

Josie rapped upon the door and it was opened by one-armed Joe Langley, the night watchman.

"Quick!" she said, "let me in and hide me somewhere, where I can't be seen."

Joe pulled her in, closed the outer door and locked it, and then faced her.

"What's up?" he demanded.

"There's a man coming here with a bomb in a black satchel," she panted. "He intends to blow up this building, in which all the shells are stored. I want to catch him in the act, Joe, and you must hide me somewhere."

Joe glanced around with a puzzled look.

"Where?" he asked helplessly.

So Josie looked around her, too. This end of the long building was partitioned off for offices, as it fronted the town. The central section was a big space containing a table, benches, etc., while on either side were little glass rooms with partitions between them reaching about seven feet in height, the ceiling being some twelve feet from the floor. The first room to the left of the entrance was marked "Manager" on its glass door; the next office "Purchasing Agent," and the third "Chief Engineer." On the right hand side, the corresponding offices were marked "Secretary," "Examiner," and "Superintendent." All the office doors were locked except that of the Purchasing Agent, which stood ajar. Josie sprang into that office and cast a hurried glance around. The glass division between that and the manager's office was "frosted" with white paint, but so carelessly done that she found places where she could see through into the office of the manager. Also she could see into the main, or reception room, even with her door closed.

While she examined this place a knock came on the outer door--a loud, imperative knock.

"This will do," whispered Josie to Joe. "Go and let him in, but don't let him suspect I'm here."

Joe was not quick-witted, but on the battlefields of France he had learned prompt obedience to orders. Josie, as a government agent, was now his commander, so he merely nodded to her as he walked over to unlock the outer door.

Kauffman stepped in, satchel in hand.

"You're the watchman, I suppose," he said cheerfully. "Is Mr. Colton here?"

"No," answered Joe.

"I was to meet him here at this time," said Kauffman.

"He said he'd be back this evening," returned Joe, just recalling that fact, "but he isn't here yet."

"All right," said the man, "I'll wait."

He carefully placed the satchel on the table and sat down on a bench. Joe regarded him suspiciously, remembering the girl's warning, but said nothing more. Josie was watching Kauffman from her retreat, but as her little office was dark and the German sat under a bright light it was impossible for him to know that his every movement was under observation.

The minutes dragged. A big clock on the wall ticked with an ominous sound. Kauffman drew out his watch and compared it with the clock. He appeared to grow restless.

Josie's quick ears caught the distant sound of a motor car coming down the road. Perhaps Kauffman heard it also. He rose from his seat and going to the table unlocked the black satchel, pressed the top open and looked inside it. Still bending over the satchel he placed a cigarette in his mouth, lighted a match and applied the flame to his cigarette. His back was toward Josie but she comprehended instantly the action.

"He has lighted the fuse!" she murmured, triumphantly.

The motor car came to a sudden halt outside the door, which Joe had left unlocked; but while the German turned expectantly toward the door the maimed soldier, hearing Josie's whisper, approached her little room and slightly opened her door.

"He has lighted the fuse of the bomb," she said to him excitedly. "The bomb is in the satchel!"

Joe turned quickly to the table. He dived into the bag with his one good hand, drew out the heavy ball of steel and rushed with it to the door just as the manager, Mr. Colton, opened it and stepped in.

So swift were Joe's actions that Kauffman had no time to interfere. Both he and the manager stared in amazement as Joe Langley rushed outside and with all his might hurled the bomb far out upon the common.

"Confound you!" cried Kauffman. "What did you do that for?"

"What is it?" inquired the astonished manager.

"A bomb!" cried Josie, stepping from her retreat and confronting them. "A bomb with the fuse lighted, and timed to blow up this building after you had gone away, Mr. Colton. That man before you is a German spy, and I arrest him in the name of the law. Put up your hands, Abe Kauffman!"

The little revolver was in her hand, steadily covering him. Kauffman gave an amused laugh, but he slowly raised his arms, as commanded.

"I don't quite understand," said the puzzled manager, looking from one to the other.

"Well, I brought the new projectile, Colton, as I had agreed," answered the German, coolly, "but your quaint watchman has thrown it away. As for the girl," he added, with a broad grin, "she has fooled me. She said she had brains, and I find she was mistaken."

The manager turned to Josie.

"May I ask who you are, Miss, and how you came to be in my office?"

"I am Josie O'Gorman, an agent of the government secret service," she replied, not quite truthfully. "I've been shadowing this man for some time. I tell you, sir, he brought a bomb here, to destroy this building, and under pretense of lighting a cigarette he has just lighted the time fuse. The bomb was in that satchel, but--" she added impressively, "as a matter of fact the thing was harmless, as I had already removed the powder from the fuse."

Kauffman gave a low whistle.

"How did you manage that?" he asked curiously.

"Never mind how," she retorted; "I did it."

Kauffman turned to the manager.

"Will you please order your man to get the projectile?" he asked. "It is lucky for us all that the thing isn't loaded, or there really would have been an explosion." He now turned to Josie, with his hands still in the air, and explained: "It is meant to explode through impact, and ordering it tossed out there was the most dangerous thing you could have done."

At the manager's command Joe took an electric searchlight and went out to find the steel ball.

"If you please, miss," said Kauffman, "may I put down my arms? They are tired, and I assure you I will not try to escape."

Josie lowered the revolver. Her face was red. She was beginning to wonder if she had bungled the case. A second thought, however--a thought of the papers she had found in the old desk--reassured her. She might have been wrong in some respects, but surely she was right in the main.

"This man," said Mr. Colton, pointing to Kauffman, "is known to me as a munition expert. He bears the endorsement of the Secretary of War and is the inventor of the most effective shells we now manufacture. What you have mistaken for a bomb is his latest design of projectile for an eight-inch gun. He had arranged to bring it here and explain to me its mechanism to-night, and also to submit a proposition giving our company the control of its manufacture. If you are a government agent, you surely understand that these arrangements must be conducted with great secrecy. If we purchase the right to make this projectile, we must first induce the government to use it, by demonstrating its effectiveness, and then secure our contracts. So your interference, at this time, is---ahem!--annoying."

Josie's face was a little more red than before. A second motor car drew up at the door and to her astonishment Mrs. Charleworth entered and greeted both the manager and Kauffman in her usual charming manner. Then she looked inquiringly at the girl.

"Pardon me, madam," said Mr. Colton. "There has been a singular misunderstanding, it seems, and our friend here has been accused of being a German spy by this young lady, who is a government detective-- or--or claims to be such. The precious projectile, in which you are so deeply interested, has just been tossed out upon the common, but Joe Langley is searching for it."

Mrs. Charleworth's face wore an amused smile.

"We are so beset with spies, on every hand, that such an error is quite likely to occur," said she. "I recognize this young lady as a friend of the Hathaway family, and I have met her at the Liberty Girls' Shop, so she is doubtless sincere--if misled. Let us hope we can convince her-- Miss O'Gorman, isn't it?--that we are wholly innocent of attempting to promote the Kaiser's interests."

Joe came in with the steel ball, which he deposited upon the table. Then, at a nod from the manager, the soldier took his searchlight and departed through the door leading to the big room in the rear. It was time to make his regular rounds of the works, and perhaps Mr. Colton preferred no listeners to the conversation that might follow.