

CHAPTER XIV

ISIDORE LE DRIEUX

Perhaps the cigar was half gone when Patsy gave a sudden start and squeezed Uncle John's hand, which she had been holding in both her own.

"What is it, my dear?"

"The man I told you of. There he is, just across the lobby. The man with the gray clothes and gray hair."

"Oh, yes; the one lighting a cigar."

"Precisely."

Uncle John gazed across the lobby reflectively. The stranger's eyes roved carelessly around the big room and then he moved with deliberate steps toward their corner. He passed several vacant chairs and settees on his way and finally paused before a lounging-chair not six feet distant from the one occupied by Mr. Merrick.

"Pardon me; is this seat engaged, sir?" he asked.

"No," replied Uncle John, not very graciously, for it was a deliberate

intrusion.

The stranger sat down and for a time smoked his cigar in silence. He was so near them that Patsy forbore any conversation, knowing he would overhear it.

Suddenly the man turned squarely in their direction and addressed them.

"I hope you will pardon me, Mr. Merrick, if I venture to ask a question," said he.

"Well, sir?"

"I saw you talking with Mr. Jones this evening--A. Jones, you know, who says he came from Sangoa."

"Didn't he?" demanded the old gentleman.

The stranger smiled.

"Perhaps; once on a time; allowing such a place exists. But his last journey was here from Austria."

"Indeed!"

Mr. Merrick and Patsy were both staring at the man incredulously.

"I am quite sure of that statement, sir; but I cannot prove it, as yet."

"Ah! I thought not."

Patsy had just told her uncle how she had detected this man stealthily watching Jones, and how he had followed the boy when he retired to his room. The present interview had, they both knew, something to do with this singular action. Therefore Mr. Merrick restrained his indignation at the stranger's pointed questioning. He realized quite well that the man had come to their corner determined to catechise them and gain what information he could. Patsy realized this, too. So, being forewarned, they hoped to learn his object without granting him the satisfaction of "pumping" them.

"I suppose you are friends of this Mr. A. Jones," was his next remark.

"We are acquaintances," said Mr. Merrick.

"Has he ever mentioned his adventures in Austria to you?"

"Are you a friend of Mr. Jones?" demanded uncle John.

"I am not even an acquaintance," said the man, smiling. "But I am interested in him, through a friend of mine who met him abroad. Permit me to introduce myself, sir."

He handed them a card which read:

"ISADORE LE DRIEUX

Importer of Pearls and Precious Stones

36 Maiden Lane,

New York City."

"I have connections abroad, in nearly all countries," continued the man, "and it is through some of them that I have knowledge of this young fellow who has taken the name of A. Jones. In fact, I have a portrait of the lad, taken in Paris, which I will show you."

He searched in his pocket and produced an envelope from which he carefully removed a photograph, which he handed to Uncle John. Patsy examined it, too, with a start of surprise. The thin features, the large serious eyes, even the closely set lips were indeed those of A. Jones. But in the picture he wore a small mustache.

"It can't be our A. Jones," murmured Patsy. "This one is older."

"That is on account of the mustache," remarked Le Drieux, who was closely watching their faces. "This portrait was taken more than a year ago."

"Oh; but he was in Sangoa then," protested Patsy, who was really

bewildered by the striking resemblance.

The stranger smiled indulgently.

"As a matter of fact, there is no Sangoa," said he; "so we may doubt the young man's assertion that he was ever there."

"Why are you interested in him?" inquired Mr. Merrick.

"A natural question," said Le Drieux, after a moment of hesitation. "I know you well by reputation, Mr. Merrick, and believe I am justified in speaking frankly to you and your niece, provided you regard my statements as strictly confidential. A year ago I received notice from my friend in Austria that the young man had gone to America and he was anxious I should meet him. At the time I was too busy with my own affairs to look him up, but I recently came to California for a rest, and noticed the strong resemblance between the boy, A. Jones, and the portrait sent me. So I hunted up this picture and compared the two. In my judgment they are one and the same. What do you think, sir?"

"I believe there is a resemblance," answered Uncle John, turning the card over. "But here is a name on the back of the photograph: 'Jack Andrews.'"

"Yes; this is Jack Andrews," said Le Drieux, nodding. "Have you ever heard the name before?"

"Never."

"Well, Andrews is noted throughout Europe, and it is but natural he should desire to escape his notoriety by assuming another name out here. Do you note the similarity of the initials? 'J.A.' stand for Jack Andrews. Reverse them and 'A.J.' stand for A. Jones. By the way, what does he claim the 'A' means? Is it Andrew?"

"It means nothing at all," said Patsy. "He told us so."

"I see. You caught him unprepared. That isn't like Jack. He is always on guard."

Both Patsy and Uncle John were by this time sorely perplexed. They had a feeling common to both of them, that the subject of this portrait and A. Jones were two separate and distinct persons; yet the resemblance could not be denied, if they were indeed the same, young Jones had deliberately lied to them, and recalling his various statements and the manner in which they had been made, they promptly acquitted the boy of the charge of falsehood.

"For what was Jack Andrews noted throughout Europe?" inquired Mr. Merrick, after silently considering these things.

"Well, he was a highflier, for one thing," answered Le Drieux. "He was

known as a thorough 'sport' and, I am told, a clever gambler. He had a faculty of making friends, even among the nobility. The gilded youth of London, Paris and Vienna cultivated his acquaintance, and through them he managed to get into very good society. He was a guest at the splendid villa of Countess Ahmberg, near Vienna, when her magnificent collection of pearls disappeared. You remember that loss, and the excitement it caused, do you not?"

"No, sir; I have never before heard of the Countess of Ahmberg or her pearls."

"Well, the story filled the newspapers for a couple of weeks. The collection embraced the rarest and most valuable pearls known to exist."

"And you accuse this man, Andrews, of stealing them?" asked Uncle John, tapping with his finger the portrait he still held.

"By no means, sir; by no means!" cried Le Drieux hastily. "In fact, he was one of the few guests at the villa to whom no suspicion attached. From the moment the casket of pearls was last seen by the countess until their loss was discovered, every moment of Andrews' time was accounted for. His alibi was perfect and he was quite prominent in the unsuccessful quest of the thief."

"The pearls were not recovered, then?"

"No. The whole affair is still a mystery. My friend in Vienna, a pearl merchant like myself, assisted Andrews in his endeavor to discover the thief and, being much impressed by the young man's personality, sent me this photograph, asking me to meet him, as I have told you, when he reached America."

"Is his home in this country?"

"New York knows him, but knows nothing of his family or his history. He is popular there, spending money freely and bearing the reputation of an all-around good fellow. On his arrival there, a year ago, he led a gay life for a few days and then suddenly disappeared. No one knew what had become of him. When I found him here, under the name of A. Jones, the disappearance was solved."

"I think," said Uncle John, "you are laboring under a serious, if somewhat natural, mistake. The subject of this picture is like A. Jones, indeed, but he is older and his expression more--more--"

"Blase and sophisticated," said Patsy.

"Thank you, my dear; I am no dictionary, and if those are real words they may convey my meaning. I feel quite sure, Mr. Le Drieux, that the story of Andrews can not be the story of young Jones."

Le Drieux took the picture and replaced it in his pocket.

"To err is human," said he, "and I will admit the possibility of my being mistaken in my man. But you will admit the resemblance?"

"Yes. They might be brothers. But young Jones has said he has no brothers, and I believe him."

Le Drieux sat in silence for a few minutes. Then he said:

"I appealed to you, Mr. Merrick, because I was not thoroughly satisfied, in my own mind, of my conclusions. You have added to my doubts, I must confess, yet I cannot abandon the idea that the two men are one and the same. As my suspicion is only shared by you and your niece, in confidence, I shall devote myself for a few days to studying young Jones and observing his actions. In that way I may get a clue that will set all doubt at rest."

"We will introduce you to him," said Patsy. "and then you may question him as much as you like."

"Oh, no; I prefer not to make his acquaintance until I am quite sure," was the reply. "If he is not Jack Andrews he would be likely to resent the insinuation that he is here trading under a false name. Good night, Mr. Merrick. Good night, Miss Doyle. I thank you for your courteous consideration."

He had risen, and now bowed and walked away.

"Well," said Patsy. "what was he after? And did he learn anything from us?"

"He did most of the talking himself," replied Uncle John, looking after Le Drieux with a puzzled expression. "Of course he is not a jewel merchant."

"No," said Patsy, "he's a detective, and I'll bet a toothpick to a match that he's on the wrong scent."

"He surely is. Unfortunately, we cannot warn Ajo against him."

"It isn't necessary, Uncle. Why, the whole thing is absurd. Our boy is not a gambler or roysterer, nor do I think he has ever been in Europe. Mr. Le Drieux will have to guess again!"