

CHAPTER XVI - THE LODGING AT SPOTVILLE

"Wake up, Patsy: I smell coffee!" called Beth, and soon the two girls were dressed and assisting Myrtle to complete her toilet. Through the open windows came the cool, fragrant breath of morning; the sky was beginning to blush at the coming of the sun.

"To think of our getting up at such unearthly hours!" cried Patsy cheerfully. "But I don't mind it in the least, Beth; do you?"

"I love the daybreak," returned Beth, softly. "We've wasted the best hours of morning abed, Patsy, these many years."

"But there's a difference," said Myrtle, earnestly. "I know the daybreak in the city very well, for nearly all my life I have had to rise in the dark in order to get my breakfast and be at work on time. It is different from this, I assure you; especially in winter, when the chill strikes through to your bones. Even in summer time the air of the city is overheated and close, and the early mornings cheerless and uncomfortable. Then I think it is best to stay in bed as long as you can--if you have nothing else to do. But here, out in the open, it seems a shame not to be up with the birds to breathe the scent of the fields and watch the sun send his heralds ahead of him to proclaim his coming and then climb from the bottomless pit into the sky and take possession of it."

"Why, Myrtle!" exclaimed Patsy, wonderingly; "what a poetic notion. How did it get into your head, little one?"

Myrtle's sweet face rivaled the sunrise for a moment. She made no reply but only smiled pathetically.

Uncle John's knock upon the door found them ready for breakfast, which old Dan'l had skilfully prepared in the tiny kitchen and now placed upon a round table set out upon the porch. By the time they had finished the simple meal Wampus had had his coffee and prepared the automobile for the day's journey. A few minutes later they said good-bye to the aged musician and took the trail that led through Spotville.

The day's trip was without event. They encountered one or two Indians on the way, jogging slowly along on their shaggy ponies; but the creatures were mild and inoffensive. The road was fairly good and they

made excellent time, so that long before twilight Spotville was reached and the party had taken possession of the one small and primitive "hotel" the place afforded. It was a two-story, clapboarded building, the lower floor being devoted to the bar and dining room, while the second story was divided into box-like bedrooms none too clean and very cheaply furnished.

"I imagine we shall find this place 'the limit'," remarked Uncle John ruefully. "But surely we shall be able to stand it for one night," he added, with a philosophic sigh.

"Want meat fer supper?" asked the landlord, a tall, gaunt man who considered himself dressed when he was in his shirt sleeves.

"What kind of meat?" inquired Uncle John, cautiously.

"Kin give yeh fried pork er jerked beef. Ham 'a all out an' the chickens is beginnin' to lay."

"Eggs?"

"Of course, stranger. Thet's the on'y thing Spotville chickens lay, nowadays. I s'pose whar yeh come from they lay biscuits 'n' pork chops."

"No. Door knobs, sometimes," said Mr. Merrick, "but seldom pork chops. Let's have eggs, and perhaps a little fried pork to go with them. Any milk?"

"Canned er fresh?"

"Fresh preferred."

The landlord looked at him steadily.

"Yeh've come a long-way, stranger," he said, "an' yeh must 'a' spent a lot of money, here 'n' there. Air yeh prepared to pay fer thet order in solid cash?"

Uncle John seemed startled, and looked at the Major, who smiled delightedly.

"Are such things expensive, sir?" the latter asked the landlord.

"Why, we don't eat 'em ourselves, 'n' that's a cold fact. Eggs is eggs, an' brings forty cents a dozen to ship. There's seven cows in town, 'n' forty-one babies, so yeh kin figger what fresh milk's worth."

"Perhaps," said Uncle John mildly, "we can stand the expense--if we won't rob the babies."

"Don't worry 'bout that. The last autymobble folks as come this way got hot because I charged 'em market prices fer the truck they et. So I'm jest inquirin' beforehand, to save hard feelin's. I've found out one thing 'bout autymobble folks sense I've ben runnin' this hoe-tel, an' that is that a good many is ownin' machines that oughter be payin' their bills instid o' buyin' gasoline."

The Major took him aside. He did not tell the cautious landlord that Mr. Merrick was one of the wealthiest men in America, but he exhibited a roll of bills that satisfied the man his demands would be paid in full.

The touring party feasted upon eggs and fresh milk, both very delicious but accompanied by odds and ends of food not so palatable. The landlord's two daughters, sallow, sunken cheeked girls, waited on the guests and the landlord's wife did the cooking.

Beth, Patsy and Myrtle retired early, as did Uncle John. The Major, smoking his "bedtime cigar," as he called it, strolled out into the yard and saw Wampus seated in the automobile, also smoking.

"We get an early start to-morrow, Wampus," said the Major. "Better get to bed."

"Here is my bed," returned the chauffeur, quietly.

"But there's a room reserved for you in the hotel."

"I know. Don't want him. I sleep me here."

The Major looked at him reflectively.

"Ever been in this town before, Wampus?" he asked.

"No, sir. But I been in other towns like him, an' know this kind of hotel. Then why do I sleep in front seat of motor car?"

"Because you are foolish, I suppose, being born that way and unable to escape your heritage. For my part, I shall sleep in a bed; like a Christian," said the Major rather testily.

"Even Christian cannot sleep sometime," returned Wampus, leaning back in his seat and puffing a cloud of smoke into the clear night air. "For me, I am good Christian; but I am not martyr."

"What do you mean by that?" demanded the Major.

"Do you sometime gamble?" inquired Wampus softly.

"Not often, sir."

"But sometime? Ah! Then I make you a bet. I bet you ten dollar to one cent you not sleep in your bed to-night."

The Major coughed. Then he frowned.

"Is it so bad as that?" he asked.

"I think he is."

"I'll not believe it!" exclaimed Major Doyle. "This hotel isn't what you might call first-class, and can't rank with the Waldorf-Astoria; but I imagine the beds will be very comfortable."

"Once," said Wampus, "I have imagination, too. Now I have experience; so I sleep in automobile."

The Major walked away with an exclamation of impatience. He had never possessed much confidence in the Canadian's judgment and on this occasion he considered the fellow little wiser than a fool.

Wampus rolled himself in a rug and was about to stretch his moderate length upon the broad double seat when a pattering of footsteps was heard and Beth came up to the car. She was wrapped in a dark cloak and carried a bundle of clothing under one arm and her satchel in the unoccupied hand. There was a new moon which dimly lighted the scene, but as all the townspeople were now in bed and the hotel yard deserted there was no one to remark upon the girl's appearance.

"Wampus," she said, "let me into the limousine, please. The night is so perfect I've decided to sleep here in the car."

The chauffeur jumped down and opened the door.

"One moment an' I make up the beds for all," he said.

"Never mind that," Beth answered. "The others are all asleep, I'm sure."

Wampus shook his head.

"They all be here pretty soon," he predicted, and proceeded to deftly prepare the interior of the limousine for the expected party. When Beth had entered the car Wampus pitched the lean-to tent and arranged the cots as he was accustomed to do when they "camped out."

Scarcely had he completed this task when Patsy and Myrtle appeared. They began to explain their presence, but Wampus interrupted them, saying:

"All right, Miss Patsy an' Miss Myrtle. Your beds he made up an' Miss 'Lizbeth already asleep in him."

So they crept inside with sighs of relief, and Wampus had just mounted to the front seat again and disposed himself to rest when Uncle John trotted up, clad in his trousers and shirt, with the balance of his apparel clasped in his arms. He looked at the tent with pleased approval.

"Good boy, Wampus!" he exclaimed. "That room they gave me is an inferno. I'm afraid our young ladies won't sleep a wink."

"Oh, yes," returned Wampus with a nod; "all three now inside car, safe an' happy."

"I'm glad of it. How was your own room, Wampus?"

"I have not seen him, sir. But I have suspect him; so I sleep here."

"You are a wise chauffeur--a rare genus, in other words. Good night, Wampus. Where's the Major?"

Wampus chuckled.

"In hotel. Sir, do the Major swear sometime?"

Uncle John crept under the tent.

"If he does," he responded, "he's swearing this blessed minute. Anyhow, I'll guarantee he's not asleep."

Wampus again mounted to his perch.

"No use my try to sleep 'til Major he come," he muttered, and settled himself to wait.

It was not long.

Presently some one approached on a run, and a broad grin overspread the chauffeur's features. The Major had not delayed his escape long enough to don his trousers even; he had grabbed his belongings in both arms and fled in his blue and white striped undergarments.

Wampus leaped down and lifted the flap of the tent. The Major paused long enough in the moonlight to stare at the chauffeur and say sternly:

"If you utter one syllable, you rascal, I'll punch your head!"

Wampus was discreet. He said not a word.