

CHAPTER XVIII - THE SILENT MAN

Even the Major smiled benignantly when he reached his appointed room in the magnificent Hotel del Coronado, which is famed throughout the world.

"This," said he, "reminds me of New York; and it's the first thing that has, since I left home."

"Why, Daddy, it isn't like New York at all," protested Patsy, standing beside him at the broad window overlooking the ocean. "Did you ever see a palm tree waving in New York; or daisy bushes as tall as a man; or such masses of roses and flowering vines? And then just notice the mountains over there--they're in Mexico, I'm told--and this great headland in the other direction; it's called Point Loma. Oh, I never imagined any place could be so beautiful!"

The others were equally excited, and Uncle John said, smiling broadly:

"Well, we're here at last, my dears, and I'm sure we are already well paid for our trip across the continent. What pleasant rooms these are. If the hotel table is at all to be compared with the house itself we shall have a happy time here, which means we will stay as long as possible."

But the table was another surprise, for the meals were equal to any served in the great Eastern metropolis. Uncle John complimented the landlord, a cheery faced, fat little man who had at one time managed a famous New York hotel and had brought his talents and experience to far California.

"I'm sorry," said this gentle boniface, "that I could not reserve better rooms for you--for there are some choice views from some locations. I had a corner suite saved for your party, a suite I consider the most desirable in the hotel; but an eccentric individual arrived yesterday who demanded the entire suite, and I had to let him have it. He will not stay long, and as soon as he goes you shall have the rooms."

"Who is he?" asked Uncle John.

"A rich miner; a most melancholy and peculiar person, by the way," replied landlord Ross. "I believe his name is Jones."

Mr. Merrick started.

"Jones, and a miner?" he said. "What's his other name--Anson?"

"We'll look and see," replied Mr. Ross, turning to the hotel register. "No; not Anson. He is registered as C.B. Jones, of Boston."

"Oh; that's not the Jones at all," said Uncle John, disappointed.

"It's the Jones who is our guest," replied the landlord, smiling.

Meantime the three girls had gone for a walk along the coast. The beach is beautiful at Coronado. There is a high sea wall of rock, and the path runs along its edge almost the length of the promontory. The rocks are sloping, however, and it is not very difficult to climb down them to where the waves break against the wall.

Near the hotel they met straggling groups, strolling in either direction, but half a mile away the promenade was practically deserted. It was beginning to grow dark, and Beth said, regretfully:

"We must get back, girls, and dress for dinner--an unusual luxury, isn't it? Our trunks arrived at the hotel two weeks ago, and are now in our rooms, doubtless, awaiting us to unpack them."

"Don't let's return just yet," begged Myrtle. "I want to see the sun set."

"It will be gorgeous," said Patsy, glancing at the sky; "but we can see it from our windows, and as we're a long way from the hotel now I believe Beth's suggestion is wise."

So they began to retrace their steps. Myrtle still walked with some difficulty, and they had not proceeded far when Beth exclaimed:

"Look at that man down there!"

Her companions followed her direction and saw standing upon a huge pile of rocks at the water's edge a slight, solitary figure. Something in the poise, as he leaned forward staring at the darkened waves--for the sun was low and cast shadows aslant the water--struck Myrtle as familiar.

"Oh, girls!" she exclaimed; "it's the Grand Canyon man."

"Why, I believe it is," agreed Patsy. "What is he doing?"

"Nothing," said Beth, briefly. "But he is going to do something, I think."

While they stared at him from their elevation the man straightened an instant and cast a hasty glance to either side. The place seemed to him deserted, for he failed to observe the group of three intently watching his motions from the high bank overhead. Next moment he turned back to the water and leaned over the edge of rock again.

"Don't!" cried Myrtle, her clear voice ringing over the lap of the waves; "please don't!"

He swung around and turned his gaunt features upward to where the young girl leaned upon her crutches, with clasped hands and a look of distress upon her sweet face.

"Don't!" she repeated, pleadingly.

He passed his hand over his eyes with a very weary gesture and looked at Myrtle again--this time quite steadily. She was trembling in every limb and her cheeks were white with fear.

Slowly--very slowly--the man turned and began to climb the rocks; not directly upward to where the girls stood, but diagonally, so as to reach the walk some distance ahead of them. They did not move until he had gained the path and turned toward the hotel. Then they followed and kept him in sight until he reached the entrance to the court and disappeared within.

"I wonder," said Patsy, as they made their way to their rooms, "whether he really was thinking of plunging into the ocean; or whether that time at the Grand Canyon he had a notion of jumping into the chasm."

"If so," added Beth, "Myrtle has saved his life twice. But she can't be always near to watch the man, and if he has suicidal intentions, he'll make an end of himself, sooner or later, without a doubt."

"Perhaps," said Myrtle, hesitatingly, "I am quite wrong, and the strange man had no intention of doing himself an injury. But each time I obeyed an impulse that compelled me to cry out; and afterward I have been much ashamed of my forwardness."

They did not see the melancholy man at dinner; but afterward, in the spacious lobby, they discovered him sitting in a far corner reading a

magazine. He seemed intent on this occupation and paid no attention to the life around him. The girls called Uncle John's attention to him, and Mr. Merrick at once recognized him as the same individual they had met at the Grand Canyon.

"But I am not especially pleased to encounter him again," he said with a slight frown; "for, if I remember aright, he acted very rudely to Myrtle and proved unsociable when I made overtures and spoke to him."

"I wonder who he is?" mused Patsy, watching the weary, haggard features as his eyes slowly followed the lines of his magazine.

"I'll inquire and find out," replied her uncle.

The cherubic landlord was just then pacing up and down the lobby, pausing here and there to interchange a word with his guests. Uncle John approached him and said:

"Can you tell me, Mr. Ross, who the gentleman is in the corner?"

The landlord looked around at the corner and smiled.

"That," said he, "is the gentleman we spoke of this afternoon--Mr. C.B. Jones--the man who usurped the rooms intended for you."

"Rooms?" repeated Uncle John. "Has he a large party, then?"

"He is alone; that is the queer part of it," returned the landlord. "Nor has he much baggage. But he liked the suite--a parlor with five rooms opening out of it--and insisted upon having them all, despite the fact that it is one of the most expensive suites in the hotel. I said he was eccentric, did I not?"

"You were justified," said Mr. Merrick, thought fully. "Thank you, sir, for the information."

Even as he rejoined the girls, who were seated together upon a broad divan, the man arose, laid down his magazine and came slowly down the room, evidently headed for the elevator. But with a start he recognized the girl who had accosted him on the beach, and the others with her, and for an instant came to a full stop before the group, his sad eyes fixed intently upon Myrtle's face.

The situation was a bit awkward, and to relieve it Uncle John remarked in his cheery voice:

"Well, Mr. Jones, we meet again, you see."

The man turned slowly and faced him; then bowed in a mechanical way and proceeded to the elevator, into which he disappeared.

Naturally Uncle John was indignant.

"Confound the fellow!" he exclaimed. "He's worse than a boor. But perhaps his early education was neglected."

"Did you call him Mr. Jones, sir?" asked Myrtle in a voice that trembled with excitement.

"Yes, my dear; but it is not your Uncle Anson. I've inquired about him. The Joneses are pretty thick, wherever you go; but I hope not many are like this fellow."

"Something's wrong with him," declared Patsy. "He's had some sad bereavement--a great blow of some sort--and it has made him somber and melancholy. He doesn't seem to know he acts rudely. You can tell by the man's eyes that he is unhappy."

"His eyes have neither color nor expression," remarked Beth. "At his best, this Mr. Jones must have been an undesirable acquaintance."

"You can't be sure of that," returned Patsy; "and I'm positive my theory is correct. More and more am I inclined to agree with Myrtle that he is disgusted with life, and longs to end it."

"Let him, then," retorted Uncle John. "I'm sure such a person is of no use to the world, and if he doesn't like himself he's better out of it."

That kindly Mr. Merrick should give vent to such a heartless speech proved how much annoyed he had been by Mr. Jones' discourtesy.

"He might be reclaimed, and--and comforted," said Myrtle, softly. "When I think of the happiness you have brought into my life, sir, I long to express my gratitude by making some one else happy."

"You're doing it, little one," he answered, pinching her cheek. "If we've brought a bit of sunshine into your life we've reaped an ample reward in

your companionship. But if you can find a way to comfort that man Jones, and fetch him out of his dumps, you are certainly a more wonderful fairy than I've given you credit for."

Myrtle did not reply to this, although it pleased her. She presently pleaded weariness and asked permission to return to her room. Beth and Patsy wanted to go into the great domed ballroom and watch the dancing; so Myrtle bade them good night and ascended by the elevator to her floor.