

## **CHAPTER X - A COYOTE SERENADE**

The roads were bad enough. They were especially bad west of Williams. Just now an association of automobile tourists has been formed to create a boulevard route through from the Atlantic to the Pacific coast, but at the time of this story no attention had been given the roads of the far West and only the paths of the rancheros from town to town served as guides. On leaving Williams they turned south so as to avoid the more severe mountain roads, and a fine run through a rather uninteresting country brought them to Prescott on the eve of the second day after leaving the Canyon. Here they decided to take a day's rest, as it was Sunday and the hotel was comfortable; but Monday morning they renewed their journey and headed southwesterly across the alkali plains--called "mesa"--for Parker, on the boundary line between Arizona and California.

Towns of any sort were very scarce in this section and the country was wild and often barren of vegetation for long stretches. There were some extensive ranches, however, as this is the section favored for settlement by a class of Englishmen called "remittance men." These are mostly the "black sheep" or outcasts of titled families, who having got into trouble of some sort at home, are sent to America to isolate themselves on western ranches, where they receive monthly or quarterly remittances of money to support them. The remittance men are poor farmers, as a rule. They are idle and lazy except when it comes to riding, hunting and similar sports. Their greatest industry is cattle raising, yet these foreign born "cowboys" constitute an entirely different class from those of American extraction, found in Texas and on the plains of the Central West. They are educated and to an extent cultured, being "gentlemen born" but sad backsliders in the practise of the profession. Because other ranchers hesitate to associate with them they congregate in settlements of their own, and here in Arizona, on the banks of the Bill Williams Branch of the Colorado River, they form almost the total population.

Our friends had hoped to make the little town of Gerton for the night, but the road was so bad that Wampus was obliged to drive slowly and carefully, and so could not make very good time. Accidents began to happen, too, doubtless clue to the hard usage the machine had received. First a spring broke, and Wampus was obliged to halt long enough to

clamp it together with stout steel braces. An hour later the front tire was punctured by cactus spines, which were thick upon the road. Such delays seriously interfered with their day's mileage.

Toward sunset Uncle John figured, from the information he had received at Prescott, that they were yet thirty miles from Gerton, and so he decided to halt and make camp while there was yet sufficient daylight remaining to do so conveniently.

"We might hunt for a ranch house and beg for shelter," said he, "but from the stories I've heard of the remittance men I am sure we will enjoy ourselves better if we rely entirely upon our own resources."

The girls were, of course, delighted at the prospect of such an experience, for the silent, solitary mesa made them feel they were indeed "in the wilds of the Great American Desert." The afternoon had been hot and the ride dusty, but there was now a cooler feeling in the air since the sun had fallen low in the horizon.

They carried their own drinking water, kept ice-cold in thermos bottles, and Uncle John also had a thermos tub filled with small squares of ice. This luxury, in connection with their ample supply of provisions, enabled the young women to prepare a supper not to be surpassed in any modern hotel. The soup came from one can, the curried chicken from another, while artichokes, peas, asparagus and plum pudding shed their tin coverings to complete the meal. Fruits, cheese and biscuits they had in abundance, so there was no hardship in camping out on a deserted Arizona table-land, as far as food was concerned. The Interior of the limousine, when made into berths for the three girls, was as safe and cosy as a Pullman sleeping coach. Only the men's quarters, the "lean-to" tent, was in any way open to invasion.

After the meal was ended and the things washed and put away they all sat on folding camp chairs outside the little tent and enjoyed the intense silence surrounding them. The twilight gradually deepened into darkness. Wampus kept one of the searchlights lit to add an element of cheerfulness to the scene, and Myrtle was prevailed upon to sing one or two of her simple songs. She had a clear, sweet voice, although not a strong one, and they all--especially Uncle John--loved to hear her sing.

Afterward they talked over their trip and the anticipated change from this arid region to the verdure of California, until suddenly a long, bloodcurdling howl broke the stillness and caused them one and all to start from their seats. That is, all but Wampus. The chauffeur, sitting apart with his black cigar in his mouth, merely nodded and said: "Coyote."

The Major coughed and resumed his seat. Uncle John stood looking into the darkness as if trying to discern the creature.

"Are coyotes considered dangerous?" he asked the Canadian.

"Not to us," replied Wampus. "Sometime, if one man be out on mesa alone, an' plenty coyote come, he have hard fight for life. Coyote is wild dog. He is big coward unless pretty hungry. If I leave light burn he never come near us."

"Then let it burn--all night," said Mr. Merrick. "There he goes again--and another with him! What a horrible wail it is."

"I rather like it," said Patsy, with her accustomed calmness. "It is certainly an added experience to be surrounded by coyotes. Probably our trip wouldn't have been complete without it."

"A little of that serenade will suffice me," admitted Beth, as the howls grew nearer and redoubled in volume.

Myrtle's eyes were big and earnest. She was not afraid, but there was something uncanny in being surrounded by such savage creatures.

Nearer and nearer sounded the howls, until it was easy to see a dozen fierce eyes gleaming in the darkness, not a stone's throw away from the camp.

"I guess you girls had better go to bed," remarked Uncle John, a bit nervously. "There's no danger, you know--none at all. Let the brutes howl, if they want to--especially as we can't stop them. But you are tired, my dears, and I'd like to see you settled for the night."

Somewhat reluctantly they entered the limousine, drew the curtains and prepared for bed. Certainly they were having a novel experience, and if Uncle John would feel easier to have them listen to the howling coyotes

from inside the limousine instead of outside, they could not well object to his request.

Presently Wampus asked the Major for his revolver, and on obtaining the weapon he walked a few paces toward the coyotes and fired a shot into their group. They instantly scattered and made off, only to return in a few moments to their former position.

"Will they continue this Grand Opera chorus all night?" asked Uncle John.

"Perhap," said Wampus. "They hungry, an' smell food. Coyote can no reason. If he could, he know ver' well we never feed him."

"The next time we come this way let us fetch along a ton or so of coyote feed," suggested the Major. "I wonder what the poor brutes would think if they were stuffed full for once in their lives?"

"It have never happen, sir," observed Wampus, shaking his head gravely. "Coyote all born hungry; he live hungry; he die hungry. If ever coyote was not hungry he would not be coyote."

"In that case, Major," said Uncle John, "let us go to bed and try to sleep. Perhaps in slumber we may forget these howling fiends."

"Very well," agreed Major Doyle, rising to enter the little tent.

Wampus unexpectedly interposed. "Wait," called the little chauffeur. "Jus' a minute, if you please."

While the Major and Mr. Merrick stood wondering at the request, the Canadian, who was still holding the revolver in one hand, picked a steel rod from the rumble of the automobile and pushing aside the flap of the little tent entered. The tail-lamp of the car burned inside, dimly lighting the place.

The Major was about to follow Wampus when a revolver shot arrested him. This sound was followed by a quick thumping against the ground of the steel bar, and then Wampus emerged from the tent holding a dark, squirming object on the end of the rod extended before him.

"What is it?" asked Mr. Merrick, somewhat startled.

"Rattlesnake," said Wampus, tossing the thing into the sagebrush. "I see him crawl in tent while you eat supper."

"Why did you not tell us?" cried the Major excitedly.

"I thought him perhaps crawl out again. Him sometime do that. But no. Mister snake he go sleep in tent which is reserve for his superior. I say nothing, for I do not wish to alarm the young ladies. That is why I hold the dog Mumble so tight, for he small eye see snake too, an' fool dog wish to go fight him. Rattlesnake soon eat Mumble up--eh? But never mind; there is no worry. I am Wampus, an' I am here. You go to bed now, an' sleep an' be safe."

He said this rather ostentatiously, and for that reason neither of the others praised his watchful care or his really brave act. That Wampus was proving himself a capable and faithful servant even the Major was forced to admit, yet the man's bombast and self-praise robbed him of any word of commendation he justly earned.

"I think," said Uncle John, "I'll bunk on the front seat to-night. I'm short, you see, and will just about curl up in the space. I believe snakes do not climb up wheels. Make my bed on the front seat, Wampus."

The man grinned but readily obeyed. The Major watched him thoughtfully.

"For my part," he said, "I'll have a bed made on top the roof."

"Pshaw!" said Uncle John; "you'll scratch the paint."

"That is a matter of indifference to me," returned the Major.

"You'll roll off, in your sleep, and hurt yourself."

"I'll risk that, sir."

"Are you afraid, Major?"

"Afraid! Me? Not when I'm awake, John. But what's to prevent more of those vermin from crawling into the tent during the night?"

"Such thing very unusual." remarked Wampus, placing the last blanket on Mr. Merrick's improvised bed. "Perhaps you sleep in tent a week an' never see another rattler."

"Just the same," concluded the Major, "I'll have my bed on top the limousine."

He did, Wampus placing blankets and a pillow for him without a word of protest. The Major climbed over Uncle John and mounted to the roof of the car, which sloped to either side but was broad and long enough to accommodate more than one sleeper. Being an old campaigner and a shrewd tactician, Major Doyle made two blankets into rolls, which he placed on either side of him, to "anchor" his body in position. Then he settled himself to rest beneath the brilliant stars while the coyotes maintained their dismal howling. But a tired man soon becomes insensible to even such annoyances.

The girls, having entered the limousine from the door opposite the tent, were all unaware of the rattlesnake episode and supposed the shot had been directed against the coyotes. They heard the Major climbing upon the roof, but did not demand any explanation, being deep in those bedtime confidences so dear to all girls. Even they came to disregard the persistent howls of the coyotes, and in time fell asleep.

Wampus did not seem afraid of snakes. The little chauffeur went to bed in the tent and slept soundly upon his cot until daybreak, when the coyotes withdrew and the Canadian got up to make the coffee.

The Major peered over the edge of the roof to watch him. He had a sleepy look about his eyes, as if he had not rested well. Uncle John was snoring with gentle regularity and the girls were still asleep.

"Wampus," said the Major, "do you know the proper definition of a fool?"

Wampus reflected, stirring the coffee carefully.

"I am not--what you call him?--a dictionairre; no. But I am Wampus. I have live much in very few year. I would say a fool is man who think he is wise. For what is wise? Nothing!"

The Major felt comforted.

"It occurred to me," he said, beginning to climb down from the roof, "that a fool was a man who left a good home for this uncomfortable life on a barren desert. This country wasn't made for humans; it belongs to the

coyotes and the rattlesnakes. What right have we to intrude upon them, then?"

Wampus did not reply. It was not his business to criticise his employers.