

### 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.