

CHAPTER XXI - A TALE OF WOE

That evening after dinner, as Mr. Merrick sat alone in the hotel lobby, the girls having gone to watch the Major bowl tenpins, Mr. Jones approached and sat down in the chair beside him.

Uncle John greeted the man with an attempt at cordiality. He could not yet bring himself to like his personality, but on Myrtle's account and because he was himself generous enough to wish to be of service to anyone so forlorn and unhappy, he treated Mr. Jones with more respect than he really thought he deserved.

"Tell me, Mr. Merrick," was the abrupt request, "where you found Myrtle Dean."

Uncle John told him willingly. There was no doubt but Myrtle had interested the man.

"My girls found her on the train between Chicago and Denver," he began. "She was on her way to join her uncle in Leadville."

"What is her uncle's name?"

"Anson Jones. But the child was almost helpless, ill and without friends or money. She was not at all sure her uncle was still in Leadville, in which case she would be at the mercy of a cold world. So I telegraphed and found that Anson Jones had been gone from the mining camp for several months. Do you know, sir, I at first suspected you might be the missing uncle? For I heard you were a miner and found that your name is Jones. But I soon discovered you are not Anson Jones, but C.B. Jones-which alters the case considerably."

Mr. Jones nodded absently.

"Tell me the rest," he said.

Uncle John complied. He related the manner in which Beth and Patsy had adopted Myrtle, the physician's examination and report upon her condition, and then told the main points of their long but delightful journey from Albuquerque to San Diego in the limousine.

"It was one of the most fortunate experiments we have ever tried," he concluded; "for the child has been the sweetest and most agreeable companion imaginable, and her affection and gratitude have amply repaid us for anything we have done for her. I am determined she shall not leave us, sir. When we return to New York I shall consult the best specialist to be had, and I am confident she can be fully cured and made as good as new."

The other man had listened intently, and when the story was finished he sat silent for a time, as if considering and pondering over what he had heard. Then, without warning, he announced quietly:

"I am Anson Jones."

Uncle John fairly gasped for breath.

"You Anson Jones!" he exclaimed. Then, with plausible suspicion he added: "I myself saw that you are registered as C.B. Jones."

"It is the same thing," was the reply. "My name is Collanson--but my family always called me 'Anson', when I had a family--and by that name I was best known in the mining camps. That is what deceived you."

"But--dear me!--I don't believe Myrtle knows her uncle's name is Collanson."

"Probably not. Her mother, sir, my sister, was my only remaining relative, the only person on earth who cared for me--although I foolishly believed another did. I worked for success as much on Kitty's account--Kitty was Myrtle's mother--as for my own sake. I intended some day to make her comfortable and happy, for I knew her husband's death had left her poor and friendless. I did not see her for years, nor write to her often; it was not my way. But Kitty always knew I loved her."

He paused and sat silent a moment. Then he resumed, in his quiet, even tones:

"There is another part of my story that you must know to understand me fully; to know why I am now a hopeless, desperate man; or was until--until last night, perhaps. Some years ago, when in Boston, I fell in love with a beautiful girl. I am nearly fifty, and she was not quite thirty, but it never occurred to me that I was too old to win her love, and she frankly

confessed she cared for me. But she said she could not marry a poor man and would therefore wait for me to make a fortune. Then I might be sure she would marry me. I believed her. I do not know why men believe women. It is an absurd thing to do. I did it; but other men have been guilty of a like folly. Ah, how I worked and planned! One cannot always make a fortune in a short time. It took me years, and all the time she renewed her promises and kept my hopes and my ambitions alive.

"At last I won the game, as I knew I should do in time. It was a big strike. I discovered the 'Blue Bonnet' mine, and sold a half interest in it for a million. Then I hurried to Boston to claim my bride.... She had been married just three months, after waiting, or pretending to wait, for me for nearly ten years! She married a poor lawyer, too, after persistently refusing me because I was poor. She laughed at my despair and coldly advised me to find some one else to share my fortune."

He paused again and wearily passed his hand over his eyes--a familiar gesture, as Myrtle knew. His voice had grown more and more dismal as he proceeded, and just now he seemed as desolate and unhappy as when first they saw him at the Grand Canyon.

"I lived through it somehow," he continued; "but the blow stunned me. It stuns me yet. Like a wounded beast I slunk away to find my sister, knowing she would try to comfort me. She was dead. Her daughter Myrtle, whom I had never seen, had been killed in an automobile accident. That is what her aunt, a terrible woman named Martha Dean, told me, although now I know it was a lie, told to cover her own baseness in sending an unprotected child to the far West to seek an unknown uncle. I paid Martha Dean back the money she claimed she had spent for Myrtle's funeral; that was mere robbery, I suppose, but not to be compared with the crime of her false report. I found myself bereft of sweetheart, sister--even an unknown niece. Despair claimed me. I took the first train for the West, dazed and utterly despondent. Some impulse led me to stop off at the Grand Canyon, and there I saw the means of ending all my misery. But Myrtle interfered."

Uncle John, now thoroughly interested and sympathetic, leaned over and said solemnly:

"The hand of God was in that!"

Mr. Jones nodded.

"I am beginning to believe it," he replied. "The girl's face won me even in that despairing mood. She has Kitty's eyes."

"They are beautiful eyes," said Uncle John, earnestly. "Sir, you have found in your niece one of the sweetest and most lovely girls that ever lived. I congratulate you!"

Mr. Jones nodded again. His mood had changed again since they began to speak of Myrtle. His eyes now glowed with pleasure and pride. He clasped Mr. Merrick's hand in his own as he said with feeling:

"She has saved me, sir. Even before I knew she was my niece I began to wonder if it would not pay me to live for her sake. And now--"

"And now you are sure of it," cried Uncle John, emphatically. "But who is to break the news to Myrtle?"

"No one, just yet," was the reply. "Allow me, sir, if you please, to keep her in ignorance of the truth a little longer. I only made the discovery myself today, you see, and I need time to think it all out and determine how best to take advantage of my good fortune."

"I shall respect your wish, sir," said Mr. Merrick.

The girls came trooping back then, and instead of running away Anson Jones remained to talk with them.

Beth and Patsy were really surprised to find the "Sad One" chatting pleasantly with Uncle John. The Major looked at the man curiously, not understanding the change in him. But Myrtle was quite proud of the progress he was making and his improved spirits rendered the girl very happy indeed. Why she should take such an interest in this man she could not have explained, except that he had been discouraged and hopeless and she had succeeded in preventing him from destroying his life and given him courage to face the world anew. But surely that was enough, quite sufficient to give her a feeling of "proprietaryship," as Patsy had expressed it, in this queer personage. Aside from all this, she was growing to like the man who owed so much to her. Neither Patsy nor Beth could yet see much to interest them or to admire in his gloomy character; but Myrtle's intuition led her to see beneath the surface, and

she knew there were lovable traits in Mr. Jones' nature if he could only be induced to display them.