

CHAPTER V - A WONDER ON WHEELS

But the Major was not cross when they met him in Uncle John's sitting room. He beamed upon the three girls most genially, for he liked Myrtle and fully approved all that was being done for her.

"Of course it's like Patsy," he had said to Mr. Merrick that morning. "She couldn't help being a sweet ministering angel if she tried; and Beth is growing more and more like her. It will do those girls good, John, to have some human being to coddle and care for. If Patsy could have a fault, it would be wasting so much affection on that bunch o' rags Mumbles, who audaciously chewed up one of my pet slippers while I was at dinner last evening. No dog is a fit thing to occupy a girl's time, and this imp o' mischief Mumbles must take a back seat from now on."

Uncle John laughed, for he knew his brother-in-law had never conquered his antipathy for poor Mumbles, and realized why.

"Take care that you do not get jealous of Myrtle," he replied. "You're a selfish old beast, and don't wish Patsy to love anyone but yourself."

"And why should she?" was the inquiry. "Any dutiful daughter ought to be satisfied with loving such a father as I am."

"And in that," remarked Uncle John, whimsically, "you remind me of Wampus. You should strut around and say: 'Behold me! I am Patsy's father!'"

The Major was full of news at luncheon time.

"What do you think, my dears?" he said, addressing the girls. "Your crazy uncle must have had another snooze, unbeknown to us, for he's got the wildest idea into his head that human brains--or lack of them--ever conceived."

"You are not very respectful, sir," retorted Mr. Merrick stiffly, as he ate his salad. "But we must not expect too much of a disabled soldier--and an Irishman to boot--who has not been accustomed to good society."

Major Doyle looked at his brother-in-law with an approving smile.

"Very well put, John," he said. "You're improving in repartee. Presently you'll add that I'm unlettered and uncivilized, and no fit associate for a person who has made an egregious fortune out of tin cans in the wilds of Oregon."

"But what's the news?" asked Patsy impatiently. "What new idea has Uncle John conceived?"

"First," replied the Major, "he has bought an automobile as big as a baggage car. Next he has engaged a chauffeur who is a wild Canadian Indian with a trace of erratic French blood in his veins--a combination liable to result in anything. Mr. Wampus, the half-breed calls himself, and from the looks of him he's murdered many a one in his day."

"Oh, Major!"

"Show me an automobile driver that hasn't. Myrtle knows. It's no trick to knock over a peaceful pedestrian or so, to say nothing of chickens, cats and dogs mangled by the roadside. I confidently expect he'll make a pancake of dear little Mumbles before he's five miles on the road. Eh, Patsy?"

"Be sensible, Daddy."

"It's my strong point. If I'm any judge of character this Wampus is a speed fiend."

"He is recommended as a very careful driver," said Mr. Merrick; "and moreover he has signed a contract to obey my orders."

"Very good," said Beth. "I'm not afraid of Mr. Wampus. What next, Major?"

"Next," continued Patsy's father, with a solemn wink at the row of curious faces, "your inventive relative has ordered the automobile rebuilt, thinking he's wiser than the makers. He's having a furnace put in it, for one thing--it's a limousine, you know, and all enclosed in glass. Also it's as big as a barn, as I said."

"You said a freight car," observed Patsy.

"True. A small barn or a big freight car. The seats are to be made convertible into sleeping berths, so if we get caught out overnight we have all the comforts of a hotel except the bell boys."

"I'll be the bell boy," promised Patsy.

"Also we're to take a portable kitchen along, like they use in the army, with a gasoline stove all complete. The thing fits under the back seat, I believe."

"All this," said Beth, "strikes me as being very sensible and a credit to Uncle John's genius. I'm a good cook, as you know, and the kitchen outfit appeals to me. But how about provisions?"

"Provisions are being provided," replied her uncle, genially smiling at her praise. However scornfully the Major might view his preparations he was himself mightily proud of them.

"Tinned stuff, I presume," remarked his brother-in-law. "John Merrick has a weakness for tin cans, having got his money out of them."

"You're wrong," protested Uncle John. "I merely made my money from the tin the cans were made of. But we won't get money out of these cans when they're opened; it will be something better, such as sardines and hominy, preserved cream and caviar, beans and boned chicken."

"Sounds fine!" cried Patsy with enthusiasm. "But how can you arrange to carry so much, Uncle?"

"The limousine body is pretty big, as the Major says, and high enough to allow me to put in a false bottom. In the space beneath it I shall stow all the bedding, the eatables and kitchen utensils, and a small tent. Then we shall be prepared for whatever happens."

"I doubt it," objected the Major. "There's gasoline to be reckoned with. It's well enough to feed ourselves, but what if we ran short of the precious feed for the engines?"

"The two tanks will hold sixty gallons. That ought to carry us any reasonable distance," replied Mr. Merrick.

"You see, Daddy, our Uncle John is an experienced traveler, while you are not," declared Patsy. "In all our journeys together I've found him full of resources and very farsighted. This trip doesn't worry me at all."

"Nor me," added Beth. "We are sure to have a delightful time under Uncle's auspices."

"Wampus," said Uncle John, "is so pleased with my preparations that he wants us to start in the car from here."

"Can you put it on runners, like a sledge?" asked the Major. "That's the only way it could travel through this snow. Or perhaps you'll hire a snowplow to go ahead of it."

"No; I told Wampus it was impracticable," was the reply. "We shall load our machine on a flat car and ship it to Albuquerque, which is in New Mexico and almost directly south of Denver. We shall then be over the worst grades of the Rocky Mountains."

"And which way do we go then?" inquired Beth.

"I have not yet decided. We can go still farther south, into Texas, or make our way down into Phoenix and across the prairies to Imperial Valley, or follow the Santa Fe route by way of the Grand Canyon."

"Oh, let's go that way!" exclaimed Patsy.

"And freeze to death?" asked the Major. "It's the northernmost route."

"When we get to Albuquerque we will be below the line of frosts and snow," explained Mr. Merrick. "The climate is genial all through that section during winter. Haggerty says--"

"I guessed it!" groaned the Major. "If Haggerty recommends this trip we'll surely be in trouble."

"Aside from Haggerty, Wampus knows that country thoroughly," said Uncle John stoutly.

"Tell me: did Haggerty recommend Wampus?"

"No."

"Then there's hopes of the fellow. As you say, John, there is no need to decide until we get to Albuquerque. When do we make the start?"

"Day after to-morrow. The car will be shipped to-morrow night, but our party will follow by daylight, so as to see Colorado Springs, Pike's Peak and Pueblo as we pass by them."