

CHAPTER XV - THE ROMANCE OF DAN'L

It did not take them very long to reach the river, a muddy little stream set below high banks. By Dan'l's direction they turned to the left and followed the wind of the river for a mile or so until suddenly out of the darkness loomed a quaint little bungalow which the old German claimed to be his home.

"I haf architected it mineself, unt make it built as I like it. You vill come in unt shtop der night mit me," he said, as Wampus halted the machine before the door.

There was a little murmur of protest at this, for the house appeared to be scarcely bigger than the automobile. But Uncle John pointed out, sensibly enough, that they ought not to undertake an unknown road at nighttime, and that Spotville, the town for which they were headed, was still a long way off. The Major, moreover, had a vivid recollection of his last night's bed upon the roof of the limousine, where he had crept to escape rattlesnakes, and was in no mood to again camp out in the open while they traveled in Arizona. So he advocated accepting Dan'l's invitation. The girls, curious to know how so many could be accommodated in the bungalow, withdrew all further objections and stood upon the low, pergola-roofed porch while their host went inside to light the lamps.

They were really surprised at the cosy aspect of the place. Half the one-story dwelling was devoted to a living room, furnished simply but with modest taste. A big square table was littered with music, much being in manuscript--thus proving Dan'l's assertion that he was a composer. Benches were as numerous as chairs, and all were well-cushioned with tanned skins as coverings. A few good prints were on the walls and the aspect of the place was entirely agreeable to the old man's guests.

As the room was somewhat chilly he made a fire in the ample fireplace and then with an air of pride exhibited to his visitors his tiny kitchen, his own bedroom and a storeroom, which occupied the remainder of the space in the bungalow. He told them he would prepare beds in the living room for the girls, give his own room to Mr. Merrick and Major Doyle, while he and Wampus would bunk in the storeroom.

"I haf much blankets," he said; "dere vill be no troubles to keep varm."

Afterward they sat before the fire and by the dim lights of the kerosene lamps chatted together of the day's adventures.

Uncle John asked Dan'l what had brought him to this deserted, out-of-the-way spot, and the old man told his story in a manner that amused them all greatly.

"I haf been," said he, "much famous in my time, unt had a individualness pointed out whereeffer I went. I vas orchestra leader at the Theater Royal in Stuttgart, unt our king haf complimented me many times. But I vas foolish. I vas foolish enough to think that ven a man iss great he can stay great. I married me to a clefer prima donna, unt composed a great opera, which vas finer as anything Herr Wagner has efer done. Eh? But dere vas jealousy at work to opposition me. Von day ven my fine opera vas all complete I vent to the theater to lead mine orchestra. To my surprisement der Herr Director tells me I can retire on a pension; I am too old unt he has hired a younger man, who iss Herr Gabert. I go home bewildered unt mishappy, to find that Herr Gabert has stole the score of mine opera unt run away mit mine vife. Vot I can do? Nothing. Herr Gabert he lead my orchestra tint all der people applauds him. I am forgot. One day I see our king compliment Herr Gabert. He produces my opera unt say he compositioned it. Eferybody iss crazy about id, unt crown Herr Gabert mit flowers. My vife sings in der opera. The people cheer her unt she rides away mit Herr Gabert in his carriage to a grand supper mit der nobility unt der Herr Director.

"I go home unt say: 'Who am I?' I answer: 'Nobody!' Am I now great? No; I am a speck. Vot can I do? Veil, I go away. I haf some money--a leedle. I come to America. I do not like crowds any more. I like to be alone mit my violin. I find dis place; I build dis house; I lif here unt make happiness. My only neighbors are de remittance men, who iss more mischieving as wicked. Dey vill nod bother me much. So after a time I die here. Vy nod? I am forgot in Stuttgart."

There was pathos in the tale and his way of telling it. The old man spoke cheerfully, but they could see before them the tragedy depicted by his simple words. His hearers were all silent when he had concluded, feeling they could say nothing to console him or lighten his burden. Only

Wampus, sitting in the background, looked scornfully upon the man who had once been the idol of his townspeople.

Dan'l took a violin from a shelf and began to play, softly but with masterly execution. He caught their mood instantly. The harmony was restful and contented. Patsy turned down the lamps, to let the flicker of the firelight dominate the room, and Dan'l understood and blended the flickering light into his melody.

For a long time he continued to improvise, in a way that fairly captivated his hearers, despite their varied temperaments, and made them wonder at his skill. Then without warning he changed to a stirring, martial air that filled the room with its rich, resonant tones. There was a fugue, a wonderful finale, and while the concluding notes rang in their ears the old man laid his violin in his lap, leaned back against his cushions and heaved a deep sigh.

They forebore disturbing him for a while. How strange it seemed that this really talented musician should be banished to a wilderness while still possessing power to stir the souls of men with his marvelous execution. Truly he was a "maestro," as he had said; a genius whose star had risen, flashed across the sky and suddenly faded, leaving his future a blank.

Wampus moved uneasily in his chair.

"I like to know something," he remarked.

Dan'l roused himself and turned to look at the speaker.

"You have one bad eye," continued Wampus, reflectively. "What make him so? You stick violin bow in eye some day?"

"No," grunted Dan'l.

"Bad eye he no make himself," persisted the little chauffeur. "What make him, then?"

For a moment there was an awkward silence. The girls considered this personal inquiry offensive and regretted admitting Wampus to the room. But after a time the old German answered the question, quietly and in a half amused tone.

"Can you nod guess?" he said. "Herr Gabert hurt mine eye."

"Oh!" exclaimed Wampus, nodding approvingly "You fight duel with him? Of course. It mus' be."

"I haf one goot eye left, howefer," continued Dan'l. "It vill do me fery well. Dere iss nod much to see out here."

"I know," said Wampus. "But Herr Gabert. What happen to him?"

Again there was a pause. Then the German said slowly:

"I am nod rich; but efery year I send a leetle money to Stuttgart to put some flowers on Herr Gabert's grave."

The chauffeur's face brightened. He got up from his chair and solemnly shook Dan'l's hand.

"You are great musician," he announced. "You can believe it, for it is true. An' you have shake the hand of great chauffeur. I am Wampus."

Dan'l did not answer. He had covered his good eye with his hand.