

Aunt Jane's Nieces on Vacation

By

Edith Van Dyne

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CHAPTER I

THE HOBO AT CHAZY JUNCTION

Mr. Judkins, the station agent at Chazy Junction, came out of his little house at daybreak, shivered a bit in the chill morning air and gave an involuntary start as he saw a private car on the sidetrack. There were two private cars, to be exact--a sleeper and a baggage car--and Mr. Judkins knew the three o'clock train must have left them as it passed through.

"Ah," said he aloud; "the nabobs hev arrove."

"Who are the nabobs?" asked a quiet voice beside him.

Again Mr. Judkins started; he even stepped back a pace to get a better view of the stranger, who had approached so stealthily through the dim light that the agent was unaware of his existence until he spoke.

"Who be you?" he demanded, eyeing the man suspiciously.

"Never mind who I am," retorted the other in a grumpy tone; "the original question is 'who are the nabobs?'"

"See here, young feller; this ain't no place fer tramps," observed Mr.

Judkins, frowning with evident displeasure; "Chazy Junction's got all it kin do to support its reg'lar inhabitants. You'll hev to move on."

The stranger sat down on a baggage truck and eyed the private car reflectively. He wore a rough gray suit, baggy and threadbare, a flannel shirt with an old black tie carelessly knotted at the collar, a brown felt hat with several holes in the crown, and coarse cowhide shoes that had arrived at the last stages of usefulness. You would judge him to be from twenty-five to thirty years of age; you would note that his face was browned from exposure, that it was rather set and expressionless but in no way repulsive. His eyes, dark and retrospective, were his most redeeming feature, yet betrayed little of their owner's character. Mr. Judkins could make nothing of the fellow, beyond the fact that he was doubtless a "tramp" and on that account most unwelcome in this retired neighborhood.

Even tramps were unusual at Chazy Junction. The foothills were sparsely settled and the inhabitants too humble to be attractive to gentlemen of the road, while the rocky highways, tortuous and uneven, offered no invitation to the professional pedestrian.

"You'll hev to move on!" repeated the agent, more sternly.

"I can't," replied the other with a smile. "The car I was--er--attached to has come to a halt. The engine has left us, and--here we are, I and the nabobs."

"Be'n ridin' the trucks, eh?"

"No; rear platform. Very comfortable it was, and no interruptions. The crazy old train stopped so many times during the night that I scarcely woke up when they sidetracked us here, and the first thing I knew I was abandoned in this wilderness. As it grew light I began to examine my surroundings, and discovered you. Glad to meet you, sir."

"You needn't be."

"Don't begrudge me the pleasure, I implore you. I can't blame you for being gruff and unsociable; were you otherwise you wouldn't reside at--at--" he turned his head to read the half legible sign on the station house, "at Chazy Junction. I'm familiar with most parts of the United States, but Chazy Junction gets my flutters. Why, oh, why in the world did it happen?"

Mr. Judkins scowled but made no answer. He was wise enough to understand

he was no match in conversation for this irresponsible outcast who knew the great world as perfectly as the agent knew his junction. He turned away and stared hard at the silent sleeper, the appearance of which was not wholly unexpected.

"You haven't informed me who the nabobs are, nor why they choose to be

sidetracked in this forsaken stone-quarry," remarked the stranger, eyeing the bleak hills around him in the growing light of dawn.

The agent hesitated. His first gruff resentment had been in a manner disarmed and he dearly loved to talk, especially on so interesting a subject as "the nabobs." He knew he could astonish the tramp, and the temptation to do so was too strong to resist.

"It's the great John Merrick, who's got millions to burn but don't light many bonfires," he began, not very graciously at first. "Two years ago he bought the Cap'n Wegg farm, over by Millville, an'--"

"Where's Millville?" inquired the man.

"Seven mile back in the hills. The farm ain't nuthin' but cobblestone an' pine woods, but--"

"How big is Millville?"

"Quite a town. Eleven stores an' houses, 'sides the mill an' a big settlement buildin' up at Royal, where the new paper mill is jest started. Royal's four mile up the Little Bill Hill."

"But about the nabob--Mr. Merrick, I think you called him?"

"Yes; John Merrick. He bought the Cap'n Wegg place an' spent summer

'fore last on it--him an' his three gals as is his nieces."

"Oh; three girls."

"Yes. Clever gals, too. Stirred things up some at Millville, I kin tell you, stranger. Lib'ral an' good-natured, but able to hold their own with the natives. We missed 'em, last year; but t'other day I seen ol' Hucks, that keeps their house for 'em--he 'n' his wife--an' Hucks said they was cumin' to spend this summer at the farm an' he was lookin' fer 'em any day. The way they togged up thet farmhouse is somethin' won'erful, I'm told. Hain't seen it, myself, but a whole carload o' furnitoor--an' then some more--was shipped here from New York, an' Peggy McNutt, over t' Millville, says it must 'a' cost a for-tun'."

The tramp nodded, somewhat listlessly.

"I feel quite respectable this morning, having passed the night as the guest of a millionaire," he observed. "Mr. Merrick didn't know it, of course, or he would have invited me inside."

"Like enough," answered the agent seriously. "The nabob's thet reckless an' unaccountable, he's likely to do worse ner that. That's what makes him an' his gals interestin'; nobody in quarries. How about breakfast, friend Judkins?"

"That's my business an' not yourn. My missus never feeds tramps."

"Rather ungracious to travelers, eh?"

"Ef you're a traveler, go to the hoe-tel yonder an' buy your breakfas' like a man."

"Thank you; I may follow your advice."

The agent walked up the track and put out the semaphore lights, for the sun was beginning to rise over the hills. By the time he came back a colored porter stood on the platform of the private car and nodded to him.

"Folks up yit?" asked Judkins.

"Dressing, seh."

"Goin' ter feed 'em in there?"

"Not dis mohnin'. Dey'll breakfas' at de hotel. Carriage here yit?"

"Not yit. I s'pose ol' Hucks'll drive over for 'em," said the agent.

"Dey's 'spectin' some one, seh. As fer me, I gotta live heah all day, an' it makes me sick teh think of it."

"Heh!" retorted the agent, scornfully; "you won't git sick. You're too well paid fer that."

The porter grinned, and just then a little old gentleman with a rosy, cheery face pushed him aside and trotted down the steps.

"Mornin', Judkins!" he cried, and shook the agent's hand. "What a glorious sunrise, and what crisp, delicious air! Ah, but it's good to be in old Chazy County again!"

The agent straightened up, his face wreathed with smiles, and cast an "I told you so!" glance toward the man on the truck. But the stranger had disappeared.