

CHAPTER XXII - THE CONFESSION

After that evening the man attached himself to the party on every possible occasion. Sometimes in their trips around Coronado he rode in their automobile, at other times he took Myrtle, and perhaps one other, in his own car. Every day he seemed brighter and more cheerful, until even Major Doyle admitted he was not a bad companion.

Three weeks later they moved up to Los Angeles, taking two days for the trip and stopping at Riverside and Redlands on the way. They established their headquarters at one of the handsome Los Angeles hotels and from there made little journeys through the surrounding country, the garden spot of Southern California. One day they went to Pasadena, which boasts more splendid residences than any city of its size in the world; at another time they visited Hollywood, famed as "the Paradise of Flowers." Both mountains and sea were within easy reach, and there was so much to do that the time passed all too swiftly.

It was on their return from such a day's outing that Myrtle met with her life's greatest surprise. Indeed, the surprise was shared by all but Uncle John, who had religiously kept the secret of Mr. Jones' identity.

As they reached the hotel this eventful evening Mr. Merrick said to the girls:

"After you have dressed for dinner meet us on the parlor floor. We dine privately to-night."

They were mildly astonished at the request, but as Uncle John was always doing some unusual thing they gave the matter little thought. However, on reaching the parlor floor an hour later they found Mr. Merrick, the Major and Mr. Jones in a group awaiting them, and all were garbed in their dress suits, with rare flowers in their buttonholes.

"What is it, then?" asked Patsy. "A treat?"

"I think so," said Uncle John, smiling. "Your arm, please, Miss Doyle."

The Major escorted Beth and Mr. Jones walked solemnly beside Myrtle, who still used crutches, but more as a matter of convenience than because they were necessary. At the end of a corridor a waiter threw

open the door of a small but beautiful banquet room, where a round table, glistening with cut glass and silver, was set for six. In the center of the table was a handsome centerpiece decorated with vines of myrtle, while the entire room was filled with sprays of the dainty vines, alive with their pretty blue flowers.

"Goodness me!" exclaimed Patsy, laughing gleefully. "This seems to be our little Myrtle's especial spread. Who is the host, Uncle John?"

"Mr. Jones, of course," announced Beth, promptly.

Myrtle blushed and glanced shyly at Mr. Jones. His face was fairly illumined with pleasure. He placed her in the seat of honor and said gravely:

"This is indeed Myrtle's entertainment, for she has found something. It is also partly my own thanksgiving banquet, my friends; for I, too, have found something."

His tone was so serious that all remained silent as they took their seats, and during the many courses served the conversation was less lively than on former occasions when there had been no ceremony. Myrtle tried hard to eat, but there was a question in her eyes--a question that occupied her all through the meal. When, finally, the dessert was served and the servants had withdrawn and left them to themselves, the girl could restrain her curiosity no longer.

"Tell me, Mr. Jones," she said, turning to him as he sat beside her; "what have you found?"

He was deliberate as ever in answering.

"You must not call me 'Mr. Jones,' hereafter," said he.

"Why not? Then, what shall I call you?" she returned, greatly perplexed.

"I think it would be more appropriate for you to call me 'Uncle Anson.'"

"Uncle Anson! Why, Uncle Anson is--is--"

She paused, utterly bewildered, but with a sudden suspicion that made her head whirl.

"It strikes me, Myrtle," said Uncle John, cheerfully, "that you have never been properly introduced to Mr. Jones. If I remember aright you scraped acquaintance with him and had no regular introduction. So I will now perform that agreeable office. Miss Myrtle Dean, allow me to present your uncle, Mr. Collanson B. Jones."

"Collanson!" repeated all the girls, in an astonished chorus.

"That is my name," said Mr. Jones, the first smile they had seen radiating his grim countenance. "All the folks at home, among them my sister Kitty--your mother, my dear--called me 'Anson'; and that is why, I suppose, old Martha Dean knew me only as your 'Uncle Anson.' Had she told you my name was Collanson you might have suspected earlier that 'C.B. Jones' was your lost uncle. Lost only because he was unable to find you, Myrtle. While you were journeying West in search of him he was journeying East. But I'm glad, for many reasons, that you did not know me. It gave me an opportunity to learn the sweetness of your character. Now I sincerely thank God that He led you to me, to reclaim me and give me something to live for. If you will permit me, my dear niece, I will hereafter devote my whole life to you, and earnestly try to promote your happiness."

During this long speech Myrtle had sat wide eyed and white, watching his face and marveling at the strangeness of her fate. But she was very, very glad, and young enough to quickly recover from the shock.

There was a round of applause from Patsy, Beth, the Major and Uncle John, which served admirably to cover their little friend's embarrassment and give her time to partially collect herself. Then she turned to Mr. Jones and with eyes swimming with tears tenderly kissed his furrowed cheek.

"Oh, Uncle Anson; I'm so happy!" she said.

Of course Myrtle's story is told, now. But it may be well to add that Uncle Anson did for her all that Uncle John had intended doing, and even more. The consultation with a famous New York specialist, on their return a month later, assured the girl that no painful operation was necessary. The splendid outing she had enjoyed, with the fine air of the far West, had built up her health to such an extent that nature remedied the ill she had suffered. Myrtle took no crutches back to New York--a city

now visited for the first time in her life--nor did she ever need them again. The slight limp she now has will disappear in time, the doctors say, and the child is so radiantly happy that neither she nor her friends notice the limp at all.

Patsy Doyle, as owner of the pretty flat building on Willing Square, has rented to Uncle Anson the apartment just opposite that of the Doyles, and Mr. Jones has furnished it cosily to make a home for his niece, to whom he is so devoted that Patsy declares her own doting and adoring father is fairly outclassed.

The Major asserts this is absurd; but he has acquired a genuine friendship for Anson Jones, who is no longer sad but has grown lovable under Myrtle's beneficent influence.