

CHAPTER VII

THE INVALID

The girls intercepted Maud Stanton when she returned to the hotel that evening, and told her all about A. Jones. The tale was finished long before that dyspeptic youth had wakened from his slumbers. Then they all dressed for dinner and afterward met in the lobby, where Uncle John told them he had arranged to have a big round table prepared for the entire party, including a seat for A. Jones, who might like to join them.

However, the young man did not make his appearance, and as they trooped into the dining room Patsy said resentfully:

"I believe A. Jones is in a trance and needs rolling on a barrel again."

"He probably found himself too weak to appear in public," replied Flo Stanton. "I'm sure if I had been all but drowned a few hours ago, I would prefer bed to society."

"I'm astonished that he summoned energy to visit us at all," declared Mrs. Montrose. "He may be weak and ill, but at least he is grateful."

"Jones seems a vary gentlemanly young fellow," said Mr. Merrick. "He is a bit shy and retiring, which is perhaps due to his lonely life on his

island; but I think he has been well brought up."

As they came out from dinner they observed the porters wheeling several big trunks up the east corridor. The end of each trunk was lettered: "A. Jones."

"Well," said Beth, with an amused smile, "he intends to stay a while, anyhow. You'll have a chance to meet him yet, Maud."

"I'm glad of that," answered Maud, "for I am anxious to calculate the worth of the life I helped to save. Your reports are ambiguous, and I am undecided whether you are taking the boy seriously or as a joke. From your description of his personal appearance, I incline to the belief that under ordinary circumstances I would not look twice at Mr. Jones, but having been partly instrumental in preserving him to the world, I naturally feel a proprietary interest in him."

"Of course," said Flo. "He's worth one look, out of pure curiosity; but it would be dreadful to have him tagging you around, expressing his everlasting gratitude."

"I don't imagine he'll do that," observed Patsy Doyle. "A. Jones strikes me as having a fair intellect in a shipwrecked body, and I'll wager a hatpin against a glove-buttoner that he won't bore you. At the same time he may not interest you--or any of us--for long, unless he develops talents we have not discovered. I wonder why he doesn't use his whole

name. That mystic 'A' puzzles me."

"It's an English notion, I suppose," said Mrs. Montrose.

"But he isn't English; he's American."

"Sangoese," corrected Beth.

"Perhaps he doesn't like his name, or is ashamed of it," suggested Uncle John.

"It may be 'Absalom,'" said Flo. "We once knew an actor named Absalom, and he always called himself 'A. Judson Keith.' He was a dignified chap, and when we girls one day called him 'Ab,' he nearly had hysterics."

"Mr. Werner had hysterics to-day," asserted Maud, gravely; "but I didn't blame him. He sent out a party to ride down a steep hill on horseback, as part of a film story, and a bad accident resulted. One of the horses stepped in a gopher hole and fell, and a dozen others piled up on him, including their riders."

"How dreadful!" was the general exclamation.

"Several of the horses broke their legs and had to be shot," continued Maud; "but none of the riders was seriously injured except little Sadie Martin, who was riding a bronco. The poor thing was caught under

one of the animals and the doctor says she won't be able to work again for months."

"Goodness me! And all for the sake of a picture?" cried Patsy indignantly. "I hope you don't take such risks, Maud."

"No; Flo and I have graduated from what is called 'the bronco bunch,' and now do platform work entirely. To be sure we assume some minor risks in that, but nothing to compare with the other lines of business."

"I hope the little girl you mentioned will get well, and has enough money to tide her over this trouble," said Uncle John anxiously.

"The manager will look after her," returned Mrs. Montrose. "Our people are very good about that and probably Sadie Martin's salary will continue regularly until she is able to work again."

"Well," said Beth, drawing a long breath, "I suppose we shall read all about it in the morning papers."

"Oh, no!" exclaimed Maud and added: "These accidents never get into the papers. They happen quite often, around Los Angeles, where ten thousand or more people make their living from motion pictures; but the public is protected from all knowledge of such disasters, which would detract from their pleasure in pictures and perhaps render all films unpopular."

"I thought the dear public loved the dare-devil acts," remarked Arthur Weldon.

"Oh, it does," agreed Mrs. Montrose; "yet those who attend the picture theatres seem not to consider the action taking place before their eyes to be real. Here are pictures only--a sort of amplified story book--and the spectators like them exciting; but if they stopped to reflect that men and women in the flesh were required to do these dangerous feats for their entertainment, many would be too horrified to enjoy the scenes. Of course the makers of the pictures guard their actors in all possible ways; yet, even so, casualties are bound to occur."

They had retired to a cosy corner of the public drawing room and were conversing on this interesting topic when they espied A. Jones walking toward them. The youth was attired in immaculate evening dress, but his step was slow and dragging and his face pallid.

Arthur and Uncle John drew up an easy chair for him while Patsy performed the introductions to Mrs. Montrose and her nieces. Very earnestly the boy grasped the hand of the young girl who had been chiefly responsible for his rescue, thanking her more by his manner than in his few carefully chosen words.

As for Maud, she smilingly belittled her effort, saying lightly: "I know I must not claim that it didn't amount to anything, for your life is valuable, Mr. Jones, I'm sure. But I had almost nothing to do beyond

calling Patsy Doyle's attention to you and then swimming out to keep you afloat until help came. I'm a good swimmer, so it was not at all difficult."

"Moreover," he added, "you would have done the same thing for anyone in distress."

"Certainly."

"I realize that. I am quite a stranger to you. Nevertheless, my gratitude is your due and I hope you will accept it as the least tribute I can pay you. Of all that throng of bathers, only you noticed my peril and came to my assistance."

"Fate!" whispered Flo impressively.

"Nonsense," retorted her sister. "I happened to be the only one looking out to sea. I think, Mr. Jones, you owe us apologies more than gratitude, for your folly was responsible for the incident. You were altogether too venturesome. Such action on this coast, where the surf rolls high and creates an undertow, is nothing less than foolhardy."

"I'm sure you are right," he admitted. "I did not know this coast, and foolishly imagined the old Pacific, in which I have sported and played since babyhood, was my friend wherever I found it."

"I hope you are feeling better and stronger this evening," said Mr. Merrick. "We expected you to join us at dinner."

"I--I seldom dine in public," he explained, flushing slightly. "My bill-of-fare is very limited, you know, owing to my--my condition; and so I carry my food-tablets around with me, wherever I go, and eat them in my own room."

"Food-tablets!" cried Patsy, horrified.

"Yes. They are really wafers--very harmless--and I am permitted to eat nothing else."

"No wonder your stomach is bad and you're a living skeleton!" asserted the girl, with scorn.

"My dear," said Uncle John, gently chiding her, "we must give Mr. Jones the credit for knowing what is best for him."

"Not me, sir!" protested the boy, in haste. "I'm very ignorant about--about health, and medicine and the like. But in New York I consulted a famous doctor, and he told me what to do."

"That's right," nodded the old gentleman, who had never been ill in his life. "Always take the advice of a doctor, listen to the advice of a lawyer, and refuse the advise of a banker. That's worldly wisdom."

"Were you ill when you left your home?" inquired Mrs. Montrose, looking at the young man with motherly sympathy.

"Not when I left the island," he said. "I was pretty well up to that time. But during the long ocean voyage I was terribly sick, and by the time we got to San Francisco my stomach was a wreck. Then I tried to eat the rich food at your restaurants and hotels--we live very plainly in Sangoa, you know--and by the time I got to New York I was a confirmed dyspeptic and suffering tortures. Everything I ate disagreed with me. So I went to a great specialist, who has invented these food tablets for cases just like mine, and he ordered me to eat nothing else."

"And are you better?" asked Maud.

He hesitated.

"Sometimes I imagine I am. I do not suffer so much pain, but I--I seem to grow weaker all the time."

"No wonder!" cried Patsy. "If you starve yourself you can't grow strong."

He looked at her with an expression of surprise. Then he asked abruptly:

"What would you advise me to do, Miss Doyle?"

A chorus of laughter greeted this question. Patsy flushed a trifle but covered her confusion by demanding: "Would you follow my advice?"

He made a little grimace. There was humor in the boy, despite his dyspepsia.

"I understand there is a law forbidding suicide," he replied. "But I asked your advice in an attempt to discover what you thought of my absurd condition. Now that you call my attention to it, I believe I am starving myself. I need stronger and more nourishing food; and yet the best specialist in your progressive country has regulated my diet."

"I don't believe much in specialists," asserted Patsy. "If you do, go ahead and kill yourself, in defiance of the law. According to common sense you ought to eat plenty of good, wholesome food, but you may be so disordered--in your interior--that even that would prove fatal. So I won't recommend it."

"I'm doomed, either way," he said quietly. "I know that."

"How do you know it?" demanded Maud in a tone of resentment.

He was silent a moment. Then he replied:

"I cannot remember how we drifted into this very personal argument. It seems wrong for me to be talking about myself to those who are

practically strangers, and you will realize how unused I am to the society of ladies by considering my rudeness in this interview."

"Pshaw!" exclaimed Uncle John; "we are merely considering you as a friend. You must believe that we are really interested in you," he continued, laying a kindly hand on the young fellow's shoulder. "You seem in a bad way, it's true, but your condition is far from desperate. Patsy's frankness--it's her one fault and her chief virtue--led you to talk about yourself, and I'm surprised to find you so despondent and--and--what do you call it, Beth?"

"Pessimistic?"

"That's it--pessimistic."

"But you're wrong, sir!" said the boy with a smile; "I may not be elated over my fatal disease, but neither am I despondent. I force myself to keep going when I wonder how the miserable machine responds to my urging, and I shall keep it going, after a fashion, until the final breakdown. Fate weaves the thread of our lives, I truly believe, and she didn't use very good material when she started mine. But that doesn't matter," he added quickly. "I'm trying to do a little good as I go along and not waste my opportunities. I'm obeying my doctor's orders and facing the future with all the philosophy I can summon. So now, if you--who have given me a new lease of life--think I can use it to any better advantage, I am willing to follow your counsel."

His tone was more pathetic than his words. Maud, as she looked at the boy and tried to realize that his days were numbered, felt her eyes fill with tears. Patsy sniffed scornfully, but said nothing. It was Beth who remarked with an air of unconcern that surprised those who knew her unsympathetic nature:

"It would be presumptuous for us to interfere, either with Fate or with Nature. You're probably dead wrong about your condition, for a sick person has no judgment whatever, but I've noticed the mind has a good deal to do with one's health. If you firmly believe you're going to die, why, what can you expect?"

No one cared to contradict this and a pause followed that was growing awkward when they were all aroused by the sound of hasty footsteps approaching their corner.