

CHAPTER VII - THE CHAUFFEUR IMPROVES

They all enjoyed that first day's ride. Wampus did not drive fast, for there were places where he couldn't; yet by one o'clock they had reached Laguna, sixty miles from their starting point. There was an excellent railway hotel here, so they decided to spend the rest of the day and the night at Laguna and proceed early the next morning.

The big car was an object of much curiosity to the natives, and during the afternoon Wampus was the center of attraction. Myrtle had stood the ride remarkably well, and Uncle John noticed that her eyes were brighter and a shade of color had already crept into her pale cheeks. Having risen early all three of the girls took a nap during the afternoon, as did Mr. Merrick. The Major gossiped with the station agent, the most important individual in town, and gleaned sundry information that made him look rather glum.

"I don't say the road's exactly dangerous, mind you," added the man, "but these greasers and Injuns get mischievous, at times, harmless as they look. All I'm advisin' is that you keep a sharp eye on 'em." Finding Wampus cleaning his car, while a circle of silent, attentive inhabitants looked on, the Major said to him in a low voice: "Have you a revolver?"

Wampus shook his head.

"Never carry him," he replied. "All gun he make trouble. Sometime he shoot wrong man. Don't like gun. Why should I? I am Wampus!"

The Major entered the hotel frowning.

"That fellow," he muttered, "is a natural-born coward, and we needn't expect help from him if trouble comes."

No trouble came that night, however, and in the early morning, while the sky was still reddened by the rising sun, they were off again, following more closely now the railroad, as rocky defiles began to loom up before them.

By the zigzag course they were obliged to take it was ninety miles to Gallup, and this they easily made, despite the growing steepness of the mountain road. Here was the famous Continental Divide, and the State of Arizona lay just beyond. The Continental Divide is the ridge that separates the streams tributary to the Atlantic ocean from those tributary to the Pacific, so that after crossing it one might well feel that at last the East was left behind and the great West with its romance now faced him.

They came to the little town in time to see the gorgeous sunset from this, the highest point of the Rockies, and especially to Myrtle, who had traveled so little, was the sight impressive and awe inspiring. There was a small but fairly good hotel in the place, and after supper Patsy and Beth went out for a stroll, being much interested in the dark-skinned Mexicans and still darker Indians who constituted far the larger part of the population. The party had everywhere met with respect from these people, who, although curious, were silent and well-behaved; so Uncle John and the Major, deep in a political argument on the hotel porch, had no thought of danger when they saw the two girls start away arm in arm.

The sky was still aglow, although the sun had set, and in the subdued light the coarse adobe huts and rickety frame dwellings were endowed with a picturesque appearance they did not really possess. Beth and Patsy came to the end of the main street rather suddenly, and stood a moment looking at the shadows cast by the rocky cliffs near by. Some of the peaks had snow upon them, and there was a chill in the air, now that the sun had withdrawn its warmth. The girls turned presently and took another route that might bring them quicker to the hotel, but had only proceeded a short way when in passing a rather solitary adobe structure a man stepped from the shadow of the wall and confronted them. He wore a red flannel shirt and a broad sombrero, the latter scarcely covering his dark, evil features.

The cousins stopped short. Then Beth whispered: "Let's go the other way." But as they were about to turn the Mexican drew a revolver and said in harsh, uneven English: "You halt. Keep a-still, or I shoot."

"What do you want?" asked Beth, quietly.

"Money. All you got. Jew'lry--all you got. Give 'm quick, or I shoot!"

As they stood hesitating a sound of footsteps was heard and someone approached quickly from behind them. Patsy looked hurriedly around and saw Wampus. He was walking with his thin little form bent and his hands deep in his trousers pockets. Incidentally Wampus was smoking the stub of a cigar, as was his custom when off duty.

The Mexican saw him, but marking his small size and mild manner did not flinch from his position. With one revolver still leveled at the girls he drew another from a hip pocket and turned it upon Wampus.

"You stop--halt!" he exclaimed fiercely.

Wampus did not halt. His eyes fixed upon the bandit's ugly features, still puffing his cigar and with hands in his pockets he walked deliberately past Patsy and Beth and straight up to the muzzles of the revolvers.

"Stop!" cried the Mexican; and again: "Stop!"

Wampus stopped when one revolver nearly touched his nose and another covered his body. Slowly he drew one hand from his pocket and grasped the barrel of the nearest weapon.

"Let him go," he said, not raising his voice. The man stared into the little chauffeur's eyes and released his hold of the revolver. Wampus looked at it, grunted, and put it in his pocket.

"Now the other gun," he said.

The fellow drew back and half turned, as if to escape.

"No, no!" said Wampus, as if annoyed. "You give me gun. See--I am Wampus!"

Sheepishly enough the Mexican surrendered the other weapon.

"Now turn aroun' an' go to hotel," commanded the chauffeur.

The man obeyed. Wampus turned to the girls, who were now not only relieved but on the verge of laughter and said deprecatingly:

"Do not be scare, for poor man he make no harm. He jus' try a goozle--no dare shoot here in town. Then come; I go back with you."

Silently they accompanied him along the lane, the Mexican keeping in front and looking around from time to time to see if they followed. A short distance from the hotel Wampus gave a queer whistle which brought the bandit cringing to his side. Without ado he handed the fellow his two revolvers and said calmly: "Go 'long."

The Mexican "went along" briskly and the dusk soon swallowed him up.

"Thank you, Wampus," said Patsy, gratefully; "you've saved us from a dreadful experience."

"Oh, that!" snapping his fingers scornfully. "He not a good bad-man, for he too much afraid. I have no gun, for I do not like gun. Still, if I not come, he make you give him money an' trinkets."

"You were very kind," replied Beth, "and I thank you as much as Patsy does. If you had not arrived just when you did I might have killed the man."

"You?" inquired Wampus, doubtfully.

"Yes." She showed him a small pearl-handled revolver which she carried in the pocket of her jacket. "I can shoot, Wampus."

The little chauffeur grinned; then looked grave and shook his head.

"It make funny world, these day," said he. "One time girl from city would scream to see a gun; now she carry him in pocket an' can shoot! Ver' fine; ver' fine. But I like me old style girl who make scream. Then a man not feel foolish when he try protect her."

Patsy laughed merrily; but Beth saw he was offended and hastened to say:

"I am very grateful to you, Wampus, and I know you are a brave and true man. I shall expect you to protect me at all times, for I really don't wish to shoot anyone, although I think it best to carry a revolver. Always after this, before I am tempted to fire, I shall look to see if you are not near me."

"All right," he said more cheerfully. "I am Wampus. I will be there, Miss 'Lizabeth."