

## CHAPTER XXIV FACING DANGER

Nan's presence at Cragg's Crossing rendered Josie O'Gorman uneasy. She had the Cragg case so well in hand, now, and the evidence in her possession was so positively incriminating, in her judgment, that she did not like to be balked by a clever female detective from her father's own office. She had little doubt but Nan would do all in her power to save old Hezekiah Cragg from the penalty of his misdeeds, and her greatest fear was that he might utterly disappear before O'Gorman sent her assistance.

With this fear growing in her mind, on Monday she determined to send another telegram to her father, urging haste, so she obtained permission from the Colonel to have Uncle Eben drive her and Mary Louise to the city, there being no telegraph office at Chargrove Station. But she timed the trip when no trains would stop at Chargrove during her absence and at the telegraph office she sent an imperative message to John O'Gorman at Washington demanding instant help. Since all counterfeiting cases belonged distinctly to the Secret Service Department she had little doubt her father would respond as soon as the affairs at the office would permit him to do so. But the delay was exasperating, nevertheless. Indeed, Josie was so sure that the crisis of her case was imminent that she determined to watch old Cragg's house every night until his arrest could be made. If he attempted to escape she would arrest him herself, with the aid of the little revolver she carried in her dress pocket.

On their return journey they overtook Mr. Sinclair at about a mile from the Crossing. They had never seen the man before, but when he signaled them. Uncle Eben slowed up the machine and stopped beside him.

"I beg a thousand pardons," said the dapper little stranger, removing his silk hat and bowing profoundly to the two girls, "but would you mind taking me to the town? I--I--fear I have turned my ankle; not seriously, you know, but it is uncomfortable; so if I may sit beside your chauffeur the favor will be greatly appreciated."

"To be sure," said Mary Louise with ready. "Can you get in unaided, or do you wish Uncle Eben to assist you?"

"Thank you; thank you a thousand times, young lady," said he, climbing into the front seat. "I'm stopping at the hotel," he explained, as the car again started, "for rest and quiet, because of my nervous condition. My doctor said I

would suffer a nervous breakdown if I did not seek rest and quiet in the seclusion of some country village. So I came here, and--it's secluded; it really is."

"I hope your ankle is not seriously injured, sir," said Mary Louise. "Take the gentleman to the hotel, Uncle Eben."

"Thank you," said the little man, and fussily removing a card-case from an inner pocket he added: "My card, please," and handed it to Mary Louise.

Josie glanced at the card, too. She had been regarding the stranger thoughtfully, with the same suspicions of him that Nan had formerly entertained. The card was not printed; it was engraved: one point in the man's favor. His blond hair was a wig; she had a good view of the back of it and was not to be deceived. But perhaps the moustache, which matched the hair, was genuine. Carefully considering the matter, she did not think anyone would come to Cragg's Crossing in disguise unless he were a confederate of Hezekiah Cragg, helping to circulate the counterfeit money. This odd Mr. Sinclair might be such a person and working under the direction of Ned Joselyn. Joselyn was in hiding, for some unexplained reason; Sinclair could appear openly. There might be nothing in this supposition but Josie determined to keep an eye on the nervous stranger.

He was profuse in his thanks when they let him out at Hopper's Hotel and Uncle Eben chuckled all the way home.

"Dat man am shuah some mighty 'stravagant punkins, in he's own mind," he remarked. "He oughteh git he's pictur' took in dat outfit, Ma'y Weeze, jes' to show how 'dic'lous a white man can look. He'll have all de kids in town a-chasin' of him, if he gits loose on de streets. All he needs is a brass ban' to be a circus parade."

Nan and Ingua came over to dinner that evening and Josie was very cordial to Ingua's mother, who treated her chief's daughter with the utmost friendliness. Both Ingua and Mary Louise were surprised by their politeness and comradeship, but neither of the principals was deceived by such a display. Each was on her guard, but realized it was wise to appear friendly.

Monday night Josie lurked in the shadows of the river bank until daybreak, never relaxing her espionage of the Cragg house for a moment. All was quiet, however.

Tuesday passed without event. Tuesday night Josie was at her post again, her eyes fixed on the dim light that shone from Mr. Cragg's room. Had she been able to see through the walls of the cottage she would have found the old man seated in his private apartment opposite his daughter. Could she have heard their conversation--the low, continuous hum of Old Swallowtail's voice, broken only by an occasional question from Nan--she would surely have been astonished. Nan was not much astonished, save at the fact that her father had at last voluntarily confided to her the strange story of his life, a life hitherto unknown to her. She was not easily surprised, but she was greatly impressed, and when he finally rose from his chair and went out into the night Nan sat in meditation for some time before she followed him. Ingua had long been asleep.

Josie, lurking outside, had not expected Old Swallowtail to leave the premises unless he planned to run away. His delivery of counterfeit money to Ned Joselyn had been of too recent a date to render it necessary that he revisit his stone-yard for some time to come, she argued; yet to-night, at a little after eleven o'clock, she saw his shadow pass from the house and take the path to the bridge.

Josie followed. At the bridge Mr. Cragg turned westward and at once she surmised he was bound for his rocky five acres. The old man walked deliberately, never thinking to look behind him. He might not have observed anything suspicious had he turned, but a hundred feet behind him came Josie O'Gorman, deftly dodging from tree to bush to keep in the dark places by the wayside. And behind Josie silently moved a little man in gray homespun, whose form it would be difficult to distinguish even while he stood in the open. Josie, like the prey she stalked, was too occupied to look behind.

Old Swallowtail reached the stone-yard and climbed the fence. While he paused there Josie crept close and noticed a light which suddenly flashed from the hillside. It was a momentary flash and not very brilliant, but she knew it was a signal because the old man at once started forward. She let him lead on until he disappeared among the rocks and then she boldly followed. She knew now where the secret entrance to the cavern was located.

Threading her way cautiously through the maze of rocks the girl finally reached a slanting shelf beneath which she crept on hands and knees. At its farthest edge was a square door of solid oak, rather crudely constructed but thick and substantial. This door stood ajar.

Josie, crouching beside the secret entrance, wondered what she ought to do. The regular thumping, as of machinery, which she had heard once before,

now began and continued without interruption. Here was an opportunity to catch the counterfeiters redhanded, but she was one small girl as opposed to a gang of desperate criminals.

"Oh, dear!" she whispered, half aloud, "I wish father had paid some attention to my telegram."

"He did," responded a soft voice beside her.