

CHAPTER IX

DOCTOR PATSY

Next morning Uncle John and the Weldons--including the precious baby--went for a ride into the mountains, while Beth and Patsy took their embroidery into a sunny corner of the hotel lobby.

It was nearly ten o'clock when A. Jones discovered the two girls and came tottering toward them. Tottering is the right word; he fairly swayed as he made his way to the secluded corner.

"I wish he'd use a cane," muttered Beth in an undertone. "I have the feeling that he's liable to bump his nose any minute."

Patsy drew up a chair for him, although he endeavored to prevent her.

"Are you feeling better this morning?" she inquired.

"I--I think so," he answered doubtfully. "I don't seem to get back my strength, you see."

"Were you stronger before your accident?" asked Beth.

"Yes, indeed. I went swimming, you remember. But perhaps I was not

strong enough to do that. I--I'm very careful of myself, yet I seem to grow weaker all the time."

There was a brief silence, during which the girls plied their needles.

"Are you going to stay in this hotel?" demanded Patsy, in her blunt way.

"For a time, I think. It is very pleasant here," he said.

"Have you had breakfast?"

"I took a food-tablet at daybreak."

"Huh!" A scornful exclamation. Then she glanced at the open door of the dining-hall and laying aside her work she rose with a determined air and said:

"Come with me!"

"Where?"

For answer she assisted him to rise. Then she took his hand and marched him across the lobby to the dining room.

He seemed astonished at this proceeding but made no resistance. Seated at a small table she called a waitress and said:

"Bring a cup of chocolate, a soft-boiled egg and some toast."

"Pardon me, Miss Doyle," he said; "I thought you had breakfasted."

"So I have," she replied. "The breakfast I've ordered is for you, and you're going to eat it if I have to ram it down your throat."

"But--Miss Doyle!"

"You've told us you are doomed. Well, you're going to die with a full stomach."

"But the doctor--"

"Bother the doctor! I'm your doctor, now, and I won't send in a bill, thank your stars."

He looked at her with his sad little smile.

"Isn't this a rather high-handed proceeding, Miss Doyle?"

"Perhaps."

"I haven't employed you as my physician, you know."

"True. But you've deliberately put yourself in my power."

"How?"

"In the first place, you tagged us here to this hotel."

"You don't mind, do you?"

"Not in the least. It's a public hostelry. In the second place, you confided to us your disease and your treatment of it--which was really none of our business."

"I--I was wrong to do that. But you led me on and--I'm so lonely--and you all seemed so generous and sympathetic--that I--I--"

"That you unwittingly posted us concerning your real trouble. Do you realize what it is? You're a hypo--hypo--what do they call it?--hypochondriac!"

"I am not!"

"And your doctor--your famous specialist--is a fool."

"Oh, Miss Doyle!"

"Also you are a--a chump, to follow his fool advice. You don't need

sympathy, Mr. A. Jones. What you need is a slapstick."

"A--a--"

"A slapstick. And that's what you're going to get if you don't obey orders."

Here the maid set down the breakfast, ranging the dishes invitingly before the invalid. His face had expressed all the emotions from amazement to terror during Patsy's tirade and now he gazed from her firm, determined features to the eggs and toast, in an uncertain, helpless way that caused the girl a severe effort to curb a burst of laughter.

"Now, then," she said, "get busy. I'll fix your egg. Do you want more sugar in your chocolate? Taste it and see. And if you don't butter that toast before it gets cold it won't be fit to eat."

He looked at her steadily now, again smiling.

"You're not joking, Miss Doyle?"

"I'm in dead earnest."

"Of course you realize this is the--the end?"

"Of your foolishness? I hope so. You used to eat like a sensible boy,

didn't you?"

"When I was well."

"You're well now. Your only need is sustaining, strengthening food. I came near ordering you a beefsteak, but I'll reserve that for lunch."

He sipped the chocolate.

"Yes; it needs more sugar," he said quietly. "Will you please butter my toast? It seems to me such a breakfast is worth months of suffering. How delicious this egg is! It was the fragrance of the egg and toast that conquered me. That, and--"

"And one sensible, determined girl. Don't look at me as if I were a murderess! I'm your best friend--a friend in need. And don't choke down your food. Eat slowly. Fletcherize--chew your food, you know. I know you're nearly famished, but you must gradually accustom yourself to a proper diet."

He obeyed meekly. Patsy's face was calm, but her heart beat fast, with a thrill of fear she could not repress. Acting on impulse, as she had, the girl now began to consider that she was personally responsible for whatever result might follow this radical treatment for dyspepsia. Had she been positive it was dyspepsia, she would never have dared interfere with a doctor's orders; but she felt that the boy needed food

and would die unless he had it. He might die from the effect of this unusual repast, in which case she would never forgive herself.

Meantime, the boy had cast aside all fear. He had protested, indeed, but his protests being overruled he accepted his food and its possible consequences with philosophic resignation and a growing satisfaction.

Patsy balked on the third slice of toast and took it away from him. She also denied him a second cup of chocolate. He leaned back in his chair with a sigh of content and said:

"Bless the hen that laid that egg! No dainty was ever more delicious. And now," he added, rising, "let us go and inquire the address of a good undertaker. I have made my will, and I'd like to be cremated--it's so much nicer than the old-fashioned burial, don't you think?"

"I'll attend to all that, if you wish," she replied, trying to repress a shudder as she followed him from the room. "Do you smoke?"

"I used to, but the doctor forbade it; so I gave it up entirely."

"Go over to that stand and buy a cigar. Then you may sit beside Beth and me and smoke it."

The girl did not wholly approve of smoking and had often chided Uncle John and her father and Arthur Weldon for indulging in the habit; but

this advice to young Jones was given in desperation, because all the men of her family stoutly affirmed that a cigar after a meal assisted digestion. She resumed her former seat beside Beth, and her cousin quickly read the anxiety on her face.

"What did you do, Patricia?"

"I fed him."

"Did he really eat?"

"Like a starved cat."

"Hm-m-m," said Beth. "What next, I wonder?"

Patsy wondered, too, the cold shivers chasing one another up and down her back. The boy was coming toward them, coolly puffing a cigar. He did not seem to totter quite so much as before, but he was glad to sink into an easy chair.

"How do you feel?" asked Beth, regarding him curiously.

"Like one of those criminals who are pampered with all the good things of life before being led to the scaffold."

"Any pains?"

He shook his head.

"Not yet. I've asked the clerk, whenever I signal him, to send someone to carry me to my room. If I'm not able to say good-bye to you, please accept now my thanks for all your kindness to a stranger. You see, I'm not sure whether I'll have a sudden seizure or the pains will come on gradually."

"What pains?" demanded Patsy.

"I can't explain them. Don't you believe something is bound to happen?" he inquired, nervously removing the ash from his cigar.

"To be sure. You're going to get well."

He made no reply, but sat watching Beth's nimble fingers. Patsy was too excited to resume her embroidery.

"I wonder if you are old enough to smoke?" remarked Beth.

"I'm over twenty-one."

"Indeed! We decided you were about eighteen."

"But we are not Spanish in Sangoa."

"What are your people?"

"Formerly all Americans. The younger generation are, like myself I suppose, Sangoans by birth. But there isn't a black or yellow or brown man on our island."

"How many inhabitants has Sangoa?"

"About six hundred, all told."

There was silence for a while.

"Any pains yet?" inquired Beth.

"Not yet. But I'm feeling drowsy. With your permission I'll lie down and take a nap. I slept very little last night."

He threw away his cigar, which he had smoked nearly to the end, and rising without assistance, bowed and walked away.

"Will he ever waken, I wonder?" said Beth softly.

"Of course," declared Patsy. "He has crossed the Rubicon and is going to get well. I feel it in my bones!"

"Let us hope," responded Beth, "that Ajo also feels it in his bones, rather than in his stomach."