

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, doubtingly.

"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."