

CHAPTER XIII - THE FIDDLER

Tim had listened carelessly to the conversation until now, when he said listlessly:

"Don't think us all criminals, for we're not. In my own case I did nothing to deserve exile except that I annoyed my elder brother by becoming more popular with our social set than he was. He had all the property and I was penniless, so he got rid of me by threatening to cut off my allowance unless I went to America and stayed there."

"And you accepted such a condition?" cried Patsy, scornfully. "Why were you not independent enough to earn your own living?"

He shrugged his shoulders, yet seemed amused.

"I simply couldn't," said he. "I was not educated to work, you know, and to do so at home would be to disgrace my noble family. I've too much respect for my lineage to labor with my hands or head."

"But here in America no one would know you," suggested Beth.

"I would only humiliate myself by undertaking such a task. And why should I do so? While I am in America my affectionate brother, the head of the family, supports me, as is his duty. Your philosophy is pretty enough, but it is not practical. The whole fault lies in our old-fashioned system of inheritance, the elder male of a family getting all the estate and the younger ones nothing at all. Here, in this crude and plebeian country, I believe it is the custom to provide for all one's children, and a father is at liberty to do so because his estate is not entailed."

"And he earns it himself and can do what he likes with it," added Uncle John, impatiently. "Your system of inheritance and entail may be somewhat to blame, but your worst fault is in rearing a class of molycoddles and social drones who are never of benefit to themselves or the world at large. You, sir, I consider something less than a man."

"I agree with you," replied Tim, readily. "I'm only good to cumber the earth, and if I get little pleasure out of life I must admit that it's all I'm entitled to."

"And you can't break your bonds and escape?" asked Patsy.

"I don't care to. People who are ambitious to do things merely bore me. I don't admire them or care to imitate them."

From that moment they took no further interest in the handsome outcast. His world was not their world.

And now Tobey came in, driving before him a lot of Mexicans bearing trays of food. The long table was laid in a moment, for everything was dumped upon it without any attempt at order. Each of the cowboys seized a plate from a pile at one end and helped himself to whatever he wanted.

Two or three of the men, however, were courteous enough to attend to their unwilling guests and see they were served as well as conditions would permit. The food was plentiful and of good quality, but although none of Uncle John's party was squeamish or a stickler for form, all more or less revolted from the utter disregard of all the proprieties.

"I'm sorry we have no wine; but there's plenty of whiskey, if you like it," remarked Tobey.

The girls were silent and ate little, although they could not help being interested in observing the bohemianism of these gently reared but decadent sons of respectable English families. As soon as they could they left the table, and Tobey, observing their uneasiness in spite of his damaged and nearly useless optics, decided to send them to another room where they could pass the afternoon without further annoyance. Stubby escorted the party and ushered them into a good sized room which he said was "Algy's study," although no one ever studied there.

"Algy's afraid you'll balk at the dance; so he wants to please you however he can," remarked the round faced youth. "You won't mind being left alone, will you?"

"We prefer it, sir," answered the Major, stiffly.

"You see, we're going to have a rare lark this afternoon," continued Stubby, confidentially. "Usually it's pretty dull here, and all we can do is ride and hunt--play cards and quarrel. But your coming has created no end of excitement and this dance will be our red-letter day for a long time

to come. The deuce of it is, however, that there are only two girls to dance with thirteen men. We limit our community to fifteen, you know; but little Ford and old Rutledge have backed down and won't have anything to do with this enterprise. I don't know why," he continued, thoughtfully.

"Perhaps they still have some gentlemanly instincts," suggested Patsy.

"That must be it," he replied in a relieved tone. "Well, anyhow, to avoid quarrels and bloodshed we've agreed to throw dice for the dances. Every one is to have an equal chance, you see, and when you young ladies open the dance the entire programme will be arranged for you."

"Are we to have no choice in the matter of partners?" inquired Beth curiously.

"None whatever. There would surely be a row, in that case, and we intend to have everything; pass off pleasantly if we have to kill a few to keep the peace."

With this Stubby bowed low and retreated toward the door, which suddenly opened to admit old Dan'l the fiddler, who was thrust in so violently that his body collided with that of Stubby and nearly knocked him over.

"That's all right," laughed the remittance man, recovering from the shock. "You mustn't escape, you know, Dan'l, for we depend on you for the music."

He closed the door as he went out and they all heard a bolt shoot into place. Yet the broad window, scarcely six feet from the ground, stood wide open to admit the air.

Dan'l stood in the middle of the room, motionless for a moment. Then he raised his wrinkled face and clinched his fists, shaking them in the direction of the living-room.

"Me!" he muttered; "me play for dese monkeys to dance--me! a maestro--a composer--a artiste! No; I vill nod! I vill die before I condescension to such badness, such mockery!"

They were the first words he had spoken since his arrival, and they seemed to hold all his pentup indignation. The girls pitied the old man and, recognizing in him a fellow prisoner, sought to comfort him.

"If the dance depends upon us, there will be no dance," said Patsy, firmly.

"I thought you advised submitting to the whim of these ruffians," said Uncle John in surprise.

"Only to gain time, Uncle. And the scheme has succeeded. Now is our time to plot and plan how to outwit our enemies."

"Goot!" cried Dan'l approvingly. "I help you. Dey are vermin--pah! I would kill dem all mitout mercifulness, unt be glad!"

"It won't be necessary to kill them, I hope," said Beth, smiling. "All we wish is to secure our escape."

"Vot a time dey make me!" said Dan'l, more calmly. "You see, I am living peacefulness in mine bungalow by der river--ten mile away. Dot brute Tim, he come unt ask me to fiddle for a dance. I--fiddle! Ven I refuse me to do it, he tie me up unt by forcibleness elope mit me. Iss id nod a crime--a vickedness--eh?"

"It certainly is, sir," said Uncle John. "But do not worry. These girls have some plan in their heads, I'm sure, and if we manage to escape we will carry you home in safety. Now, my dears, what is it?"

"Oh, we've only begun to think yet," said Patsy, and walked to the window. All but Myrtle and Dan'l followed her.

Below the window was a jungle of cactus, with hundreds of spines as slender and sharp as stilettos sticking in every direction.

"H-m; this room is burglar proof," muttered Uncle John, with marked disappointment.

"It also makes an excellent prison," added Patsy. "But I suspected something of this sort when I saw they had left the window open. We can't figure on getting out that way, you see."

"Id would be suiciding," Dan'l said, mournfully shaking his head. "If dese fiends were as goot as dey are clefer, dey would be angels."

"No argument seems to prevail with them," remarked Beth. "They are lawless and merciless, and in this far-away country believe they may do as they please."

"They're as bad as the bandits of Taormina," observed Patsy, smiling at the recollection of an adventure they had abroad; "but we must find some way to evade them."

Dan'l had gone over to Myrtle's corner and stood staring at her with his one shrewd eye. Uncle John looked thoughtfully out of the window and saw Wampus busy in the road before the house. He had his coat off and was cutting the bars of barbed wire and rolling them out of the way, while Mumbles, who had been left with him, ran here and there at his heels as if desiring to assist him.

From the big hall, or living room, at the right came a dull roar of voices, subdued shouts and laughter, mingled with the clinking of glasses. All the remittance men were gathered there deep in the game of dice which was to determine the order in which they were to dance with Beth and Patsy. The servants were out of sight. Wampus had the field to himself.

"Come here," said Uncle John to the girls, and when they stood beside him pointed to the car. "Wampus is making ready for the escape," he continued. "He has cleared the road and the way is now open if we can manage to get to the machine. Has your plan matured yet?"

Patsy shook her head.

"Not yet, Uncle," she replied.

"Couldn't Wampus throw us a rope?" inquired the Major.

"He could," said Uncle John; "but we would be unable to use it. Those terrible cactus spines are near enough to spear anyone who dared try to slide down a rope. Think of something else."

They all tried to do that, but no practical idea seemed forthcoming.

"Oh, no," Dan'l was saying to Myrtle; "dey are nod afraid to shoot; bud dey vill nod shoot ladies, belief me. Always dey carry refolders in deir belts--or deir holsterses. Dey eat mit refolders; dey schleep mit refolders; dey hunt, dey quarrel, unt sometimes dey shoot each odder--de best enactionment vot dey do. Bud dey do nod shoot at ladies--nefer."

"Will they wear their revolvers at the dance?" asked Beth, overhearing this speech.

"I belief id," said Dan'l, wagging his ancient head. "Dey like to be ready to draw quick like, if anybody shteps on anybody's toes. Yes; of course."

"What a horrible idea!" exclaimed Patsy.

"They're quite liable to dance and murder in the same breath," the Major observed, gloomily.

"I don't like it," said Beth. "It's something awful just to think of. Haven't they any gallantry?"

"No," answered Patsy. "But I wouldn't dance with a lot of half drunken men wearing revolvers, if they burned me at the stake for refusing."

"Ah! shtick to dat fine expressionment," cried Dan'l, eagerly. "Shtick to id! Say you won't dance if dey wear de refolfers--unt den we win de schweepstakes!"

Patsy looked at him critically, in the instant catching a part of his idea.

"What do you mean?" she asked.

Dan'l explained, while they all listened carefully, absorbed in following in thought his unique suggestions.

"Let's do it!" exclaimed Beth. "I'm sure the plan will succeed."

"It's leaving a good deal to chance," objected Uncle John, with a touch of nervousness.

"There is an element of chance in everything," declared Patsy. "But I'm sure we shall escape, Uncle. Why it's a regular coup!"

"We take them by surprise, you know," explained the Major, who heartily favored the idea.

They talked it over for a time, perfecting the details, and then became as calm and composed as a group of prisoners might. Uncle John waved his handkerchief to attract the attention of Wampus, who stole softly around the corner of the house and approached the window, taking care to keep at a respectful distance from the dangerous cactus.

"Is everything ready?" inquired Uncle John in a subdued voice.

"To be sure all is ready. Why not? I am Wampus!" was the reply, in cautious tones.

"Go back to the machine and guard it carefully, Wampus," commanded Mr. Merrick. "We expect to escape soon after dark, so have the headlights going, for we shall make a rush for it and there mustn't be a moment's delay."

"All right," said the chauffeur. "You may depend on me. I am Wampus, an' not 'fraid of a hundred coward like these. Is not Mister Algy his eye mos' beautiful blacked?"

"It is," agreed Uncle John. "Go back to the car now, and wait for us. Don't get impatient. We don't know just when we will join you, but it will be as soon as we can manage it. What is Mumbles doing?"

"Mumble he learn to be good automobilist. Jus' now he sit on seat an' watch wheel to see nobody touch. If anybody touch, Mumble he eat him up."

They all laughed at this whimsical notion and it served to relieve the strain of waiting. Wampus, grinning at the success of his joke, went back to the limousine to inspect it carefully and adjust it in every part until it was in perfect order.

Now that a definite plan of action had been decided upon their spirits rose considerably, and they passed the afternoon in eager anticipation of the crisis.

Rather earlier than expected Stubby and Tim came to say "they had been appointed a committee to escort their guests to the banquet hall, where dinner would at once be served."

"We shall have to clear away for the dance," added Stubby, "so we want to get the feast over with as quickly as possible. I hope you are all hungry, for Algy has spread himself on this dinner and we are to have every delicacy the ranch affords, regardless of expense. We can economize afterward to make up for it."

Elaborate preparations were not greatly in evidence, however. The Mexican servants had washed themselves and the floor of the big room

had been swept and cleared of some of its rubbish; but that was all. The remittance men were in their usual rough costumes and the air was redolent with the fumes of liquor.