

CHAPTER XIV MIDNIGHT VIGILS

"Well, how is our girl detective progressing in her discovery of crime and criminals?" asked Colonel Hathaway that evening, as they sat in the living-room after dinner.

"Don't call me a girl detective, please," pleaded Josie O'Gorman. "I'm only an apprentice at the trade, Colonel, and I have never realized more than I do at this moment the fact that I've considerable to learn before I may claim membership with the profession."

"Then you're finding your present trail a difficult one to follow?"

"I believe my stupidity is making it difficult," admitted Josie, with a sigh. "Father would scold me soundly if he knew how foolishly I behaved to-day. There was every opportunity of my forcing a clew by calling unexpectedly on Mr. Cragg at his office, but he defeated my purpose so easily that now I'm wondering if he suspects who I am, and why I'm here. He couldn't have been more cautious."

"He could scarcely suspect that," said the Colonel, musingly. "But I've noticed that these simple country people are chary of confiding in strangers."

"Ah, if Mr. Cragg were only that--a simple, unlettered countryman, as I thought him--I should know how to win his confidence. But, do you know, sir, he is well educated and intelligent. Once he studied for the priesthood or ministry, attending a theological college."

"Indeed!"

"My informant, the village authority--who is Sol Jerrems the storekeeper--says he objected to becoming a priest at the last because he had no leaning that way. My own opinion is that he feared his ungovernable temper would lead to his undoing. I am positive that his hysterical fury, when aroused, has gotten him into trouble many times, even in this patient community."

"That's it," said Mary Louise with conviction; "his temper has often made him cruel to poor Ingua, and perhaps his temper caused unfortunate Ned Joselyn to disappear."

"Have you discovered anything more than you have told me?" she asked.

"Not a thing," replied Mary Louise. "I'm waiting for you to make discoveries, Josie."

"A puzzle that is readily solved," remarked the Colonel, picking up his book, "is of little interest. The obstacles you are meeting, Josie, incline me to believe you girls have unearthed a real mystery. It is not a mystery of the moment, however, so take your time to fathom it. The summer is young yet."

Josie went to her room early, saying she was tired, but as soon as she was alone and free she slipped on a jacket and stealthily left the house. Down the driveway she crept like a shadow, out through the gates, over the bridge, and then she turned down the pathway leading to Old Swallowtail's cottage.

"The stepping-stones are a nearer route," she reflected, "but I don't care to tackle them in the dark."

The cottage contained but three rooms. The larger one downstairs was a combination kitchen and dining room. A small wing, built upon one side, was used by Mr. Cragg for his private apartment, but its only outlet was through the main room. At the back was a lean-to shed, in which was built a narrow flight of stairs leading to a little room in the attic, where Ingua slept. Josie knew the plan of the house perfectly, having often visited Ingua during the day when her grandfather was absent and helped her sweep and make the beds and wash the dishes.

To-night Josie moved noiselessly around the building, satisfied herself that Ingua was asleep and that Mr. Cragg was still awake, and then strove to peer through the shuttered window to discover what the old man was doing.

She found this impossible. Although the weather was warm the window was tightly shut and a thick curtain was drawn across it.

Josie slipped over to the river bank and in the shadow of a tree sat herself down to watch and wait with such patience as she could muster. It was half past nine o'clock, and Ingua had told her that when her grandfather was wakeful, and indulged in his long walks, he usually left the house between ten o'clock and midnight--seldom earlier and never later. He would go to bed, the child said, and finding he could not sleep, would again dress and go out into the night, only to return at early morning.

Josie doubted that he ever undressed on such occasions, knowing, as he no doubt did, perfectly well what his program for the night would be. She had decided that the nocturnal excursions were not due to insomnia but were

carefully planned to avoid possible observation. When all the countryside was wrapped in slumber the old gentleman stole from his cottage and went-- where? Doubtless to some secret place that had an important bearing on his life and occupation. It would be worth while, Josie believed, to discover the object of these midnight excursions. Ingua claimed that her grandfather's periods of wakeful walking were irregular; sometimes he would be gone night after night, and then for weeks he would remain at home and sleep like other folks.

So Josie was not surprised when old Swallowtail's light was extinguished shortly after ten o'clock and from then until midnight he had not left the house. Evidently this was not one of his "wakeful" periods. The girl's eyes, during this time, never left the door of the cottage. The path to the bridge passed her scarcely five yards distant. Therefore, as Hezekiah Cragg had not appeared, he was doubtless sleeping the sleep of the just--or the unjust, for all sorts and conditions of men indulge in sleep.

Josie waited until nearly one o'clock. Then she went home, let herself in by a side door to which she had taken the key, and in a few minutes was as sound asleep as Old Swallowtail ought to be.

For three nights in succession the girl maintained this vigil, with no result whatever. It was wearisome work and she began to tire of it. On the fourth day, as she was "visiting" with Ingua, she asked:

"Has your grandfather had any sleepless nights lately?"

"I don't know," was the reply. "But he ain't walked any, as he sometimes does, for I hain't heard him go out."

"Do you always hear him?"

"P'r'aps not always, but most times."

"And does he walk more than one night?" inquired Josie.

"When he takes them fits, they lasts for a week or more," asserted Ingua.

"Then, for a long time, he sleeps quiet."

"Will you let me know, the next time he takes to walking?"

"Why?" asked the child, suspiciously.

"It's a curious habit," Josie explained, "and I'd like to know what he does during all those hours of the night."

"He walks," declared Ingua; "and, if he does anything else, it's his own business."

"I've wondered," said Josie impressively, "if he doesn't visit some hidden grave during those midnight rambles."

Ingua shuddered.

"I wish ye wouldn't talk like that," she whispered. "It gives me the creeps."

"Wouldn't you like to know the truth of all this mystery, Ingua?"

"Sometimes I would, an' sometimes I wouldn't. If the truth leaked out, mebber Gran'dad would git inter a lot o' trouble. I don't want that, Josie. I ain't no cause to love Gran'dad, but he's a Cragg an' I'm a Cragg, an' no Cragg ever went back on the fambly."

It seemed unwise to urge the child further to betray her grandfather, yet for Ingua's sake, if for no other reason, Josie was determined to uncover the hidden life of Hezekiah Cragg.

The following night she watched again at her station by the river bank, and again the midnight hour struck and the old man had not left his cottage. His light was extinguished at eleven o'clock. At twelve-thirty Josie rose from the shadow of the tree and slowly walked to the bridge. There, instead of going home, she turned in the direction of the town.

In the sky were a few stars and the slim crescent of a new moon, affording sufficient light to guide her steps. Crickets chirped and frogs in the marshes sang their hoarse love songs, but otherwise an intense stillness pervaded the countryside. You must not consider Josie O'Gorman an especially brave girl, for she had no thought of fear in such solitary wanderings. Although but seventeen years of age, she had been reared from early childhood in an atmosphere of intrigue and mystery, for her detective father had been accustomed to argue his cases and their perplexities with his only child and for hours at a time he would instruct her in all the details of his profession. It was O'Gorman's ambition that his daughter might become a highly proficient female detective.

"There are so many cases where a woman is better than a man," he would say, "and there is such a lack of competent women in this important and fascinating profession, that I am promoting the interests of both my daughter and the public safety by training Josie to become a good detective."

And the girl, having been her father's confidant since she was able to walk and talk, became saturated with detective lore and only needed practical experience and more mature judgment fully to justify O'Gorman's ambition for her.

However, the shrewd old secret service officer well knew that the girl was not yet ready to be launched into active service. The experience she needed was only to be gained in just such odd private cases as the one on which she was now engaged, so he was glad to let her come to Cragg's Crossing, and Josie was glad to be there. She was only content when "working," and however the Cragg mystery developed or resulted, her efforts to solve it were sure to sharpen her wits and add to her practical knowledge of her future craft.

When she reached the town she found it absolutely deserted. Not a light shone anywhere; no watchman was employed; the denizens of Cragg's Crossing were all in bed and reveling in dreamland.

Josie sat on the bottom stair of the flight leading to the store and removed her shoes. Upstairs the family of Sol Jerrems and Miss Huckins the dressmaker were sleeping and must not be disturbed. The girl made no sound as she mounted the stairs and softly stole to the door of H. Cragg's real estate office. Here it was dark as could be, but Josie drew some skeleton keys from her pocket and slid them, one by one, into the lock. The fourth key fitted; she opened the door silently and having entered the room drew the door shut behind her.

The thick shade was drawn over the window. It was as black here as it was in the hallway. Josie flashed a small searchlight on the door of the connecting room and saw that it was not only locked in the ordinary manner but that the padlock she had noted on her former visit to the room was now inserted in the hasp and formed an additional security against intrusion.

While her electric spotlight played upon this padlock she bent over and examined it swiftly but with care.

"A Yale lock," she muttered. "It can't be picked, but it will delay me for only a few minutes."

Then from her pocket she brought out a small steel hack-saw, and as she could not work the saw and hold the flashlight at the same time she went to the window and removed the heavy shade. The light that now came into the room was dim, but sufficient for her purpose. Returning to the door of the mysterious inner room, the contents of which she had determined to investigate, she seized the padlock firmly with one hand while with the other she began to saw through the steel loop that passed through the hasp.

The sound made by the saw was so slight that it did not worry her, but another sound, of an entirely different character and coming from the hallway, caused her to pause and glance over her shoulder.

Slowly the outer door opened and a form appeared in the doorway. It was a mere shadow, at first, but it deliberately advanced to the table, struck a match and lighted a small kerosene lamp.

She was face to face with Old Swallowtail.