

CHAPTER XXV FATHER AND DAUGHTER

The girl would have screamed had not a hand been swiftly laid across her lips to stifle the sound. She tried to rise, but the shelf of rock beneath which she crouched prevented her. However, she struggled until an arm was passed firmly around her waist and a stern voice said warningly:

"Josie! Control yourself."

Instantly her form relaxed and became inert. She breathed hard and her heart still raced, but she was no longer afraid.

"Kiss me, Daddy!" she whispered, and the man obeyed with a chuckle of delight.

There was silence for a time, while she collected herself. Then she asked in a businesslike tone:

"When did you get here?"

"Sunday," said he.

"Good gracious! You must have caught the first train after getting my wire."

"I did. A certain gang of unknown counterfeiters has been puzzling me a good deal lately, and I fancied you had located the rascals."

"I have," said Josie exultantly.

"Where?" he asked.

"The rascals are down below us this very minute, Daddy. They are at our mercy."

"Old Cragg and Jim Bennett?"

"Yes; and perhaps others."

"M-m-m," mumbled O'Gorman, "you've a lot to learn yet, Josie. You're quick; you're persevering; you're courageous. But you lack judgment."

"Do you mean that you doubt my evidence?" she asked indignantly.

"I do."

"I've the counterfeit bill here in my pocket, which Cragg tried to pass on the storekeeper," she said.

"Let me see it."

Josie searched and found the bill. O'Gorman flashed a circle of light on it and studied it attentively.

"Here," he said, passing it back to her. "Don't lose it, Josie. It's worth ten dollars."

"Isn't it counterfeit?" she asked, trying to swallow a big lump that rose in her throat.

"It is one of the recent issues, good as gold."

She sat silent, rigid with disappointment. Never had she been as miserable as at this moment. She felt like crying, and a sob really did become audible in spite of her effort to suppress it. Again O'Gorman passed his arm affectionately around her waist and held her close while she tried to think what it all meant.

"Was that bill your only basis of suspicion, dear?" he presently inquired.

"No, indeed. Do you hear that noise? What are they doing down there?"

"I imagine they are running a printing press," he replied.

"Exactly!" she said triumphantly. "And why do these men operate a printing press in a secret cavern, unless they are printing counterfeit money?"

"Ah, there you have allowed your imagination to jump," returned her father. "Haven't I warned you against the danger of imagination? It leads to theory, and theory leads--nine times in ten--to failure."

"Circumstantial evidence is often valuable," declared Josie.

"It often convicts," he admitted, "but I am never sure of its justice. Whenever facts are obtainable, I prefer facts."

"Can you explain," she said somewhat coldly, for she felt she was suffering a professional rebuke, "what those men below us are printing, if not counterfeit money?"

"I can," said he.

"And you have been down there, investigating?"

"Not yet," he answered coolly.

"Then you must be theorizing, Daddy."

"Not at all. If you know you have two marbles in one pocket and two more in another pocket, you may be positive there are four altogether, whether you bother to count them individually or not."

She pondered this, trying to understand what he meant.

"You don't know old Cragg as well as I do," she asserted.

"Let us argue that point," he said quickly. "What do you know about him?"

"I know him to be an eccentric old man, educated and shrewd, with a cruel and murderous temper; I know that he has secluded himself in this half-forgotten town for many years, engaged in some secret occupation which he fears to have discovered. I am sure that he is capable of any crime and therefore--even if that bill is good--I am none the less positive that counterfeiting is his business. No other supposition fits the facts in the case."

"Is that all you know about old Cragg?" asked O'Gorman.

"Isn't it enough to warrant his arrest?" she retorted.

"Not quite. You've forgotten to mention one thing among his characteristics, Josie."

"What is that?"

"Cragg is an Irishman--just as I am."

"What has that to do with it?"

"Only this: his sympathies have always been interested in behalf of his downtrodden countrymen. I won't admit that they are downtrodden, Josie, even to you; but Cragg thinks they are. His father was an emigrant and Hezekiah was himself born in Dublin and came to this country while an infant. He imagines he is Irish yet. Perhaps he is."

There was a note of bewilderment in the girl's voice as she asked:

"What has his sympathy for the Irish to do with this case?"

"Hezekiah Cragg," explained O'Gorman, speaking slowly, "is at the head of an organization known as the 'Champions of Irish Liberty.' For many years this C. I. L. fraternity has been growing in numbers and power, fed by money largely supplied by Cragg himself. I have proof, indeed, that he has devoted his entire fortune to this cause, as well as all returns from his business enterprises. He lives in comparative poverty that the Champions of Irish Liberty may finally perfect their plans to free Ireland and allow the Irish to establish a self-governing republic."

"But--why all this secrecy, Daddy?" she asked wonderingly.

"His work here is a violation of neutrality; it is contrary to the treaty between our country and England. According to our laws Hezekiah Cragg and his followers, in seeking to deprive England of her Irish possession, are guilty of treason."

"Could he be prosecuted for sympathizing with his own race?"

"No; for sending them arms and ammunition to fight with, yes. And that is what they have been doing."

"Then you can arrest him for this act?"

"I can," said O'Gorman, "but I'll be hanged if I will, Josie. Cragg is an idealist; the cause to which he has devoted his life and fortune with a steadfast loyalty that is worthy of respect, is doomed to failure. The man's every thought is concentrated on his futile scheme and to oppose him at this juncture would drive him mad. He isn't doing any real harm to our country and even England won't suffer much through his conspiracy. But, allowing for the folly of his attempt to make his people free and independent, we must admire his lofty philanthropy, his self-sacrifice, his dogged perseverance in promoting the cause so near and dear to his heart. Let some other federal officer arrest him, if he dares; it's no work for an O'Gorman."

Josie had encountered many surprises during her brief career as an embryo detective, but this revelation was the crowning astonishment of her life. All her carefully prepared theories concerning Hezekiah Cragg had been shattered by her father's terse disclosure and instead of hating Old Swallowtail she suddenly found sympathy for his ideals welling in her heart. Josie O 'Gorman was Irish, too.

She pondered deeply the skilled detective's assertions and tried to fit them to her knowledge of old Cragg's character. The story seemed to account for much, but not all. After a time she said:

"But this mysterious business of his, which causes him to write so many letters and to receive so many answers to them--what connection can it have with the Champions of Irish Liberty?"

"Very little," said her father, "except that it enables Cragg to earn more money to feed into the ever-hungry maw of the Cause. Cragg's 'business' is one of the most unique things of the sort that I have ever encountered. And, while it is quite legitimate, he is obliged to keep it secret so as not to involve his many customers in adverse criticism."

"What on earth can it be?"

"It pertains to heaven, not earth, my dear," said O'Gorman dryly. "Cragg was educated for the ministry or the priesthood--I can't discover whether he was Catholic or Protestant--but it seems he wasn't fitted for the church. Perhaps he already had in mind the idea of devoting his life to the land that gave him birth. Anyhow, he was a well versed theologian, and exceptionally brilliant in theses, so when his money gave out he began writing sermons for others to preach, doing a mail-order business and selling his products to those preachers who are too busy or too lazy to write their own sermons. He has a sort of syndicate established and his books, which I have examined with admiration and wonder, prove he supplies sermons to preachers of all denominations throughout the United States. This involves a lot of correspondence. Every week he writes a new sermon, prints a large number of copies and sends one to each of his clients. Of course he furnishes but one man in a town or city with his products, but there are a good many towns and cities to supply."

"Is he printing sermons now?" asked Josie.

"Perhaps so; or it may be he is printing some circular to be distributed to the members of the C. I. L. Jim Bennett, the husband of the postmistress here, was once a practical printer, and he is a staunch member of the Irish fraternity. Cragg has known of this underground cavern for years, and at one time it was a regular meeting-place for his order of Champions. So he bought a printing press and, to avoid the prying eyes of his neighbors, established it here. That is the whole story of Cragg's 'crime,' Josie, and it is very simple when once fully explained."

"Do you mean to say you've discovered all this in the two days since you've been here?" asked the girl, in amazement.

"Every bit of it. I came prepared to arrest a gang of counterfeiters, and stumbled on this very interesting but quite harmless plot."

"Where have you been hiding since Sunday?" she inquired.

"Why, I didn't hide at all," he asserted. "Don't you remember giving me a ride yesterday in the Hathaway automobile?"

Josie sat silent. She was glad it was so dark under that shelf of rock, for she would rather her father did not read her humiliation and self-reproach.

"Daddy," she said, with a despairing accent, "I'm going to study to be a cook or a stenographer. I'll never make a decent detective--like Nan, for instance."

O'Gorman laughed.

"Poor Nan!" he exclaimed. "She's been more befuddled than you over this mysterious case. And Cragg is her own father, too. Come, Josie, it's getting late; let's go home."