

CHAPTER XVI

TROUBLE

Uncle John and Arthur decided not to mention to the girls this astounding charge of Isidore Le Drieux, fearing the news would make them nervous and disturb their rest, so when the men joined the merry party in the alcove they did not refer to their late interview.

Afterward, however, when all but Arthur Weldon had gone to bed and he was sitting in Uncle John's room, the two discussed the matter together with much seriousness.

"We ought to do something, sir," said Arthur. "This Jones is a mere boy, and in poor health at that. He has no friends, so far as we know, other than ourselves. Therefore it is our duty to see him through this trouble."

Mr. Merrick nodded assent.

"We cannot prevent the arrest," he replied, "for Le Drieux will not listen to reason. If we aided Jones to run away he would soon be caught. Absurd as the charge is, the youngster must face it and prove his innocence."

Arthur paced the floor in a way that indicated he was disturbed by this verdict.

"He ought to have no difficulty in proving he is not Jack Andrews," he remarked, reflectively; "and yet--those pearls are difficult to explain. Their similarity to the ones stolen in Europe fooled the expert, Le Drieux, and they are likely to fool a judge or jury. I hope Jones has some means of proving that he brought the pearls from Sangoa. That would settle the matter at once."

"As soon as he is arrested we will get him a lawyer--the best in this country," said Mr. Merrick. "More than that we cannot do, but a good lawyer will know the proper method of freeing his client."

The next morning they were up early, awaiting developments; but Le Drieux seemed in no hurry to move. He had breakfast at about nine o'clock, read his newspaper for a half hour or so, and then deliberately left the hotel. All of Mr. Merrick's party had breakfasted before this and soon after Le Drieux had gone away young Jones appeared in the lobby. He was just in time to see the Stanton girls drive away in their automobile, accompanied by their Aunt Jane.

"The motion picture stars must be late to-day," said the boy, looking after them.

"They are," answered Patsy, standing beside him at the window; "but Maud

says this happens to be one of their days of leisure. No picture is to be taken and they have only to rehearse a new play. But it's a busy life, seems to me, and it would really prove hard work if the girls didn't enjoy it so much."

"Yes," said he, "it's a fascinating profession. I understand, and nothing can be called work that is interesting. When we are obliged to do something that we do not like to do, it becomes 'work.' Otherwise, what is usually called 'work' is mere play, for it furnishes its quota of amusement."

He was quite unconscious of any impending misfortune and when Beth and Louise joined Patsy in thanking him for his pretty gifts of the pearls he flushed with pleasure. Evidently their expressions of delight were very grateful to his ears.

Said Uncle John, in a casual way: "Those are remarkably fine pearls, to have come from such an island as Sangoa."

"But we find much better ones there, I assure you," replied the boy. "I have many in my room of much greater value, but did not dare ask you to accept them as gifts."

"Do many pearls come from Sangoa, then?" asked Arthur.

"That is our one industry," answered the young man. "Many years ago my

father discovered the pearl fisheries. It was after he had purchased the island, but he recognized the value of the pearls and brought a colony of people from America to settle at Sangoa and devote their time to pearl fishing. Once or twice every year we send a ship to market with a consignment of pearls to our agent, and--to be quite frank with you--that is why I am now able to build the picture theatres I have contracted for, as well as the film factory."

"I see," said Uncle John. "But tell me this, please: Why is Sangoa so little known, or rather, so quite unknown?"

"My father," Jones returned, "loved quiet and seclusion. He was willing to develop the pearl fisheries, but objected to the flock of adventurers sure to descend upon his island if its wealth of pearls became generally known. His colony he selected with great care and with few exceptions they are a sturdy, wholesome lot, enjoying the peaceful life of Sangoa and thoroughly satisfied with their condition there. It is only within the last two years that our American agents knew where our pearls came from, yet they could not locate the island if they tried. I do not feel the same desire my father did to keep the secret, although I would dislike to see Sangoa overrun with tourists or traders."

He spoke so quietly and at the same time so convincingly that both Arthur and Uncle John accepted his explanation unquestioningly. Nevertheless, in the embarrassing dilemma in which Jones would presently be involved, the story would be sure to bear the stamp of unreality to

any uninterested hearer.

The girls had now begun to chatter over the theatre plans, and their "financial backer"--as Patsy Doyle called him--joined them with eager interest. Arthur sat at a near-by desk writing a letter; Uncle John glanced over the morning paper; Inez, the Mexican nurse, brought baby to Louise for a kiss before it went for a ride in its perambulator.

An hour had passed when Le Drieux entered the lobby in company with a thin-faced, sharp-eyed man in plain clothes. They walked directly toward the group that was seated by the open alcove window, and Arthur Weldon, observing them and knowing what was about to happen, rose from the writing-desk and drew himself tensely together as he followed them. Uncle John lowered his paper, frowned at Le Drieux and then turned his eyes upon the face of young Jones.

It was the thin-featured man who advanced and lightly touched the boy's arm.

"Beg pardon, sir," said he, in even, unemotional tones. "You are Mr. Andrews, I believe--Mr. Jack Andrews?"

The youth turned his head to look at his questioner.

"No, sir," he answered with a smile. "A case of mistaken identity. My name is Jones." Then, continuing his speech to Patsy Doyle, he said:

"There is no need to consider the acoustic properties of our theatres, for the architect--"

"Pardon me again," interrupted the man, more sternly. "I am positive this is not a case of mistaken identity. We have ample proof that Jack Andrews is parading here, under the alias of 'A. Jones.'"

The boy regarded him with a puzzled expression.

"What insolence!" muttered Beth in an under-tone but audible enough to be distinctly heard.

The man flushed slightly and glanced at Le Drieux, who nodded his head. Then he continued firmly:

"In any event, sir, I have a warrant for your arrest, and I hope you will come with me quietly and so avoid a scene."

The boy grew pale and then red. His eyes narrowed as he stared fixedly at the officer. But he did not change his position, nor did he betray either fear or agitation. In a voice quite unmoved he asked:

"On what charge do you arrest me?"

"You are charged with stealing a valuable collection of pearls from the Countess Ahmberg, at Vienna, about a year ago."

"But I have never been in Vienna."

"You will have an opportunity to prove that."

"And my name is not Andrews."

"You must prove that, also."

The boy thought for a moment. Then he asked:

"Who accuses me?"

"This gentleman; Mr. Le Drieux. He is an expert in pearls, knows intimately all those in the collection of the countess and has recognized several which you have recently presented to your friends, as among those you brought from Austria."

Again Jones smiled.

"This is absurd, sir," he remarked.

The officer returned the smile, but rather grimly.

"It is the usual protest, Mr. Andrews. I don't blame you for the denial, but the evidence against you is very strong. Will you come? And quietly?"

"I am unable to offer physical resistance," replied the young fellow, as he slowly rose from his chair and displayed his thin figure.

"Moreover," he added, with a touch of humor, "I believe there's a fine for resisting an officer. I suppose you have a legal warrant. May I be permitted to see it?"

The officer produced the warrant. Jones perused it slowly and then handed it to Mr. Merrick, who read it and passed it back to the officer.

"What shall I do, sir?" asked the boy.

"Obey the law," answered Uncle John. "This officer is only the law's instrument and it is useless to argue with him. But I will go with you to the police station and furnish bail."

Le Drieux shook his head.

"Quite impossible, Mr. Merrick," he said. "This is not a bailable offense."

"Are you sure?"

"I am positive. This is an extradition case, of international importance. Andrews, after an examination, will be taken to New York and from there to Vienna, where his crime was committed."

"But he has committed no crime!"

Le Drieux shrugged his shoulders.

"He is accused, and he must prove his innocence," said he.

"But that is nonsense!" interposed Arthur warmly. "There is no justice in such an assertion. If I know anything of the purpose of the law, and I think I do, you must first prove this man's guilt before you carry him to Austria to be tried by a foreign court."

"I don't care a snap for the purpose of the law," retorted Le Drieux.

"Our treaty with Austria provides for extradition, and that settles it. This man is already under arrest. The judge who issued the warrant believes that Jones is Jack Andrews and that Jack Andrews stole the pearls from the Countess Ahmberg. Of course, the prisoner will have a formal examination, when he may defend himself as best he can, but we haven't made this move without being sure of our case, and it will be rather difficult for him to escape the penalty of his crimes, clever as he is."

"Clever?" It was Jones himself who asked this, wonderingly.

Le Drieux bowed to him with exaggerated politeness.

"I consider you the cleverest rogue in existence," said he. "But even the cleverest may be trapped, in time, and your big mistake was in disposing of those pearls so openly. See here," he added, taking from his pocket a small packet. "Here are the famous Taprobane pearls--six of them--which were found in your room a half hour ago. They, also, were a part of the countess' collection."

"Oh, you have been to my room?"

"Under the authority of the law."

"And you have seen those pearls before?"

"Several times. I am an expert in pearls and can recognize their value at a glance," said Le Drieux with much dignity.

Jones gave a little chuckle and then turned deprecatingly to Mr. Merrick.

"You need not come with me to the station, sir," said he; "but, if you wish to assist me, please send me a lawyer and then go to the Continental and tell Mr. Goldstein of my predicament."

"I will do that," promptly replied Uncle John.

Jones turned to bow to the girls.

"I hope you young ladies can forgive this disgraceful scene," he remarked in a tone of regret rather than humiliation. "I do not see how any effort of mine could have avoided it. It seems to be one of the privileges of the people's guardians, in your free country, to arrest and imprison anyone on a mere suspicion of crime. Here is a case in which someone has sadly blundered, and I imagine it is the pompous gentleman who claims to know pearls and does not," with a nod toward Le Drieux, who scowled indignantly.

"It is an outrage!" cried Beth.

"It's worse than that," said Patsy; "but of course you can easily prove your innocence."

"If I have the chance," the boy agreed. "But at present I am a prisoner and must follow my captor."

He turned to the officer and bowed to indicate that he was ready to go. Arthur shook the young fellow's hand and promised to watch his interests in every possible way.

"Go with him now, Arthur," proposed Louise. "It's a hard thing to be taken to jail and I'm sure he needs a friend at his side at this time."

"Good advice," agreed Uncle John. "Of course they'll give him a preliminary hearing before locking him up, and if you'll stick to him

I'll send on a lawyer in double-quick time."

"Thank you," said the boy. "The lawyer first, Mr. Merrick, and then Goldstein."