

CHAPTER XX - ON POINT LOMA

Next morning a beautiful bunch of roses was brought to Myrtle's room--roses so magnificent that it seemed impossible they could be grown out of doors. But there are few hothouses in California, and the boy who brought the flowers confided to her the information that they were selected from more than five hundred blooms. She ran to show them to Patsy and Beth, who were amazed not only by the roses but by the fact that the queer Mr. Jones had sent them to Myrtle. There was no card or note accompanying the gift, but after the younger girl had related her conversation with Mr. Jones the previous evening, they could not doubt but he had sent the flowers.

"Perhaps," reflected Patsy, "we've been misjudging him. I never beheld such a stolid, unimpressive countenance in my life; but the man must have a soul of some sort, or he would not think of sending flowers to his new friend."

"It's a pretty idea," said Beth. "He wanted to assure Myrtle that he appreciated her kindness."

"I'm sure he likes me," declared Myrtle, simply. "He wasn't a bit cross when I ran in and took away his pistol, or when I preached to him. I really gave him a good talking to, and he didn't object a bit."

"What he needs," commented Beth, "is to get away from himself, and mingle with people more. I wonder if we could coax him to join us in our ride to Point Loma."

"Would we care to ask him?" said Patsy. "He's as sour and crabbed in looks as he is in disposition, and has treated Uncle John's advances shamefully. I'd like to help Myrtle bring the old fellow back to life; but perhaps we can find an easier way than to shut him up with us in an automobile."

"He wouldn't go, I'm sure," declared Myrtle. "He has mellowed a little--a very little--as these roses prove. But he treated me last night just as he does Mr. Merrick, even after our conversation. When I said 'Good night' I had to wait a long time for his answer. But I'd like you to meet him and

help cheer him up; so please let me introduce him, if there's a chance, and do be nice to him."

"I declare," cried Patsy, laughing, "Myrtle has assumed an air of proprietorship over the Sad One already."

"She has a right to, for she saved his life," said Beth.

"Three times," Myrtle added proudly. "He told me so himself."

Uncle John heard the story of Myrtle's adventure with considerable surprise, and he too expressed a wish to aid her in winning Mr. Jones from his melancholy mood.

"Every man is queer in one way or another," said he, "and I'd say the women were, too, if you females were not listening. I also imagine a very rich man has the right to be eccentric, if it pleases him."

"Is Mr. Jones rich, then?" inquired Beth.

"According to the landlord he's rich as Croesus. Made his money in mining--manipulating stocks, I suppose. But evidently his wealth hasn't been a comfort to him, or he wouldn't want to shuffle off his mortal coil and leave it behind"

They did not see the object of this conversation before leaving for the trip to Point Loma--a promontory that juts out far into the Pacific. It is reached by a superb macadamized boulevard, which passes down the north edge of the promontory, rounds the corner where stands the lighthouse, and comes back along the southern edge, all the time a hundred feet or more in elevation above the ocean.

The view from the Point is unsurpassed. Wampus stopped his car beside a handsomely appointed automobile that was just then deserted.

"Some one is here before us," remarked Patsy. "But that is not strange. The wonder is that crowds are not here perpetually."

"It is said," related the Major, who had really begun to enjoy California, "that the view from this Point includes more varied scenery than any other that is known in the world. Here we see the grand San Bernardino range of mountains; the Spanish Bight on the Mexican shore; the pretty city of San Diego climbing its hills, with the placid bay in front, where

float the warships of the Pacific Squadron; the broad stretch of orange and lemon groves, hedged with towering palm trees; Santa Catalina and the Coronado Islands; the blue Pacific rolling in front and rugged Loma with its rocky cliffs behind. What more could we ask to see from any one viewpoint?"

"Don't forget the monster hotel, with its hundred towers and gables, dominating the strip of land between the bay and the ocean," added Beth. "How near it seems, and yet it is many miles away."

Some one had told them that moonstones were to be found on the beach at the base of the cliff; so they all climbed down the steep path, followed by Mumbles, who had not perceptibly grown in size during the trip but had acquired an adventurous disposition which, coupled with his native inquisitiveness, frequently led him into trouble.

Now, when they had reached the narrow beach, Mumbles ran ahead, passed around the corner of a cliff that almost touched the water, and was presently heard barking furiously.

"Sounds as if he scented game," said Patsy.

"A turtle, perhaps, or a big fish washed ashore," suggested the Major.

But now the small dog's voice changed suddenly and became a succession of yelps expressing mingled pain and terror.

"Oh, he's hurt!" cried Myrtle; and they all hurried forward, Uncle John leading them on a run, and passed around the big rock to rescue their pet.

Some one was before them, however. The foolish dog had found a huge crab in the sand and, barking loudly, had pushed his muzzle against the creature, with the result that the crab seized his black nose in a gripping claw and pinched as hard as it was able. Mumbles tried to back away, madly howling the while; but the crab, although the smaller antagonist, gripped a rock with its other claw and held on, anchoring the terrified dog to the spot.

But help was at hand. A tall, thin man hurried to the rescue, and just as Uncle John came in sight, leading his procession, a knife severed the crab's claw and Mumbles was free. Seeing his mistress, the puppy, still

whining with pain, hurried to her for comfort, while Uncle John turned to the man and said:

"Thank you, Mr. Jones, for assisting our poor beast. Mumbles is an Eastern dog, you know, and inexperienced in dealing with crabs."

Mr. Jones was examining the claw, the despoiled owner of which had quickly slid into the water.

"It is a species of crawfish," he observed, meditatively. Then, seeing the girls approach, he straightened up and rather awkwardly lifted his hat.

The gesture surprised them all. Heretofore, when they had met, the man had merely stared and turned away, now his attempt at courtesy was startling because unexpected.

Myrtle came close to his side.

"How nice to find you here, Mr. Jones," she said brightly. "And oh, I must thank you for my lovely roses."

He watched her face with evident interest and it seemed that his own countenance had become less haggard and sad than formerly.

"Let me introduce my friends," said the girl, with sudden recollection of her duty. "This is Mr. Merrick, my good friend and benefactor; and this is Major Doyle and his daughter Miss Patricia Doyle, both of whom have the kindest hearts in the world; Miss Beth De Graf, Mr. Merrick's niece, has watched over and cared for me like a sister, and--oh, I forgot; Miss Patsy is Mr. Merrick's niece, too. So now you know them all."

The man nodded briefly his acknowledgment.

"You--you are Mr. Jones, I believe, of--of Boston?"

"Once of Boston," he repeated mechanically. Then he looked at her and added: "Go on."

"Why--what--I don't understand," she faltered. "Have I overlooked anyone?"

"Only yourself," he said.

"Oh; but I--I met you last night."

"You did not tell me your name," he reminded her.

"I'm Myrtle," she replied, smiling in her relief. "Myrtle Dean."

"Myrtle Dean!" His voice was harsh; almost a shout.

"Myrtle Dean. And I--I'm from Chicago; but I don't live there any more."

He stood motionless, looking at the girl with a fixed expression that embarrassed her and caused her to glance appealingly at Patsy. Her friend understood and came to her rescue with some inconsequent remark about poor Mumbles, who was still moaning and rubbing; his pinched nose against Patsy's chin to ease the pain.

Mr. Jones paid little heed to Miss Doyle's observation, but as Myrtle tried to hide behind Beth Mr. Merrick took the situation in hand by drawing the man's attention to the scenery, and afterward inquiring if he was searching for moonstones.

The conversation now became general, except that Mr. Jones remained practically silent. He seemed to try to interest himself in the chatter around him, but always his eyes would stray to Myrtle's face and hold her until she found an opportunity to turn away.

"We've luncheon in the car," announced Uncle John, after a time. "Won't you join us, Mr. Jones?"

"Yes," was the unconventional reply. The man was undoubtedly abstracted and did not know he was rude. He quietly followed them up the rocks and when they reached the automobile remained by Myrtle's side while Wampus brought out the lunch basket and Beth and Patsy spread the cloth upon the grass and unpacked the hamper.

Mr. Jones ate merely a mouthful, but he evidently endeavored to follow the conversation and take an interest in what was said. He finally became conscious that his continuous gaze distressed Myrtle, and thereafter strove to keep his eyes from her face. They would creep back to it, from time to time; but Beth, who was watching him curiously, concluded he was making a serious effort to deport himself agreeably and credited him with a decided improvement in manners as their acquaintance with him progressed.

After luncheon, when their return by way of Old Town and the Spanish Mission was proposed, Mr. Jones said, pointing to the car that stood beside their own:

"This is my automobile. I drive it myself. I would like Myrtle Dean to ride back with me."

The girl hesitated, but quickly deciding she must not retreat, now she had practically begun the misanthrope's reformation, she replied:

"I will be very glad to. But won't you take one of my friends, also? That will divide the party more evenly."

He looked down at his feet, thoughtfully considering the proposition.

"I'll go with you," said Beth, promptly. "Get into the front seat with Mr. Jones, Myrtle, and I'll ride behind."

The man made no protest. He merely lifted Myrtle in his arms and gently placed her in the front seat. Beth, much amused, took the seat behind, unassisted save that the Major opened the door for her. Mr. Jones evidently understood his car. Starting the engines without effort he took his place at the wheel and with a nod to Mr. Merrick said:

"Lead on, sir; I will follow."

Wampus started away. He was displeased with the other car. It did not suit him at all. And aside from the fact that the sour-faced individual who owned it had taken away two of Wampus' own passengers, the small shaggy Mumbles, who had been the established companion of Uncle John's chauffeur throughout all the long journey, suddenly deserted him. He whined to go with the other car, and when Patsy lifted him aboard he curled down beside the stranger as if thoroughly satisfied. Patsy knew why, and was amused that Mumbles showed his gratitude to Mr. Jones for rescuing him from the crab; but Wampus scowled and was distinctly unhappy all the way to Old Town.

"Him mebbe fine gentleman," muttered the Canadian to the Major; "but if so he make a disguise of it. Once I knew a dog thief who resemble him; but perhaps Mumble he safe as long as Miss Myrtle an' Miss Beth they with him."

"Don't worry," said the Major, consolingly. "I'll keep my eye on the rascal. But he's a fine driver, isn't he?"

"Oh, that!" retorted Wampus, scornfully. "Such little cheap car like that he drive himself."

At Old Town Mr. Jones left them, saying he had been to the Mission and did not care for it. But as he drove his car away there was a gentler and more kindly expression upon his features than any of them had ever seen there before, and Myrtle suspected her charm was working and the regeneration really begun.