

CHAPTER VIII - AMONG THE INDIANS

Little Myrtle grew brighter day by day. She even grew merry and developed a fine sense of humor, showing new traits in her hitherto undeveloped character. The girl never mentioned her injury nor admitted that she suffered any pain, even when directly questioned. Indeed she was not uncomfortable during that splendid automobile ride over mountain and plain into the paradise of the glowing West. Never before in her life had Myrtle enjoyed an outing, except for an hour or two in a city park; never before had she known a friend to care for her and sympathize honestly with her griefs. Therefore this experience was so exquisitely delightful that her responsive heart nearly burst with gratitude. Pretty thoughts came to her that she had never had before; her luxurious surroundings led her to acquire dainty ways and a composed and self-poised demeanor.

"Our rosebud is unfolding, petal by petal, and beginning to bloom gloriously," said Patsy to sympathetic Uncle John. "Could anyone be more sweet or lovely?"

Perhaps almost any girl, situated as Myrtle Dean was, would have blossomed under similar influences. Certain it was that Uncle John came to have a tender affection for the poor child, while the Major's big heart had warmed from the first toward the injured girl. Beth and Patsy were devoted to their new friend and even Mumbles was never so happy as when Myrtle would hold and caress him. Naturally the former waif responded freely to all this wealth of affection and strove to be companionable and cheery, that they might forget as much as possible her physical helplessness.

Mumbles was not the least important member of the party, but proved a constant source of amusement to all. In the novel domains they now traversed the small dog's excitable nature led him to investigate everything that seemed suspicious, but he was so cowardly, in spite of this, that once when Patsy let him down to chase a gopher or prairie dog--they were not sure which--the animal turned at bay and sent Mumbles retreating with his stubby tail between his legs. His comradeship for

Wampus surprised them all. The Canadian would talk seriously to the dog and tell it long stories as if the creature could understand every word--which perhaps he did. Mumbles would sit up between the driver and Patsy and listen attentively, which encouraged Wampus to talk until Patsy in self-defense turned and tossed the fuzzy animal in to Myrtle, who was always glad to receive him.

But Patsy did not always sit on the front seat. That honor was divided among them all, by turns, except the Major, who did not care for the place. Yet I think Patsy rode there oftener than anyone else, and it came to be considered her special privilege because she had first claimed it.

The Major, after the incident at Gallup, did not scorn Wampus so openly as before; but he still reserved a suspicion that the fellow was at heart a coward and a blusterer. The chauffeur's sole demerit in the eyes of the others was his tremendous egotism. The proud remark: "I am Wampus!" was constantly on his lips and he had wonderful tales to tell to all who would listen of his past experiences, in every one of which he unblushingly figured as the hero. But he really handled the big touring car in an admirable manner, and when one afternoon a tire was punctured by a cactus spine by the roadside--their first accident--they could not fail to admire the dexterous manner in which he changed the tube for a new one.

From Gallup they took a wagon road to Fort Defiance, in the Navajo Indian reservation; but the Navajos proved uninteresting people, not even occupying themselves in weaving the famous Navajo blankets, which are now mostly made in Philadelphia. Even Patsy, who had longed to "see the Indians in their native haunts," was disgusted by their filth and laziness, and the party expected no better results when they came to the adjoining Moki reservation. Here, however, they were happily disappointed, for they arrived at the pueblo of Oraibi, one of the prettiest villages on the mesa, on the eve of one of their characteristic snake dances, and decided to remain over night and see the performance. Now I am not sure but the "Snake Dance" was so opportune because Uncle John had a private interview with the native chieftain, at which the head Snake Priest and the head Antelope Priest of the tribe were present. These Indians spoke excellent English and the chief loved the white man's money, so a ceremony that has been held during the month of August for many centuries--long before the Spanish conquistadors found this interesting

tribe--was found to be on tap for that very evening. The girls were tremendously excited at the prospect and Wampus was ordered to prepare camp for the night--the first they had spent in their automobile and away from a hotel. Not only was the interior of the roomy limousine converted into sleeping quarters for the three girls, but a tent was spread, one side fastened to the car while the other was staked to the ground. Three wire folding cots came from some hidden place beneath the false bottom of the car, with bedding enough to supply them, and these were for the use of the men in the tent. The two "bedrooms" having been thus prepared, Wampus lighted the tiny gasoline stove, over which Patsy and Beth enthusiastically cooked the supper. Beth wanted to "Newburg" the tinned lobster, and succeeded in creaming it very nicely. They had potato chips, coffee and toasted Holland rusks, as well, and all thoroughly enjoyed the improvised meal.

Their camp had been pitched just at the outskirts of the Indian village, but the snake dance was to take place in a rocky glen some distance away from the pueblo and so Uncle John instructed Wampus to remain and guard their outfit, as the Moki are notorious thieves. They left the lean little chauffeur perched upon the driver's seat, smoking one of his "stogie" cigars and with Mumbles sitting gravely beside him.

Myrtle hobbled on her crutches between Beth and Patsy, who carried little tin lanterns made with lamp chimneys that had candles inside them. They first visited the chief, who announced that the ceremonies were about to begin. At a word from this imposing leader a big Indian caught up Myrtle and easily carried her on his shoulder, as if she were light as a feather, leading the way to the rocky amphitheatre. Here were assembled all the inhabitants of the village, forming a wide circle around the performers. The snakes were in a pit dug in the center of the space, over which a few branches had been placed. This is called the "kisi."

These unique and horrifying snake dances of the Moki have been described so often that I need not speak of this performance in detail. Before it was half over the girls wished they were back in their automobile; but the Major whispered that for them to leave would cause great offense to the Indians and might result in trouble. The dance is supposedly a religious one, in honor of the Rain God, and at first the snakes were not used, but as the dancers became wrought up and excited by their antics one by one they reached within the kisi and drew

out a snake, allowing the reptiles to coil around their almost naked bodies and handling them with seeming impunity. A few were harmless species, as bull snakes and arrow snakes; but mostly the Moki used rattlesnakes, which are native to the mesa and its rocky cliffs. Some travelers have claimed that the fangs of the rattlers are secretly withdrawn before the creatures are handled, but this has been proved to be untrue. The most accepted theory is that the snakes are never permitted to coil, and cannot strike unless coiled, while the weird chanting and graceful undulating motions of the dancers in some manner "charms" or intoxicates the serpents, which are not aroused to antagonism. Occasionally, however, one of the Moki priests is bitten, in which case nothing is done to aid him and he is permitted to die, it being considered a judgment of the Rain God for some sin he has committed.

The barbaric rites seemed more picturesque, as well as more revolting, in that they took place by the flickering light of torches and bonfires in a rock strewn plain usually claimed by nature. When the dancers were more frenzied they held the squirming serpents in their mouths by the middle and allowed them to coil around their necks, dancing wildly the while. The whole affair was so nauseating and offensive that as soon as it was possible the visitors withdrew and retired to their "camp." It was now almost midnight, but the path was lighted by the little lanterns they carried.

As they approached the automobile Uncle John was disturbed not to see Wampus at his post. A light showed from the front of the car, but the chauffeur seemed to be missing. Coming nearer, however, they soon were greeted by a joyous barking from Mumbles and discovered Wampus squatting upon the ground, puffing at the small end of the cigar and seeming quite composed and tranquil.

"What are you doing there?" demanded the Major, raising his lantern the better to light the scene.

"I play jailer," grunted Wampus, without moving. "Him want to steal; Mumble he make bark noise; for me, I steal too--I steal Injun."

A dusky form, prone upon the ground, began to squirm under Wampus, who was then discovered to be sitting upon a big Indian and holding him prisoner. The chauffeur, partly an Indian himself, knew well how to

manage his captive and quieted the fellow by squeezing his throat with his broad stubby fingers.

"How long have you had him there?" inquired Uncle John, looking at the discomfited "brave" curiously.

"About an hour," was the reply.

"Let him go, then. We have no prison handy, and the man has perhaps been punished enough."

"I have wait to ask permission to kill him," said Wampus solemnly. "He know English talk, an' I have told him he is to die. I have describe, sir, several torture we make on Injun who steal, which make him think he die several time. So he is now prepare for the worst."

The Indian squirmed again, and with a sigh Wampus arose and set him free.

"See," he said; "you are save only by mercy of Great White Chief. You ver' lucky Injun. But Great White Chief will leave only one eye here when he go away. If you try to steal again the eye will see, an' then the torture I have describe will be yours. I am Wampus. I have spoke."

The Indian listened intently and then slunk away into the darkness without reply. The night had no further event and in spite of their unusual experiences all slept excellently and awoke in the morning refreshed and ready for new adventures.