

CHAPTER XXIII THE FLASHLIGHT

"Perhaps," said Josie, her voice trembling a little, "I have assumed too much, and accused this man," pointing to Kauffman, "unjustly. I was trying to serve my country. But I am somewhat confused, even yet, in regard to this affair. Will you please tell me, Mrs. Charleworth, what connection you have with Mr. Kauffman, or with his--projectile?"

"Very gladly," said the lady, graciously. "I am a stockholder in this steel company--a rather important stockholder, I believe--and while I am not a member of the board of directors, Mr. Colton represents my interests. Two years ago we bought the Kauffman shell, and paid liberally for it, but Mr. Kauffman unfortunately invested his money in a transatlantic merchant ship which was sunk, with its entire cargo, by a German submarine. Again penniless, he began the manufacture of suspenders, in a small way, with money I loaned him, but was not very successful. Then he conceived the idea of a new projectile, very effective and quite different from others. He asked our company to finance him while he was experimenting and perfecting the new projectile. The company couldn't undertake to do that, but I personally financed Mr. Kauffman, having confidence in his ability. He has been six months getting the invention made, tested and ready to submit to government experts, and up to the present it has cost a lot of money. However, it is now considered perfect and Mr. Kauffman has brought it here to-night to exhibit and explain it to Mr. Colton. If Mr. Colton approves it from a manufacturing standpoint, our company will secure an option for the sole right to manufacture it."

"Mr. Kauffman has been in Dorfield several days," said Josie. "Why did he not show you the projectile before?"

"I have been out of town," explained the manager. "I returned this afternoon, especially for this interview, and made the appointment for this evening. I am a busy man--these are war times, you know--and I must make my evenings count as well as my days."

Josie scented ignominious defeat, but she had one more shot to fire.

"Mrs. Charleworth," she stated, with a severe look, "John Dyer, the school superintendent, was at your house last night, in secret conference with Mr. Kauffman and yourself."

"Oh, so you are aware of that interview?"

"Clever!" said Kauffman, "I'd no idea I was being shadowed." Then the two exchanged glances and smiled. "It seems impossible," continued the man, "to keep any little matter of business dark, these days, although the war office insists on secrecy in regard to all munitions affairs and publicity would surely ruin our chances of getting the new projectile accepted for government use."

"I am awaiting an explanation of that meeting," declared Josie sternly. "Perhaps you do not realize how important it may be."

"Well," answered Mrs. Charleworth, a thoughtful expression crossing her pleasant face, "I see no objection to acquainting you with the object of that mysterious meeting, although it involves confiding to you a bit of necessary diplomacy. Mr. Colton will tell you that the Dorfield Steel Works will under no circumstances purchase the right to manufacture the Kauffman projectile--or any other article of munition-- until it is approved and adopted by the War Department. That approval is not easily obtained, because the officials are crowded with business and a certain amount of red tape must be encountered. Experience has proved that the inventor is not the proper person to secure government endorsement; he labors under a natural disadvantage. Neither is Mr. Colton, as the prospective manufacturer, free from suspicion of selfish interest. Therefore it seemed best to have the matter taken up with the proper authorities and experts by someone not financially interested in the projectile.

"Now, Professor Dyer has a brother-in-law who is an important member of the munitions board, under General Crozier, and we have induced the professor, after much urging, to take our projectile to Washington, have it tested, and secure contracts for its manufacture. If he succeeds, we are to pay liberally for his services. That was how he came to be at our house last evening, when arrangements were finally made."

"Was such secrecy necessary?" asked Josie suspiciously.

It was Kauffman who answered this question, speaking with apparent good humor but with a tinge of sarcasm in his voice: "My dear young lady, your own disposition to secrecy--a quality quite necessary in a detective--should show you the absurdity of your question. Can we be too careful in these days of espionage? No emissary of the Kaiser must know the construction of this wonderful projectile; none should even know that it exists. Even should our government refuse to adopt it; we must not let the Central Powers know of it. My own negotiations with Mr. Colton and Mrs. Charleworth have been camouflaged by my disguise as a suspender merchant. It was equally important that Mr. Dyer's connection with us be wholly unsuspected. When the projectile is adopted, and

these works are manufacturing it in quantities to help win the war, still no information concerning it must be made public. You must realize that."

"That is all true," agreed Mr. Colton. "These frank statements, miss, have only been made to you because of your claim to being a government agent. If you fail to substantiate that claim, we shall place you under arrest and turn you over to the authorities, for our own protection."

"To be sure," said Josie; "that will be your duty. I am the daughter of John O'Gorman, one of the high officers of the United States Secret Service, who is now in Europe in the interests of the government. I came to Dorfield to visit my friend, Mary Louise Burrows, as Mrs. Charleworth is aware, and while here my suspicions were aroused of the existence of a German spy plot. Therefore I set to work to bring the criminals to justice."

"And, like the regulation detective, you have followed a false trail," commented Kauffman, with his provoking smile.

"Not altogether," retorted Josie. "I have already secured proof that will convict two persons, at least. And I am amazed that you have intrusted your secrets to that arch-traitor, Professor Dyer. Will you tell me, Mrs. Charleworth, what you know about that man?"

Mrs. Charleworth seemed astounded.

"Professor John Dyer is one of Dorfield's old residents, I believe," she answered slowly, as if carefully considering her words. "He is also the superintendent of schools, and in that capacity seems highly respected. I have never heard anything against the man, until now. His important public position should vouch for his integrity."

"Isn't his position a political appointment?" inquired Josie.

The lady looked at Mr. Colton. "Yes," said the manager. "It is true that John Dyer was active in politics long before he was made superintendent of schools. However, he was an educator, as well as a politician, so it seems his appointment was merited."

"How well do you know him personally, madam?" asked the girl.

"Not very well," she admitted. "We do not meet socially, so our acquaintance until very recently was casual. But I have looked upon him as a man of importance in the community. On learning that he had a relative on the munitions board, I asked him to come, to my house, where I made him the proposition to take our projectile to Washington and secure its adoption. I offered liberal terms for such

service, but at first the professor seemed not interested. I arranged a second meeting, last evening, at which Mr. Kauffman was present to explain technical details, and we soon persuaded Mr. Dyer to undertake the commission. We felt that we could trust him implicitly."

"When did he intend to go to Washington?" was Josie's next question.

"On the 5:30, to-morrow morning. After exhibiting the projectile to Mr. Colton and securing the firm's option to manufacture it on a royalty basis, we are to take it to my house, where Mr. Dyer will receive it and obtain our final instructions."

"One question more, if you please," said Josie. "What connection with your enterprise has Tom Linnet?"

"Linnet? I do not know such a person," declared Mrs. Charleworth.

"Who is he?" asked the manager.

"I know him," said Kauffman. "He's the night clerk at the Mansion House where I stop. Sometimes I see him when I come in late. He's not of special account; he's weak, ignorant, and--"

A sharp report interrupted him and alarmed them all.

Josie swung around quickly, for the sound--she knew it was a revolver shot--came from the rear. As Colton and Kauffman sprang to their feet and Mrs. Charleworth shrank back in a fright, the girl ran to the back door, opened it and started to make her way through the huge, dark building beyond the partition. The manager followed in her wake and as he passed through the door he turned a switch which flooded the big store-room with light.

In the center of the building were long, broad tables, used for packing. A few shells still remained grouped here and there upon the boards. On either side the walls were lined with tiers of boxes bound with steel bands and ready for shipment. No person was visible in this room, but at the farther end an outer door stood ajar and just outside it a motionless form was outlined.

Josie and Mr. Colton, approaching this outer door nearly at the same time, controlled their haste and came to an abrupt halt. The upright figure was that of Sergeant Joe Langley and the light from the room just reached a human form huddled upon the ground a few feet distant. Joe had dropped his flashlight and in his one hand held a revolver. Josie drew a long, shuddering breath. The manager took a step forward, hesitated, and returned to his former position, his face deathly white.

"What is it? What's the matter?" called Kauffman, coming upon the scene panting for he was too short and fat to run easily.

Joe turned and looked at them as if waking from a trance. His stolid face took on a shamed expression.

"Couldn't help it, sir," he said to the manager. "I caught him in the act. It was the flashlight that saved us. When it struck him he looked up and the bullet hit him fair."

"Who is it, and what was he doing?" asked Mr. Colton hoarsely.

"It's under him, sir, and he was a-lighting of it."

As he spoke, Sergeant Joe approached the form and with a shove of his foot pushed it over. It rolled slightly, unbent, and now lay at full length, facing them. Josie picked up the flashlight and turned it upon the face.

"Oh!" she cried aloud, and shivered anew, but was not surprised.

"I guess," said Joe slowly, "they'll have to get another school superintendent."

"But what's it all about? What did he do?" demanded Kauffman excitedly.

Joe took the light from Josie's hand and turned it upon a curious object that until now had been hidden by the dead man's body.

"It's a infernal machine, sir, an' I ain't sure, even yet, that it won't go off an' blow us all up. He was leanin' down an' bendin' over it, twisting that dial you see, when on a sudden I spotted him. I didn't stop to think. My Cap'n used to say 'Act first an' think afterwards,' an' that's what I did. I didn't know till now it was the school boss, but it wouldn't have made any difference. I done my duty as I saw it, an' I hope I did it right, Mr. Colton."

Kauffman was already stooping over the machine, examining it with a skilled mechanical eye.

"It's ticking!" he said, and began turning the dial backward to zero. The ticking stopped. Then the inventor stood, up and with his handkerchief wiped the perspiration from his face.

"Gott!" he exclaimed, "this is no joke. We've all been too near death to feel comfortable."

"This is horrible!" said Mr. Colton, "I can't yet believe that Dyer could be guilty of so fiendish an act."

"I can," asserted Josie grimly, "and it isn't the first time he has planned murder, either. Dyer was responsible for the explosion at the airplane factory."

Footsteps were heard. Out of the darkness between the group of buildings appeared two men, Crissey and Addison.

"Are we too late, Miss O'Gorman?" asked Crissey.

"Yes," she replied. "How did you lose track of Dyer?"

"He's a slippery fellow," said Addison, "and threw us off the scent. But finally we traced him here and--"

"And there he is," concluded Josie in a reproachful tone.

Crissey caught sight of the machine.

"Great Caesar!" he exclaimed, "who saved you?"

"I did," answered Joe, putting the revolver in his hip pocket, "but I wish you'd had the job, stranger."