

CHAPTER IX - NATURE'S MASTERPIECE

From the reservation to the Grand Canyon of the Colorado was not far, but there was no "crosscut" and so they were obliged to make a wide detour nearly to Williams before striking the road that wound upward to the world's greatest wonder.

Slowly and tediously the big car climbed the miserable trail to the rim of the Grand Canyon. It was night when they arrived, for they had timed it that way, having been told of the marvelous beauty of the canyon by moonlight. But unfortunately the sky filled with clouds toward evening, and they came to Bright Angel, their destination, in a drizzling rain and total darkness. The Major was fearful Wampus might run them into the canyon, but the machine's powerful searchlights showed the way clearly and by sticking to the road they finally drew up before an imposing hotel such as you might wonder to find in so remote a spot.

Eagerly enough they escaped from the automobile where they had been shut in and entered the spacious lobby of the hotel, where a merry throng of tourists had gathered.

"Dinner and bed," said Patsy, decidedly. "I'm all tired out, and poor Myrtle is worn to a frazzle. There's no chance of seeing the canyon tonight, and as for the dancing, card playing and promiscuous gaiety, it doesn't appeal much to a weary traveler."

The girls were shown to a big room at the front of the hotel, having two beds in it. A smaller connecting-room was given to Myrtle, while Patsy and Beth shared the larger apartment. It seems the hotel, big as it was, was fairly filled with guests, the railway running three trains a day to the wonderful canyon; but Uncle John's nieces did not mind occupying the same room, which was comfortably and even luxuriously furnished.

A noise of footsteps along the corridor disturbed Patsy at an early hour. She opened her eyes to find the room dimly lighted, as by the first streaks of dawn, and sleepily arose to raise the window shade and see if day was breaking. Her hand still upraised to guide the shade the girl stood as motionless as if turned to stone. With a long drawn, gasping breath she cried: "Oh, Beth!" and then stood staring at what is undoubtedly the most entrancing, the most awe inspiring and at the

same time the most magnificent spectacle that mortal eye has ever beheld--sunrise above the Grand Canyon of Arizona.

The master painters of the world have gathered in this spot in a vain attempt to transfer the wondrous coloring of the canyon to canvas. Authors famed for their eloquent command of language have striven as vainly to tell to others what their own eyes have seen; how their senses have been thrilled and their souls uplifted by the marvel that God's hand has wrought. It can never be pictured. It can never be described. Only those who have stood as Patricia Doyle stood that morning and viewed the sublime masterpiece of Nature can realize what those homely words, "The Grand Canyon" mean. Grand? It is well named. Since no other adjective can better describe it, that much abused one may well be accepted to incompletely serve its purpose.

Beth joined her cousin at the window and was instantly as awed and absorbed as Patsy. Neither remembered Myrtle just then, but fortunately their friend had left the connecting door of their rooms ajar and hearing them stirring came in to see if anything had happened. She found the two cousins staring intently from the window and went to the second window herself, thus witnessing the spectacle in all its glory.

Even after the magnificent coloring of sunrise had faded the sight was one to rivet the attention. The hotel seemed built at the very edge of the canyon, and at their feet the ground appeared to fall away and a great gulf yawned that was tinted on all its diverse sides with hues that rivaled those of the rainbow. Across the chasm they could clearly see the trees and hills; yet these were fully thirteen miles distant, for here is one of the widest portions of the great abyss.

"I'm going to dress," said Beth, breaking the silence at last. "It seems a sin to stay cooped up in here when such a glorious panorama is at one's feet."

The others did not reply in words, but they all began to dress together with nervous haste, and then made their way down to the canyon's brink. Others were before them, standing upon the ample porches in interested groups; but such idleness would not content our girls, who trooped away for a more intimate acquaintance with the wonderful gorge.

"Oh, how small--how terribly small--I am!" cried Patsy, lost in the immensity of the canyon's extent; but this is a common cry of travelers visiting Bright Angel. You might place a baker's dozen of the huge Falls of Niagara in the Grand Canyon and scarcely notice they were there. All the vast cathedrals of Europe set upon its plateau would seem like pebbles when viewed from the brink. The thing is simply incomprehensible to those who have not seen it.

Presently Uncle John and the Major came out to join them and they all wandered along the edge until they came to a huge rock that jutted out far over the monster gulf. On the furthest point of this rock, standing with his feet at the very brink, was a tall, thin man, his back toward them. It seemed a fearful thing to do--to stand where the slightest slip would send him reeling into the abyss.

"It's like tempting fate," whispered Patsy, a safe distance away. "I wish he would step back a little."

As if he had overheard her the man half turned and calmly examined the group. His eyes were an almost colorless blue, his features destitute of any expression. By his dress he seemed well-to-do, if not prosperous, yet there was a hint of melancholy in his poise and about him a definite atmosphere of loneliness.

After that one deliberate look he turned again and faced the canyon, paying no attention to the interested little party that hovered far enough from the edge to avoid any possible danger.

"Oh, dear!" whispered Myrtle, clinging to Beth's arm with trembling fingers, "I'm afraid he's going to--to commit suicide!"

"Nonsense!" answered Beth, turning pale nevertheless.

The figure was motionless as before. Uncle John and the Major started along the path but as Beth attempted to follow them Myrtle broke away from her and hobbled eagerly on her crutches toward the stranger. She did not go quite to the end of the jutting rock, but stopped some feet away and called in a low, intense voice:

"Don't!"

The man turned again, with no more expression in his eyes or face than before. He looked at Myrtle steadily a moment, then turned and slowly left the edge, walking to firm ground and back toward the hotel without another glance at the girl.

"I'm so ashamed," said Myrtle, tears of vexation in her eyes as she rejoined her friends. "But somehow I felt I must warn him--it was an impulse I just couldn't resist."

"Why, no harm resulted, in any event, my dear," returned Beth. "I wouldn't think of it again."

They took so long a walk that all were nearly famished when they returned to the hotel for breakfast.

Of course Patsy and Beth wanted to go down Bright Angel Trail into the depths of the canyon, for that is the thing all adventurous spirits love to do.

"I'm too fat for such foolishness," said Uncle John, "so I'll stay up here and amuse Myrtle."

The Major decided to go, to "look after our Patsy;" so the three joined the long line of daring tourists and being mounted on docile, sure-footed burros, followed the guide down the trail.

Myrtle and Uncle John spent the morning on the porch of the hotel. At breakfast the girl had noticed the tall man they had encountered at the canyon's edge quietly engaged in eating at a small table in a far corner of the great dining room. During the forenoon he came from the hotel to the porch and for a time stood looking far away over the canyon.

Aroused to sympathy by the loneliness of this silent person, Uncle John left his chair and stood beside him at the railing.

"It's a wonderful sight, sir," he remarked in his brisk, sociable way; "wonderful indeed!"

For a moment there was no reply.

"It seems to call one," said the man at length, as if to himself. "It calls one."

"It's a wonder to me it doesn't call more people to see it," observed Mr. Merrick, cheerfully. "Think of this magnificent thing--greater and grander than anything the Old World can show, being here right in the heart of America, almost--and so few rush to see it! Why, in time to come, sir," he added enthusiastically, "not to have seen the Grand Canyon of Arizona will be an admission of inferiority. It's--it's the biggest thing in all the world!"

The stranger made no reply. He had not even glanced at Uncle John. Now he slowly turned and stared fixedly at Myrtle for a moment, till she cast down her eyes, blushing. Then he re-entered the hotel; nor was he again seen by them.

The little man was indignant at the snub. Rejoining Myrtle he said to her:

"That fellow wasn't worth saving--if you really saved him, my dear. He says the canyon calls one, and for all I care he may go to the bottom by any route he pleases."

Which speech showed that gentle, kindly Mr. Merrick was really annoyed. But a moment later he was all smiles again and Myrtle found him a delightful companion because he knew so well how to read people's thoughts, and if they were sad had a tactful way of cheering them.

The girls and the Major returned from their trip to the plateau full of rapture at their unique experiences.

"I wouldn't have missed it for a million dollars!" cried the Major; but he added: "and you couldn't hire me to go again for two million!"

"It was great," said Patsy; "but I'm tuckered out."

"I had nineteen narrow escapes from sudden death," began Beth, but her cousin interrupted her by saying: "So had everyone in the party; and if the canyon had caved in we'd all be dead long ago. Stop your chattering now and get ready for dinner. I'm nearly starved."

Next morning they took a farewell view of the beautiful scene and then climbed into their automobile to continue their journey. Many of the tourists had wondered at their temerity in making such a long trip through a poorly settled country in a motor car and had plied them with

questions and warnings. But they were thoroughly enjoying this outing and nothing very disagreeable had happened to them so far. I am sure that on this bright, glorious morning you could not have hired any one of the party to abandon the automobile and finish the trip by train.