

CHAPTER VI - WAMPUS SPEEDS

"So this is Albuquerque," observed Patsy Doyle, as they alighted from the train. "Is it a big town playing peek-a-boo among those hills, Uncle John, or is this really all there is to the place?"

"It's a pretty big town, my dear. Most of the houses are back on the prairie, but fortunately our hold is just here at the depot."

It was a quaint, attractive building, made of adobe cement, in the ancient mission style; but it proved roomy and extremely comfortable.

"Seems to me," whispered Myrtle to Beth, "we're high up on the mountains, even yet."

"So we are," was the reply. "We're just between Glorietta Pass and the Great Continental Divide. But the steepest of the Rockies are behind us, and now the slopes are more gradual all the way to California. How do you like it, dear?"

"Oh, the mountains are grand!" exclaimed Myrtle. "I had never imagined anything so big and stately and beautiful." The other girls had seen mountains before, but this was their friend's first experience, and they took much pleasure in Myrtle's enthusiastic delight over all she saw.

Adjoining the hotel was a bazaar, in front of which sat squatted upon the ground two rows of Mojave Indians, mostly squaws, with their curious wares spread out for sale upon blankets. There must have been a score of them, and they exhibited odd pottery ornaments of indistinguishable shapes, strings of glass beads and beadwork bags, and a few really fine jardinieres and baskets. After the girls had been to their rooms and established themselves in the hotel they hurried out to interview the Indians, Myrtle Dean supporting herself by her crutches while Patsy and Beth walked beside her. The lame girl seemed to attract the squaws at once, and one gave her a bead necklace while another pressed upon her a small brown earthenware fowl with white spots all over it. This latter might have been meant to represent a goose, an ostrich or a guinea hen; but Myrtle was delighted with it and thanked the generous squaw, who responded merely with a grunt, not understanding English. A man in a wide sombrero who stood lazily by observed the incident and said:

"Don't thank the hag. She's selfish. The Mojaven think it brings luck to have a gift accepted by a cripple."

Myrtle flushed painfully.

"I suppose my crutches make me look more helpless than I really am," she whispered to her friends as they moved away. "But they're such a help in getting around that I'm very grateful to have them, and as I get stronger I can lay them aside and not be taken for a cripple any more."

The air was delightfully invigorating here in the mountains, yet it was not at all cold. The snow, as Uncle John had predicted, had all been left behind them. After dinner they took a walk through the pretty town and were caught in the dark before they could get back. The twilights are very brief in Albuquerque.

"This is a very old town," remarked Uncle John. "It was founded by a Spanish adventurer named Cabrillo in the seventeenth century, long before the United States came into existence. But of course it never amounted to anything until the railroad was built."

Next day they were sitting in a group before the hotel when a man was seen approaching them with shuffling steps. Uncle John looked at him closely and Mumbles leaped from Patsy's lap and rushed at the stranger with excited barks.

"Why, it's Wampus," said Mr. Merrick. "The car must have arrived."

Wampus caught up the baby dog and held it under his arm while he took his cap off and bowed respectfully to his employer.

"He an' me, we here," he announced.

"Who is 'he,' Wampus?"

"Aut'mob'l'."

"When did you arrive?"

"Half hour ago. He on side track."

"Very good. You have made capital time, for a freight train. Let us go at once and get the car unloaded."

Wampus hesitated, looking sheepish.

"I been arrest," he said.

"Arrested! For what?"

"I make speed. They not like it. They arrest me--Me--Wampus!" He straightened his slim little form with an assumption of dignity.

"I knew it," sighed the Major. "I decided he was a speed fiend the first time I saw him."

"But--dear me!" said Uncle John; "how could you be arrested for speeding when the automobile was on a fiat car?"

Wampus glanced over his shoulder. Two railroad men had followed him and were now lounging against the porch railing. One had his right eye bandaged while the other carried one arm in a sling. Both scowled as they eyed the Canadian fixedly.

"Freight train make pretty slow time," began the chauffeur. "I know you in hurry, so freight train he make me nervous. I say polite to conductor I like to go faster. He laugh. I say polite to brakeman we must go faster. He make abusing speech. I climb into engine an' say polite to engineer to turn on steam. He insult me. So I put my foot on him an' run engine myself. I am Wampus. I understan' engine--all kinds. Brakeman he swear; he swear so bad I put him off train. Conductor must have lump of coal in eye to keep quiet. Fireman he jus' smile an' whistle soft an' say nothing; so we friends. When I say 'shovel in coal,' he shovel. When we pass stations quick like, he whistle with engine loud. So now we here an' I been arrest."

Patsy tittered and stuffed her handkerchief into her mouth. Uncle John first chuckled and then looked grave. The Major advanced to Wampus and soberly shook his hand.

"You're a brave man, sir, for a chauffeur," he said. "I congratulate you,"

Wampus still looked uneasy.

"I been arrest," he repeated.

Uncle John beckoned the railroad men to come forward.

"Is this story true?" he asked.

"Most of it, sir," answered the conductor. "It's only by the mercy of Providence we're here alive. This scoundrel held up the whole crew and ran away with the engine. We might have had a dozen collisions or smash-ups, for he went around curves at sixty miles an hour. We'd cut our train in two, so as to pull half of it at a time up the grade at Lamy, and so there were only six cars on this end of it. The other half is seventy miles back, and part of what we have here ought to have been left at the way stations. I can't make out, sir, whether it's burglary, or highway robbery or arson an' murder he's guilty of, or all of 'em; but I've telegraphed for instructions and I'll hold him a prisoner until the superintendent tells me what to do with him."

Mr. Merrick was very sober now.

"The matter is serious," he said. "This man is in my employ, but I did not hire him to steal a railway train or fight its crew. Not badly hurt, I hope, sir?"

"My eye's pretty bad," growled the conductor. "Tom, here, thought his arm was broken, at first; but I guess it's only sprained."

"How about the brakeman he threw off the train?"

"Why, we were not going fast, just then, and it didn't hurt him. We saw him get up and shake his fist at the robber. If he ever meets Mr. Wampus again he'll murder him."

"Come with me to the telegraph office and I'll see what I can do to straighten this out," said Mr. Merrick briskly. On the way he remarked to the conductor: "I'm sorry I let Wampus travel alone. He's just a little bit affected in his mind, you know, and at times isn't responsible for what he does."

The conductor scratched his head doubtfully.

"I suspected he was crazy," he replied, "and that's why I didn't hurt him. But if he's crazy he's the most deliberate loonatic I ever run acrost."

The superintendent had just wired instructions to put the outlaw in jail when Mr. Merrick reached the telegraph office, but after an hour spent in sending messages back and forth a compromise was affected and the

little millionaire had agreed to pay a goodly sum to the company by way of damages and to satisfy the crew of the freight train--which he succeeded in doing by a further outlay of money.

"You're not worth all this bother," said Mr. Merrick to the humbled Wampus, when the final settlement had been made, "but chauffeurs are scarce in Albuquerque and I can't be delayed. Never, sir, while you are in my employ, must you allow yourself to be guilty of such an act again!"

Wampus sighed.

"Never," he promised, "will I ride by freight train again. Send car by express. I am Wampus. Freight train he make me nervous."

The automobile was quickly unloaded and at once Wampus set to work to get it in running order. He drove it to the hotel at about sundown and Mr. Merrick told the girls to be ready to start after an early breakfast the next morning.

"Which way do we go?" asked the Major.

"We'll have a talk with Wampus this evening and decide," said Uncle John.

"Don't leave out the Grand Canyon!" begged Patsy.

"Nor the Petrified Forests." added Beth. "And couldn't we visit the Moki Indian reservation?"

"Those things may be well enough in their way," observed the Major, "but is their way our way? That's the question. The one thing we must take into consideration is the matter of roads. We must discover which road is the best and then take it. We're not out of the mountains yet, and we shall have left the railroad, the last vestige of civilization, behind us."

But the conference evolved the fact, according to Wampus, that the best and safest roads were for a time along the line of the Santa Fe, directly west; and this would enable them to visit most of the scenes the girls were eager to see.

"No boulevard in mountain anywhere," remarked Wampus; "but road he good enough to ride on. Go slow an' go safe. I drive 'Autocrat' from here to Los Angeles blindfold."

With this assurance they were obliged to be content, and an eager and joyful party assembled next morning to begin the journey so long looked forward to. The landlord of the hotel, a man with a careworn face, shook his head dismally and predicted their return to Albuquerque within twenty-four hours.

"Of course people do make the trip from here to the coast," he said; "but it's mighty seldom, and they all swear they'll never do it again. It's uncomfortable, and it's dangerous."

"Why?" asked Uncle John.

"You're headed through a wild country, settled only by Mexicans, Indians, and gangs of cowboys still worse. The roads are something awful. That man Wampus is an optimist, and will tackle anything and then be sorry for it afterward. The towns are scattered from here on, and you won't strike a decent meal except at the railway stations. Taking all these things into consideration, I advise you to make your headquarters here for the winter."

"Thank you," returned Mr. Merrick pleasantly. "It's too late for us to back out now, even if we felt nervous and afraid, which I assure you we do not."

"We are not looking for excessive comfort on this journey, you know," remarked Patsy. "But thank you for your warning, sir. It has given us great pleasure; for if there were no chance of adventure before us we should all be greatly disappointed."

Again the landlord shook his head.

"Right?" asked Wampus, at the wheel.

"Go ahead," said Mr. Merrick, and slowly the big car started upon its journey into the Golden West.

The air was keen and bracing, but not chilly. The sunshine flooded the landscape on every side. All the windows of the limousine had been lowered.

Myrtle Dean had been established in one corner of the broad back seat, where she nestled comfortably among the cushions. Uncle John sat beside her, with Beth and the Major on the seat on front. There were two

folding chairs that could be used on occasion, and the back seat easily accommodated three, the "Autocrat" being a seven passenger car; but Patsy was perched in front beside Wampus, which was really the choicest seat of all, so there was ample room inside to "swing a cat," as the Major stated--if anyone had cared to attempt such a feat. Of course the wee Mumbles was in Patsy's lap, and he seemed to have overcome his first aversion of Wampus and accepted the little chauffeur into the circle of his favored acquaintances. Indeed, they soon became fast friends.

On leaving the town Wampus turned into a smooth, hard wagon road that ran in zigzag fashion near the railroad grade. The car bowled along right merrily for some twenty miles, when the driver turned to the right and skimmed along a high plateau. It was green and seemed fertile, but scarcely a farmhouse could they see, although the clear air permitted a broad view.

"He up hill now all way to Continental Divide," said Wampus to Patsy; "then he go down hill long time."

"It doesn't seem to be much uphill," returned the girl, "and the road is very good."

"We make time here," observed the driver. "By'm-by we find rock an' bad road. Then we go slow."

The Major was watching the new chauffeur carefully, and despite his dismal forebodings the man seemed not at all reckless but handled his car with rare skill. So the critic turned to his brother-in-law and asked:

"Is it fully decided which way we shall go?"

"I've left it to Wampus and the girls," was the reply. "On account of our little invalid here we shall take the most direct route to California. It isn't a short route, at that. On Beth's account we shall visit the Moki and Navajo reservations, and on Patsy's account we're going by way of the Grand Canyon of Arizona. Wampus says he knows every inch of the road, so for my part I'm content to be just a passenger."

"Which remark," said the Major, "indicates that I'm to be just a passenger also. Very well, John; I'm willing. There may be trouble ahead of us, but to-day is so magnificent that it's wise to forget everything but the present."