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*** START OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK AUNT JANE'S NIECES AND UNCLE JOHN ***

JOHN***

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AUNT JANE'S NIECES AND UNCLE JOHN

BY

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1911

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCING "MUMBLES"

Major Gregory Doyle paced nervously up and down the floor of the cosy sitting room.

"Something's surely happened to our Patsy!" he exclaimed.

A little man with a calm face and a bald head, who was seated near the fire, continued to read his newspaper and paid no attention to the outburst.

"Something has happened to Patsy!" repeated the Major, "Patsy" meaning his own and only daughter Patricia.

"Something is always happening to everyone," said the little man, turning his paper indifferently. "Something is happening to me, for I can't find the rest of this article. Something is happening to you, for you're losing your temper."

"I'm not, sir! I deny it."

"As for Patsy," continued the other, "she is sixteen years old and knows New York like a book. The girl is safe enough."

"Then where is she? Tell me that, sir. Here it is, seven o'clock, dark as pitch and raining hard, and Patsy is never out after six. Can you, John Merrick, sit there like a lump o' putty and do nothing, when your niece and my own darlin' Patsy is lost—or strayed or stolen?"

"What would you propose doing?" asked Uncle John, looking up with a smile.

"We ought to get out the police department. It's raining and cold, and—"

"Then we ought to get out the fire department. Call Mary to put on more coal and let's have it warm and cheerful when Patsy comes in."

"But, sir—"

"The trouble with you, Major, is that dinner is half an hour late. One can imagine all sorts of horrible things on an empty stomach. Now, then—"

He paused, for a pass-key rattled in the hall door and a moment later Patsy Doyle, rosy and animated, fresh from the cold and wet outside, smilingly greeted them.

She had an umbrella, but her cloak was dripping with moisture and in its ample folds was something huddled and bundled up like a baby, which she carefully protected.

"So, then," exclaimed the Major, coming forward for a kiss, "you're back at last, safe and sound. Whatever kept ye out 'til this time o' night, Patsy darlin'?" he added, letting the brogue creep into his tone, as he did when stirred by any emotion.

Uncle John started to take off her wet cloak.

"Look out!" cried Patsy; "you'll disturb Mumbles."

The two men looked at her bundle curiously.

"Who's Mumbles?" asked one.

"What on earth is Mumbles?" inquired the other.

The bundle squirmed and wriggled. Patsy sat down on the floor and carefully unwound the folds of the cloak. A tiny dog, black and shaggy, put his head out, blinked sleepily at the lights, pulled his fat, shapeless body away from the bandages and trotted solemnly over to the fireplace. He didn't travel straight ahead, as dogs ought to walk, but "cornerwise," as Patsy described it; and when he got to the hearth he rolled himself into a ball, lay down and went to sleep.

During this performance a tense silence had pervaded the room. The Major looked at the dog rather gloomily; Uncle John with critical eyes that held a smile in them; Patsy with ecstatic delight.

"Isn't he a dear!" she exclaimed.

"It occurs to me," said the Major stiffly, "that this needs an explanation. Do you mean to say, Patsy Doyle, that you've worried the hearts out of us this past hour, and kept the dinner waiting, all because of a scurvy bit of an animal?"

"Pshaw!" said Uncle John. "Speak for yourself, Major. I wasn't worried a bit."

"You see," explained Patsy, rising to take off her things and put them away, "I was coming home early when I first met Mumbles. A little boy had him, with a string tied around his neck, and when Mumbles tried to run up to me the boy jerked him back cruelly—and afterward kicked him. That made me mad."

"Of course," said Uncle John, nodding wisely.

"I cuffed the boy, and he said he'd take it out on Mumbles, as soon as I'd gone away. I didn't like that. I offered to buy the dog, but the boy didn't dare sell him. He said it belonged to his father, who'd kill him and kick up a row besides if he didn't bring Mumbles home. So I found out where they lived and as it wasn't far away I went home with him."

"Crazy Patsy!" smiled Uncle John.

"And the dinner waiting!" groaned the Major, reproachfully.

"Well, I had a time, you can believe!" continued Patsy, with animation. "The man was a big brute, and half drunk. He grabbed up the little doggie and threw it into a box, and then told me to go home and mind my business."

"Which of course you refused to do."

"Of course. I'd made up my mind to have that dog."

"Dogs," said the Major, "invariably are nuisances."

"Not invariably," declared Patsy. "Mumbles is different. Mumbles is a good doggie, and wise and knowing, although he's only a baby dog yet. And I just couldn't leave him to be cuffed and kicked and thrown around by those brutes. When the man found I was determined to have Mumbles he demanded twenty-five dollars."

"Twenty-five dollars!" It startled Uncle John.

"For that bit of rags and meat?" asked the Major, looking at the puppy with disfavor. "Twenty-five cents would be exorbitant."

"The man misjudged me," observed Patsy, with a merry laugh that matched her twinkling blue eyes. "In the end he got just two dollars for Mumbles, and when I came away he bade me good-bye very respectfully. The boy howled. He hasn't any dog to kick and is broken-hearted. As for Mumbles, he's going to lead a respectable life and be treated like a dog."

"Do you mean to keep him?" inquired the Major.

"Why not?" said Patsy. "Don't you like him, Daddy?"

Her father turned Mumbles over with his toe. The puppy lay upon its back, lazily, with all four paws in the air, and cast a comical glance from one beady bright eye at the man who had disturbed him.

The Major sighed.

"He can't hunt, Patsy; he's not even a mouser."

"We haven't a mouse in the house."

"He's neither useful nor ornamental. From the looks o' the beast he's only good to sleep and eat."

"What's the odds?" laughed Patsy, cuddling Mumbles up in her arms. "We don't expect use or ornamentation from Mumbles. All we ask is his companionship."

Mary called them to dinner just then, and the girl hurried to her room to make a hasty toilet while the men sat down at the table and eyed their soup reflectively.

"This addition to the family," remarked Uncle John, "need not make you at all unhappy, my dear Major. Don't get jealous of Mumbles, for heaven's sake, for the little brute may add a bit to Patsy's bliss."

"It's the first time I've ever allowed a dog in the house."

"You are not running this present establishment. It belongs exclusively to Patsy."

"I've always hated the sight of a woman coddling a dog," added the Major, frowning.

"I know. I feel the same way myself. But it isn't the dog's fault. It's the woman's. And Patsy won't make a fool of herself over that frowsy puppy, I assure you. On the contrary, she's likely to get a lot of joy out of her new plaything, and if you really want to make her happy, Major, don't discourage this new whim, absurd as it seems. Let Patsy alone. And let Mumbles alone."

The girl came in just then, bringing sunshine with her. Patsy Doyle was not very big for her years, and some people unkindly described her form as "chubby." She had glorious red hair—really-truly red—and her blue eyes were the merriest, sweetest eyes any girl could possess. You seldom noticed her freckles, her saucy chin or her turned-up nose; you only saw the laughing eyes and crown of golden red, and seeing them you liked Patsy Doyle at once and imagined she was very good to look at, if not strictly beautiful. No one had friends more loyal, and these two old men—the stately Major and round little Uncle John—fairly worshiped Patsy.

No one might suspect, from the simple life of this household, which occupied the second corner flat at 3708 Willing Square, that Miss Doyle was an heiress. Not only that, but perhaps one of the very richest girls in New York. And the reason is readily explained when I state the fact that Patsy's Uncle John Merrick, the round little bald-headed man who sat contentedly eating his soup, was a man of many millions, and this girl his favorite niece. An old bachelor who had acquired an immense fortune in the far Northwest, Mr. Merrick had lately retired from active business and come East to seek any relatives that might remain to him after forty years' absence. His sister Jane had gathered around her three nieces—Louise Merrick, Elizabeth De Graf and Patricia Doyle—and when Aunt Jane died Uncle John adopted these three girls and made their happiness the one care of his jolly, unselfish life. At that time Major Doyle, Patsy's only surviving parent, was a poor bookkeeper; but Uncle John gave him charge of his vast property interests, and loving Patsy almost as devotedly as did her father, made his home with the Doyles and began to enjoy himself for the first time in his life.

At the period when this story opens the eldest niece, Louise Merrick, had just been married to Arthur Weldon, a prosperous young business man, and the remaining two nieces, as well as Uncle John, were feeling rather lonely and depressed. The bride had been gone on her honeymoon three days, and during the last two days it had rained persistently; so, until Patsy came home from a visit to Beth and brought the tiny dog with her, the two old gentlemen had been feeling dreary enough.

Patsy always livened things up. Nothing could really depress this spirited girl for long, and she was always doing some interesting thing to create a little excitement.

"If she hadn't bought a twenty-five cent pup for two dollars," remarked the Major, "she might have brought home an orphan from the gutters, or a litter of tomcats, or one of the goats that eat the tin cans at Harlem. Perhaps, after all, we should be thankful it's only—what's his name?"

"Mumbles," said Patsy, merrily. "The boy said they called him that because he mumbled in his sleep. Listen!"

Indeed, the small waif by the fire was emitting a series of noises that seemed a queer mixture of low growls and whines—evidence unimpeachable that he had been correctly named.

At Patsy's shout of laughter, supplemented by Uncle John's chuckles and a reproachful cough from the Major, Mumbles awakened and lifted his head. It may be an eye discovered the dining-table in the next room, or an intuitive sense of smell directed him, for presently the small animal came trotting in—still traveling "cornerwise"—and sat up on his hind legs just beside Patsy's chair.

"That settles it," said the Major, as his daughter began feeding the dog. "Our happy home is broken up."

"Perhaps not," suggested Uncle John, reaching out to pat the soft head of Mumbles. "It may be the little beggar will liven us all up a bit."

CHAPTER II

UNCLE JOHN'S IDEA

Two hours later Uncle John, who had been dozing in his big chair by the fire while Patsy drummed on the piano, sat up abruptly and looked around him with a suddenly acquired air of decision.

"I have an idea," he announced.

"Did you find it in your dreams, then?" asked the Major, sharply.

"Why, Daddy, how cross you are!" cried Patsy. "Can't Uncle John have an idea if he wants to?"

"I'm afraid of his ideas," admitted the Major, suspiciously. "Every time he goes to sleep and catches a thought, it means trouble."

Patsy laughed, looking at her uncle curiously, and the little man smiled at her genially in return.

"It takes me a long time to figure a thing out," he said; "and when I've a problem to solve a bit of a snooze helps wonderfully. Patsy, dear, it occurs to me we're lonely."

"We surely are, Uncle!" she exclaimed.

"And in the dumps."

"Our spirits are at the bottom of the bottomless pit."

"So what we need is—a change."

"There it goes!" said the Major ruefully. "I knew very well any idea of John Merrick's would cause us misery. But understand this, you miserable home-wrecker, sir, my daughter Patsy steps not one foot out of New York this winter."

"Why not?" mildly inquired Uncle John.

"Because you've spirited her away from me times enough, and deprived her only parent of her society. First you gallivanted off to Europe, and then to Millville, and next to Elmhurst; so now, egad, I'm going to keep the girl with me if I have to throttle every idea in your wicked old head!"

"But I'm planning to take you along, this time. Major," observed Uncle John reflectively.

"Oh. Hum! Well, I can't go. There's too much business to be attended to—looking after your horrible money."

"Take a vacation. You know I don't care anything about the business. It can't go very wrong, anyhow. What does it matter if my income isn't invested properly, or the bond coupons cut when they're due? Drat the money!"

"That's what I say," added Patsy eagerly. "Be a man, Major Doyle, and put the business out of your mind. Let's go somewhere and have a good romp. It will cheer us up."

The Major stared first at one and then at the other.

"What's the programme, John?" he asked stiffly.

"It's going to be a cold winter," remarked the little man, bobbing his head up and down slowly.

"It is!" cried Patsy, clasping her hands fervently. "I can feel it in my bones."

"So we're going," said Uncle John, impressively, "to California—where they grow sunshine and roses to offset our blizzards and icicles."

"Hurray!" shouted Patsy. "I've always wanted to go to California."

"California!" said the Major, amazed; "why, it's farther away than Europe. It takes a month to get there."

"Nonsense." retorted Uncle John. "It's only four days from coast to coast. I have a time-table, somewhere," and he began searching in his pockets.

There was a silence, oppressive on the Major's part, ecstatic as far as Patsy was concerned. Uncle John found the railway folder, put on his spectacles, and began to examine it.

"At my time of life," remarked Major Doyle, who was hale and hearty as a boy, "such a trip is a great undertaking."

"Twenty-four hours to Chicago," muttered Uncle John; "and then three days to Los Angeles or San Francisco. That's all there is to it."

"Four days and four nights of dreary riding. We'd be dead by that time," prophesied the Major.

Uncle John looked thoughtful. Then he lay back in his chair and spread his handkerchief over his face again.

"No, no!" cried the Major, in alarm. "For mercy's sake, John, don't go to sleep and catch any more of those terrible ideas. No one knows where the next one might carry us—to Timbuktu or Yucatan, probably. Let's stick to California and settle the question before your hothouse brain grows any more weeds."

"Yucatan," remarked Mr. Merrick, composedly, his voice muffled by the handkerchief, "isn't a bad suggestion."

"I knew it!" wailed the Major. "How would Ethiopia or Hindustan strike you?"

Patsy laughed at him. She knew something good was in store for her and like all girls was enraptured at the thought of visiting new and interesting scenes.

"Don't bother Uncle John, Daddy," she said. "You know very well he will carry out any whim that seizes him; especially if you oppose the plan, which you usually do."

"He's the most erratic and irresponsible man that ever lived," announced her father, staring moodily at the spread handkerchief which covered Uncle John's cherub-like features. "New York is good enough for anybody, even in winter; and now that you're in society, Patsy—"

"Oh, bother society! I hate it."

"True," he agreed; "it's a regular treadmill when it has enslaved one, and keeps you going on and on without progressing a bit. The object of society is to tire you out and keep you from indulging in any other occupation."

"You know nothing about it," observed Patsy, demurely, "and that is why you love to rail at society. The things you know, Daddy dear, are the things you never remark upon."

"Huh!" grunted the Major, and relapsed into silence.

Mumbles had finished his after-dinner nap and was now awakening to activity. This dog's size, according to the Major, was "about 4x6; but you can't tell which is the 4 and which the 6." He was distressingly shaggy. Patsy could find the stump of his tail only by careful search. Seldom were both eyes uncovered by hair at the same time. But, as his new mistress had said, he was a wise little dog for one who had only known the world for a few months, and his brain was exceedingly alert. After yawning at the fire he rubbed his back against the Major's legs, sat up beside Patsy and looked at her from one eye pleadingly. Next he trotted over to Uncle John. The big white handkerchief attracted him and one corner hung down from the edge of the reclining chair. Mumbles sat up and reached for it, but could not quite get it in his teeth. So he sat down and thought it over, and presently made a leap so unexpectedly agile that Patsy roared with merriment and even the Major grinned. Uncle John, aroused, sat up and found the puppy rolling on the floor and fighting the handkerchief as if it had been some deadly foe.

"Thank goodness," sighed the Major. "The little black rascal has providently prevented you from evolving another idea."

"Not so," responded Mr. Merrick amiably. "I've thought the thing all out, and completed our programme."

"Is it still to be California?" anxiously inquired Patsy.

"Of course. I can't give up the sunshine and roses, you know. But we won't bore the Major by four solid days of railway travel. We'll break the journey, and take two or three weeks to it—perhaps a month."

"Conquering Caesar! A month!" ejaculated the old soldier, a desperate look on his face.

"Yes. Listen, both of you. We'll get to Chicago in a night and a day. We will stop off there and visit the

stockyards, and collect a few squeals for souvenirs."

"No, we won't!" declared Patsy, positively.

"We might sell Mumbles to some Chicago sausage factory," remarked the Major, "but not for two whole dollars. He wouldn't make more than half a pound at twenty cents the pound."

"There are other sights to be seen in Chicago," continued Uncle John. "Anyhow, we'll stop off long enough to get rested. Then on to Denver and Pike's Peak."

"That sounds good," said Patsy.

"At Denver," said Uncle John, "we will take a touring car and cross the mountains in it. There are good roads all the way from there to California."

"Who told you so?" demanded the Major.

"No one. It's a logical conclusion, for I've lived in the West and know the prairie roads are smoother than boulevards. However, Haggerty told me the other day that he has made the trip from Denver to Los Angeles by automobile, and what others can do, we can do."

"It will be glorious!" prophesied Patsy, delightedly.

The Major looked grave, but could find no plausible objection to offer. He really knew nothing about the West and had never had occasion to consider such a proposition before.

"We'll talk to Haggerty," he said. "But you must remember he's a desperate liar, John, and can't be trusted as a guidepost. When do you intend to start?"

"Why not to-morrow?" asked Uncle John mildly.

Even Patsy demurred at this.

"Why, we've got to get ready, Uncle," she said. "And who's going? Just we three?"

"We will take Beth along, of course." Beth was Elizabeth De Graf, another niece. "But Beth is fortunately the sort of girl who can pull up stakes and move on at an hour's notice."

"Beth is always ready for anything," agreed Patsy. "But if we are going to a warm climate we will need summer clothes."

"You can't lug many clothes in a motor car," observed the Major.

"No; but we can ship them on ahead."

"Haggerty says," remarked Uncle John, "that you won't need thin clothes until you get out to California. In fact, the mountain trip is rather cool. But it's perpetual sunshine, you know, even there, with brisk, keen air; and the whole journey, Haggerty says, is one of absolute delight."

"Who is Haggerty?" asked Patsy.

"A liar," answered the Major, positively.

"He's a very good fellow whom we sometimes meet in the city," said Uncle John. "Haggerty is on the Board, and director in a bank or two, and quite respectable. But the Major—"

"The Major's going to California just to prove that Haggerty can't speak the truth," observed that gentleman, tersely heading off any threatened criticism. "I see there is no opposing your preposterous scheme, John, so we will go with you and make the best of it. But I'm sure it's all a sad mistake. What else did Haggerty tell you?"

"He says it's best to pick up a motor car and a chauffeur in Denver, rather than ship them on from here. There are plenty of cars to be had, and men who know every inch of the road."

"That seems sensible," declared Patsy, "and we won't lose time waiting for our own car to follow by freight. I think, Uncle John, I can be ready by next Tuesday."

"Why, to-morrow's Saturday!" gasped the Major. "The business—"

"Cut the business off short," suggested his brother-in-law. "You've to cut it somewhere, you know, or you'll never get away; and, as it's my business, I hereby authorize you to neglect it from this moment

until the day of our return. When we get back you can pick up the details again and worry over it as much as you please."

"Will we ever get back?" asked the Major, doubtfully.

"If we don't, the business won't matter."

"That's the idea," cried Patsy, approvingly. "Daddy has worked hard all summer, Uncle John, looking after that annoying money of yours, and a vacation will do him oodles of good."

Major Doyle sighed.

"I misdoubt the wisdom of the trip," said he, "but I'll go, of course, if you all insist. Over the Rocky Mountains and across the Great American Desert in an automobile doesn't sound very enticing, but—"

"Haggerty says—"

"Never mind Haggerty. We'll find out for ourselves."

"And, after all," said Patsy, "there are the sunshine and roses at the end of the journey, and they ought to make up for any amount of bother in getting there."

"Girl, you're attempting to deceive me—to deceive your old Daddy," said the Major, shaking his head at her. "You wouldn't have any fun riding to California in a palace car; even the sunshine and roses couldn't excite you under such circumstances; but if there's a chance for adventure—a chance to slide into trouble and make a mighty struggle to get out again—both you and that wicked old uncle of yours will jump at it. I know ye both. And that's the real reason we're going to travel in an automobile instead of progressing comfortably as all respectable people do."

"You're a humbug," retorted Mr. Merrick. "You wouldn't go by train if I'd let you."

"No," admitted the Major; "I must be on hand to rescue you when you and Patsy go fighting windmills."

CHAPTER III

MYRTLE DEAN

"We were due in Denver three hours ago, and it's an hour's run or more yet," remarked Beth De Graf, walking briskly up and down the platform of a way station where the train had stopped for orders.

"And it's beginning to snow," observed Patricia Doyle, beside her. "I'm afraid this weather isn't very propitious for an automobile trip."

"Uncle John doesn't worry," said Beth. "He believes there is perpetual sunshine west of Denver."

"Yes; a man named Haggerty told him. But you'll notice that Daddy doesn't seem to believe the tale. Anyhow, we shall soon know the truth, Beth, and the trip is somewhat on the order of a voyage of discovery, which renders it fascinating to look forward to. There is such fun in not knowing just what is going to happen next."

"When one travels with Uncle John," returned Beth, smiling, "she knows exactly—nothing. That is why I am always eager to accept if he invites me to go anywhere with him."

The passengers thronging the platform—"stretching their legs" after the confinement of the tedious railway journey—eyed these two girls admiringly. Beth was admitted a beauty, and one of the society journals had lately announced that she had few peers in all the great metropolis. Chestnut brown hair; dark, serious and steady eyes; an exquisite complexion and rarely regular features all conspired to render the young girl wonderfully attractive. Her stride was athletic, free and graceful; her slender form well poised and dignified. Patsy, the "plug-ugly," as she called herself, was so bright and animated and her blue eyes sparkled so constantly with fun and good humor, that she attracted fully as much attention as her more sedate and more beautiful cousin, and wherever she went was sure to make a host of friends.

"See!" she cried, clasping Beth's arm; "there is that lovely girl at the window again. I've noticed her ever since the train left Chicago, and she is always in the same seat in that tourist coach. I wonder why she doesn't get out for a bit of fresh air now and then."

Beth looked up at the fair, girlish face that gazed wistfully from the window. The unknown seemed very young—not more than fourteen or fifteen years of age. She wore a blue serge suit of rather coarse weave, but it was neat and becoming. Around the modest, sweet eyes were deep circles, denoting physical suffering or prolonged worry; yet the lips smiled, wanly but persistently. She had evidently noticed Uncle John's two nieces, for her eyes followed them as they marched up and down the platform and when Patsy looked up and nodded, a soft flush suffused her features and she bowed her head in return.

At the cry of "all aboard!" a scramble was made for the coaches and Beth and Patsy, re-entering their staterooms, found their Uncle and the Major still intent upon their interminable game of cribbage.

"Let's go back and talk to the girl," suggested Patsy. "Somehow, the poor thing seems lonely, and her smile was more pathetic than cheerful."

So they made their way through the long train to the tourist coach, and there found the girl they were seeking. The surrounding seats were occupied by groups of passengers of rather coarse caliber, many being foreign laborers accompanied by their wives and children. The air in the car was close and "stuffy" and the passengers seemed none too neat in their habits and appearance. So the solitary girl appeared like a rose blooming in a barnyard and her two visitors were instantly sorry for her. She sat in her corner, leaning wearily against the back of the cane seat, with a blanket spread over her lap. Strangely enough the consideration of her fellow passengers left the girl in undisturbed possession of a double seat.

"Perhaps she is ill," thought Patsy, as she and Beth sat down opposite and entered into conversation with the child. She was frankly communicative and they soon learned that her name was Myrtle Dean, and that she was an orphan. Although scarcely fifteen years of age she had for more than two years gained a livelihood by working in a skirt factory in Chicago, paying her board regularly to a cross old aunt who was her only relative in the big city. Three months ago, however, she had met with an accident, having been knocked down by an automobile while going to her work and seriously injured.

"The doctors say," she confided to her new friends, "that I shall always be lame, although not quite helpless. Indeed, I can creep around a little now, when I am obliged to move, and I shall get better every day. One of my hips was so badly injured that it will never be quite right again, and my Aunt Martha was dreadfully worried for fear I would become a tax upon her. I cannot blame her, for she has really but little money to pay for her own support. So, when the man who ran over me paid us a hundred dollars for damages—"

"Only a hundred dollars!" cried Beth, amazed.

"Wasn't that enough?" inquired Myrtle innocently.

"By no means," said Patsy, with prompt indignation. "He should have given you five thousand, at least. Don't you realize, my dear, that this accident has probably deprived you of the means of earning a livelihood?"

"I can still sew," returned the girl, courageously, "although of course I cannot get about easily to search for employment."

"But why did you leave Chicago?" asked Beth.

"I was coming to that part of my story. When I got the hundred dollars Aunt Martha decided I must use it to go to Leadville, to my Uncle Anson, who is my mother's only brother. He is a miner out there, and Aunt Martha says he is quite able to take care of me. So she bought my ticket and put me on the train and I'm now on my way to Leadville to find Uncle Anson."

"To *find* him!" exclaimed Patsy. "Don't you know his address?"

"No; we haven't had a letter from him for two years. But Aunt Martha says he must be a prominent man, and everybody in Leadville will know him, as it's a small place."

"Does he know you are coming?" asked Beth, thoughtfully.

"My aunt wrote him a letter two days before I started, so he ought to receive it two days before I get there," replied Myrtle, a little uneasily. "Of course I can't help worrying some, because if I failed to find Uncle Anson I don't know what might happen to me."

"Have you money?" asked Beth.

"A little. About three dollars. Aunt gave me a basket of food to last until I get to Leadville, and after paying for my ticket and taking what I owed her for board there wasn't much left from the hundred dollars."

"What a cruel old woman!" cried Patsy, wrathfully. "She ought to be horsewhipped!"

"I am sure it was wrong for her to cast you off in this heartless way," added Beth, more conservatively.

"She is not really bad," returned Myrtle, the tears starting to her eyes. "But Aunt Martha has grown selfish, and does not care for me very much. I hope Uncle Anson will be different. He is my mother's brother, you know, while Aunt Martha is only my father's sister, and an old maid who has had rather a hard life. Perhaps," she added, wistfully, "Uncle Anson will love me—although I'm not strong or well."

Both Patsy and Beth felt desperately sorry for the girl.

"What is Uncle Anson's other name?" asked the latter, for Beth was the more practical of Uncle John's nieces and noted for her clear thinking.

"Jones. Mr. Anson Jones."

"Rather a common name, if you have to hunt for him," observed the questioner, musingly. "Has he been in Leadville long?"

"I do not know," replied Myrtle. "His last letter proved that he was in Leadville two years ago, and he said he had been very successful and made money; but he has been in other mining camps, I know, and has wandered for years all over the West."

"Suppose he should be wandering now?" suggested Patsy; but at the look of alarm on Myrtle's face she quickly changed the subject, saying: "You must come in to dinner with us, my dear, for you have had nothing but cold truck to eat since you left Chicago. They say we shall be in Denver in another hour, but I'm afraid to believe it. Anyhow, there is plenty of time for dinner."

"Oh, I can't go, really!" cried the girl. "It's—it's so hard for me to walk when the train is moving; and—and—I wouldn't feel happy in that gay, luxurious dining car."

"Well, we must go, anyway, or the Major will be very disagreeable," said Patsy. "Good-bye, Myrtle; we shall see you again before we leave the train."

As the two girls went forward to their coach Beth said to Patsy:

"I'm afraid that poor thing will be greatly disappointed when she gets to Leadville. Imagine anyone sending a child on such a wild goose chase—and an injured and almost helpless child, at that!"

"I shudder to think what would become of her, with no uncle to care for her and only three dollars to her name," added Patsy. "I have never heard of such an inhuman creature as that Aunt Martha, Beth. I hope there are not many like her in the world."

At dinner they arranged with the head waiter of the dining car to send in a substantial meal, smoking hot, to Myrtle Dean, and Patsy herself inspected the tray before it went to make sure everything was there that was ordered. They had to satisfy Uncle John's curiosity at this proceeding by relating to him Myrtle Dean's story, and the kindly little man became very thoughtful and agreed with them that it was a cruel act to send the poor girl into a strange country in search of an uncle who had not been heard of in two years.

When the train pulled into the station at Denver the first care of John Merrick's party was to look after the welfare of the lame girl. They got a porter to assist her into the depot waiting room and then Uncle John inquired about the next train for Leadville, and found it would not start until the following morning, the late overland train having missed that day's connections. This was a serious discovery for poor Myrtle, but she smiled bravely and said:

"I can pass the night in this seat very comfortably, so please don't worry about me. It is warm here, you know, and I won't mind a bit the sitting up. Thank you all very much for your kindness, and good-bye. I'll be all right, never fear."

Uncle John stood looking down at her thoughtfully.

"Did you engage a carriage, Major?" he asked.

"Yes; there's one now waiting," was the reply.

"All right. Now, then, my dear, let's wrap this blanket around you tight and snug."

"What are you going to do?" asked Myrtle with a startled look.

"Carry you outside. It's pretty cold and snowy, so we must wrap you up. Now, Major, take hold on the other side. Here we go!"

Patsy smiled—rather pitifully—at the expression of bewilderment on Myrtle's face. Uncle John and the Major carried her tenderly to a carriage and put her in the back seat. Patsy sprang in next, with Mumbles clasped tightly in her arms, the small dog having been forced to make the journey thus far in the baggage car. Beth and the Major entered the carriage next, while Uncle John mounted beside the driver and directed him to the Crown Palace Hotel.

It was growing dark when they reached the dingy hostelry, which might have been palatial when it was named but was now sadly faded and tawdry. It proved to be fairly comfortable, however, and the first care of the party was to see Myrtle Dean safely established in a cosy room, with a grate fire to cheer her. Patsy and Beth had adjoining rooms and kept running in for a word with their protégé, who was so astonished and confused by her sudden good fortune that she was incapable of speech and more inclined to cry than to laugh.

During the evening Uncle John was busy at the telegraph booth. He sent several messages to Leadville, to Anson Jones, to the Chief of Police and to the various hotels; but long before midnight, when the last replies were received, he knew that Anson Jones had left Leadville five months ago, and his present whereabouts were unknown. Having learned these facts the little man went to bed and slept peacefully until morning.

Myrtle had begged them to see that she was called at five o'clock, that she might have ample time to get to the depot for her train, but no one called her and the poor child was so weary and worn with her trip that the soft bed enthralled her for many hours after daybreak.

Patsy finally aroused her, opening the blinds to let in the sunshine and then sitting beside Myrtle's bed to stroke her fair hair and tell her it was nearly noon.

"But my train!" wailed the girl, greatly distressed.

"Oh, the train has gone hours ago. But never mind that, dear. Uncle John has telegraphed to Leadville and found that Anson Jones is not there. He left months ago, and is now wandering; in fields and pastures unknown."

Myrtle sat up in bed and glared at Patsy wild-eyed.

"Gone!" she said. "Gone! Then what am I to do?"

"I can't imagine, dear," said Patsy, soothingly. "What do you think you will do?"

The girl seemed dazed and for a time could not reply.

"You must have thought of this thing," suggested her new friend, "for it was quite possible Anson Jones would not be in Leadville when you arrived there."

"I did not dare think of it," returned Myrtle in a low, frightened tone. "I once asked Aunt Martha what I could do in case Uncle Anson wasn't to be found, and she said he *must* be found, for otherwise I would be obliged to earn my own living."

"And she knew you to be so helpless!"

"She knows I can sew, if only I can get work to do," said the girl, simply. "I'm not really a cripple, and I'm getting better of my hurt every day. Aunt Martha said I would be just as well off in Denver or Leadville as in Chicago, and made me promise, if the worst came, not to let any charitable organization send me back to her."

"In other words," exclaimed Patsy, indignantly, "she wanted to get rid of you, and did not care what became of you."

"She was afraid I would cost her money," admitted the poor child, with shamed, downcast eyes.

Patsy went to the window and stood looking out for a time. Myrtle began to dress herself. As she said, she was not utterly helpless, moving the upper part of her body freely and being able to walk slowly

about a room by holding on to chairs or other furniture.

"I'm afraid I'm causing you a lot of worry over me," said she, smiling sadly as Patsy turned toward her; "and that is ungrateful when I remember how kind you have all been. Why, these hours since I met you have seemed like fairyland. I shall treasure them as long as I live. There must be another train to Leadville soon, and I'll take that. As soon as I am ready I will go to the depot and wait there."

Patsy looked at her reflectively. The poor child was called upon to solve a queer problem—one which might well have bewildered the brain of a more experienced person.

"Tell me," she said; "why should you go to Leadville at all, now that you have no friend or relative there to care for you?"

"My ticket is to Leadville, you know," replied Myrtle. "If I did not go I would waste the money it cost."

Patsy laughed at this.

"You're a wonderfully impractical child," she said, deftly assisting Myrtle to finish dressing. "What you really need is some one to order you around and tell you what to do. So you must stop thinking about yourself, for a time, and let *us* do the thinking. Here—sit in this chair by the window. Do you want Mumbles in your lap? All right. Now gaze upon the scenery until I come back. There's a man washing windows across the street; watch and see if he does his work properly."

Then she went away to join a conference in Uncle John's sitting room. Major Doyle was speaking when she entered and his voice was coldly ironical.

"The temperature outside is six degrees above freezing," he observed. "The clerk downstairs says the snow is nine feet deep over the mountain trails and the wind would cut an iron beam in two. If you take an automobile to California, John, you must put it on snowshoes and connect it with a steam heating-plant."

Uncle John, his hands thrust deep in his pockets, paced thoughtfully up and down the room.

"Haggerty said—"

"Didn't I give you Haggerty's record, then?" asked the Major. "If you want the exact truth it's safe to go directly opposite to what Haggerty says."

"He's a very decent fellow," protested Mr. Merrick, "and is considered in the city to be strictly honest."

"But after this?"

"You can't blame him for the weather conditions here. I've been talking with Denver people myself, this morning, and they all say it's unusual to have such cold weather at this time of year. The thermometer hasn't been so low in the past twenty-six years, the natives say."

"Are they all named Haggerty?" asked the Major, scornfully.

"If you will kindly allow me to speak, and tell you what Haggerty said," remarked Uncle John tersely, "I shall be able to add to your information."

"Go ahead, then."

"Haggerty said that in case we ran into cold weather in Denver, which was possible—"

"Quite possible!"

"Then we had best go south to Santa Fe and take the route of the old Santa Fe Trail as far as Albuquerque, or even to El Paso. Either way we will be sure to find fine weather, and good roads into California."

"So Haggerty says."

"It stands to reason," continued Mr. Merrick, "that on the Southern route we will escape the severe weather. So I have decided to adopt that plan."

"I think you are quite wise in that," broke in Patsy, before her father could object.

"All those queer Spanish names sound interesting," said Beth. "When do we start, Uncle?"

"In a day or two. I have some things here to attend to that may delay us that long. But when once we are started southward we shall bowl along right merrily."

"Unless we run into more snowstorms." Of course it was the Major who said that, and pointedly ignoring the remark Uncle John turned to Patsy and said:

"How did you find Myrtle Dean this morning?"

"She is rested, and seems very bright and cheerful, Uncle; but of course she is much distressed by the news that her Uncle Anson has vanished from Leadville. Yet she thinks she will continue her journey by the next train, as she has paid for her ticket and can't afford to waste the money."

"It would be absurd for the child to go to Leadville on that account. A mining camp is no place for such a frail thing," returned Mr. Merrick. "What would you suggest, Patsy?"

"Really, Uncle John, I don't know what to suggest."

"She can never earn her living by sewing," declared Beth. "What she ought to have is a trained nurse and careful attention."

"I'll have a doctor up to look her over," said Uncle John, in his decisive way. He was a mild little man generally, but when he made up his mind to do a thing it was useless to argue with him. Even Major Doyle knew that; but the old soldier was so fond of arguing for the sake of argument, and so accustomed to oppose his wealthy brother-in-law—whom he loved dearly just the same—that he was willing to accept defeat rather than permit Mr. Merrick to act without protest.

CHAPTER IV

AN INTERESTING PROTÉGÉ

A young physician was appointed by the management to attend any guest who might require his services, and Uncle John had a talk with him and sent him to Myrtle's room to give her a thorough examination. This he did, and reported that the girl's present condition was due largely to mismanagement of her case at the time she was injured. With care she would get better and stronger rapidly, but the hip joint was out of its socket and only a skillful operation would serve to permanently relieve her of lameness.

"What she needs just now," continued the doctor, "is a pair of crutches, so she can get around better and be in the fresh air and sunshine as much as possible. She is a very frail little woman at present and must build up her health and strength before submitting to the operation I have mentioned. Then, if it is properly done, she ought to recover completely and be as good as new."

"I must inform you," said Uncle John, "that Myrtle Dean is just a little waif whom my nieces picked up on the train. I believe she is without friends or money. Such being the circumstances, what would you advise?"

The doctor shook his head gravely.

"Poor thing!" he said. "She ought to be rich, at this juncture, instead of poor, for the conditions facing her are serious. The operation I speak of is always an expensive one, and meantime the child must go to some charitable institution or wear out her feeble strength in trying to earn enough to keep the soul in her body. She seems to have a brave and beautiful nature, sir, and were she educated and cared for would some day make a splendid woman. But the world is full of these sad cases. I'm poor myself, Mr. Merrick, but this child interests me, and after you have gone I shall do all in my power to assist her."

"Thank you," said Uncle John, thoughtfully nodding his bald head. "I'll think it over and see you again, doctor, before I leave."

An hour later Myrtle was fitted with crutches of the best sort obtainable, and was overjoyed to find how greatly they assisted her. The Major, a kindly man, decided to take Myrtle out for a drive, and while they were gone Uncle John had a long conversation with Beth and Patsy.

"Here is a case," said he, "where my dreadful money can do some good. I am anxious to help Myrtle Dean, for I believe she is deserving of my best offices. But I don't exactly know what to do. She is really *your* protégé, my dears, and I am going to put the affair in your hands for settlement. Just tell me what to do, and I'll do it. Spend my money as freely upon Myrtle as you please."

The girls faced the problem with enthusiasm.

"She's a dear little thing," remarked Patsy, "and seems very grateful for the least kindness shown her. I am sure she has never been treated very nicely by that stony-hearted old aunt of hers."

"In all my experience," said Beth, speaking as if her years were doubled, "I have never known anyone so utterly helpless. She is very young and inexperienced, with no friends, no money, and scarcely recovered from an accident. It is clearly our duty to do something for Myrtle, and aside from the humane obligation I feel that already I love the child, having known her only a day."

"Admitting all this, Beth," returned her uncle, "you are not answering my question. What shall we do for Myrtle? How can we best assist her?"

"Why not take her to California with us?" inquired Patsy, with sudden inspiration. "The sunshine and roses would make a new girl of her in a few weeks."

"Could she ride so far in an automobile?" asked Beth, doubtfully.

"Why not? The fresh air would be just the thing for her. You'll get a big touring car, won't you, Uncle John?"

"I've bought one already—a seven-seated 'Autocrat'—and there will be plenty of room in it for Myrtle," he said.

"Good gracious! Where did you find the thing so suddenly?" cried Patsy.

"I made the purchase this morning, bright and early, before you were up," replied Mr. Merrick, smilingly. "It is a fine new car, and as soon as I saw it I knew it was what I wanted. It is now being fitted up for our use."

"Fitted up?"

"Yes. I've an idea in my head to make it a movable hotel. If we're going to cross the plains and the mountains and the deserts, and all that sort of thing, we must be prepared for any emergencies. I've also sent for a chauffeur who is highly recommended. He knows the route we're going to take; can make all repairs necessary in case of accident, and is an experienced driver. I expect him here any minute. His name is Wampus."

"But about Myrtle," said Beth. "Can we make her comfortable on a long ride?"

"Certainly," asserted Uncle John. "We are not going to travel day and night, my dear, for as soon as we get away from this frozen country we can take our time and journey by short stages. My notion is that we will have more fun on the way than we will in California."

"Myrtle hasn't any proper clothes," observed Patsy, reflectively. "We'll have to shop for her, Beth, while Uncle is getting the car ready."

"Are you sure to leave to-morrow, Uncle John?" inquired Beth.

"To-morrow or the next day. There's no use leaving before the 'Autocrat' is ready to ship."

"Oh; we're not going to ride in it, then?"

"Not just yet. We shall take the train south to Santa Fe, and perhaps to Albuquerque. I'll talk to Wampus about that. When we reach a good climate we'll begin the journey overland—and not before."

"Then," said Patsy, "I'm sure we shall have time to fit out Myrtle very nicely."

Mr. Wampus was announced just then, and while Uncle John conferred with the chauffeur his two nieces went to their room to talk over Myrtle Dean's outfit and await the return of the girl from her ride.

"They tell me," said Mr. Merrick, "that you are an experienced chauffeur."

"I am celebrate," replied Wampus. "Not as chauffeur, but as expert automobilist."

He was a little man and quite thin. His legs were short and his arms long. He had expressionless light gray eyes and sandy hair cropped close to his scalp. His mouth was wide and good-humored, his chin long and broad, his ears enormous in size and set at right angles with his head. His cheek bones were as high and prominent as those of an Indian, and after a critical examination of the man Uncle John was impelled to ask his nationality.

"I am born in Canada, at Quebec Province," he answered. "My father he trapper; my mother squaw. For me, I American, sir, and my name celebrate over all the world for knowing automobile like father knows his son." He paused, and added impressively: "I am Wampus!"

"Have you ever driven an 'Autocrat' car?" asked Mr. Merrick.

"'Autocrat?' I can take him apart blindfold, an' put him together again."

"Have you ever been overland to California?"

"Three time."

"Then you know the country?"

"In the dark. I am Wampus."

"Very good, Wampus. You seem to be the man I want, for I am going to California in an 'Autocrat' car, by way of the Santa Fe Trail and—and—"

"No matter. We find way. I am—"

"I know. Now tell me, Wampus: if I employ you will you be faithful and careful? I have two girls in my party—three girls, in fact—and from the moment you enter my service I shall expect you to watch over our welfare and guide us with skill and intelligence. Will you do this?"

The man seemed somewhat offended by the question.

"When you have Wampus, what more you want?" he inquired. "Maybe you not know Wampus. You come from far East. All right. You go out and ask automobile man about Wampus. Ask ever'body. When you have inquire you feel more happy. I come again."

He started to go, but Mr. Merrick restrained him.

"You have been highly recommended already," said he. "But you cannot expect me to have as high an opinion of you as you have of yourself; at least, until I know you better. Would you like to undertake this engagement?"

"Yes. Just now I free. My business is expert automobilist. I am Wampus. But perhaps you want cheap man. My price high."

"What is your price?"

"Fifty dollar week. You eat me an' sleep me."

"I do not object to your price. Come out with me to the garage and I will show you my car and explain what is being done to it."

Although all the automobile men seemed to defer most respectfully to Wampus, Mr. Merrick did not neglect to make proper inquiries in regard to the man. Locally he really was "celebrate" and Uncle John was assured on all sides that he was fortunate to get so intelligent and experienced a chauffeur as this same Wampus.

"He seems to have instinctive knowledge of all machinery," said one informant, "and can handle perfectly any car that is made. The only trouble with the fellow is that he is conceited."

"I've noticed that," returned Mr. Merrick.

"Another thing," said the gentleman; "don't believe implicitly all that Wampus tells you. He has a habit of imagining things. But he is a faithful, honest fellow, for all that, and will handle your car better than any other man you could get in Denver—or anywhere in the West, I imagine."

So Wampus was engaged, and putting the man's references and indorsements all together Mr. Merrick felt that he had gained a prize.

When the big Major, returning from his drive, escorted Myrtle Dean to the elevator, the girl was joyously using her new crutches. Patsy and Beth met her and said they had important news to communicate. Not until she was in her own room, seated in a comfortable chair and gazing at them anxiously, did they tell the poor waif of the good fortune in store for her.

"Uncle John," announced Patsy, "has invited you to join our party and go to California with us."

Myrtle stared a moment, as if trying to realize what that meant. The tiny Mumbles, sitting beside the chair with his head cocked to one side, suddenly made a prodigious leap and landed in Myrtle's lap, where he began licking her chin and wagging his stumpy tail as if seconding the invitation. As the girl stroked his soft hair her eyes filled with tears.

"Oh, you are all so kind to me!" she sobbed, losing her composure.
"But I can't go! Of course I can't go."

"Why not?" asked Beth, smiling.

"It would be an—impersition!" Poor Myrtle sometimes stumbled over big words. "I know that. I can't let you burden your happy party with a poor cripple, just because your hearts are kind and you pity me!"

"Nonsense!" said Beth. "You're not a cripple, dear; you're just an invalid, and will soon be as strong as any of us. We have invited you, Myrtle, because we all like you, and shall soon learn to love you. We are selfish enough to want your companionship. It isn't pity, at all, you see."

"I'm mighty glad," added Patsy, "your Uncle Anson ran away from Leadville. If he hadn't done that we should have had to give you up; but now we may keep you as long as we wish, for you haven't any particular engagement to interfere with our plans."

All this was said so frankly and unaffectedly that little Myrtle was led to abandon her suspicion and grew radiant with delight. Indeed, she hugged and squeezed the squirming Mumbles until he resented such strenuous fondling and escaped to Patsy's more moderate embraces. Myrtle had never yet ridden in an automobile, and the prospect of a long journey across the country in a big touring car, with California's roses and sunshine at the end of it, was certainly alluring enough to intoxicate one far more accustomed to pleasure than this friendless, impoverished girl.

After the cousins had explained all their plans to Myrtle and assured her she was to be their cherished guest for a long time—until she was well and strong again, at the least—they broached the subject of her outfit. The poor child flushed painfully while admitting the meagerness of her wardrobe. All her possessions were contained in one small canvas "hold-all," and she lacked many necessities which her callous aunt had suggested that Uncle Anson might be induced to buy for her once she had joined him in Leadville. Uncle John's nieces grew more and more indignant as they discovered the details of this selfish woman's crime—for Patsy declared it was nothing less than a crime to send a helpless child far into the West to search for an unknown uncle whose whereabouts were only conjectural.

That very afternoon Beth and Patsy began shopping for Myrtle, and presently all sorts of parcels, big and little, began to arrive for their new protégé. Myrtle was amazed and awed by the splendor of her new apparel, and could scarcely believe her good fortune. It seemed like a fairy tale to her, and she imagined herself a Cinderella with two fairy godmothers who were young and pretty girls possessing the purse of Fortunatus and the generosity of Glinda the Good. At night, when she was supposed to be asleep, Myrtle crept from her bed, turned on the electric light and gloated over her treasures, which she had almost feared might vanish into thin air and leave her as desolate as before.

Next morning, as soon as breakfast was over, the girls took Myrtle out with them to some of the shops, fitting her to shoes and gloves and having her try on some ready-made gowns so that they might be quickly altered for her use. Patsy also bought her a set of soft and pretty furs, thinking she might need them on the journey if the weather continued cool, and this seemed to cap the climax of Myrtle's happiness.

"What 'stonishes me most," gasped the child, trying to get her breath between the surprises she experienced, "is how you can think of so many things to do for me. Of course I know you are rich; but I've never before heard of rich people being so very generous to poor ones."

"Once," said Beth, gravely, "we were poor ourselves, Patsy and I, and had to work hard for our living. That was before our Uncle John came and gave us a share of his money, together with his love and sympathy. Isn't it natural, my dear, that we should now be eager to share our good fortune with you, since we have more money than we can use otherwise, and you are to be our little friend and

companion?"

"Perhaps so," replied Myrtle, smiling gaily and much comforted by the explanation. "But, oh dear! I'm so glad you found me!"

"We are glad, too," said Patsy. "But here it is, time for luncheon, and we've wasted the whole morning in shopping. I'm sure the Major will be cross if we do not hurry back to the hotel."

CHAPTER V

A WONDER ON WHEELS

But the Major was not cross when they met him in Uncle John's sitting room. He beamed upon the three girls most genially, for he liked Myrtle and fully approved all that was being done for her.

"Of course it's like Patsy," he had said to Mr. Merrick that morning. "She couldn't help being a sweet ministering angel if she tried; and Beth is growing more and more like her. It will do those girls good, John, to have some human being to coddle and care for. If Patsy could have a fault, it would be wasting so much affection on that bunch o' rags Mumbles, who audaciously chewed up one of my pet slippers while I was at dinner last evening. No dog is a fit thing to occupy a girl's time, and this imp o' mischief Mumbles must take a back seat from now on."

Uncle John laughed, for he knew his brother-in-law had never conquered his antipathy for poor Mumbles, and realized why.

"Take care that you do not get jealous of Myrtle," he replied. "You're a selfish old beast, and don't wish Patsy to love anyone but yourself."

"And why should she?" was the inquiry. "Any dutiful daughter ought to be satisfied with loving such a father as I am."

"And in that," remarked Uncle John, whimsically, "you remind me of Wampus. You should strut around and say: 'Behold me! I am Patsy's father!'"

The Major was full of news at luncheon time.

"What do you think, my dears?" he said, addressing the girls. "Your crazy uncle must have had another snooze, unbeknown to us, for he's got the wildest idea into his head that human brains—or lack of them—ever conceived."

"You are not very respectful, sir," retorted Mr. Merrick stiffly, as he ate his salad. "But we must not expect too much of a disabled soldier—and an Irishman to boot—who has not been accustomed to good society."

Major Doyle looked at his brother-in-law with an approving smile.

"Very well put, John," he said. "You're improving in repartee. Presently you'll add that I'm unlettered and uncivilized, and no fit associate for a person who has made an egregious fortune out of tin cans in the wilds of Oregon."

"But what's the news?" asked Patsy impatiently. "What new idea has Uncle John conceived?"

"First," replied the Major, "he has bought an automobile as big as a baggage car. Next he has engaged a chauffeur who is a wild Canadian Indian with a trace of erratic French blood in his veins—a combination liable to result in anything. Mr. Wampus, the half-breed calls himself, and from the looks of him he's murdered many a one in his day."

"Oh, Major!"

"Show me an automobile driver that hasn't. Myrtle knows. It's no trick to knock over a peaceful pedestrian or so, to say nothing of chickens, cats and dogs mangled by the roadside. I confidently expect he'll make a pancake of dear little Mumbles before he's five miles on the road. Eh, Patsy?"

"Be sensible, Daddy."

"It's my strong point. If I'm any judge of character this Wampus is a speed fiend."

"He is recommended as a very careful driver," said Mr. Merrick; "and moreover he has signed a contract to obey my orders."

"Very good," said Beth. "I'm not afraid of Mr. Wampus. What next, Major?"

"Next," continued Patsy's father, with a solemn wink at the row of curious faces, "your inventive relative has ordered the automobile rebuilt, thinking he's wiser than the makers. He's having a furnace put in it, for one thing—it's a limousine, you know, and all enclosed in glass. Also it's as big as a barn, as I said."

"You said a freight car," observed Patsy.

"True. A small barn or a big freight car. The seats are to be made convertible into sleeping berths, so if we get caught out overnight we have all the comforts of a hotel except the bell boys."

"I'll be the bell boy," promised Patsy.

"Also we're to take a portable kitchen along, like they use in the army, with a gasoline stove all complete. The thing fits under the back seat, I believe."

"All this," said Beth, "strikes me as being very sensible and a credit to Uncle John's genius. I'm a good cook, as you know, and the kitchen outfit appeals to me. But how about provisions?"

"Provisions are being provided," replied her uncle, genially smiling at her praise. However scornfully the Major might view his preparations he was himself mightily proud of them.

"Tinned stuff, I presume," remarked his brother-in-law. "John Merrick has a weakness for tin cans, having got his money out of them."

"You're wrong," protested Uncle John. "I merely made my money from the tin the cans were made of. But we won't get money out of these cans when they're opened; it will be something better, such as sardines and hominy, preserved cream and caviar, beans and boned chicken."

"Sounds fine!" cried Patsy with enthusiasm. "But how can you arrange to carry so much, Uncle?"

"The limousine body is pretty big, as the Major says, and high enough to allow me to put in a false bottom. In the space beneath it I shall stow all the bedding, the eatables and kitchen utensils, and a small tent. Then we shall be prepared for whatever happens."

"I doubt it," objected the Major. "There's gasoline to be reckoned with. It's well enough to feed ourselves, but what if we ran short of the precious feed for the engines?"

"The two tanks will hold sixty gallons. That ought to carry us any reasonable distance," replied Mr. Merrick.

"You see, Daddy, our Uncle John is an experienced traveler, while you are not," declared Patsy. "In all our journeys together I've found him full of resources and very farsighted. This trip doesn't worry me at all."

"Nor me," added Beth. "We are sure to have a delightful time under Uncle's auspices."

"Wampus," said Uncle John, "is so pleased with my preparations that he wants us to start in the car from here."

"Can you put it on runners, like a sledge?" asked the Major. "That's the only way it could travel through this snow. Or perhaps you'll hire a snowplow to go ahead of it."

"No; I told Wampus it was impracticable," was the reply. "We shall load our machine on a flat car and ship it to Albuquerque, which is in New Mexico and almost directly south of Denver. We shall then be over the worst grades of the Rocky Mountains."

"And which way do we go then?" inquired Beth.

"I have not yet decided. We can go still farther south, into Texas, or make our way down into Phoenix and across the prairies to Imperial Valley, or follow the Santa Fe route by way of the Grand Canyon."

"Oh, let's go that way!" exclaimed Patsy.

"And freeze to death?" asked the Major. "It's the northernmost route."

"When we get to Albuquerque we will be below the line of frosts and snow," explained Mr. Merrick. "The climate is genial all through that section during winter. Haggerty says—"

"I guessed it!" groaned the Major. "If Haggerty recommends this trip we'll surely be in trouble."

"Aside from Haggerty, Wampus knows that country thoroughly," said Uncle John stoutly.

"Tell me: did Haggerty recommend Wampus?"

"No."

"Then there's hopes of the fellow. As you say, John, there is no need to decide until we get to Albuquerque. When do we make the start?"

"Day after to-morrow. The car will be shipped to-morrow night, but our party will follow by daylight, so as to see Colorado Springs, Pike's Peak and Pueblo as we pass by them."

CHAPTER VI

WAMPUS SPEEDS

"So this is Albuquerque," observed Patsy Doyle, as they alighted from the train. "Is it a big town playing peek-a-boo among those hills, Uncle John, or is this really all there is to the place?"

"It's a pretty big town, my dear. Most of the houses are back on the prairie, but fortunately our hold is just here at the depot."

It was a quaint, attractive building, made of adobe cement, in the ancient mission style; but it proved roomy and extremely comfortable.

"Seems to me," whispered Myrtle to Beth, "we're high up on the mountains, even yet."

"So we are," was the reply. "We're just between Glorietta Pass and the Great Continental Divide. But the steepest of the Rockies are behind us, and now the slopes are more gradual all the way to California. How do you like it, dear?"

"Oh, the mountains are grand!" exclaimed Myrtle. "I had never imagined anything so big and stately and beautiful." The other girls had seen mountains before, but this was their friend's first experience, and they took much pleasure in Myrtle's enthusiastic delight over all she saw.

Adjoining the hotel was a bazaar, in front of which sat squatted upon the ground two rows of Mojave Indians, mostly squaws, with their curious wares spread out for sale upon blankets. There must have been a score of them, and they exhibited odd pottery ornaments of indistinguishable shapes, strings of glass beads and beadwork bags, and a few really fine jardinieres and baskets. After the girls had been to their rooms and established themselves in the hotel they hurried out to interview the Indians, Myrtle Dean supporting herself by her crutches while Patsy and Beth walked beside her. The lame girl seemed to attract the squaws at once, and one gave her a bead necklace while another pressed upon her a small brown earthenware fowl with white spots all over it. This latter might have been meant to represent a goose, an ostrich or a guinea hen; but Myrtle was delighted with it and thanked the generous squaw, who responded merely with a grunt, not understanding English. A man in a wide sombrero who stood lazily by observed the incident and said:

"Don't thank the hag. She's selfish. The Mojaven think it brings luck to have a gift accepted by a cripple."

Myrtle flushed painfully.

"I suppose my crutches make me look more helpless than I really am," she whispered to her friends as they moved away. "But they're such a help in getting around that I'm very grateful to have them, and

as I get stronger I can lay them aside and not be taken for a cripple any more."

The air was delightfully invigorating here in the mountains, yet it was not at all cold. The snow, as Uncle John had predicted, had all been left behind them. After dinner they took a walk through the pretty town and were caught in the dark before they could get back. The twilights are very brief in Albuquerque.

"This is a very old town," remarked Uncle John. "It was founded by a Spanish adventurer named Cabrillo in the seventeenth century, long before the United States came into existence. But of course it never amounted to anything until the railroad was built."

Next day they were sitting in a group before the hotel when a man was seen approaching them with shuffling steps. Uncle John looked at him closely and Mumbles leaped from Patsy's lap and rushed at the stranger with excited barks.

"Why, it's Wampus," said Mr. Merrick. "The car must have arrived."

Wampus caught up the baby dog and held it under his arm while he took his cap off and bowed respectfully to his employer.

"He an' me, we here," he announced.

"Who is 'he,' Wampus?"

"Aut'mob'l'."

"When did you arrive?"

"Half hour ago. He on side track."

"Very good. You have made capital time, for a freight train. Let us go at once and get the car unloaded."

Wampus hesitated, looking sheepish.

"I been arrest," he said.

"Arrested! For what?"

"I make speed. They not like it. They arrest me—*Me*—Wampus!" He straightened his slim little form with an assumption of dignity.

"I knew it," sighed the Major. "I decided he was a speed fiend the first time I saw him."

"But—dear me!" said Uncle John; "how could you be arrested for speeding when the automobile was on a fiat car?"

Wampus glanced over his shoulder. Two railroad men had followed him and were now lounging against the porch railing. One had his right eye bandaged while the other carried one arm in a sling. Both scowled as they eyed the Canadian fixedly.

"Freight train make pretty slow time," began the chauffeur. "I know you in hurry, so freight train he make me nervous. I say polite to conductor I like to go faster. He laugh. I say polite to brakeman we must go faster. He make abusing speech. I climb into engine an' say polite to engineer to turn on steam. He insult me. So I put my foot on him an' run engine myself. I am Wampus. I understan' engine—all kinds. Brakeman he swear; he swear so bad I put him off train. Conductor must have lump of coal in eye to keep quiet. Fireman he jus' smile an' whistle soft an' say nothing; so we friends. When I say 'shovel in coal,' he shovel. When we pass stations quick like, he whistle with engine loud. So now we here an' I been arrest."

Patsy tittered and stuffed her handkerchief into her mouth. Uncle John first chuckled and then looked grave. The Major advanced to Wampus and soberly shook his hand.

"You're a brave man, sir, for a chauffeur," he said. "I congratulate you,"

Wampus still looked uneasy.

"I been arrest," he repeated.

Uncle John beckoned the railroad men to come forward.

"Is this story true?" he asked.

"Most of it, sir," answered the conductor. "It's only by the mercy of Providence we're here alive. This scoundrel held up the whole crew and ran away with the engine. We might have had a dozen collisions or smash-ups, for he went around curves at sixty miles an hour. We'd cut our train in two, so as to pull half of it at a time up the grade at Lamy, and so there were only six cars on this end of it. The other half is seventy miles back, and part of what we have here ought to have been left at the way stations. I can't make out, sir, whether it's burglary, or highway robbery or arson an' murder he's guilty of, or all of 'em; but I've telegraphed for instructions and I'll hold him a prisoner until the superintendent tells me what to do with him."

Mr. Merrick was very sober now.

"The matter is serious," he said. "This man is in my employ, but I did not hire him to steal a railway train or fight its crew. Not badly hurt, I hope, sir?"

"My eye's pretty bad," growled the conductor. "Tom, here, thought his arm was broken, at first; but I guess it's only sprained."

"How about the brakeman he threw off the train?"

"Why, we were not going fast, just then, and it didn't hurt him. We saw him get up and shake his fist at the robber. If he ever meets Mr. Wampus again he'll murder him."

"Come with me to the telegraph office and I'll see what I can do to straighten this out," said Mr. Merrick briskly. On the way he remarked to the conductor: "I'm sorry I let Wampus travel alone. He's just a little bit affected in his mind, you know, and at times isn't responsible for what he does."

The conductor scratched his head doubtfully.

"I suspected he was crazy," he replied, "and that's why I didn't hurt him. But if he's crazy he's the most deliberate loonatic I ever run acrost."

The superintendent had just wired instructions to put the outlaw in jail when Mr. Merrick reached the telegraph office, but after an hour spent in sending messages back and forth a compromise was affected and the little millionaire had agreed to pay a goodly sum to the company by way of damages and to satisfy the crew of the freight train—which he succeeded in doing by a further outlay of money.

"You're not worth all this bother," said Mr. Merrick to the humbled Wampus, when the final settlement had been made, "but chauffeurs are scarce in Albuquerque and I can't be delayed. Never, sir, while you are in my employ, must you allow yourself to be guilty of such an act again!"

Wampus sighed.

"Never," he promised, "will I ride by freight train again. Send car by express. I am Wampus. Freight train he make me nervous."

The automobile was quickly unloaded and at once Wampus set to work to get it in running order. He drove it to the hotel at about sundown and Mr. Merrick told the girls to be ready to start after an early breakfast the next morning.

"Which way do we go?" asked the Major.

"We'll have a talk with Wampus this evening and decide," said Uncle John.

"Don't leave out the Grand Canyon!" begged Patsy.

"Nor the Petrified Forests." added Beth. "And couldn't we visit the Moki Indian reservation?"

"Those things may be well enough in their way," observed the Major, "but is their way our way? That's the question. The one thing we must take into consideration is the matter of roads. We must discover which road is the best and then take it. We're not out of the mountains yet, and we shall have left the railroad, the last vestige of civilization, behind us."

But the conference evolved the fact, according to Wampus, that the best and safest roads were for a time along the line of the Santa Fe, directly west; and this would enable them to visit most of the scenes the girls were eager to see.

"No boulevard in mountain anywhere," remarked Wampus; "but road he good enough to ride on. Go slow an' go safe. I drive 'Autocrat' from here to Los Angeles blindfold."

With this assurance they were obliged to be content, and an eager and joyful party assembled next morning to begin the journey so long looked forward to. The landlord of the hotel, a man with a careworn face, shook his head dismally and predicted their return to Albuquerque within twenty-four hours.

"Of course people *do* make the trip from here to the coast," he said; "but it's mighty seldom, and they all swear they'll never do it again. It's uncomfortable, and it's dangerous."

"Why?" asked Uncle John.

"You're headed through a wild country, settled only by Mexicans, Indians, and gangs of cowboys still worse. The roads are something awful. That man Wampus is an optimist, and will tackle anything and then be sorry for it afterward. The towns are scattered from here on, and you won't strike a decent meal except at the railway stations. Taking all these things into consideration, I advise you to make your headquarters here for the winter."

"Thank you," returned Mr. Merrick pleasantly. "It's too late for us to back out now, even if we felt nervous and afraid, which I assure you we do not."

"We are not looking for excessive comfort on this journey, you know," remarked Patsy. "But thank you for your warning, sir. It has given us great pleasure; for if there were no chance of adventure before us we should all be greatly disappointed."

Again the landlord shook his head.

"Right?" asked Wampus, at the wheel.

"Go ahead," said Mr. Merrick, and slowly the big car started upon its journey into the Golden West.

The air was keen and bracing, but not chilly. The sunshine flooded the landscape on every side. All the windows of the limousine had been lowered.

Myrtle Dean had been established in one corner of the broad back seat, where she nestled comfortably among the cushions. Uncle John sat beside her, with Beth and the Major on the seat on front. There were two folding chairs that could be used on occasion, and the back seat easily accommodated three, the "Autocrat" being a seven passenger car; but Patsy was perched in front beside Wampus, which was really the choicest seat of all, so there was ample room inside to "swing a cat," as the Major stated—if anyone had cared to attempt such a feat. Of course the wee Mumbles was in Patsy's lap, and he seemed to have overcome his first aversion of Wampus and accepted the little chauffeur into the circle of his favored acquaintances. Indeed, they soon became fast friends.

On leaving the town Wampus turned into a smooth, hard wagon road that ran in zigzag fashion near the railroad grade. The car bowled along right merrily for some twenty miles, when the driver turned to the right and skimmed along a high plateau. It was green and seemed fertile, but scarcely a farmhouse could they see, although the clear air permitted a broad view.

"He up hill now all way to Continental Divide," said Wampus to Patsy; "then he go down hill long time."

"It doesn't seem to be much uphill," returned the girl, "and the road is very good."

"We make time here," observed the driver. "By'm-by we find rock an' bad road. Then we go slow."

The Major was watching the new chauffeur carefully, and despite his dismal forebodings the man seemed not at all reckless but handled his car with rare skill. So the critic turned to his brother-in-law and asked:

"Is it fully decided which way we shall go?"

"I've left it to Wampus and the girls," was the reply. "On account of our little invalid here we shall take the most direct route to California. It isn't a short route, at that. On Beth's account we shall visit the Moki and Navajo reservations, and on Patsy's account we're going by way of the Grand Canyon of Arizona. Wampus says he knows every inch of the road, so for my part I'm content to be just a passenger."

"Which remark," said the Major, "indicates that I'm to be just a passenger also. Very well, John; I'm willing. There may be trouble ahead of us, but to-day is so magnificent that it's wise to forget

everything but the present."

CHAPTER VII

THE CHAUFFEUR IMPROVES

They all enjoyed that first day's ride. Wampus did not drive fast, for there were places where he couldn't; yet by one o'clock they had reached Laguna, sixty miles from their starting point. There was an excellent railway hotel here, so they decided to spend the rest of the day and the night at Laguna and proceed early the next morning.

The big car was an object of much curiosity to the natives, and during the afternoon Wampus was the center of attraction. Myrtle had stood the ride remarkably well, and Uncle John noticed that her eyes were brighter and a shade of color had already crept into her pale cheeks. Having risen early all three of the girls took a nap during the afternoon, as did Mr. Merrick. The Major gossiped with the station agent, the most important individual in town, and gleaned sundry information that made him look rather glum.

"I don't say the road's exactly dangerous, mind you," added the man, "but these greasers and Injuns get mischievous, at times, harmless as they look. All I'm advisin' is that you keep a sharp eye on 'em." Finding Wampus cleaning his car, while a circle of silent, attentive inhabitants looked on, the Major said to him in a low voice: "Have you a revolver?"

Wampus shook his head.

"Never carry him," he replied. "All gun he make trouble. Sometime he shoot wrong man. Don't like gun. Why should I? I am Wampus!"

The Major entered the hotel frowning.

"That fellow," he muttered, "is a natural-born coward, and we needn't expect help from him if trouble comes."

No trouble came that night, however, and in the early morning, while the sky was still reddened by the rising sun, they were off again, following more closely now the railroad, as rocky defiles began to loom up before them.

By the zigzag course they were obliged to take it was ninety miles to Gallup, and this they easily made, despite the growing steepness of the mountain road. Here was the famous Continental Divide, and the State of Arizona lay just beyond. The Continental Divide is the ridge that separates the streams tributary to the Atlantic ocean from those tributary to the Pacific, so that after crossing it one might well feel that at last the East was left behind and the great West with its romance now faced him.

They came to the little town in time to see the gorgeous sunset from this, the highest point of the Rockies, and especially to Myrtle, who had traveled so little, was the sight impressive and awe inspiring. There was a small but fairly good hotel in the place, and after supper Patsy and Beth went out for a stroll, being much interested in the dark-skinned Mexicans and still darker Indians who constituted far the larger part of the population. The party had everywhere met with respect from these people, who, although curious, were silent and well-behaved; so Uncle John and the Major, deep in a political argument on the hotel porch, had no thought of danger when they saw the two girls start away arm in arm.

The sky was still aglow, although the sun had set, and in the subdued light the coarse adobe huts and rickety frame dwellings were endowed with a picturesque appearance they did not really possess. Beth and Patsy came to the end of the main street rather suddenly, and stood a moment looking at the shadows cast by the rocky cliffs near by. Some of the peaks had snow upon them, and there was a chill in the air, now that the sun had withdrawn its warmth. The girls turned presently and took another route that might bring them quicker to the hotel, but had only proceeded a short way when in passing a rather solitary adobe structure a man stepped from the shadow of the wall and confronted them. He wore a red flannel shirt and a broad sombrero, the latter scarcely covering his dark, evil features.

The cousins stopped short. Then Beth whispered: "Let's go the other way." But as they were about to

turn the Mexican drew a revolver and said in harsh, uneven English: "You halt. Keep a-still, or I shoot."

"What do you want?" asked Beth, quietly.

"Money. All you got. Jew'lry—all you got. Give 'm quick, or I shoot!"

As they stood hesitating a sound of footsteps was heard and someone approached quickly from behind them. Patsy looked hurriedly around and saw Wampus. He was walking with his thin little form bent and his hands deep in his trousers pockets. Incidentally Wampus was smoking the stub of a cigar, as was his custom when off duty.

The Mexican saw him, but marking his small size and mild manner did not flinch from his position. With one revolver still leveled at the girls he drew another from a hip pocket and turned it upon Wampus.

"You stop—halt!" he exclaimed fiercely.

Wampus did not halt. His eyes fixed upon the bandit's ugly features, still puffing his cigar and with hands in his pockets he walked deliberately past Patsy and Beth and straight up to the muzzles of the revolvers.

"Stop!" cried the Mexican; and again: "Stop!"

Wampus stopped when one revolver nearly touched his nose and another covered his body. Slowly he drew one hand from his pocket and grasped the barrel of the nearest weapon.

"Let him go," he said, not raising his voice. The man stared into the little chauffeur's eyes and released his hold of the revolver. Wampus looked at it, grunted, and put it in his pocket.

"Now the other gun," he said.

The fellow drew back and half turned, as if to escape.

"No, no!" said Wampus, as if annoyed. "You give me gun. See—I am Wampus!"

Sheepishly enough the Mexican surrendered the other weapon.

"Now turn aroun' an' go to hotel," commanded the chauffeur.

The man obeyed. Wampus turned to the girls, who were now not only relieved but on the verge of laughter and said deprecatingly:

"Do not be scare, for poor man he make no harm. He jus' try a goozle—no dare shoot here in town. Then come; I go back with you."

Silently they accompanied him along the lane, the Mexican keeping in front and looking around from time to time to see if they followed. A short distance from the hotel Wampus gave a queer whistle which brought the bandit cringing to his side. Without ado he handed the fellow his two revolvers and said calmly: "Go 'long."

The Mexican "went along" briskly and the dusk soon swallowed him up.

"Thank you, Wampus," said Patsy, gratefully; "you've saved us from a dreadful experience."

"Oh, that!" snapping his fingers scornfully. "He not a good bad-man, for he too much afraid. I have no gun, for I do not like gun. Still, if I not come, he make you give him money an' trinkets."

"You were very kind," replied Beth, "and I thank you as much as Patsy does. If you had not arrived just when you did I might have killed the man."

"You?" inquired Wampus, doubtfully.

"Yes." She showed him a small pearl-handled revolver which she carried in the pocket of her jacket. "I can shoot, Wampus."

The little chauffeur grinned; then looked grave and shook his head.

"It make funny world, these day," said he. "One time girl from city would scream to see a gun; now she carry him in pocket an' can shoot! Ver' fine; ver' fine. But I like me old style girl who make scream."

Then a man not feel foolish when he try protect her."

Patsy laughed merrily; but Beth saw he was offended and hastened to say:

"I am very grateful to you, Wampus, and I know you are a brave and true man. I shall expect you to protect me at all times, for I really don't wish to shoot anyone, although I think it best to carry a revolver. Always after this, before I am tempted to fire, I shall look to see if you are not near me."

"All right," he said more cheerfully. "I am Wampus. I will be there, Miss 'Lizbeth."

CHAPTER VIII

AMONG THE INDIANS

Little Myrtle grew brighter day by day. She even grew merry and developed a fine sense of humor, showing new traits in her hitherto undeveloped character. The girl never mentioned her injury nor admitted that she suffered any pain, even when directly questioned. Indeed she was not uncomfortable during that splendid automobile ride over mountain and plain into the paradise of the glowing West. Never before in her life had Myrtle enjoyed an outing, except for an hour or two in a city park; never before had she known a friend to care for her and sympathize honestly with her griefs. Therefore this experience was so exquisitely delightful that her responsive heart nearly burst with gratitude. Pretty thoughts came to her that she had never had before; her luxurious surroundings led her to acquire dainty ways and a composed and self-poised demeanor.

"Our rosebud is unfolding, petal by petal, and beginning to bloom gloriously," said Patsy to sympathetic Uncle John. "Could anyone be more sweet or lovely?"

Perhaps almost any girl, situated as Myrtle Dean was, would have blossomed under similar influences. Certain it was that Uncle John came to have a tender affection for the poor child, while the Major's big heart had warmed from the first toward the injured girl. Beth and Patsy were devoted to their new friend and even Mumbles was never so happy as when Myrtle would hold and caress him. Naturally the former waif responded freely to all this wealth of affection and strove to be companionable and cheery, that they might forget as much as possible her physical helplessness.

Mumbles was not the least important member of the party, but proved a constant source of amusement to all. In the novel domains they now traversed the small dog's excitable nature led him to investigate everything that seemed suspicious, but he was so cowardly, in spite of this, that once when Patsy let him down to chase a gopher or prairie dog—they were not sure which—the animal turned at bay and sent Mumbles retreating with his stubby tail between his legs. His comradeship for Wampus surprised them all. The Canadian would talk seriously to the dog and tell it long stories as if the creature could understand every word—which perhaps he did. Mumbles would sit up between the driver and Patsy and listen attentively, which encouraged Wampus to talk until Patsy in self-defense turned and tossed the fuzzy animal in to Myrtle, who was always glad to receive him.

But Patsy did not always sit on the front seat. That honor was divided among them all, by turns, except the Major, who did not care for the place. Yet I think Patsy rode there oftener than anyone else, and it came to be considered her special privilege because she had first claimed it.

The Major, after the incident at Gallup, did not scorn Wampus so openly as before; but he still reserved a suspicion that the fellow was at heart a coward and a blusterer. The chauffeur's sole demerit in the eyes of the others was his tremendous egotism. The proud remark: "I am Wampus!" was constantly on his lips and he had wonderful tales to tell to all who would listen of his past experiences, in every one of which he unblushingly figured as the hero. But he really handled the big touring car in an admirable manner, and when one afternoon a tire was punctured by a cactus spine by the roadside—their first accident—they could not fail to admire the dexterous manner in which he changed the tube for a new one.

From Gallup they took a wagon road to Fort Defiance, in the Navajo Indian reservation; but the Navajos proved uninteresting people, not even occupying themselves in weaving the famous Navajo blankets, which are now mostly made in Philadelphia. Even Patsy, who had longed to "see the Indians in their native haunts," was disgusted by their filth and laziness, and the party expected no better

results when they came to the adjoining Moki reservation. Here, however, they were happily disappointed, for they arrived at the pueblo of Oraibi, one of the prettiest villages on the mesa, on the eve of one of their characteristic snake dances, and decided to remain over night and see the performance. Now I am not sure but the "Snake Dance" was so opportune because Uncle John had a private interview with the native chieftain, at which the head Snake Priest and the head Antelope Priest of the tribe were present. These Indians spoke excellent English and the chief loved the white man's money, so a ceremony that has been held during the month of August for many centuries—long before the Spanish conquistadors found this interesting tribe—was found to be on tap for that very evening. The girls were tremendously excited at the prospect and Wampus was ordered to prepare camp for the night—the first they had spent in their automobile and away from a hotel. Not only was the interior of the roomy limousine converted into sleeping quarters for the three girls, but a tent was spread, one side fastened to the car while the other was staked to the ground. Three wire folding cots came from some hidden place beneath the false bottom of the car, with bedding enough to supply them, and these were for the use of the men in the tent. The two "bedrooms" having been thus prepared, Wampus lighted the tiny gasoline stove, over which Patsy and Beth enthusiastically cooked the supper. Beth wanted to "Newburg" the tinned lobster, and succeeded in creaming it very nicely. They had potato chips, coffee and toasted Holland rusks, as well, and all thoroughly enjoyed the improvised meal.

Their camp had been pitched just at the outskirts of the Indian village, but the snake dance was to take place in a rocky glen some distance away from the pueblo and so Uncle John instructed Wampus to remain and guard their outfit, as the Moki are notorious thieves. They left the lean little chauffeur perched upon the driver's seat, smoking one of his "stogie" cigars and with Mumbles sitting gravely beside him.

Myrtle hobbled on her crutches between Beth and Patsy, who carried little tin lanterns made with lamp chimneys that had candles inside them. They first visited the chief, who announced that the ceremonies were about to begin. At a word from this imposing leader a big Indian caught up Myrtle and easily carried her on his shoulder, as if she were light as a feather, leading the way to the rocky amphitheatre. Here were assembled all the inhabitants of the village, forming a wide circle around the performers. The snakes were in a pit dug in the center of the space, over which a few branches had been placed. This is called the "kisi."

These unique and horrifying snake dances of the Moki have been described so often that I need not speak of this performance in detail. Before it was half over the girls wished they were back in their automobile; but the Major whispered that for them to leave would cause great offense to the Indians and might result in trouble. The dance is supposedly a religious one, in honor of the Rain God, and at first the snakes were not used, but as the dancers became wrought up and excited by their antics one by one they reached within the kisi and drew out a snake, allowing the reptiles to coil around their almost naked bodies and handling them with seeming impunity. A few were harmless species, as bull snakes and arrow snakes; but mostly the Moki used rattlesnakes, which are native to the mesa and its rocky cliffs. Some travelers have claimed that the fangs of the rattlers are secretly withdrawn before the creatures are handled, but this has been proved to be untrue. The most accepted theory is that the snakes are never permitted to coil, and cannot strike unless coiled, while the weird chanting and graceful undulating motions of the dancers in some manner "charms" or intoxicates the serpents, which are not aroused to antagonism. Occasionally, however, one of the Moki priests is bitten, in which case nothing is done to aid him and he is permitted to die, it being considered a judgment of the Rain God for some sin he has committed.

The barbaric rites seemed more picturesque, as well as more revolting, in that they took place by the flickering light of torches and bonfires in a rock strewn plain usually claimed by nature. When the dancers were more frenzied they held the squirming serpents in their mouths by the middle and allowed them to coil around their necks, dancing wildly the while. The whole affair was so nauseating and offensive that as soon as it was possible the visitors withdrew and retired to their "camp." It was now almost midnight, but the path was lighted by the little lanterns they carried.

As they approached the automobile Uncle John was disturbed not to see Wampus at his post. A light showed from the front of the car, but the chauffeur seemed to be missing. Coming nearer, however, they soon were greeted by a joyous barking from Mumbles and discovered Wampus squatting upon the ground, puffing at the small end of the cigar and seeming quite composed and tranquil.

"What are you doing there?" demanded the Major, raising his lantern the better to light the scene.

"I play jailer," grunted Wampus, without moving. "Him want to steal; Mumble he make bark noise; for me, I steal too—I steal Injun."

A dusky form, prone upon the ground, began to squirm under Wampus, who was then discovered to be sitting upon a big Indian and holding him prisoner. The chauffeur, partly an Indian himself, knew

well how to manage his captive and quieted the fellow by squeezing his throat with his broad stubby fingers.

"How long have you had him there?" inquired Uncle John, looking at the discomfited "brave" curiously.

"About an hour," was the reply.

"Let him go, then. We have no prison handy, and the man has perhaps been punished enough."

"I have wait to ask permission to kill him," said Wampus solemnly. "He know English talk, an' I have told him he is to die. I have describe, sir, several torture we make on Injun who steal, which make him think he die several time. So he is now prepare for the worst."

The Indian squirmed again, and with a sigh Wampus arose and set him free.

"See," he said; "you are save only by mercy of Great White Chief. You ver' lucky Injun. But Great White Chief will leave only one eye here when he go away. If you try to steal again the eye will see, an' then the torture I have describe will be yours. I am Wampus. I have spoke."

The Indian listened intently and then slunk away into the darkness without reply. The night had no further event and in spite of their unusual experiences all slept excellently and awoke in the morning refreshed and ready for new adventures.

CHAPTER IX

NATURE'S MASTERPIECE

From the reservation to the Grand Canyon of the Colorado was not far, but there was no "crosscut" and so they were obliged to make a wide detour nearly to Williams before striking the road that wound upward to the world's greatest wonder.

Slowly and tediously the big car climbed the miserable trail to the rim of the Grand Canyon. It was night when they arrived, for they had timed it that way, having been told of the marvelous beauty of the canyon by moonlight. But unfortunately the sky filled with clouds toward evening, and they came to Bright Angel, their destination, in a drizzling rain and total darkness. The Major was fearful Wampus might run them into the canyon, but the machine's powerful searchlights showed the way clearly and by sticking to the road they finally drew up before an imposing hotel such as you might wonder to find in so remote a spot.

Eagerly enough they escaped from the automobile where they had been shut in and entered the spacious lobby of the hotel, where a merry throng of tourists had gathered.

"Dinner and bed," said Patsy, decidedly. "I'm all tired out, and poor Myrtle is worn to a frazzle. There's no chance of seeing the canyon to-night, and as for the dancing, card playing and promiscuous gaiety, it doesn't appeal much to a weary traveler."

The girls were shown to a big room at the front of the hotel, having two beds in it. A smaller connecting-room was given to Myrtle, while Patsy and Beth shared the larger apartment. It seems the hotel, big as it was, was fairly filled with guests, the railway running three trains a day to the wonderful canyon; but Uncle John's nieces did not mind occupying the same room, which was comfortably and even luxuriously furnished.

A noise of footsteps along the corridor disturbed Patsy at an early hour. She opened her eyes to find the room dimly lighted, as by the first streaks of dawn, and sleepily arose to raise the window shade and see if day was breaking. Her hand still upraised to guide the shade the girl stood as motionless as if turned to stone. With a long drawn, gasping breath she cried: "Oh, Beth!" and then stood staring at what is undoubtedly the most entrancing, the most awe inspiring and at the same time the most magnificent spectacle that mortal eye has ever beheld—sunrise above the Grand Canyon of Arizona.

The master painters of the world have gathered in this spot in a vain attempt to transfer the wondrous coloring of the canyon to canvas. Authors famed for their eloquent command of language have striven as vainly to tell to others what their own eyes have seen; how their senses have been

thrilled and their souls uplifted by the marvel that God's hand has wrought. It can never be pictured. It can never be described. Only those who have stood as Patricia Doyle stood that morning and viewed the sublime masterpiece of Nature can realize what those homely words, "The Grand Canyon" mean. Grand? It is well named. Since no other adjective can better describe it, that much abused one may well be accepted to incompletely serve its purpose.

Beth joined her cousin at the window and was instantly as awed and absorbed as Patsy. Neither remembered Myrtle just then, but fortunately their friend had left the connecting door of their rooms ajar and hearing them stirring came in to see if anything had happened. She found the two cousins staring intently from the window and went to the second window herself, thus witnessing the spectacle in all its glory.

Even after the magnificent coloring of sunrise had faded the sight was one to rivet the attention. The hotel seemed built at the very edge of the canyon, and at their feet the ground appeared to fall away and a great gulf yawned that was tinted on all its diverse sides with hues that rivaled those of the rainbow. Across the chasm they could clearly see the trees and hills; yet these were fully thirteen miles distant, for here is one of the widest portions of the great abyss.

"I'm going to dress," said Beth, breaking the silence at last. "It seems a sin to stay cooped up in here when such a glorious panorama is at one's feet."

The others did not reply in words, but they all began to dress together with nervous haste, and then made their way down to the canyon's brink. Others were before them, standing upon the ample porches in interested groups; but such idleness would not content our girls, who trooped away for a more intimate acquaintance with the wonderful gorge.

"Oh, how small—how terribly small—I am!" cried Patsy, lost in the immensity of the canyon's extent; but this is a common cry of travelers visiting Bright Angel. You might place a baker's dozen of the huge Falls of Niagara in the Grand Canyon and scarcely notice they were there. All the vast cathedrals of Europe set upon its plateau would seem like pebbles when viewed from the brink. The thing is simply incomprehensible to those who have not seen it.

Presently Uncle John and the Major came out to join them and they all wandered along the edge until they came to a huge rock that jutted out far over the monster gulf. On the furthest point of this rock, standing with his feet at the very brink, was a tall, thin man, his back toward them. It seemed a fearful thing to do—to stand where the slightest slip would send him reeling into the abyss.

"It's like tempting fate," whispered Patsy, a safe distance away. "I wish he would step back a little."

As if he had overheard her the man half turned and calmly examined the group. His eyes were an almost colorless blue, his features destitute of any expression. By his dress he seemed well-to-do, if not prosperous, yet there was a hint of melancholy in his poise and about him a definite atmosphere of loneliness.

After that one deliberate look he turned again and faced the canyon, paying no attention to the interested little party that hovered far enough from the edge to avoid any possible danger.

"Oh, dear!" whispered Myrtle, clinging to Beth's arm with trembling fingers, "I'm afraid he's going to—to commit suicide!"

"Nonsense!" answered Beth, turning pale nevertheless.

The figure was motionless as before. Uncle John and the Major started along the path but as Beth attempted to follow them Myrtle broke away from her and hobbled eagerly on her crutches toward the stranger. She did not go quite to the end of the jutting rock, but stopped some feet away and called in a low, intense voice:

"Don't!"

The man turned again, with no more expression in his eyes or face than before. He looked at Myrtle steadily a moment, then turned and slowly left the edge, walking to firm ground and back toward the hotel without another glance at the girl.

"I'm so ashamed," said Myrtle, tears of vexation in her eyes as she rejoined her friends. "But somehow I felt I must warn him—it was an impulse I just couldn't resist."

"Why, no harm resulted, in any event, my dear," returned Beth. "I wouldn't think of it again."

They took so long a walk that all were nearly famished when they returned to the hotel for breakfast.

Of course Patsy and Beth wanted to go down Bright Angel Trail into the depths of the canyon, for that is the thing all adventurous spirits love to do.

"I'm too fat for such foolishness," said Uncle John, "so I'll stay up here and amuse Myrtle."

The Major decided to go, to "look after our Patsy;" so the three joined the long line of daring tourists and being mounted on docile, sure-footed burros, followed the guide down the trail.

Myrtle and Uncle John spent the morning on the porch of the hotel. At breakfast the girl had noticed the tall man they had encountered at the canyon's edge quietly engaged in eating at a small table in a far corner of the great dining room. During the forenoon he came from the hotel to the porch and for a time stood looking far away over the canyon.

Aroused to sympathy by the loneliness of this silent person, Uncle John left his chair and stood beside him at the railing.

"It's a wonderful sight, sir," he remarked in his brisk, sociable way; "wonderful indeed!"

For a moment there was no reply.

"It seems to call one," said the man at length, as if to himself. "It calls one."

"It's a wonder to me it doesn't call more people to see it," observed Mr. Merrick, cheerfully. "Think of this magnificent thing—greater and grander than anything the Old World can show, being here right in the heart of America, almost—and so few rush to see it! Why, in time to come, sir," he added enthusiastically, "not to have seen the Grand Canyon of Arizona will be an admission of inferiority. It's—it's the biggest thing in all the world!"

The stranger made no reply. He had not even glanced at Uncle John. Now he slowly turned and stared fixedly at Myrtle for a moment, till she cast down her eyes, blushing. Then he re-entered the hotel; nor was he again seen by them.

The little man was indignant at the snub. Rejoining Myrtle he said to her:

"That fellow wasn't worth saving—if you really saved him, my dear. He says the canyon calls one, and for all I care he may go to the bottom by any route he pleases."

Which speech showed that gentle, kindly Mr. Merrick was really annoyed. But a moment later he was all smiles again and Myrtle found him a delightful companion because he knew so well how to read people's thoughts, and if they were sad had a tactful way of cheering them.

The girls and the Major returned from their trip to the plateau full of rapture at their unique experiences.

"I wouldn't have missed it for a million dollars!" cried the Major; but he added: "and you couldn't hire me to go again for two million!"

"It was great," said Patsy; "but I'm tuckered out."

"I had nineteen narrow escapes from sudden death," began Beth, but her cousin interrupted her by saying: "So had everyone in the party; and if the canyon had caved in we'd all be dead long ago. Stop your chattering now and get ready for dinner. I'm nearly starved."

Next morning they took a farewell view of the beautiful scene and then climbed into their automobile to continue their journey. Many of the tourists had wondered at their temerity in making such a long trip through a poorly settled country in a motor car and had plied them with questions and warnings. But they were thoroughly enjoying this outing and nothing very disagreeable had happened to them so far. I am sure that on this bright, glorious morning you could not have hired any one of the party to abandon the automobile and finish the trip by train.

CHAPTER X

The roads were bad enough. They were especially bad west of Williams. Just now an association of automobile tourists has been formed to create a boulevard route through from the Atlantic to the Pacific coast, but at the time of this story no attention had been given the roads of the far West and only the paths of the rancheros from town to town served as guides. On leaving Williams they turned south so as to avoid the more severe mountain roads, and a fine run through a rather uninteresting country brought them to Prescott on the eve of the second day after leaving the Canyon. Here they decided to take a day's rest, as it was Sunday and the hotel was comfortable; but Monday morning they renewed their journey and headed southwesterly across the alkali plains—called "mesa"—for Parker, on the boundary line between Arizona and California.

Towns of any sort were very scarce in this section and the country was wild and often barren of vegetation for long stretches. There were some extensive ranches, however, as this is the section favored for settlement by a class of Englishmen called "remittance men." These are mostly the "black sheep" or outcasts of titled families, who having got into trouble of some sort at home, are sent to America to isolate themselves on western ranches, where they receive monthly or quarterly remittances of money to support them. The remittance men are poor farmers, as a rule. They are idle and lazy except when it comes to riding, hunting and similar sports. Their greatest industry is cattle raising, yet these foreign born "cowboys" constitute an entirely different class from those of American extraction, found in Texas and on the plains of the Central West. They are educated and to an extent cultured, being "gentlemen born" but sad backsliders in the practise of the profession. Because other ranchers hesitate to associate with them they congregate in settlements of their own, and here in Arizona, on the banks of the Bill Williams Branch of the Colorado River, they form almost the total population.

Our friends had hoped to make the little town of Gerton for the night, but the road was so bad that Wampus was obliged to drive slowly and carefully, and so could not make very good time. Accidents began to happen, too, doubtless clue to the hard usage the machine had received. First a spring broke, and Wampus was obliged to halt long enough to clamp it together with stout steel braces. An hour later the front tire was punctured by cactus spines, which were thick upon the road. Such delays seriously interfered with their day's mileage.

Toward sunset Uncle John figured, from the information he had received at Prescott, that they were yet thirty miles from Gerton, and so he decided to halt and make camp while there was yet sufficient daylight remaining to do so conveniently.

"We might hunt for a ranch house and beg for shelter," said he, "but from the stories I've heard of the remittance men I am sure we will enjoy ourselves better if we rely entirely upon our own resources."

The girls were, of course, delighted at the prospect of such an experience, for the silent, solitary mesa made them feel they were indeed "in the wilds of the Great American Desert." The afternoon had been hot and the ride dusty, but there was now a cooler feeling in the air since the sun had fallen low in the horizon.

They carried their own drinking water, kept ice-cold in thermos bottles, and Uncle John also had a thermos tub filled with small squares of ice. This luxury, in connection with their ample supply of provisions, enabled the young women to prepare a supper not to be surpassed in any modern hotel. The soup came from one can, the curried chicken from another, while artichokes, peas, asparagus and plum pudding shed their tin coverings to complete the meal. Fruits, cheese and biscuits they had in abundance, so there was no hardship in camping out on a deserted Arizona table-land, as far as food was concerned. The Interior of the limousine, when made into berths for the three girls, was as safe and cosy as a Pullman sleeping coach. Only the men's quarters, the "lean-to" tent, was in any way open to invasion.

After the meal was ended and the things washed and put away they all sat on folding camp chairs outside the little tent and enjoyed the intense silence surrounding them. The twilight gradually deepened into darkness. Wampus kept one of the searchlights lit to add an element of cheerfulness to the scene, and Myrtle was prevailed upon to sing one or two of her simple songs. She had a clear, sweet voice, although not a strong one, and they all—especially Uncle John—loved to hear her sing.

Afterward they talked over their trip and the anticipated change from this arid region to the verdure of California, until suddenly a long, bloodcurdling howl broke the stillness and caused them one and all to start from their seats. That is, all but Wampus. The chauffeur, sitting apart with his black cigar in his mouth, merely nodded and said: "Coyote."

The Major coughed and resumed his seat. Uncle John stood looking into the darkness as if trying to discern the creature.

"Are coyotes considered dangerous?" he asked the Canadian.

"Not to us," replied Wampus. "Sometime, if one man be out on mesa alone, an' plenty coyote come, he have hard fight for life. Coyote is wild dog. He is big coward unless pretty hungry. If I leave light burn he never come near us."

"Then let it burn—all night," said Mr. Merrick. "There he goes again—and another with him! What a horrible wail it is."

"I rather like it," said Patsy, with her accustomed calmness. "It is certainly an added experience to be surrounded by coyotes. Probably our trip wouldn't have been complete without it."

"A little of that serenade will suffice me," admitted Beth, as the howls grew nearer and redoubled in volume.

Myrtle's eyes were big and earnest. She was not afraid, but there was something uncanny in being surrounded by such savage creatures.

Nearer and nearer sounded the howls, until it was easy to see a dozen fierce eyes gleaming in the darkness, not a stone's throw away from the camp.

"I guess you girls had better go to bed," remarked Uncle John, a bit nervously. "There's no danger, you know—none at all. Let the brutes howl, if they want to—especially as we can't stop them. But you are tired, my dears, and I'd like to see you settled for the night."

Somewhat reluctantly they entered the limousine, drew the curtains and prepared for bed. Certainly they were having a novel experience, and if Uncle John would feel easier to have them listen to the howling coyotes from inside the limousine instead of outside, they could not well object to his request.

Presently Wampus asked the Major for his revolver, and on obtaining the weapon he walked a few paces toward the coyotes and fired a shot into their group. They instantly scattered and made off, only to return in a few moments to their former position.

"Will they continue this Grand Opera chorus all night?" asked Uncle John.

"Perhap," said Wampus. "They hungry, an' smell food. Coyote can no reason. If he could, he know ver' well we never feed him."

"The next time we come this way let us fetch along a ton or so of coyote feed," suggested the Major. "I wonder what the poor brutes would think if they were stuffed full for once in their lives?"

"It have never happen, sir," observed Wampus, shaking his head gravely. "Coyote all born hungry; he live hungry; he die hungry. If ever coyote was not hungry he would not be coyote."

"In that case, Major," said Uncle John, "let us go to bed and try to sleep. Perhaps in slumber we may forget these howling fiends."

"Very well," agreed Major Doyle, rising to enter the little tent.

Wampus unexpectedly interposed. "Wait," called the little chauffeur. "Jus' a minute, if you please."

While the Major and Mr. Merrick stood wondering at the request, the Canadian, who was still holding the revolver in one hand, picked a steel rod from the rumble of the automobile and pushing aside the flap of the little tent entered. The tail-lamp of the car burned inside, dimly lighting the place.

The Major was about to follow Wampus when a revolver shot arrested him. This sound was followed by a quick thumping against the ground of the steel bar, and then Wampus emerged from the tent holding a dark, squirming object on the end of the rod extended before him.

"What is it?" asked Mr. Merrick, somewhat startled.

"Rattlesnake," said Wampus, tossing the thing into the sagebrush. "I see him crawl in tent while you eat supper."

"Why did you not tell us?" cried the Major excitedly.

"I thought him perhaps crawl out again. Him sometime do that. But no. Mister snake he go sleep in tent which is reserve for his superior. I say nothing, for I do not wish to alarm the young ladies. That is

why I hold the dog Mumble so tight, for he small eye see snake too, an' fool dog wish to go fight him. Rattlesnake soon eat Mumble up—eh? But never mind; there is no worry. I am Wampus, an' I am here. You go to bed now, an' sleep an' be safe."

He said this rather ostentatiously, and for that reason neither of the others praised his watchful care or his really brave act. That Wampus was proving himself a capable and faithful servant even the Major was forced to admit, yet the man's bombast and self-praise robbed him of any word of commendation he justly earned.

"I think," said Uncle John, "I'll bunk on the front seat to-night. I'm short, you see, and will just about curl up in the space. I believe snakes do not climb up wheels. Make my bed on the front seat, Wampus."

The man grinned but readily obeyed. The Major watched him thoughtfully.

"For my part," he said, "I'll have a bed made on top the roof."

"Pshaw!" said Uncle John; "you'll scratch the paint."

"That is a matter of indifference to me," returned the Major.

"You'll roll off, in your sleep, and hurt yourself."

"I'll risk that, sir."

"Are you afraid, Major?"

"Afraid! Me? Not when I'm awake, John. But what's to prevent more of those vermin from crawling into the tent during the night?"

"Such thing very unusual." remarked Wampus, placing the last blanket on Mr. Merrick's improvised bed. "Perhaps you sleep in tent a week an' never see another rattler."

"Just the same," concluded the Major, "I'll have my bed on top the limousine."

He did, Wampus placing blankets and a pillow for him without a word of protest. The Major climbed over Uncle John and mounted to the roof of the car, which sloped to either side but was broad and long enough to accommodate more than one sleeper. Being an old campaigner and a shrewd tactician, Major Doyle made two blankets into rolls, which he placed on either side of him, to "anchor" his body in position. Then he settled himself to rest beneath the brilliant stars while the coyotes maintained their dismal howling. But a tired man soon becomes insensible to even such annoyances.

The girls, having entered the limousine from the door opposite the tent, were all unaware of the rattlesnake episode and supposed the shot had been directed against the coyotes. They heard the Major climbing upon the roof, but did not demand any explanation, being deep in those bedtime confidences so dear to all girls. Even they came to disregard the persistent howls of the coyotes, and in time fell asleep.

Wampus did not seem afraid of snakes. The little chauffeur went to bed in the tent and slept soundly upon his cot until daybreak, when the coyotes withdrew and the Canadian got up to make the coffee.

The Major peered over the edge of the roof to watch him. He had a sleepy look about his eyes, as if he had not rested well. Uncle John was snoring with gentle regularity and the girls were still asleep.

"Wampus," said the Major, "do you know the proper definition of a fool?"

Wampus reflected, stirring the coffee carefully.

"I am not—what you call him?—a dictionairre; no. But I am Wampus. I have live much in very few year. I would say a fool is man who think he is wise. For what is wise? Nothing!"

The Major felt comforted.

"It occurred to me," he said, beginning to climb down from the roof, "that a fool was a man who left a good home for this uncomfortable life on a barren desert. This country wasn't made for humans; it belongs to the coyotes and the rattlesnakes. What right have we to intrude upon them, then?"

Wampus did not reply. It was not his business to criticise his employers.

CHAPTER XI

A REAL ADVENTURE AT LAST

Uncle John woke up when the Major inadvertently placed a heel upon his round stomach on the way to the ground. The chubby little millionaire had slept excellently and was in a genial humor this morning. He helped Wampus fry the bacon and scramble the eggs, while the Major called the girls.

It proved a glorious sunrise and the air was full of pure ozone. They had suffered little from cold during the trip, although it was in the dead of winter and the altitude considerable. Just now they were getting closer to California every hour, and when they descended from the mesa it would gradually grow warmer.

They were all becoming expert at "breaking camp," and preparing for the road. Beth and Patsy put away the bedding and "made up" the interior of the limousine for traveling. The Major and Uncle John folded the tent and packed it away, while Wampus attended to the dishes and tinware and then looked over his car. In a surprisingly short time they were all aboard and the big machine was gliding over the faint trail.

The mesa was not a flat or level country, for they were still near to the mountain ranges. The way was up hill and down, in gentle slopes, and soon after starting they breasted the brow of a hill and were confronted by half a dozen mounted men, who seemed as much astonished at the encounter as they were.

It being an event to meet anyone in this desolate place Wampus involuntarily brought the car to a halt, while the riders lined up beside it and stared rather rudely at the party. They were dressed as cowboys usually are, with flannel shirts, chapelets and sombrero hats; but their faces were not rugged nor healthy, as is the case with most Western cowboys, but bore marks of dissipation and hard living.

"Remittance men," whispered Wampus.

Uncle John nodded. He had heard of this curious class. Especially were the men staring at the three pretty, feminine faces that peered from the interior of the limousine. They had remained silent thus far, but now one of them, a fellow with dark eyes and a sallow complexion, reined his horse nearer the car and removed his hat with a sweeping gesture that was not ungraceful.

"A merry morning to you, fair ladies—or angels—I much misdoubt which we have chanced upon. Anyhow, welcome to Hades!"

Uncle John frowned. He did not like the bantering, impudent tone. Beth flushed and turned aside her head; Myrtle shrank back in her corner out of sight; but Patsy glared fixedly at the speaker with an expression that was far from gracious. The remittance man did not seem daunted by this decided aversion. A sneering laugh broke from his companions, and one of them cried:

"Back up, Algy, and give your betters a chance. You're out of it, old man."

"I have no betters," he retorted. Then, turning to the girls again and ignoring the presence of the men accompanying them, he continued:

"Beauteous visions, since you have wilfully invaded the territory of Hades Ranch, of which diabolical domain I, Algernon Tobey, am by grace of his Satanic majesty the master, I invite you to become my guests and participate in a grand ball which I shall give this evening in your honor."

His comrades laughed again, and one of them shouted:

"Good for you, Algy. A dance—that's the thing!"

"Why, we haven't had the chance of a dance for ages," said another approvingly.

"Because we have had no ladies to dance with," explained Algy. "But here are three come to our rescue—perhaps more, if I could see inside that barricade—and they cannot refuse us the pleasure of their society."

"Sir," said Major Doyle, stiffly, "you are pleased to be impertinent. Ride on, you rascals, and spare us further sight of you."

The man turned upon him a scowling face.

"Don't interfere," he said warningly. "This isn't your party, you old duffer!"

"Drive ahead, Wampus," commanded Uncle John.

Wampus had to get out and crank the engines, which he calmly proceeded to do. The man who had called himself Algernon Tobey perceived his intention and urged his pony to the front of the car.

"Let that thing alone. Keep your hands off!" he said.

Wampus paid no attention. The fellow brought his riding whip down sharply on the chauffeur's shoulders, inflicting a stinging blow. Instantly little Wampus straightened up, grasped Tobey by the leg and with a swift, skillful motion jerked him from his horse. The man started to draw his revolver, but in an instant he and Wampus were rolling together upon the ground and the Canadian presently came uppermost and held his antagonist firmly between his knees. Then with deliberation he raised his clinched fist and thrust it forcibly against Mr. Tobey's eye, repeating the impact upon his nose, his chin and his cheek in a succession of jarring thumps that were delivered with scientific precision. Algy fairly howled, kicking and struggling to be free. None of his comrades offered to interfere and it seemed they were grimly enjoying the punishment that was being; inflicted upon their leader.

When Wampus had quite finished his work he arose, adjusted his disarranged collar and tie and proceeded to crank the engines. Then he climbed into his seat and started the car with a sudden bound. As he did so a revolver shot rang out and one of the front tires, pierced by the bullet, ripped itself nearly in two as it crumpled up. A shout of derisive laughter came from the cowboys. Algy was astride his pony again, and as Wampus brought the damaged car to a stop the remittance men dashed by and along the path, taking the same direction Uncle John's party was following". Tobey held back a little, calling out:

"Au revoir! I shall expect you all at my party. I'm going now to get the fiddler."

He rejoined his comrades then, and they all clattered away until a roll of the mesa hid them from sight.

Uncle John got down from his seat to assist his chauffeur.

"Thank you, Wampus," he said. "Perhaps you should have killed him while you had the opportunity; but you did very well."

Wampus was wrestling with the tire.

"I have never start a private graveyard," he replied, "for reason I am afraid to hurt anyone. But I am Wampus. If Mister Algy he dance to-night, somebody mus' lead him, for he will be blind."

"I never met such a lawless brood in my life," prowled the Major, indignantly. "If they were in New York they'd be put behind the bars in two minutes."

"But they are in Arizona—in the wilderness," said Uncle John gravely. "If there are laws here such people do not respect them."

It took a long time to set the new tire and inflate it, for the outer tube was torn so badly that an extra one had to be substituted. But finally the task was accomplished and once more they renewed their journey.

Now that they were alone with their friends the girls were excitedly gossiping over the encounter.

"Do you really suppose we are on that man's ground—his ranch, as he calls it?" asked Myrtle, half fearfully.

"Why, I suppose someone owns all this ground, barren as it is," replied Patsy. "But we are following a regular road—not a very good one, nor much traveled; but a road, nevertheless—and any road is public property and open for the use of travelers."

"Perhaps we shall pass by their ranch house," suggested Beth.

"If we do," Uncle John answered, "I'll have Wampus put on full speed. Even their wild ponies can't follow us then, and if they try shooting up the tires again they are quite likely to miss as we spin by."

"Isn't there any other road?" the Major asked.

Wampus shook his head.

"I have never come jus' this same route before," he admitted; "but I make good friend in Prescott, who know all Arizona blindfold. Him say this is nice, easy road and we cannot get lost for a good reason—the reason there is no other road at all—only this one."

"Did your friend say anything about Hades Ranch?" continued the questioner.

"He say remittance man make much mischief if he can; but he one foreign coward, drunk most time an' when sober weak like my aunt's tea. He say don't let remittance man make bluff. No matter how many come, if you hit one they all run."

"H-m," murmured Uncle John, "I'm not so sure of that, Wampus. There seems to be a good many of those insolent rascals, and I hope we shall not meet them again. They may give us trouble yet."

"Never be afraid," advised the chauffeur. "I am Wampus, an' I am here!"

Admitting that evident truth, our tourists were not greatly reassured. Wampus could not tell where the road might lead them, for he did not know, save that it led by devious winds to Parker, on the border between Arizona and California; but what lay between them and that destination was a sealed book to them all.

The car was heavy and the road soft; so in spite of their powerful engines the car was not making more than fifteen miles an hour. A short ride brought them to a ridge, from the top of which they saw a huddle of buildings not far distant, with a near-by paddock containing a number of ponies and cattle. The buildings were not palatial, being composed mostly of adobe and slab wood; but the central one, probably the dwelling or ranch house, was a low, rambling pile covering considerable ground.

The road led directly toward this group of buildings, which our travelers at once guessed to be "Hades Ranch." Wampus slowed down and cast a sharp glance around, but the land on either side of the trail was thick with cactus and sagebrush and to leave the beaten path meant a puncture almost instantly. There was but one thing to be done.

"Pretty good road here," said Wampus. "Hold tight an' don't get scare. We make a race of it."

"Go ahead," returned Uncle John, grimly. "If any of those scoundrels get in your way, run them down."

"I never like to hurt peoples; but if that is your command, sir, I will obey," said Wampus, setting his jaws tightly together.

The car gathered speed and shot over the road at the rate of twenty miles an hour; then twenty-five—then thirty—and finally forty. The girls sat straight and looked eagerly ahead. Forms were darting here and there among the buildings of the ranch, quickly congregating in groups on either side of the roadway. A red flag fluttered in the center of the road, some four feet from the ground.

"Look out!" shouted Uncle John. "Stop, Wampus; stop her, I say!"

Wampus saw why, and applied his brakes. The big car trembled, slowed down, and came to a stop less than a foot away from three ugly bars of barbed wire which had been placed across the road. They were now just beside the buildings, and a triumphant shout greeted them from their captors, the remittance men.

CHAPTER XII

CAPTURED

"Welcome to Hades!" cried a stout little man in a red blouse, sticking his leering countenance through the door of the limousine.

"Shut up, Stubby," commanded a hoarse voice from the group. "Haven't you any manners? You haven't been introduced yet."

"I've engaged the dark eyed one for the first dance," persisted

Stubby, as a dozen hands dragged him away from the door.

The Major sprang out and confronted the band.

"What are we to understand by this outrage?" he demanded fiercely.

"It means you are all invited to a party, and we won't accept any regrets," replied a laughing voice.

Patsy put her head out of the window and looked at the speaker. It was Mr. Algernon Tobey. He had two strips of sticking plaster over his nose. One of his eyes was swollen shut and the other was almost closed. Yet he spoke in a voice more cheerful than it was when they first met him.

"Don't be afraid," he added. "No one has the slightest intention of injuring any of you in any way, I assure you."

"We have not the same intention in regard to you, sir," replied Major Doyle, fuming with rage, for his "Irish was up," as he afterward admitted. "Unless you at once remove that barricade and allow us to proceed we will not be responsible for what happens. You are warned, sir!"

Uncle John, by this time standing beside the Major upon the ground, had been quietly "sizing up the situation," as he would have expressed it. He found they had been captured by a party of fourteen men, most of whom were young, although three or four, including Tobey, were of middle age. The atmosphere of the place, with its disorderly surroundings and ill kept buildings, indicated that Hades Ranch was bachelor quarters exclusively. Half a dozen Mexicans and one or two Chinamen were in the background, curious onlookers.

Mr. Merrick noted the fact that the remittance men were an unkempt, dissipated looking crew, but that their faces betokened reckless good humor rather than desperate evil. There was no doubt but most of them were considering this episode in the light of a joke, and were determined to enjoy the experience at the expense of their enforced guests.

Uncle John had lived many years in the West and knew something of these peculiar English exiles. Therefore he was neither frightened nor unduly angry, but rather annoyed by the provoking audacity of the fellows. He had three young girls to protect and knew these men could not be fit acquaintances for them. But he adopted a tone different from the Major's and addressed himself to Tobey as the apparent leader of the band.

"Sir," he said calmly but with pointed emphasis, "I believe you were born a gentleman, as were your comrades here."

"You are right," answered Tobey. "And each and every one you see before you has fallen from his former high estate—through no fault of his own." This may have been a sarcasm, for the others laughed in boisterous approval. "In some respects we are still gentlemen," Tobey went on, "but in others we are not to be trusted. Be reasonable, sir—I haven't the faintest idea who you are or what your name is—and consider calmly our proposition. Here we are, a number of young fellows who have seen better and happier days, living alone in the midst of an alkali desert. Most of us haven't seen a female for months, nor a lady for years. Why, last fall Stubby there rode eighty miles to Buxton, just to stand on a corner and see a lot of greasy Mexican women go by. We tire of exclusive male society, you see. We get to bore one another terribly. So here, like a visitation from heaven, three attractive young ladies descend upon us, traveling through our domain, and having discovered their presence we instantly decided to take advantage of the opportunity and invite them to an impromptu ball. There's no use refusing us, for we insist on carrying out our plan. If you men, perhaps the fathers of the young ladies, behave reasonably, we will entertain you royally and send you on your way rejoicing. Won't we, boys?"

They shouted approval.

"But if you oppose us and act ugly about this fête, gentlemen, we shall be obliged to put a few bullets into you, and decide afterward what disposition to make of the girls. About the best stunt we do is shooting. We can't work; we're too poor to gamble much; but we hunt a good bit and we can shoot straight. I assure you we wouldn't mind losing and taking a few lives if a scrimmage is necessary. Eh, boys?"

"That's right, Algy," said one, answering for the others; "we'll have that dance if we die for it—ev'ry man Jack of us."

Myrtle was trembling in her corner of the limousine. Beth sat still with a curl on her lips. But Patsy was much interested in the proceedings and had listened attentively to the above conversation. Now the girl suddenly swung open the door and sprang out beside her father, facing the group of cowboys.

"I am Patricia Doyle," she said in a clear voice, "and these gentlemen," indicating the Major and Mr. Merrick, "are my father and my uncle. You understand perfectly why they object to the arrangement you suggest, as any one of you would object, had you a daughter in a like position. But you are arbitrary and not inclined to respect womanhood. Therefore but one course is open to us—to submit under protest to the unwelcome attentions you desire to thrust upon us."

They listened silently to this frank speech, and some of their faces wore crestfallen expressions by the time she had finished. Indeed, one of the older men turned on his heel and walked away, disappearing among the buildings. After a brief hesitation a delicate young fellow—almost a boy—followed this man, his face flaming red with shame. But the others stood their ground.

"Very good, Miss Doyle," remarked Tobey, with forced cheerfulness. "You are quite sensible to submit to the inevitable. Bring out your friends and introduce them, and then we'll all go in to luncheon and prepare for the dance."

"I won't submit to this!" cried the Major, stamping his foot angrily.

"Yes, you will," said Uncle John, with a motion preventing his irate brother-in-law from drawing a revolver, "Patsy is quite right, and we will submit with as much dignity as we can muster, being overpowered by numbers."

He beckoned to Beth, who stepped out of the car and assisted Myrtle to follow her. A little cheer of bravado had arisen from the group, inspired by their apparent victory; but when Myrtle's crutches appeared and they saw the fair, innocent face of the young girl who rested upon them, the shout died away in a hush of surprise.

"This is my cousin, Elizabeth De Graf," announced Patsy, with cold deliberation, determined that the proprieties should be observed in all intercourse with these people. "And I present our friend, Myrtle Dean. Under ordinary circumstances I believe Myrtle would be excused from dancing, but I suppose no brute in the form of a man would have consideration for her infirmity."

This time even Tobey flushed.

"You've a sharp tongue, Miss Doyle, and it's liable to lead you into trouble," he retorted, losing for the moment his suave demeanor. "We may be brutes—and I imagine we are—but we're not dangerous unless provoked."

It was savagely said, and Uncle John took warning and motioned Patsy to be silent.

"Lead the way, sir," he said. "Our chauffeur will of course remain with the car."

Wampus had kept his seat, motionless and silent. He only nodded in answer to Mr. Merrick's instructions and was entirely disregarded by the remittance men.

The man called "Stubby," who had a round, good-humored face, stepped eagerly to Myrtle's side and exclaimed: "Let me assist you, please."

"No," she said, shaking her head with a wan smile; "I am quite able to walk alone."

He followed her, though, full of interest and with an air of deep respect that belied his former actions. Tobey, content with his present success, walked beside Mr. Merrick and led the procession toward the ranch house. The Major followed, his tall form upright, his manner bellicose and resentful, with Beth and Patsy on either side of him. The remittance men followed in a straggling crowd, laughing and boisterously talking among themselves. Just as they reached the house a horseman came clattering down the road and all paused involuntarily to mark the new arrival. The rider was a handsome, slim young fellow, dressed as were the other cowboys present, and he came on at a breakneck speed that seemed only warranted by an errand of life and death.

In front of him, tied to the saddle, appeared a huge bundle, and as the horse dashed up to the group standing by the ranch house the rider gracefully threw himself off and removed his hat with a sweeping gesture as he observed the young ladies.

"I've got him, Algy!" he cried merrily.

"Dan'l?" asked Tobey.

"Dan'l himself." He pointed to the bundle, which heaved and wriggled to show it was alive. "He refused to come willingly, of course; so I brought him anyhow. Never yet was there a fiddler willing to be accommodating."

"Good for you, Tim!" shouted a dozen voices. And Stubby added in his earnest way; "Dan'l was never more needed in his life."

Tobey was busy unwinding a long lariat that bent the captive nearly double and secured him firmly to the panting horse. When the bonds were removed Dan'l would have tumbled prone to the ground had not willing hands caught him and supported him upon his feet. Our friends then observed that he was an aged man with a face thickly furrowed with wrinkles. He had but one eye, small and gray and very shrewd in expression, which he turned contemptuously upon the crowd surrounding him. Numb and trembling from his cramped position upon the horse and the terrible jouncing he had endured, the fiddler could scarcely stand at first and shook as with a palsy; but he made a brave effort to control his weakness and turned smilingly at the murmur of pity and indignation that came from the lips of the girls.

"Where's the fiddle?" demanded Tobey, and Tim unhooked a calico bag from the saddlebow and held it out. A laugh greeted the gesture.

"Dan'l said he be hanged if he'd come," announced Tim, with a grim appreciation of the humorous side of the situation; "so I hung him and brought him along—and his fiddle to boot. But don't boot it until after the dance."

"What do you mean, sir, by this rebellious attitude?" questioned Tobey, sticking his damaged face close to that of the fiddler.

Dan'l blinked with his one eye but refused to answer.

"I've a good mind to skin you alive," continued the leader, in a savage tone. "You'll either obey my orders or I'll throw you into the snake pit."

"Let him alone, Algy," said Tim, carelessly. "The old scoundrel has been tortured enough already. But I see we have partners for the dance," looking critically at the girls, "and I claim first choice because I've brought the fiddler."

At this a roar of protest arose and Tobey turned and said sullenly:

"Come in, all of you. We'll settle the order of dancing later on."

The interior of the ranch house was certainly picturesque. A great living room ran all across the front, with an immense fireplace built of irregular adobe bricks. The floor was strewn with skins of animals—mostly coyotes, a few deer and one or two mountain lions—and the walls were thickly hung with weapons and trophies of the chase. A big table in one corner was loaded with bottles and glasses, indicating the intemperate habits of the inmates, while on the chimney shelf were rows of pipes and jars of tobacco. An odor similar to that of a barroom hung over the place which the air from the open windows seemed unable to dissipate.

There were plenty of benches and chairs, with a long mess table occupying the center of the room. In a corner was an old square piano, which a Mexican was trying to dust as the party entered.

"Welcome to Hades!" exclaimed Tobey, with an absurd gesture. "Be good enough to make yourselves at home and I'll see if those devils of Chinamen are getting luncheon ready."

Silently the prisoners sat down. The crowd poured in after them and disposed themselves in various attitudes about the big room, all staring with more or less boldness at the three girls. Dan'l the fiddler was pushed in with the others and given a seat, while two or three of the imitation cowboys kept guard over him to prevent any possible escape. So far the old man had not addressed a word to anyone.

With the absence of the leader the feeling of restraint seemed to relax. The cowboys began whispering among themselves and chuckling with glee, as if they were enjoying some huge joke. Stubby had placed himself near the three young ladies, whom he eyed with adoring glances, and somehow none of the prisoners regarded this childish young fellow in exactly the same light as they did his comrades. Tim, his attitude full of grace as he lounged against a settle, was also near the group. He seemed a bit thoughtful since his dramatic arrival and had little to say to anyone.

Mr. Merrick engaged Stubby in conversation.

"Does Mr. Tobey own this place?" he asked.

"By proxy, yes," was the reply. "It isn't in his name, you know, although that doesn't matter, for he couldn't sell his desert ranch if he had a title to it. I suppose that is what his folks were afraid of. Algy is the fourth son of old Lord Featherbone, and got into a disgraceful mess in London some years ago. So

Featherbone shipped him over here, in charge of a family solicitor who hunted out this sequestered spot, bought a couple of thousand acres and built this hut. Then he went home and left Algy here to keep up the place on a paltry ten pounds—fifty dollars—a month."

"Can he manage to do that?" asked Uncle John.

"Why, he has to, you see. He's got together a few cattle, mostly stolen I imagine; but he doesn't try to work the land. Moreover he's established this community, composed of his suffering fellow exiles, the secret of which lies in the fact that we work the cooperative plan, and all chip in our remittances to boil the common pot. We can keep more servants and buy more food and drink, that way, than if each one of us lived separately."

"Up in Oregon," said Mr. Merrick, "I've known of some very successful and prosperous ranchmen among the remittance men."

"Oh, we're all kinds, I suppose, good and bad," admitted Stubby. "This crew's mostly bad, and they're moderately proud of it. It's a devil of a life, sir, and Hades Ranch is well named. I've only been here a month. Had a little property up North; but the sheriff took it for debt, and that forced me to Algy, whom I detest. I think I'll move on, before long. But you see I'm limited. Can't leave Arizona or I'll get my remittance cut off."

"Why were you sent here into exile?" asked Myrtle artlessly.

He turned red and refused to meet her eyes.

"Went wrong, Miss," he said, "and my folks wouldn't stand for it. We're all in the same boat," sweeping his arm around, "doing punishment for our misdeeds."

"Do none of you ever reform?" inquired Patsy.

"What's the use? We're so far away from home no one there would ever believe in our reformation. Once we become outcasts, that's the end of our careers. We're buried in these Western wilds and allowed just enough to keep alive."

"I would think," said Uncle John musingly, "that the manly way would be to cut yourself off entirely from your people at home and go to some city in the United States where honesty and industry would win a new name for you. Then you could be respected and happy and become of use to the world."

Stubby laughed.

"That has been tried," he replied; "but few ever made a success of it. We're generally the kind that prefers idleness to work. My family is wealthy, and I don't mind taking from them what little they give me willingly and all that I can screw out of them besides. I'm in for life, as the saying is, and I've no especial ambition except to drink myself to death as soon as possible."

Patsy shuddered. It seemed a horrible thing to be so utterly hopeless. Could this young fellow have really merited his fate?

CHAPTER XIII

THE FIDDLER

Tim had listened carelessly to the conversation until now, when he said listlessly:

"Don't think us all criminals, for we're not. In my own case I did nothing to deserve exile except that I annoyed my elder brother by becoming more popular with our social set than he was. He had all the property and I was penniless, so he got rid of me by threatening to cut off my allowance unless I went to America and stayed there."

"And you accepted such a condition?" cried Patsy, scornfully. "Why were you not independent enough to earn your own living?"

He shrugged his shoulders, yet seemed amused.

"I simply couldn't," said he. "I was not educated to work, you know, and to do so at home would be to disgrace my noble family. I've too much respect for my lineage to labor with my hands or head."

"But here in America no one would know you," suggested Beth.

"I would only humiliate myself by undertaking such a task. And why should I do so? While I am in America my affectionate brother, the head of the family, supports me, as is his duty. Your philosophy is pretty enough, but it is not practical. The whole fault lies in our old-fashioned system of inheritance, the elder male of a family getting all the estate and the younger ones nothing at all. Here, in this crude and plebeian country, I believe it is the custom to provide for all one's children, and a father is at liberty to do so because his estate is not entailed."

"And he earns it himself and can do what he likes with it," added Uncle John, impatiently. "Your system of inheritance and entail may be somewhat to blame, but your worst fault is in rearing a class of mollycoddles and social drones who are never of benefit to themselves or the world at large. You, sir, I consider something less than a man."

"I agree with you," replied Tim, readily. "I'm only good to cumber the earth, and if I get little pleasure out of life I must admit that it's all I'm entitled to."

"And you can't break your bonds and escape?" asked Patsy.

"I don't care to. People who are ambitious to do things merely bore me. I don't admire them or care to imitate them."

From that moment they took no further interest in the handsome outcast. His world was not their world.

And now Tobey came in, driving before him a lot of Mexicans bearing trays of food. The long table was laid in a moment, for everything was dumped upon it without any attempt at order. Each of the cowboys seized a plate from a pile at one end and helped himself to whatever he wanted.

Two or three of the men, however, were courteous enough to attend to their unwilling guests and see they were served as well as conditions would permit. The food was plentiful and of good quality, but although none of Uncle John's party was squeamish or a stickler for form, all more or less revolted from the utter disregard of all the proprieties.

"I'm sorry we have no wine; but there's plenty of whiskey, if you like it," remarked Tobey.

The girls were silent and ate little, although they could not help being interested in observing the bohemianism of these gently reared but decadent sons of respectable English families. As soon as they could they left the table, and Tobey, observing their uneasiness in spite of his damaged and nearly useless optics, decided to send them to another room where they could pass the afternoon without further annoyance. Stubby escorted the party and ushered them into a good sized room which he said was "Algy's study," although no one ever studied there.

"Algy's afraid you'll balk at the dance; so he wants to please you however he can," remarked the round faced youth. "You won't mind being left alone, will you?"

"We prefer it, sir," answered the Major, stiffly.

"You see, we're going to have a rare lark this afternoon," continued Stubby, confidentially. "Usually it's pretty dull here, and all we can do is ride and hunt—play cards and quarrel. But your coming has created no end of excitement and this dance will be our red-letter day for a long time to come. The deuce of it is, however, that there are only two girls to dance with thirteen men. We limit our community to fifteen, you know; but little Ford and old Rutledge have backed down and won't have anything to do with this enterprise. I don't know why," he continued, thoughtfully.

"Perhaps they still have some gentlemanly instincts," suggested Patsy.

"That must be it," he replied in a relieved tone. "Well, anyhow, to avoid quarrels and bloodshed we've agreed to throw dice for the dances. Every one is to have an equal chance, you see, and when you young ladies open the dance the entire programme will be arranged for you."

"Are we to have no choice in the matter of partners?" inquired Beth curiously.

"None whatever. There would surely be a row, in that case, and we intend to have everything; pass off pleasantly if we have to kill a few to keep the peace."

With this Stubby bowed low and retreated toward the door, which suddenly opened to admit old Dan'l

the fiddler, who was thrust in so violently that his body collided with that of Stubby and nearly knocked him over.

"That's all right," laughed the remittance man, recovering from the shock. "You mustn't escape, you know, Dan'l, for we depend on you for the music."

He closed the door as he went out and they all heard a bolt shoot into place. Yet the broad window, scarcely six feet from the ground, stood wide open to admit the air.

Dan'l stood in the middle of the room, motionless for a moment. Then he raised his wrinkled face and clinched his fists, shaking them in the direction of the living-room.

"Me!" he muttered; "me play for dese monkeys to dance—me! a maestro—a composer—a artiste! No; I vill nod! I vill die before I condescention to such badness, such mockery!"

They were the first words he had spoken since his arrival, and they seemed to hold all his pentup indignation. The girls pitied the old man and, recognizing in him a fellow prisoner, sought to comfort him.

"If the dance depends upon us, there will be no dance," said Patsy, firmly.

"I thought you advised submitting to the whim of these ruffians," said Uncle John in surprise.

"Only to gain time, Uncle. And the scheme has succeeded. Now is our time to plot and plan how to outwit our enemies."

"Goot!" cried Dan'l approvingly. "I help you. Dey are vermin—pah! I would kill dem all mitout mercifulness, unt be glad!"

"It won't be necessary to kill them, I hope," said Beth, smiling. "All we wish is to secure our escape."

"Vot a time dey make me!" said Dan'l, more calmly. "You see, I am living peacefulness in mine bungalow by der river—ten mile away. Dot brute Tim, he come unt ask me to fiddle for a dance. I—fiddle! Ven I refuse me to do it, he tie me up unt by forcibleness elope mit me. Iss id nod a crime—a vickedness—eh?"

"It certainly is, sir," said Uncle John. "But do not worry. These girls have some plan in their heads, I'm sure, and if we manage to escape we will carry you home in safety. Now, my dears, what is it?"

"Oh, we've only begun to think yet," said Patsy, and walked to the window. All but Myrtle and Dan'l followed her.

Below the window was a jungle of cactus, with hundreds of spines as slender and sharp as stilettos sticking in every direction.

"H-m; this room is burglar proof," muttered Uncle John, with marked disappointment.

"It also makes an excellent prison," added Patsy. "But I suspected something of this sort when I saw they had left the window open. We can't figure on getting out that way, you see."

"Id would be suiciding," Dan'l said, mournfully shaking his head. "If dese fiends were as goot as dey are clefer, dey would be angels."

"No argument seems to prevail with them," remarked Beth. "They are lawless and merciless, and in this far-away country believe they may do as they please."

"They're as bad as the bandits of Taormina," observed Patsy, smiling at the recollection of an adventure they had abroad; "but we must find some way to evade them."

Dan'l had gone over to Myrtle's corner and stood staring at her with his one shrewd eye. Uncle John looked thoughtfully out of the window and saw Wampus busy in the road before the house. He had his coat off and was cutting the bars of barbed wire and rolling them out of the way, while Mumbles, who had been left with him, ran here and there at his heels as if desiring to assist him.

From the big hall, or living room, at the right came a dull roar of voices, subdued shouts and laughter, mingled with the clinking of glasses. All the remittance men were gathered there deep in the game of dice which was to determine the order in which they were to dance with Beth and Patsy. The servants were out of sight. Wampus had the field to himself.

"Come here," said Uncle John to the girls, and when they stood beside him pointed to the car. "Wampus is making ready for the escape," he continued. "He has cleared the road and the way is now open if we can manage to get to the machine. Has your plan matured yet?"

Patsy shook her head.

"Not yet, Uncle," she replied.

"Couldn't Wampus throw us a rope?" inquired the Major.

"He could," said Uncle John; "but we would be unable to use it. Those terrible cactus spines are near enough to spear anyone who dared try to slide down a rope. Think of something else."

They all tried to do that, but no practical idea seemed forthcoming.

"Oh, no," Dan'l was saying to Myrtle; "dey are nod afraid to shoot; bud dey vill nod shoot ladies, belief me. Always dey carry refolfers in deir belts—or deir holsterses. Dey eat mit refolfers; dey schleep mit refolfers; dey hunt, dey quarrel, unt sometimes dey shoot each odder—de best enactionment vot dey do. Bud dey do nod shoot at ladies—nefer."

"Will they wear their revolvers at the dance?" asked Beth, overhearing this speech.

"I belief id," said Dan'l, wagging his ancient head. "Dey like to be ready to draw quick like, if anybody shteps on anybody's toes. Yes; of course."

"What a horrible idea!" exclaimed Patsy.

"They're quite liable to dance and murder in the same breath," the Major observed, gloomily.

"I don't like it," said Beth. "It's something awful just to think of. Haven't they any gallantry?"

"No," answered Patsy. "But I wouldn't dance with a lot of half drunken men wearing revolvers, if they burned me at the stake for refusing."

"Ah! shtick to dat fine expressionment," cried Dan'l, eagerly. "Shtick to id! Say you won't dance if dey wear de refolfers—unt den we win de schweepstakes!"

Patsy looked at him critically, in the instant catching a part of his idea.

"What do you mean?" she asked.

Dan'l explained, while they all listened carefully, absorbed in following in thought his unique suggestions.

"Let's do it!" exclaimed Beth. "I'm sure the plan will succeed."

"It's leaving a good deal to chance," objected Uncle John, with a touch of nervousness.

"There is an element of chance in everything," declared Patsy. "But I'm sure we shall escape, Uncle. Why it's a regular coup!"

"We take them by surprise, you know," explained the Major, who heartily favored the idea.

They talked it over for a time, perfecting the details, and then became as calm and composed as a group of prisoners might. Uncle John waved his handkerchief to attract the attention of Wampus, who stole softly around the corner of the house and approached the window, taking care to keep at a respectful distance from the dangerous cactus.

"Is everything ready?" inquired Uncle John in a subdued voice.

"To be sure all is ready. Why not? I am Wampus!" was the reply, in cautious tones.

"Go back to the machine and guard it carefully, Wampus," commanded Mr. Merrick. "We expect to escape soon after dark, so have the headlights going, for we shall make a rush for it and there mustn't be a moment's delay."

"All right," said the chauffeur. "You may depend on me. I am Wampus, an' not 'fraid of a hundred coward like these. Is not Mister Algy his eye mos' beautiful blacked?"

"It is," agreed Uncle John. "Go back to the car now, and wait for us. Don't get impatient. We don't know just when we will join you, but it will be as soon as we can manage it. What is Mumble doing?"

"Mumble he learn to be good automobilist. Jus' now he sit on seat an' watch wheel to see nobody touch. If anybody touch, Mumble he eat him up."

They all laughed at this whimsical notion and it served to relieve the strain of waiting. Wampus, grinning at the success of his joke, went back to the limousine to inspect it carefully and adjust it in every part until it was in perfect order.

Now that a definite plan of action had been decided upon their spirits rose considerably, and they passed the afternoon in eager anticipation of the crisis.

Rather earlier than expected Stubby and Tim came to say "they had been appointed a committee to escort their guests to the banquet hall, where dinner would at once be served."

"We shall have to clear away for the dance," added Stubby, "so we want to get the feast over with as quickly as possible. I hope you are all hungry, for Algy has spread himself on this dinner and we are to have every delicacy the ranch affords, regardless of expense. We can economize afterward to make up for it."

Elaborate preparations were not greatly in evidence, however. The Mexican servants had washed themselves and the floor of the big room had been swept and cleared of some of its rubbish; but that was all. The remittance men were in their usual rough costumes and the air was redolent with the fumes of liquor.

CHAPTER XIV

THE ESCAPE

As the prisoners quietly took their places at the table Tobey, who had been drinking hard, decided to make a speech. His face was badly swollen and he could only see through a slit in one eye, so severe had been the beating administered by Wampus earlier in the day; but the fellow had grit, in spite of his other unmanly qualities, and his imperturbable good humor had scarcely been disturbed by the punishment the Canadian had inflicted upon him.

"Ladies," said he, "and gentlemen—which of course includes our respected male guests—I am happy to inform you that the programme for the First Annual Hades Ranch Ball has finally been arranged, and the dances apportioned in a fair and impartial manner. The Grand March will take place promptly at seven o'clock, led by Miss Doyle and Knuckles, who has won the privilege by throwing four sixes. I am to follow with Miss De Graf, and the rest will troop on behind with the privilege of looking at the ladies. If anyone dares to create disorder his dances with the young ladies will be forfeited. Dan'l will play the latest dance music on his fiddle, and if it isn't spirited and up-to-date we'll shoot his toes off. We insist upon plenty of two-steps and waltzes and will wind up with a monney-musk in the gray light of dawn. This being fully understood, I beg you, my good friends, to fall to and eat and be merry; but don't linger unduly over the dainties, for we are all anxious, like good soldiers, to get into action."

The remittance men applauded this oratory, and incidentally attacked the eatables with evident determination to obey their leader's injunction.

"We can eat any time," remarked Stubby, with his mouth full; "but his Satanic majesty only knows when Hades Ranch will see another dance—with real ladies for partners."

The Chinese cooks and the Mexican servants had a lively time during this meal, for the demands made upon them were incessant. Uncle John, whose even disposition was seldom ruffled, ate with a good appetite, while even the Major, glum and scowling, did not disdain the numerous well-prepared dishes. As for Dan'l, he took full advantage of the occasion and was the last one to leave the table. Our girls, however, were too excited to eat much and little Myrtle, especially, was pallid and uneasy and had a startled look in her eyes whenever anyone made a sudden motion.

As soon as the repast was concluded the servants cleared the long table in a twinkling and pushed it back against the wall at one end of the long room. A chair was placed for Dan'l on top of this expansive

board, which thus became a stage from whence he could overlook the room and the dancers, and then two of the remittance men tossed the old fiddler to his elevated place and commanded him to make ready.

Dan'l said nothing and offered no resistance. He sat plaintively sawing upon his ancient but rich-toned violin while the floor was brushed, the chairs and benches pushed against the wall and the room prepared for action. Behind the violinist was a low, broad window facing a grass plot that was free from the terrifying cactus, and the old man noted with satisfaction that it stood wide open.

Uncle John's party had pressed close to the table and stood watching the proceedings.

"Ready now!" called Tobey; "the Grand March is about to begin. Take your partners, boys. Look sharp, there, Dan'l, and give us a martial tune that will lift our feet."

Dan'l meekly set the violin underneath his chin and raised the bow as if in readiness. "Knuckles," a brawny fellow with a florid face and a peculiar squint, approached Patsy and bowed.

"You're to lead with me, Miss," he said. "Are you ready?"

"Not quite," she returned with dignified composure; "for I perceive you are not quite ready yourself."

"Eh? Why not?" he inquired, surprised.

"You are still wearing your firearms," she replied. "I cannot and will not dance with a man who carries a revolver."

"That's nothing," he retorted. "We always do."

"Always?"

"Of course. And if I shed my gun what's to prevent some one else getting the drop on me?"

"That's it," said Patsy, firmly. "The weapons must all be surrendered before we begin. We positively refuse to dance if rioting and shooting are likely to occur."

A murmur of protest arose at this speech, for all the remittance men had gathered around to listen to the argument.

"That's all tommy-rot," observed Handsome Tim, in a sulky tone. "We're not spoiling for a row; it's the dance we're after."

"Then give up the revolvers," said Beth, coming to her cousin's assistance. "If this is to be a peaceful entertainment you will not need to be armed, and it is absurd to suppose a lady will dance with a gentleman who is a walking arsenal."

They looked into one another's faces uncertainly. Dan'l sat softly tuning his violin, as if uninterested in the controversy. Uncle John and the Major looked on with seeming indifference.

"You must decide which you prefer—the revolvers or the dance," remarked Patsy, staring coolly into the ring of faces.

"Would your English ladies at home consent to dance with armed men?" asked Beth.

"They're quite right, boys," said Stubby, nodding his bullethead. "Let's agree to deposit all the shooting irons 'til the dance is over."

"I won't!" cried Knuckles, his scowl deepening.

"By Jove, you will!" shouted Tobey, with unexpected vehemence. "You're delaying the programme, old man, and it's a nuisance to dance in this armor, anyway. Here—pile all your guns in this corner; every one of you, mind. Then we shall all stand on an equal footing."

"Put them on the table there, by the old fiddler," said Patsy; "then we will know we are perfectly safe."

Rather unwillingly they complied, each man walking up to the table and placing his revolver at Dan'l's feet. The girls watched them intently.

"That man over there is still armed," called Beth, pointing to a swarthy Mexican who squatted near the door.

"That's all right," said Tobey, easily. "He's our guard, Pedro. I've stationed him there so you won't attempt to escape till we get ready to let you go."

Patsy laughed.

"There's little danger of that," she said.

"All ready, now!" exclaimed Knuckles, impatiently. "We're all as harmless as doves. Let 'er go, Dan'!"

The old man was just then assisting Uncle John to lift Myrtle to the top of the table, where the Major had placed a chair for her. Knuckles growled, but waited until the girl was seated near the window. Then Dan'l drew his bow and struck up a spirited march. Patsy took the arm of Knuckles and paraded down the long room. Beth followed with Tobey, and behind them tramped the remittance men in files of two. At the far end were grouped the servants, looking curiously upon the scene, which was lighted by lamps swung from the ceiling and a row of candles upon the edge of the mantelshelf.

To carry out the idea of a grand march Patsy drew her escort here and there by sharp turns and half circles, the others trailing behind like a huge snake until she had passed down the length of the room and started to return up the other side to the starting point. So engrossed had been the cowboys that they did not observe the Major and Uncle John clamber upon the table and stand beside Myrtle.

The procession was half way up the hall on its return when Patsy said abruptly: "Now, Beth!" and darted away from her partner's side and toward the table. Beth followed like a streak, being an excellent runner, and for a moment Knuckles and Tobey, thus deserted by their partners, stopped to watch them in amazement. Then their comrades bumped into them and recalled them to their senses.

By that time the two girls had reached the table and leaped upon it. Uncle John was waving his handkerchief from the window as a signal to Wampus; Dan'l had laid aside his fiddle and seized a revolver in either hand, and the Major had caught up two more of the discarded weapons.

As Beth and Patsy turned, panting, and from their elevation looked up the room, the cowboys gave a bellow of rage and rushed forward.

"Keep back!" shouted the Major, in stentorian tones, "I'll shoot the first man that interferes."

Noting the grim determination in the old soldier's eye, they hesitated and came to a halt.

"What do you mean by this infernal nonsense?" cried Tobey, in disgust.

"Why, it's just checkmate, and the game is up," replied Uncle John amiably. "We've decided not to hold the proposed dance, but to take our departure at once."

He turned and passed Myrtle out of the window where Wampus took her in his arms, crutches and all, and carried her to the automobile. The remittance men, unarmed and confronted by their own revolvers, stood gaping open-mouthed and seemingly dazed.

"Let's rush 'em, boys!" shouted Handsome Tim, defiantly.

"Rush 'em alone, if you like," growled Knuckles. "I'm not ready for the graveyard yet."

"You are vot iss called cowardices," said Dan'l, flourishing the revolvers he held. "Come on mit der courage, somebotty, so I can shoot holes in you."

"You're building your own coffin just now, Dan'l," retorted Tobey, in baffled rage. "We know where to get you, old boy, and we'll have revenge for this night's work."

"I vill take some popguns home mit me," was the composed reply. "Den, ven you come, I vill make a receptioning for you. Eh?"

Uncle John, Patsy and Beth had followed Myrtle through the window and disappeared.

"Now, sir," said the Major to the old fiddler, "make your escape while I hold them at bay."

"Nod yet," replied Dan'l. "Ve must gif ourselves de most protectionment ve can."

With this he gathered up the firearms, one by one, and tossed them through the window. Then he straightened up and a shot flashed down the hall and tumbled the big Mexican guard to the floor just as he was about to glide through the doorway.

"Dit ve say shtand still, or dit ve nod say shtand still?" asked Dan'l, sternly. "If somebody gets hurt, it

iss because he don'd obey de orderations."

"Go, sir!" commanded the Major.

"I vill; bud I go last," declared the old man. "I follow you—see? Bud you take my violin, please—unt be very tender of id, like id vas your sveetheardt."

The Major took the violin and climbed through the window, proceeding to join the others, who were by now seated in the car. When he had gone Dan'l prepared to follow, first backing toward the window and then turning to make an agile leap to the ground below. And now with a shout the cowboys made their rush, only to halt as Dan'l reappeared at the window, covering them again with his revolvers.

"So, you defils—make a listen to me," he called. "I am experiencing a goot-bye to you, who are jackals unt imitation men unt haf no goot right to be alive. Also if I see any of you de next time, I vill shoot first unt apologise at der funeral. I haf no more monkey business mit you voteffer; so keep vere you are until I am gone, unt you vill be safeness."

He slowly backed away from the window, and so thoroughly cowed was the group of ruffians that the old fiddler had been lifted hastily into the automobile before the cowboys mustered courage to leap through the window and search in the darkness for their revolvers, which lay scattered widely upon the ground.

Wampus, chuckling gleefully, jerked the hoods off his glaring searchlights, sprang to his seat and started the machine down the road before the crack of a single revolver was heard in protest. The shots came thicker after that, but now the automobile was bowling merrily along the road and soon was out of range.

"De road iss exceptionalment goot," remarked Dan'l. "Dere iss no dangerousness from here to der rifer."

"Danger?" said the chauffeur, scornfully. "Who cares for danger? I am Wampus, an' I am here!"

"We are all here," said Patsy, contentedly nestling against the cushions; "and I'm free to confess that I'm mighty glad of it!"

CHAPTER XV

THE ROMANCE OF DAN'L

It did not take them very long to reach the river, a muddy little stream set below high banks. By Dan'l's direction they turned to the left and followed the wind of the river for a mile or so until suddenly out of the darkness loomed a quaint little bungalow which the old German claimed to be his home.

"I haf architected it mineself, unt make it built as I like it. You vill come in unt shtop der night mit me," he said, as Wampus halted the machine before the door.

There was a little murmur of protest at this, for the house appeared to be scarcely bigger than the automobile. But Uncle John pointed out, sensibly enough, that they ought not to undertake an unknown road at nighttime, and that Spotville, the town for which they were headed, was still a long way off. The Major, moreover, had a vivid recollection of his last night's bed upon the roof of the limousine, where he had crept to escape rattlesnakes, and was in no mood to again camp out in the open while they traveled in Arizona. So he advocated accepting Dan'l's invitation. The girls, curious to know how so many could be accommodated in the bungalow, withdrew all further objections and stood upon the low, pergola-roofed porch while their host went inside to light the lamps.

They were really surprised at the cosy aspect of the place. Half the one-story dwelling was devoted to a living room, furnished simply but with modest taste. A big square table was littered with music, much being in manuscript—thus proving Dan'l's assertion that he was a composer. Benches were as numerous as chairs, and all were well-cushioned with tanned skins as coverings. A few good prints were on the walls and the aspect of the place was entirely agreeable to the old man's guests.

As the room was somewhat chilly he made a fire in the ample fireplace and then with an air of pride

exhibited to his visitors his tiny kitchen, his own bedroom and a storeroom, which occupied the remainder of the space in the bungalow. He told them he would prepare beds in the living room for the girls, give his own room to Mr. Merrick and Major Doyle, while he and Wampus would bunk in the storeroom.

"I haf much blankets," he said; "dere vill be no troubles to keep varm."

Afterward they sat before the fire and by the dim lights of the kerosene lamps chatted together of the day's adventures.

Uncle John asked Dan'l what had brought him to this deserted, out-of-the-way spot, and the old man told his story in a manner that amused them all greatly.

"I haf been," said he, "much famous in my time, unt had a individualness pointed out whereeffer I went. I vas orchestra leader at the Theater Royal in Stuttgart, unt our king haf complimented me many times. But I vas foolish. I vas foolish enough to think that ven a man iss great he can stay great. I married me to a clefer prima donna, unt composed a great opera, which vas finer as anything Herr Wagner has efer done. Eh? But dere vas jealousy at work to opposition me. Von day ven my fine opera vas all complete I vent to the theater to lead mine orchestra. To my surprisement der Herr Director tells me I can retire on a pension; I am too old unt he has hired a younger man, who iss Herr Gabert. I go home bewildered unt mishappy, to find that Herr Gabert has stole the score of mine opera unt run away mit mine vife. Vot I can do? Nothing. Herr Gabert he lead my orchestra tint all der people applauds him. I am forgot. One day I see our king compliment Herr Gabert. He produces my opera unt say he compositioned it. Eferybody iss crazy about id, unt crown Herr Gabert mit flowers. My vife sings in der opera. The people cheer her unt she rides away mit Herr Gabert in his carriage to a grand supper mit der nobility unt der Herr Director.

"I go home unt say: 'Who am I?' I answer: 'Nobody!' Am I now great? No; I am a speck. Vot can I do? Veil, I go away. I haf some money—a leedle. I come to America. I do not like crowds any more. I like to be alone mit my violin. I find dis place; I build dis house; I lif here unt make happiness. My only neighbors are de remittance men, who iss more mischiefing as wicked. Dey vill nod bother me much. So after a time I die here. Vy nod? I am forgot in Stuttgart."

There was pathos in the tale and his way of telling it. The old man spoke cheerfully, but they could see before them the tragedy depicted by his simple words. His hearers were all silent when he had concluded, feeling they could say nothing to console him or lighten his burden. Only Wampus, sitting in the background, looked scornfully upon the man who had once been the idol of his townspeople.

Dan'l took a violin from a shelf and began to play, softly but with masterly execution. He caught their mood instantly. The harmony was restful and contented. Patsy turned down the lamps, to let the flicker of the firelight dominate the room, and Dan'l understood and blended the flickering light into his melody.

For a long time he continued to improvise, in a way that fairly captivated his hearers, despite their varied temperaments, and made them wonder at his skill. Then without warning he changed to a stirring, martial air that filled the room with its rich, resonant tones. There was a fugue, a wonderful finale, and while the concluding notes rang in their ears the old man laid his violin in his lap, leaned back against his cushions and heaved a deep sigh.

They forebore disturbing him for a while. How strange it seemed that this really talented musician should be banished to a wilderness while still possessing power to stir the souls of men with his marvelous execution. Truly he was a "maestro," as he had said; a genius whose star had risen, flashed across the sky and suddenly faded, leaving his future a blank.

Wampus moved uneasily in his chair.

"I like to know something," he remarked.

Dan'l roused himself and turned to look at the speaker.

"You have one bad eye," continued Wampus, reflectively. "What make him so? You stick violin bow in eye some day?"

"No," grunted Dan'l.

"Bad eye he no make himself," persisted the little chauffeur. "What make him, then?"

For a moment there was an awkward silence. The girls considered this personal inquiry offensive and regretted admitting Wampus to the room. But after a time the old German answered the question,

quietly and in a half amused tone.

"Can you nod guess?" he said. "Herr Gabert hurt mine eye."

"Oh!" exclaimed Wampus, nodding approvingly "You fight duel with him? Of course. It mus' be."

"I haf one goot eye left, howefer," continued Dan'l. "It vill do me fery well. Dere iss nod much to see out here."

"I know," said Wampus. "But Herr Gabert. What happen to him?"

Again there was a pause. Then the German said slowly:

"I am nod rich; but efery year I send a leetle money to Stuttgart to put some flowers on Herr Gabert's grave."

The chauffeur's face brightened. He got up from his chair and solemnly shook Dan'l's hand.

"You are great musician," he announced. "You can believe it, for it is true. An' you have shake the hand of great chauffeur. I am Wampus."

Dan'l did not answer. He had covered his good eye with his hand.

CHAPTER XVI

THE LODGING AT SPOTVILLE

"Wake up, Patsy: I smell coffee!" called Beth, and soon the two girls were dressed and assisting Myrtle to complete her toilet. Through the open windows came the cool, fragrant breath of morning; the sky was beginning to blush at the coming of the sun.

"To think of our getting up at such unearthly hours!" cried Patsy cheerfully. "But I don't mind it in the least, Beth; do you?"

"I love the daybreak," returned Beth, softly. "We've wasted the best hours of morning abed, Patsy, these many years."

"But there's a difference," said Myrtle, earnestly. "I know the daybreak in the city very well, for nearly all my life I have had to rise in the dark in order to get my breakfast and be at work on time. It is different from this, I assure you; especially in winter, when the chill strikes through to your bones. Even in summer time the air of the city is overheated and close, and the early mornings cheerless and uncomfortable. Then I think it is best to stay in bed as long as you can—if you have nothing else to do. But here, out in the open, it seems a shame not to be up with the birds to breathe the scent of the fields and watch the sun send his heralds ahead of him to proclaim his coming and then climb from the bottomless pit into the sky and take possession of it."

"Why, Myrtle!" exclaimed Patsy, wonderingly; "what a poetic notion. How did it get into your head, little one?"

Myrtle's sweet face rivaled the sunrise for a moment. She made no reply but only smiled pathetically.

Uncle John's knock upon the door found them ready for breakfast, which old Dan'l had skilfully prepared in the tiny kitchen and now placed upon a round table set out upon the porch. By the time they had finished the simple meal Wampus had had his coffee and prepared the automobile for the day's journey. A few minutes later they said good-bye to the aged musician and took the trail that led through Spotville.

The day's trip was without event. They encountered one or two Indians on the way, jogging slowly along on their shaggy ponies; but the creatures were mild and inoffensive. The road was fairly good and they made excellent time, so that long before twilight Spotville was reached and the party had taken possession of the one small and primitive "hotel" the place afforded. It was a two-story, clapboarded building, the lower floor being devoted to the bar and dining room, while the second story was divided into box-like bedrooms none too clean and very cheaply furnished.

"I imagine we shall find this place 'the limit'," remarked Uncle John ruefully. "But surely we shall be able to stand it for one night," he added, with a philosophic sigh.

"Want meat fer supper?" asked the landlord, a tall, gaunt man who considered himself dressed when he was in his shirt sleeves.

"What kind of meat?" inquired Uncle John, cautiously.

"Kin give yeh fried pork er jerked beef. Ham 'a all out an' the chickens is beginnin' to lay."

"Eggs?"

"Of course, stranger. Thet's the on'y thing Spotville chickens lay, nowadays. I s'pose whar yeh come from they lay biscuits 'n' pork chops."

"No. Door knobs, sometimes," said Mr. Merrick, "but seldom pork chops. Let's have eggs, and perhaps a little fried pork to go with them. Any milk?"

"Canned er fresh?"

"Fresh preferred."

The landlord looked at him steadily.

"Yeh've come a long-way, stranger," he said, "an' yeh must 'a' spent a lot of money, here 'n' there. Air yeh prepared to pay fer thet order in solid cash?"

Uncle John seemed startled, and looked at the Major, who smiled delightedly.

"Are such things expensive, sir?" the latter asked the landlord.

"Why, we don't eat 'em ourselves, 'n' thet's a cold fact. Eggs is eggs, an' brings forty cents a dozen to ship. There's seven cows in town, 'n' forty-one babies, so yeh kin figger what fresh milk's worth."

"Perhaps," said Uncle John mildly, "we can stand the expense—if we won't rob the babies."

"Don't worry 'bout thet. The last autymobble folks as come this way got hot because I charged 'em market prices fer the truck they et. So I'm jest inquirin' beforehand, to save hard feelin's. I've found out one thing 'bout autymobble folks sense I've ben runnin' this hoe-tel, an' thet is thet a good many is ownin' machines thet oughter be payin' their bills instid o' buyin' gasoline."

The Major took him aside. He did not tell the cautious landlord that Mr. Merrick was one of the wealthiest men in America, but he exhibited a roll of bills that satisfied the man his demands would be paid in full.

The touring party feasted upon eggs and fresh milk, both very delicious but accompanied by odds and ends of food not so palatable. The landlord's two daughters, sallow, sunken cheeked girls, waited on the guests and the landlord's wife did the cooking.

Beth, Patsy and Myrtle retired early, as did Uncle John. The Major, smoking his "bedtime cigar," as he called it, strolled out into the yard and saw Wampus seated in the automobile, also smoking.

"We get an early start to-morrow, Wampus," said the Major. "Better get to bed."

"Here is my bed," returned the chauffeur, quietly.

"But there's a room reserved for you in the hotel."

"I know. Don't want him. I sleep me here."

The Major looked at him reflectively.

"Ever been in this town before, Wampus?" he asked.

"No, sir. But I been in other towns like him, an' know this kind of hotel. Then why do I sleep in front seat of motor car?"

"Because you are foolish, I suppose, being born that way and unable to escape your heritage. For my part, I shall sleep in a bed; like a Christian," said the Major rather testily.

"Even Christian cannot sleep sometime," returned Wampus, leaning back in his seat and puffing a cloud of smoke into the clear night air. "For me, I am good Christian; but I am not martyr."

"What do you mean by that?" demanded the Major.

"Do you sometime gamble?" inquired Wampus softly.

"Not often, sir."

"But sometime? Ah! Then I make you a bet. I bet you ten dollar to one cent you not sleep in your bed to-night."

The Major coughed. Then he frowned.

"Is it so bad as that?" he asked.

"I think he is."

"I'll not believe it!" exclaimed Major Doyle. "This hotel isn't what you might call first-class, and can't rank with the Waldorf-Astoria; but I imagine the beds will be very comfortable."

"Once," said Wampus, "I have imagination, too. Now I have experience; so I sleep in automobile."

The Major walked away with an exclamation of impatience. He had never possessed much confidence in the Canadian's judgment and on this occasion he considered the fellow little wiser than a fool.

Wampus rolled himself in a rug and was about to stretch his moderate length upon the broad double seat when a pattering of footsteps was heard and Beth came up to the car. She was wrapped in a dark cloak and carried a bundle of clothing under one arm and her satchel in the unoccupied hand. There was a new moon which dimly lighted the scene, but as all the townspeople were now in bed and the hotel yard deserted there was no one to remark upon the girl's appearance.

"Wampus," she said, "let me into the limousine, please. The night is so perfect I've decided to sleep here in the car."

The chauffeur jumped down and opened the door.

"One moment an' I make up the beds for all," he said.

"Never mind that," Beth answered. "The others are all asleep, I'm sure."

Wampus shook his head.

"They all be here pretty soon," he predicted, and proceeded to deftly prepare the interior of the limousine for the expected party. When Beth had entered the car Wampus pitched the lean-to tent and arranged the cots as he was accustomed to do when they "camped out."

Scarcely had he completed this task when Patsy and Myrtle appeared. They began to explain their presence, but Wampus interrupted them, saying:

"All right, Miss Patsy an' Miss Myrtle. Your beds he made up an' Miss 'Lizabeth already asleep in him."

So they crept inside with sighs of relief, and Wampus had just mounted to the front seat again and disposed himself to rest when Uncle John trotted up, clad in his trousers and shirt, with the balance of his apparel clasped in his arms. He looked at the tent with pleased approval.

"Good boy, Wampus!" he exclaimed. "That room they gave me is an inferno. I'm afraid our young ladies won't sleep a wink."

"Oh, yes," returned Wampus with a nod; "all three now inside car, safe an' happy."

"I'm glad of it. How was your own room, Wampus?"

"I have not seen him, sir. But I have suspect him; so I sleep here."

"You are a wise chauffeur—a rare genus, in other words. Good night, Wampus. Where's the Major?"

Wampus chuckled.

"In hotel. Sir, do the Major swear sometime?"

Uncle John crept under the tent.

"If he does," he responded, "he's swearing this blessed minute. Anyhow, I'll guarantee he's not asleep."

Wampus again mounted to his perch.

"No use my try to sleep 'til Major he come," he muttered, and settled himself to wait.

It was not long.

Presently some one approached on a run, and a broad grin overspread the chauffeur's features. The Major had not delayed his escape long enough to don his trousers even; he had grabbed his belongings in both arms and fled in his blue and white striped undergarments.

Wampus leaped down and lifted the flap of the tent. The Major paused long enough in the moonlight to stare at the chauffeur and say sternly:

"If you utter one syllable, you rascal, I'll punch your head!"

Wampus was discreet. He said not a word.

CHAPTER XVII

YELLOW POPPIES

"So this is California!" exclaimed Patsy gleefully, as the automobile left Parker and crossed the Arizona line.

"But it doesn't look any different," said Myrtle, peering out of the window.

"Of course not," observed Uncle John. "A State boundary is a man-made thing, and doesn't affect the country a bit. We've just climbed a miniature mountain back in Arizona, and now we must climb a mate to it in California. But the fact is, we've entered at last the Land of Enchantment, and every mile now will bring us nearer and nearer to the roses and sunshine."

"There's sunshine here now," declared the Major. "We've had it right along. But I haven't seen the roses yet, and a pair of ear muffs wouldn't be uncomfortable in this cutting breeze."

"The air *is* rather crisp," admitted Uncle John. "But we're still in the mountainous district, and Haggerty says—"

The Major coughed derisively and Mumbles barked and looked at Uncle John sagaciously.

"Haggerty says—"

"Is that a rabbit or a squirrel? Something has caught the eye of our Mumbles," interrupted the Major, pointing vaguely across the mesa.

"Haggerty says—"

"I wonder if Mumbles could catch 'em," remarked the Major, with complacency.

"He says that every mile we travel brings us nearer the scent of the orange blossoms and the glare of the yellow poppies," persisted Uncle John. "You see, we've taken the Southern route, after all, for soon we shall be on the Imperial road, which leads to San Diego—in the heart of the gorgeous Southland."

"What is the Imperial road?" inquired Beth.

"The turnpike through Imperial Valley, said to be the richest bit of land in all the world, not excepting the famous Nile banks of Egypt. There is no railway there yet, but the Valley is settling very fast, and Haggerty says—"

"How remarkable!" exclaimed the Major, gazing straight ahead. And again Mumbles, curled in Patsy's lap, lifted his shaggy head and gave a wailing bark.

Uncle John frowned, but was loyal to Haggerty.

"He says that if America was now unknown to all the countries of the world, Imperial would soon make it famous. They grow wonderful crops there—strawberries and melons the year around, as well as all the tropical and semi-tropical fruits and grains, flowers and vines known to any country yet discovered."

"Do we go to Imperial?" asked Myrtle, eagerly.

"I think not, my dear; we just skirt the edge of the Valley. It's rather wild and primitive there yet; for although many settlers are flocking to that favored district Imperial is large enough to be an empire by itself. However, we shall find an ideal climate at Coronado, by the edge of the blue Pacific, and there and at Los Angeles we shall rest from our journey and get acquainted with the wonders of the Golden State. Has the trip tired you, girls?"

"Not me," answered Beth, promptly. "I've enjoyed every mile of the way."

"And so have I," added Patsy; "except perhaps the adventure with the remittance men. But I wouldn't care to have missed even that, for it led to our acquaintance with old Dan'l."

"For my part," said Myrtle softly, "I've been in a real fairyland. It has seemed like a dream to me, all this glorious journey, and I shall hate to wake up, as I must in time."

"Don't worry just yet about the awakening, dear," returned Patsy, leaning over to kiss her little friend. "Just enjoy it while you can. If fairylands exist, they were made for just such as you, Myrtle."

"One of the greatest marvels of our trip," said the Major, with a smile, "is the improvement in our dear little invalid. It isn't the same Myrtle who started out with us, believe me. Can't you all see the change?"

"I can *feel* it," returned Myrtle, happily. "And don't you notice how well I walk, and how little use I have now for the crutches?"

"And can you feel the rosy cheeks and bright eyes, too?" asked Uncle John, regarding her with much satisfaction.

"The trip was just the thing for Myrtle," added Patsy. "She has grown stronger every day; but she is not quite well yet, you know, and I depend a good deal upon the genial climate of California to insure her complete recovery."

Uncle John did not reply. He remembered the doctor's assertion that a painful operation would be necessary to finally restore Myrtle to a normal condition, and his kindly heart disliked to reflect upon the ordeal before the poor girl.

Haggerty proved a prophet, after all. Each mile they covered opened new vistas of delight to the eager travelers. The air grew more balmy as they left the high altitudes and came upon the level country to the north, of the San Bernardino range of mountains, nor was it long before they sighted Imperial and sped through miles of country carpeted with the splendid yellow poppies which the State has adopted as the emblems of California. And behind this golden robe loomed the cotton fields of Imperial, one of the most fascinating sights the traveler may encounter. They made a curve to the right here, and headed northerly until they came to Salton. Skirting the edge of the curious Salton Sea they now headed directly west toward Escondido, finding the roads remarkably good and for long stretches as smooth and hard as an asphalt boulevard. The three days it took them to cross the State were days of wonder and delight.

It was not long before they encountered the roses and carnations growing on every side, which the Major had persistently declared to be mythical.

"It seems all wrong," asserted Patsy's father, moodily, "for such delicate flowers to be growing out of doors in midwinter. And look at the grass! Why, the seasons are changed about. It's Springtime just now in California."

"The man at the last stop we made told me his roses bloomed the year round," said Patsy, "And just smell the orange blossoms, will you! Aren't they sweet, and don't they remind you of brides?"

From Escondido it was a short run to the sea and their first glimpse of the majestic Pacific was from a high bluff overhanging the water. From this point the road ran south to San Diego, skirting the coast along a mountain trail that is admitted to be one of the most picturesque rides in America.

Descending the hills as they neared San Diego they passed through fields of splendid wild flowers so extensive and beautiful that our girls fairly gasped in wonder. The yellow and orange poppies predominated, but there were acres of wild mustard throwing countless numbers of gorgeous saffron spikes skyward, and vistas of blue carconnes, white daisies and blood-red delandres. The yucca was in bloom, too, and added its mammoth flower to the display.

They did not halt at San Diego, the southernmost city of California, from whence the Mexican line is in plain sight, but drove to the bay, where Wampus guided the limousine on to the big ferryboat bound for Coronado. They all left the car during the brief voyage and watched the porpoises sporting in the clear water of the bay and gazed abstractedly at the waving palms on the opposite shore, where lies nestled "the Crown of the Pacific"—Coronado.

CHAPTER XVIII

THE SILENT MAN

Even the Major smiled benignantly when he reached his appointed room in the magnificent Hotel del Coronado, which is famed throughout the world.

"This," said he, "reminds me of New York; and it's the first thing that has, since I left home."

"Why, Daddy, it isn't like New York at all," protested Patsy, standing beside him at the broad window overlooking the ocean. "Did you ever see a palm tree waving in New York; or daisy bushes as tall as a man; or such masses of roses and flowering vines? And then just notice the mountains over there—they're in Mexico, I'm told—and this great headland in the other direction; it's called Point Loma. Oh, I never imagined any place could be so beautiful!"

The others were equally excited, and Uncle John said, smiling broadly:

"Well, we're here at last, my dears, and I'm sure we are already well paid for our trip across the continent. What pleasant rooms these are. If the hotel table is at all to be compared with the house itself we shall have a happy time here, which means we will stay as long as possible."

But the table was another surprise, for the meals were equal to any served in the great Eastern metropolis. Uncle John complimented the landlord, a cheery faced, fat little man who had at one time managed a famous New York hotel and had brought his talents and experience to far California.

"I'm sorry," said this gentle boniface, "that I could not reserve better rooms for you—for there are some choice views from some locations. I had a corner suite saved for your party, a suite I consider the most desirable in the hotel; but an eccentric individual arrived yesterday who demanded the entire suite, and I had to let him have it. He will not stay long, and as soon as he goes you shall have the rooms."

"Who is he?" asked Uncle John.

"A rich miner; a most melancholy and peculiar person, by the way," replied landlord Ross. "I believe his name is Jones."

Mr. Merrick started.

"Jones, and a miner?" he said. "What's his other name—Anson?"

"We'll look and see," replied Mr. Ross, turning to the hotel register. "No; not Anson. He is registered as C.B. Jones, of Boston."

"Oh; that's not the Jones at all," said Uncle John, disappointed.

"It's the Jones who is our guest," replied the landlord, smiling.

Meantime the three girls had gone for a walk along the coast. The beach is beautiful at Coronado. There is a high sea wall of rock, and the path runs along its edge almost the length of the promontory. The rocks are sloping, however, and it is not very difficult to climb down them to where the waves break against the wall.

Near the hotel they met straggling groups, strolling in either direction, but half a mile away the promenade was practically deserted. It was beginning to grow dark, and Beth said, regretfully:

"We must get back, girls, and dress for dinner—an unusual luxury, isn't it? Our trunks arrived at the hotel two weeks ago, and are now in our rooms, doubtless, awaiting us to unpack them."

"Don't let's return just yet," begged Myrtle. "I want to see the sun set."

"It will be gorgeous," said Patsy, glancing at the sky; "but we can see it from our windows, and as we're a long way from the hotel now I believe Beth's suggestion is wise."

So they began to retrace their steps. Myrtle still walked with some difficulty, and they had not proceeded far when Beth exclaimed:

"Look at that man down there!"

Her companions followed her direction and saw standing upon a huge pile of rocks at the water's edge a slight, solitary figure. Something in the poise, as he leaned forward staring at the darkened waves—for the sun was low and cast shadows aslant the water—struck Myrtle as familiar.

"Oh, girls!" she exclaimed; "it's the Grand Canyon man."

"Why, I believe it is," agreed Patsy. "What is he doing?"

"Nothing," said Beth, briefly. "But he is going to do something, I think."

While they stared at him from their elevation the man straightened an instant and cast a hasty glance to either side. The place seemed to him deserted, for he failed to observe the group of three intently watching his motions from the high bank overhead. Next moment he turned back to the water and leaned over the edge of rock again.

"Don't!" cried Myrtle, her clear voice ringing over the lap of the waves; "please don't!"

He swung around and turned his gaunt features upward to where the young girl leaned upon her crutches, with clasped hands and a look of distress upon her sweet face.

"Don't!" she repeated, pleadingly.

He passed his hand over his eyes with a very weary gesture and looked at Myrtle again—this time quite steadily. She was trembling in every limb and her cheeks were white with fear.

Slowly—very slowly—the man turned and began to climb the rocks; not directly upward to where the girls stood, but diagonally, so as to reach the walk some distance ahead of them. They did not move until he had gained the path and turned toward the hotel. Then they followed and kept him in sight until he reached the entrance to the court and disappeared within.

"I wonder," said Patsy, as they made their way to their rooms, "whether he really was thinking of plunging into the ocean; or whether that time at the Grand Canyon he had a notion of jumping into the chasm."

"If so," added Beth, "Myrtle has saved his life twice. But she can't be always near to watch the man, and if he has suicidal intentions, he'll make an end of himself, sooner or later, without a doubt."

"Perhaps," said Myrtle, hesitatingly, "I am quite wrong, and the strange man had no intention of doing himself an injury. But each time I obeyed an impulse that compelled me to cry out; and afterward I have been much ashamed of my forwardness."

They did not see the melancholy man at dinner; but afterward, in the spacious lobby, they discovered him sitting in a far corner reading a magazine. He seemed intent on this occupation and paid no attention to the life around him. The girls called Uncle John's attention to him, and Mr. Merrick at once recognized him as the same individual they had met at the Grand Canyon.

"But I am not especially pleased to encounter him again," he said with a slight frown; "for, if I remember aright, he acted very rudely to Myrtle and proved unsociable when I made overtures and spoke to him."

"I wonder who he is?" mused Patsy, watching the weary, haggard features as his eyes slowly followed the lines of his magazine.

"I'll inquire and find out," replied her uncle.

The cherubic landlord was just then pacing up and down the lobby, pausing here and there to interchange a word with his guests. Uncle John approached him and said:

"Can you tell me, Mr. Ross, who the gentleman is in the corner?"

The landlord looked around at the corner and smiled.

"That," said he, "is the gentleman we spoke of this afternoon—Mr. C.B. Jones—the man who usurped the rooms intended for you."

"Rooms?" repeated Uncle John. "Has he a large party, then?"

"He is alone; that is the queer part of it," returned the landlord. "Nor has he much baggage. But he liked the suite—a parlor with five rooms opening out of it—and insisted upon having them all, despite the fact that it is one of the most expensive suites in the hotel. I said he was eccentric, did I not?"

"You were justified," said Mr. Merrick, thoughtfully. "Thank you, sir, for the information."

Even as he rejoined the girls, who were seated together upon a broad divan, the man arose, laid down his magazine and came slowly down the room, evidently headed for the elevator. But with a start he recognized the girl who had accosted him on the beach, and the others with her, and for an instant came to a full stop before the group, his sad eyes fixed intently upon Myrtle's face.

The situation was a bit awkward, and to relieve it Uncle John remarked in his cheery voice:

"Well, Mr. Jones, we meet again, you see."

The man turned slowly and faced him; then bowed in a mechanical way and proceeded to the elevator, into which he disappeared.

Naturally Uncle John was indignant.

"Confound the fellow!" he exclaimed. "He's worse than a boor. But perhaps his early education was neglected."

"Did you call him Mr. Jones, sir?" asked Myrtle in a voice that trembled with excitement.

"Yes, my dear; but it is not your Uncle Anson. I've inquired about him. The Joneses are pretty thick, wherever you go; but I hope not many are like this fellow."

"Something's wrong with him," declared Patsy. "He's had some sad bereavement—a great blow of some sort—and it has made him somber and melancholy. He doesn't seem to know he acts rudely. You can tell by the man's eyes that he is unhappy."

"His eyes have neither color nor expression," remarked Beth. "At his best, this Mr. Jones must have been an undesirable acquaintance."

"You can't be sure of that," returned Patsy; "and I'm positive my theory is correct. More and more am I inclined to agree with Myrtle that he is disgusted with life, and longs to end it."

"Let him, then," retorted Uncle John. "I'm sure such a person is of no use to the world, and if he doesn't like himself he's better out of it."

That kindly Mr. Merrick should give vent to such a heartless speech proved how much annoyed he had been by Mr. Jones' discourtesy.

"He might be reclaimed, and—and comforted," said Myrtle, softly. "When I think of the happiness you have brought into my life, sir, I long to express my gratitude by making some one else happy."

"You're doing it, little one," he answered, pinching her cheek. "If we've brought a bit of sunshine into your life we've reaped an ample reward in your companionship. But if you can find a way to comfort that man Jones, and fetch him out of his dumps, you are certainly a more wonderful fairy than I've given you credit for."

Myrtle did not reply to this, although it pleased her. She presently pleaded weariness and asked permission to return to her room. Beth and Patsy wanted to go into the great domed ballroom and watch the dancing; so Myrtle bade them good night and ascended by the elevator to her floor.

CHAPTER XIX

"THREE TIMES"

Softly stepping over the thick carpets, which deadened the sound of the crutches—now becoming scarcely necessary to her—the young girl passed along the corridor, passing angles and turns innumerable on her way to her room. Some erratic architect certainly concocted the plan of the Hotel del Coronado. It is a very labyrinth of passages connecting; its nine hundred rooms, and one has to have a good bump of location to avoid getting lost in its mazes.

Near one of the abrupt turns a door stood ajar, and in passing Myrtle glanced in, and then paused involuntarily. It was a small parlor, prettily furnished, and in a big chair reclined a man whose hands were both pressed tight against his face, thus covering it completely. But Myrtle knew him. The thin frame, as well as the despairing attitude, marked him as the man who had come so strangely into her life and whose personality affected her so strangely. She now stood in the dimly lighted corridor looking in upon him with infinite pity, and as she looked her glance fell upon the table beside him, where something bright glittered beneath the electric lamps.

Her heart gave a sudden thump of mingled fear and dismay. She knew intuitively what that "something" was. "Let him," Uncle John had said; but Myrtle instantly determined *not* to let him.

She hesitated a moment; but seeing that the man remained motionless, his eyes still covered, as if lost to all his surroundings, she softly crept forward and entered the room. She held the crutches under her arms, but dared not use them for fear of making a noise. Step by step she stole forward until the table was within reach. Then she stretched out her hand, seized the revolver, and hid it in the folds of her blouse.

Turning for a final glance at the man she was startled to find he had removed his hands and was steadfastly regarding her.

Myrtle leaned heavily on her crutches. She felt faint and miserable, like a criminal caught in the act. As her eyes fell before the intent gaze her face turned scarlet with humiliation and chagrin. Still, she did not attempt to escape, the idea not occurring to her; so for a time the tableau was picturesque—the lame girl standing motionless with downcast eyes and the man fixedly staring at her.

"Three times!" he slowly said, in a voice finally stirred by a trace of emotion. "Three times. My child, why are you so persistent?"

Myrtle tried to be brave and meet his gaze. It was not quite so difficult now the silent man had spoken.

"Why do you force me to be persistent?" she asked, a tremor in her voice. "Why are you determined to—to—"

Words failed her, but he nodded to show he understood.

"Because," said he, "I am tired; very tired, my child. It's a big world; too big, in fact; but there's nothing in it for me any more."

There was expression enough in his voice now; expression of utter despondency.

"Why?" asked Myrtle, somewhat frightened to find herself so bold.

He did not answer for a long time, but sat reading her mobile face until a gentler look came into his hard blue eyes.

"It is a story too sad for young ears," he finally replied. "Perhaps, too, you would not understand it, not knowing or understanding me. I'm an odd sort of man, well along in years, and I've lived an odd sort of life. But my story, such as it is, has ended, and I'm too weary to begin another volume."

"Oh, no!" exclaimed Myrtle, earnestly. "Surely this cannot be the fulfillment and end of your life. If it were, why should *I* come into your life just now?"

He stared at her with a surprised—an even startled—look.

"Have you come into my life?" he inquired, in a low, curious tone.

"Haven't I?" she returned. "At the Grand Canyon—"

"I know," he interrupted hastily. "That was your mistake; and mine. You should not have interfered. I should not have let you interfere."

"But I did," said Myrtle.

"Yes. Somehow your voice sounded like a command, and I obeyed it; perhaps because no living person has a right to command me. You—you took me by surprise."

He passed his hand over his eyes with that weary gesture peculiar to him, and then fell silent.

Myrtle had remained standing. She did not know what to do in this emergency, or what more to say. The conversation could not be ended in this summary fashion. The hopeless man needed her in some way; how, she did not know. Feeling weak and very incompetent to meet the important crisis properly, the girl crept to a chair opposite the man and sank into it. Then she leaned her chin upon her hand and looked pleadingly at her strange acquaintance. He met her eyes frankly. The hard look in his own seemed to have disappeared, dispelled by a sympathy that was new to him.

And so they sat, regarding one another silently yet musingly, for a long time.

"I wish," said Myrtle once, in her softest, sweetest tones, "I could help you. Some one helped me when I was in great trouble, so I want to help you."

He did not reply, and another period of silence ensued. But his next speech showed he had been considering her words.

"Because you have suffered," he said, "you have compassion for others who suffer. But your trouble is over now?"

"Almost," she said, smiling brightly.

He sighed, but questioned her no farther.

"A while ago," she volunteered, "I had neither friends nor relatives." He gave her a queer look, then. "I had no money. I had been hurt in an accident and was almost helpless. But I did not despair, sir—and I am only an inexperienced girl.

"In my darkest hour I found friends—kind, loving friends—who showed me a new world that I had not suspected was in existence. I think the world is like a great mirror," she continued, meditatively, "and reflects our lives just as we ourselves look upon it. Those who turn sad faces toward the world find only sadness reflected. But a smile is reflected in the same way, and cheers and brightens our hearts. You think there is no pleasure to be had in life. That is because you are heartsick and—and tired, as you say. With one sad story ended you are afraid to begin another—a sequel—feeling it would be equally sad. But why should it be? Isn't the joy or sorrow equally divided in life?"

"No," he replied.

"A few days ago," she continued earnestly, "we were crossing the Arizona deserts. It was not pleasant, but we did not despair, for we knew the world is not all desert and that the land of roses and sunshine lay just beyond. Now that we're in California we've forgotten the dreary desert. But you—Why, sir, you've just crossed your desert, and you believe all the world is bitter and cruel and holds no joy for you! Why don't you step out bravely into the roses and sunshine of life, and find the joy that has been denied you?"

He looked into her eyes almost fearfully, but it seemed to her that his own held a first glimmer of hope.

"Do you believe there can be joy for me anywhere in the world?" he asked.

"Of course. I tell you there's just as much sweet as there is bitter in life. Don't I know it? Haven't I proved it? But happiness doesn't chase people who try to hide from it. It will meet you halfway, but you've got to do your share to deserve it. I'm not preaching; I've lived this all out, in my own experience, and know what I'm talking about. Now as for you, sir, I can see very plainly you haven't been doing your duty. You've met sorrow and let it conquer you. You've taken melancholy by the hand and won't let go of it. You haven't tried to fight for your rights—the rights God gave to every man and expects him to hold fast to and take advantage of. No, indeed!"

"But what is the use?" he asked, timidly, yet with an eager look in his face. "You are young, my child; I am nearly old enough to have been your father. There are things you have not yet learned; things I hope you will never learn. An oak may stand alone in a field, and be lonely because it cannot touch

bought with another. A flower may bloom alone in a garden, and wither and die for want of companionship. God's wisdom grouped every living thing. He gave Adam a comrade. He created no solitary thing. But see, my child: although this world contains countless thousands, there is not one among them I may call my friend."

"Oh, yes; just one!" said Myrtle quickly. "I am your friend. Not because you want me, but because you need me. And that's a beginning, isn't it? I can find other friends for you, among *my* friends, and you will be sure to like them because I like them."

This naive suggestion did not affect him as much as the fact that this fair young girl had confessed herself his friend. He did not look at Myrtle now; he stared straight ahead, at the wall paper, and his brow was furrowed as if he was thinking deeply.

Perhaps any other man would have thanked the girl for her sympathy and her proffered friendship, or at the least have acknowledged it. But not so this queer Mr. Jones; eccentric, indeed, as the shrewd landlord had described him. Nor did Myrtle seem to expect an acknowledgment. It was enough for her that her speech had set him thinking along new lines.

He sat musing for so long that she finally remembered it was growing late, and began to fear Patsy and Beth would seek their rooms, which connected with her own, and find her absent. That would worry them. So at last she rose softly, took her crutches and turned to go.

"Good night, my—friend," she said.

"Good night, my child," he answered in a mechanical tone, without rousing from his abstraction.

Myrtle went to her room and found it was not so late as she had feared. She opened a drawer and placed the revolver in it, not without a little shudder.

"At any rate," she murmured, with satisfaction, "he will not use this to-night."

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.

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.

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.

*** END OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK AUNT JANE'S NIECES AND UNCLE JOHN ***

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