

CHAPTER XVII A CLEW AT LAST

That night Josie resumed her watch of Cragg's cottage. She did not trust to the shadow of the tree to conceal her but hid herself under the bank of the river, among the dry stones, allowing only her head to project above the embankment and selecting a place where she could peer through some low bushes.

She suspected that the excitement of the previous night might render the old man nervous and wakeful and send him out on one of his midnight prowls. This suspicion seemed justified when, at eleven-thirty, his light went out and a few minutes later he turned the corner of the house and appeared in the path.

He did not seem nervous, however. With hands clasped behind his back and head bowed, he leisurely paced the path to the bridge, without hesitation crossed the river and proceeded along the road in a direction opposite to the village.

Josie was following, keeping herself concealed with utmost care. She remembered that his eyes were sharp in penetrating shadows.

He kept along the main country road for a time and then turned to the right and followed an intersecting road. Half a mile in this direction brought him to a lane running between two farm tracts but which was so little used that grass and weeds had nearly obliterated all traces of wagon-wheels.

By this time Josie's eyes were so accustomed to the dim moonlight that she could see distinctly some distance ahead of her. The sky was clear; there was just enough wind to rustle the leaves of the trees. Now and then in some farmyard a cock would crow or a dog bark, but no other sounds broke the stillness of the night.

The girl knew now where Old Swallowtail was bound. At the end of this lane lay his five acres of stones, and he was about to visit it. The fact gave her a queer little thrill of the heart, for a dozen strange fancies crossed her mind in rapid succession. If he had really killed Ned Joselyn, it was probable he had buried the man in this neglected place, amongst the rubble of stones. Josie had inspected every foot of ground on the Kenton Place and satisfied herself no grave had been dug there. Indeed, at the time of Joselyn's "disappearance" the ground had been frozen so hard that the old man could not have dug a

grave. Perhaps after a night or two he had dragged the corpse here and covered it with stones. It would be a safe hiding-place.

And now regret for his act drove the murderer here night after night to watch over the secret grave.

Or, granting that the supposed crime had not been committed, might not Mr. Cragg have discovered some sort of mineral wealth in his stone-yard, which would account for his paying taxes on the place and visiting it so often? Or did he simply love the solitude of the dreary waste where, safe from prying eyes, he could sit among the rocky boulders and commune with himself beneath the moonlit sky?

Such conjectures as these occupied the girl's mind while she stealthily "shadowed" the old man along the lane. Never once did he look behind him, although she was prepared to dissolve from view instantly, had he done so. And at last the end of the lane was reached and he climbed the rail fence which separated it from the valley of stones.

Josie saw him suddenly pause, motionless, as he clung to the rails. She guessed from his attitude that he was staring straight ahead of him at something that had surprised him. A full minute he remained thus before he let himself down on the other side and disappeared from view.

The girl ran lightly forward and, crouching low, peered through the bars of the fence. Half a dozen paces distant the old man stood among the stones in a silent paroxysm of rage. He waved his long arms in the air, anon clenching his fists and shaking them at some object beyond him. His frail old body fluttered back and forth, right and left, as if he were doing a weird dance among the rocks. The violence of his emotion was something terrible to witness and fairly startled the girl. Had he screamed, or sobbed, or shrieked, or moaned, the scene would have been more bearable, but such excess of silent, intense rage, made her afraid for the first time in her life.

She wanted to run away. At one time she actually turned to fly; but then common sense came to her rescue and she resolved to stay and discover what had affected Old Swallowtail so strongly. From her present position she could see nothing more than a vista of tumbled stones, but rising until her head projected above the topmost rail she presently saw, far across the valley, an automobile, standing silhouetted against the gray background.

The machine was at present vacant. It had been driven in from the other side of the valley, where doubtless there were other lanes corresponding with the one she was in. However, there was no fence on that side to separate the lane from the waste tract, so the machine had been driven as close as possible to the edge of the stones.

Although the automobile was deserted, that was evidently the object which had aroused old Cragg's fury, the object at which he was even yet shaking his clenched fists. Josie wondered and watched. Gradually the paroxysm of wrath diminished. Presently the old man stood as motionless as the stones about him. Five minutes, perhaps, he remained thus, controlling himself by a mighty effort, regaining his capacity to think and reason. Then, to the girl's amazement, he tottered toward a large, shelf-like slab of stone and kneeling down, as before an altar, he bared his head, raised his arms on high and began to pray.

There was no mistaking this attitude. Old Swallowtail was calling on God to support him in this hour of trial. Josie felt something clutching at her heart. Nothing could be more impressive than this scene--this silent but earnest appeal to the Most High by the man whom she suspected of murder--of crimes even more terrible. She could see his eyes, pleading and sincere, turned upward; could see his gray hair flutter in the breeze; could see his lips move, though they uttered no sound. And after he had poured out his heart to his Maker he extended his arms upon the slab, rested his head upon them and again became motionless.

The girl waited. She was sorely troubled, surprised, even humiliated at being the witness of this extraordinary and varied display of emotion. She felt a sense of intrusion that was almost unjustifiable, even in a detective. What right had anyone to spy upon a communion between God and man?

He rose, at length, rose and walked uncertainly forward, stumbling among the ragged rocks. He made for the far hillside that was cluttered with huge fragments of stone, some weighing many tons and all tumbled helter-skelter as if aimlessly tossed there by some giant hand. And when he reached the place he threaded his way between several great boulders and suddenly disappeared.

Josie hesitated a moment what to do, yet instinct urged her to follow. She had a feeling that she was on the verge of an important discovery, that events were about to happen which had been wholly unforeseen even by old Cragg himself.

She was taking a serious risk by venturing on the stony ground, for under the moonlight her dark form would show distinctly against the dull gray of the stones. Yet she climbed the fence and with her eye fixed on the cluster of rocks where Old Swallowtail had disappeared she made her way as best she could toward the place. Should the old man reappear or the owner of the strange automobile emerge from the rocks Josie was sure to be discovered, and there was no telling what penalty she might be obliged to pay for spying. It was a dreary, deserted place; more than one grave might be made there without much chance of detection.

In a few minutes she had reached the hillside and was among the great boulders. She passed between the same ones where Mr. Cragg had disappeared but found so many set here and there that to follow his trail was impossible unless chance led her aright.

There were no paths, for a rubble of small stones covered the ground everywhere. Between some of the huge rocks the passage was so narrow she could scarcely squeeze through; between others there was ample space for two people to walk abreast. The girl paused frequently to listen, taking care the while to make no sound herself, but an intense silence pervaded the place.

After wandering here and there for a time without result she had started to return to the entrance of this labyrinth when her ears for the first time caught a sound--a peculiar grinding, thumping sound that came from beneath her feet seemingly, and was of so unusual a character that she was puzzled to explain its cause.

The shadows cast by the towering rocks rendered this place quite dark, so Josie crouched in the deepest shade she could find and listened carefully to the strange sound, trying to determine its origin. It was surely under ground--a little to the right of her--perhaps beneath the hillside, which slanted abruptly from this spot. She decided there must be some secret passage that led to a cave under the hill. Such a cave might be either natural or artificial; in either case she was sure old Cragg used it as a rendezvous or workshop and visited it stealthily on his "wakeful" nights.

Having located the place to the best of her ability Josie began to consider what caused that regular, thumping noise, which still continued without intermission.

"I think it must be some sort of an engine," she reflected; "a stamp for ore, or something of that sort. Still, it isn't likely there is any steam or electrical

power to operate the motor of so big a machine. It might be a die stamp, though, operated by foot power, or--this is most likely--a foot-power printing-press. Well, if a die stamp or a printing press, I believe the mystery of Old Swallowtail's 'business' is readily explained."

She sat still there, crouching between the rocks, for more than two hours before the sound of the machine finally ceased. Another hour passed in absolute silence. She ventured to flash her pocket searchlight upon the dial of her watch and found it was nearly four o'clock. Dawn would come, presently, and then her situation would be more precarious than ever.

While she thus reflected the sound of footsteps reached her ears--very near to her, indeed--and a voice muttered:

"Come this way. Have you forgotten?"

"Forgotten? I found the place, didn't I?" was the surly reply.

Then there passed her, so closely that she could have touched them, three dim forms. She watched them go and promptly followed, taking the chance of discovery if they looked behind. They were wholly unconscious of her presence, however, and soon made their way out into the open. There they paused, and Josie, hiding behind a high rock, could both see and hear them plainly.

One was old Cragg; another a tall, thin man with a monocle in his left eye; the third, she found to her surprise, was none other than Jim Bennett the postman. The tall man held in his arms a heavy bundle, securely wrapped.

"You'll surely get them off to-morrow?" said Cragg to him,

"Of course," was the answer. "You may be certain I'll not have them on my hands longer than is necessary."

"Do you mean to play square, this time?"

"Don't be a fool," said the tall man impatiently. "Your infernal suspicions have caused trouble enough, during the past year. Hidden like a crab in your shell, you think everything on the outside is going wrong. Can't you realize, Cragg, that I must be loyal to C. I. L.? There's no question of my playing square; I've got to."

"That's right, sir," broke in Jim Bennett. "Seems to me he's explained everything in a satisfactory manner--as far as anyone could explain."

"Then good night," said Cragg, gruffly, "and--good luck."

"Good night," growled the tall man in return and made off in the direction of the automobile, carrying the package with him. The other two stood silently watching him until he reached the car, took his seat and started the motor. Presently the machine passed out of sight and then Bennett said in a tone of deepest respect:

"Good night, Chief. This meeting was a great thing for C. I. L. It brings us all nearer to final success."

"I wish I could trust him," replied Cragg, doubtfully. "Good night, Jim."

The postman made off in another direction and the old man waited until he had fully disappeared before he walked away over the stones himself. Josie let him go. She did not care to follow him home. Weary though she was from her long vigil she determined to examine the rocks by daylight before she left the place.

The sun was just showing its rim over the hills when she quitted Hezekiah Cragg's five acres of stones and took the lane to the highway. But her step was elastic, her eyes bright, her face smiling.

"I've found the entrance, though I couldn't break in," she proudly murmured. "But a little dynamite--or perhaps a few blows of an axe-- will soon remove the barrier. This affair, however, is now too big and too serious for me to handle alone. I must have help. I think it will amaze dear old Dad to know what I've stumbled on this night!"