

## CHAPTER XIX - "THREE TIMES"

Softly stepping over the thick carpets, which deadened the sound of the crutches--now becoming scarcely necessary to her--the young girl passed along the corridor, passing angles and turns innumerable on her way to her room. Some erratic architect certainly concocted the plan of the Hotel del Coronado. It is a very labyrinth of passages connecting; its nine hundred rooms, and one has to have a good bump of location to avoid getting lost in its mazes.

Near one of the abrupt turns a door stood ajar, and in passing Myrtle glanced in, and then paused involuntarily. It was a small parlor, prettily furnished, and in a big chair reclined a man whose hands were both pressed tight against his face, thus covering it completely. But Myrtle knew him. The thin frame, as well as the despairing attitude, marked him as the man who had come so strangely into her life and whose personality affected her so strangely. She now stood in the dimly lighted corridor looking in upon him with infinite pity, and as she looked her glance fell upon the table beside him, where something bright glittered beneath the electric lamps.

Her heart gave a sudden thump of mingled fear and dismay. She knew intuitively what that "something" was. "Let him," Uncle John had said; but Myrtle instantly determined not to let him.

She hesitated a moment; but seeing that the man remained motionless, his eyes still covered, as if lost to all his surroundings, she softly crept forward and entered the room. She held the crutches under her arms, but dared not use them for fear of making a noise. Step by step she stole forward until the table was within reach. Then she stretched out her hand, seized the revolver, and hid it in the folds of her blouse.

Turning for a final glance at the man she was startled to find he had removed his hands and was steadfastly regarding her.

Myrtle leaned heavily on her crutches. She felt faint and miserable, like a criminal caught in the act. As her eyes fell before the intent gaze her face turned scarlet with humiliation and chagrin. Still, she did not attempt to escape, the idea not occurring to her; so for a time the tableau was

picturesque--the lame girl standing motionless with downcast eyes and the man fixedly staring at her.

"Three times!" he slowly said, in a voice finally stirred by a trace of emotion. "Three times. My child, why are you so persistent?"

Myrtle tried to be brave and meet his gaze. It was not quite so difficult now the silent man had spoken.

"Why do you force me to be persistent?" she asked, a tremor in her voice. "Why are you determined to--to--"

Words failed her, but he nodded to show he understood.

"Because," said he, "I am tired; very tired, my child. It's a big world; too big, in fact; but there's nothing in it for me any more."

There was expression enough in his voice now; expression of utter despondency.

"Why?" asked Myrtle, somewhat frightened to find herself so bold.

He did not answer for a long time, but sat reading her mobile face until a gentler look came into his hard blue eyes.

"It is a story too sad for young ears," he finally replied. "Perhaps, too, you would not understand it, not knowing or understanding me. I'm an odd sort of man, well along in years, and I've lived an odd sort of life. But my story, such as it is, has ended, and I'm too weary to begin another volume."

"Oh, no!" exclaimed Myrtle, earnestly. "Surely this cannot be the fulfillment and end of your life. If it were, why should I come into your life just now?"

He stared at her with a surprised--an even startled--look.

"Have you come into my life?" he inquired, in a low, curious tone.

"Haven't I?" she returned. "At the Grand Canyon--"

"I know," he interrupted hastily. "That was your mistake; and mine. You should not have interfered. I should not have let you interfere."

"But I did," said Myrtle.

"Yes. Somehow your voice sounded like a command, and I obeyed it; perhaps because no living person has a right to command me. You--you took me by surprise."

He passed his hand over his eyes with that weary gesture peculiar to him, and then fell silent.

Myrtle had remained standing. She did not know what to do in this emergency, or what more to say. The conversation could not be ended in this summary fashion. The hopeless man needed her in some way; how, she did not know. Feeling weak and very incompetent to meet the important crisis properly, the girl crept to a chair opposite the man and sank into it. Then she leaned her chin upon her hand and looked pleadingly at her strange acquaintance. He met her eyes frankly. The hard look in his own seemed to have disappeared, dispelled by a sympathy that was new to him.

And so they sat, regarding one another silently yet musingly, for a long time.

"I wish," said Myrtle once, in her softest, sweetest tones, "I could help you. Some one helped me when I was in great trouble, so I want to help you."

He did not reply, and another period of silence ensued. But his next speech showed he had been considering her words.

"Because you have suffered," he said, "you have compassion for others who suffer. But your trouble is over now?"

"Almost," she said, smiling brightly.

He sighed, but questioned her no farther.

"A while ago," she volunteered, "I had neither friends nor relatives." He gave her a queer look, then. "I had no money. I had been hurt in an accident and was almost helpless. But I did not despair, sir--and I am only an inexperienced girl.

"In my darkest hour I found friends--kind, loving friends--who showed me a new world that I had not suspected was in existence. I think the world is like a great mirror," she continued, meditatively, "and reflects our lives just as we ourselves look upon it. Those who turn sad faces

toward the world find only sadness reflected. But a smile is reflected in the same way, and cheers and brightens our hearts. You think there is no pleasure to be had in life. That is because you are heartsick and--and tired, as you say. With one sad story ended you are afraid to begin another--a sequel--feeling it would be equally sad. But why should it be? Isn't the joy or sorrow equally divided in life?"

"No," he replied.

"A few days ago," she continued earnestly, "we were crossing the Arizona deserts. It was not pleasant, but we did not despair, for we knew the world is not all desert and that the land of roses and sunshine lay just beyond. Now that we're in California we've forgotten the dreary desert. But you--Why, sir, you've just crossed your desert, and you believe all the world is bitter and cruel and holds no joy for you! Why don't you step out bravely into the roses and sunshine of life, and find the joy that has been denied you?"

He looked into her eyes almost fearfully, but it seemed to her that his own held a first glimmer of hope.

"Do you believe there can be joy for me anywhere in the world?" he asked.

"Of course. I tell you there's just as much sweet as there is bitter in life. Don't I know it? Haven't I proved it? But happiness doesn't chase people who try to hide from it. It will meet you halfway, but you've got to do your share to deserve it. I'm not preaching; I've lived this all out, in my own experience, and know what I'm talking about. Now as for you, sir, I can see very plainly you haven't been doing your duty. You've met sorrow and let it conquer you. You've taken melancholy by the hand and won't let go of it. You haven't tried to fight for your rights--the rights God gave to every man and expects him to hold fast to and take advantage of. No, indeed!"

"But what is the use?" he asked, timidly, yet with an eager look in his face. "You are young, my child; I am nearly old enough to have been your father. There are things you have not yet learned; things I hope you will never learn. An oak may stand alone in a field, and be lonely because it cannot touch boughs with another. A flower may bloom alone in a garden, and wither and die for want of companionship. God's wisdom

grouped every living thing. He gave Adam a comrade. He created no solitary thing. But see, my child: although this world contains countless thousands, there is not one among them I may call my friend."

"Oh, yes; just one!" said Myrtle quickly. "I am your friend. Not because you want me, but because you need me. And that's a beginning, isn't it? I can find other friends for you, among my friends, and you will be sure to like them because I like them."

This naive suggestion did not affect him as much as the fact that this fair young girl had confessed herself his friend. He did not look at Myrtle now; he stared straight ahead, at the wall paper, and his brow was furrowed as if he was thinking deeply.

Perhaps any other man would have thanked the girl for her sympathy and her proffered friendship, or at the least have acknowledged it. But not so this queer Mr. Jones; eccentric, indeed, as the shrewd landlord had described him. Nor did Myrtle seem to expect an acknowledgment. It was enough for her that her speech had set him thinking along new lines.

He sat musing for so long that she finally remembered it was growing late, and began to fear Patsy and Beth would seek their rooms, which connected with her own, and find her absent. That would worry them. So at last she rose softly, took her crutches and turned to go.

"Good night, my--friend," she said.

"Good night, my child," he answered in a mechanical tone, without rousing from his abstraction.

Myrtle went to her room and found it was not so late as she had feared. She opened a drawer and placed the revolver in it, not without a little shudder.

"At any rate," she murmured, with satisfaction, "he will not use this to-night."