

Aunt Jane's Nieces and Uncle John

By

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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, coddling 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."