

## 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."