

## CHAPTER XV "OLD SWALLOWTAIL"

Josie was so astonished that she still bent over the lock, motionless, saw in hand. In the instant she made a mental review of her proceedings and satisfied herself that she had been guilty of no professional blunder. The inopportune appearance of Mr. Cragg must be attributed to a blind chance--to fate. So the first wave of humiliation that swept over her receded as she gathered her wits to combat this unexpected situation.

Mr. Cragg stood by the table looking at her. He was very calm. The discovery of the girl had not aroused that violence of temper for which the old man was noted. Josie straightened up, slipped the saw in her pocket and faced him unflinchingly.

"Won't you sit down?" he said, pointing to a chair beside her. "I would like to know why you have undertaken to rob me."

Josie sat down, her heart bounding with joy. If he mistook her for a thief all was not lost and she would not have to write "finis" as yet to this important case. But she made no answer to his remark; she merely stared at him in a dull, emotionless way that was cleverly assumed.

"I suppose," he continued, "you have been told I am rich--a miser--and perhaps you imagine I keep my wealth in that little room, because I have taken pains to secure it from intrusion by prying meddlers. I suspected you, my girl, when you came to see me the other day. Your errand was palpably invented. You wanted to get the lay of the room, in preparation for this night's work. But who told you I was worthy of being robbed? Was it Ingua?"

"No," came a surly reply. "She won't mention you to me."

"Very good. But the neighbors--the busy-bodies around here? Perhaps old Sol Jerrems has gossiped of my supposed hoard. Is it not so?"

Josie dropped her eyes as if confused but remained silent. The old man seemed to regard her as a curiosity, for his cold gray eyes examined her person with the same expression with which he might have regarded a caged monkey.

"Then you do not wish to confess?"

"What's the use?" she demanded with a burst of impatience. "Haven't you caught me at the job?"

He continued to eye her, reflectively.

"The cities breed felons," he remarked. "It is a pity so young a girl should have chosen so dangerous and disastrous a career. It is inevitably disastrous. How did it happen that Colonel Hathaway allowed you to impose on him?"

"I do sewing," she said doggedly.

"In order to gain entrance to a household, I suppose. But Hathaway is wealthy. Why did you not undertake to rob him, instead of me?"

"One at a time," said Josie, with a short laugh.

"Oh, I understand. You expected to make the small pick-ups and then land the grand coup. The answer is simple, after all. But," he added, his voice growing stern and menacing for the first time, "I do not intend to be robbed, my girl. Fleece Hathaway if you can; it is none of my business; but you must not pry into my personal affairs or rifle my poor rooms. Do you understand me?"

"I--I think so, sir."

"Avoid me, hereafter. Keep out of my path. The least interference from you, in any way, will oblige me to turn you over to the police."

"You'll let me go, now?"

He glanced at her, frowning.

"I am too much occupied to prosecute you--unless you annoy me further. Perhaps you have this night learned a lesson that will induce you to abandon such desperate, criminal ventures."

Josie stood up.

"I wish I knew how you managed to catch me," she said, with a sigh.

"You were watching my house to-night, waiting until I was safely in bed before coming here. I happened to leave my room for a little air, and going out my back door I passed around the house and stood at the corner, in deep shade. My eyes were good enough to distinguish a form lurking under the tree by the river bank. I went in, put out my light, and returned to my former position.

You watched the house and I watched you. You are not very clever, for all your slyness. You will never be clever enough to become a good thief--meaning a successful thief. After a half hour I saw you rise and take the path to the village. I followed you. Do you understand now? God has protected the just and humbled the wicked."

That final sentence surprised the girl. Coming from his lips, it shocked her. In his former speech he had not denounced her crime, but only her indiscretion and the folly of her attempt. Suddenly he referred to God as his protector, asserting his personal uprightness as warrant for Divine protection; and, singularly enough, his tone was sincere.

Josie hesitated whether to go or not, for Old Swallowtail seemed in a talkative mood and she had already discovered a new angle to his character. By way of diversion she began to cry.

"I--I know I'm wicked," she sobbed; "it's wrong to steal; I know it is. But I--I--need the money, and you've got lots of it; and--and--I thought you must be just as wicked as I am!"

His expression changed to one of grim irony.

"Yes," said he, "by common report I am guilty of every sin in the calendar. Do you know why?"

"No; of course I don't!" she answered, softening her sobs to hear more clearly.

"Years ago, when I was a young man, I stabbed a fellow-student in the neck--a dreadful wound--because he taunted me about my mode of dress. I was wearing the only clothes my eccentric father would provide me with. I am wearing the same style of costume yet, as penance for that dastardly act--caused by an ungovernable temper with which I have been cursed from my birth. I would have entered the service of God had it not been for that temper. I am unable to control it, except by avoiding undue contact with my fellow men. That is why. I am living here, a recluse, when I should be taking an active part in the world's work."

He spoke musingly, as if to himself more than to the girl who hung on each word with eager interest. No one had ever told her as much of Old Swallowtail as he was now telling her of himself. She wondered why he was so confidential. Was it because she seemed dull and stupid? Because she was a stranger who was likely to decamp instantly when he let her go? Or was the

retrospective mood due to the hour and the unwonted situation? She waited, scarce breathing lest she lose a word.

"The poor fellow whom I stabbed lived miserably for twenty years afterward," he went on, "and I supported him and his family during that time, for his life had been ruined by my act. Later in life and here at the Crossing, people saw me kill a balky horse in a wild rage, and they have been afraid of me ever since. Even more recently I--"

He suddenly paused, remembering where he was and to whom he was speaking. The girl's face was perfectly blank when he shot a shrewd glance at it. Her look seemed to relieve his embarrassment.

"However," said he in a different tone, "I am not so black as I'm painted."

"I don't think you treat poor Ingua quite right," remarked Josie.

"Eh? Why not?"

"You neglect her; you don't give her enough to eat; she hasn't a dress fit for a ragamuffin to wear. And she's your granddaughter."

He drew in a long breath, staring hard.

"Has she been complaining?"

"Not to me," said Josie; "but she doesn't need to. Haven't I eyes? Doesn't everyone say it's a shame to treat the poor child the way you do? My personal opinion is that you're a poor excuse for a grandfather," she added, with more spirit than she had yet exhibited.

He sat silent a long time, looking at the lamp. His face was hard; his long, slim fingers twitched as if longing to throttle someone; but he positively ignored Josie's presence. She believed he was struggling to subdue what Ingua called "the devils," and would not have been surprised had he broken all bounds and tried to do her an injury.

"Go!" he said at last, still without looking at her. "Go, and remember that I will not forgive twice."

She thought it best to obey. Very softly she left the room, and as she passed out he was still staring at the flame of the lamp and alternately clenching and unclenching his talon-like fingers.