

CHAPTER XV - BUB'S HOBBY

When their visitor had departed Mary Louise turned to her friend.

"Now, Irene, tell me about that queer letter," she begged.

"Not yet, dear. I'm sure it isn't important, though it's curious to find such an old letter tucked away in a book Uncle Peter bought at an auction in New York--a letter that refers to your own people, in days long gone by. In fact, Mary Louise, it was written so long ago that it cannot possibly interest us except as proof of the saying that the world's a mighty small place. When I have nothing else to do I mean to read that old epistle from start to finish; then, if it contains anything you'd care to see, I'll let you have a look at it."

With this promise Mary Louise was forced to be content, for she did not wish to annoy Irene by further pleadings. It really seemed, on reflection, that the letter could be of little consequence to anyone. So she put it out of mind, especially as just now they spied Bub sitting on the bench and whittling as industriously as ever.

"Let me go to him first," suggested Irene, with a mischievous smile. "He doesn't seem at all afraid of me, for some reason, and after I've led him into conversation you can join us."

So she wheeled her chair over to where the boy sat. He glanced toward her as she approached the bench but made no movement to flee.

"We've had a visitor," said the girl, confidentially; "a lady who has taken the Bigbee house for the summer."

Bub nodded, still whittling.

"I know; I seen her drive her car up the grade on high," he remarked, feeling the edge of his knife-blade reflectively. "Seems like a real sport--fer a gal--don't she?"

"She isn't a girl; she's a grown woman."

"To me," said Bub, "ev'rything in skirts is gals. The older they gits, the more ornery, to my mind. Never seen a gal yit what's wuth havin' 'round."

"Some day," said Irene with a smile, "you may change your mind about girls."

"An' ag'in," said Bub, "I mayn't. Dad says he were soft in the head when he took up with marm, an' Talbot owned a wife once what tried ter pizen him; so he giv 'er the shake an' come here to live in peace; but Dad's so used to scoldin's thet he can't sleep sound in the open any more onless he lays down beside the brook where it's noisiest. Then it reminds him o' marm an' he feels like he's to home."

Gals think they got the men scared, an' sometimes they guess right. Even Miss' Morrison makes Will toe the mark, an' Miss' Morrison ain't no slouch, fer a gal."

This somewhat voluble screed was delivered slowly, interspersed with periods of aimless whittling, and when Irene had patiently heard it through she decided it wise to change the subject.

"To-morrow we are going to ride in Miss Lord's automobile," she remarked.

Bub grunted.

"She says she can easily run it up to our door. Do you believe that!"

"Why not?" he inquired. "Don't Will Morrison have a car? It's over there in the shed now."

"Could it be used?" quietly asked Mary Louise, who had now strolled up behind the bench unperceived.

Bub turned a scowling face to her, but she was looking out across the bluff. And she had broached a subject in which the boy was intensely interested.

"Thet thar car in there is a reg'lar hummer," he asserted, waving the knife in one hand and the stick in the other by way of emphasis. "Tain't much fer looks, ye know, but looks cuts no figger with machinery, s'long's it's well greased. On a hill, thet car's a cat; on a level stretch, she's a jack-rabbit. I've seen Will Morrison take 'er ter Millbank an' back in a hour--jus' one lonesome hour!"

"That must have been in its good days," observed Mary Louise. "The thing hasn't any tires on it now."

"Will takes the tires off ev'ry year, when he goes away, an' puts 'em in the cellar," explained Bub. "They's seven good tires down cellar now; I counted 'em the day afore ye come here."

"In that case," said Mary Louise, "if any of us knew how to drive we could use the car."

"Drive?" said Bub scornfully. "That's nuth'n'."

"Oh. Do you know how?"

"Me? I kin drive any car thet's on wheels. Two years ago, afore Talbot come, I used ter drive Will Morrison over t' Millbank ev'ry week t' catch the train; an' brung the car home ag'in; an' went fer Will when he come back."

"You must have been very young, two years ago," said Irene.

"Shucks. I'm goin' on fifteen this very minnit. When I were 'leven I druv the Higgins car fer 'em an' never hit the ditch once. Young! Wha'd'ye think I am--a KID?"

So indignant had he become that he suddenly rose and slouched away, nor could they persuade him to return.

"We're going to have a lot of fun with that boy, once we learn how to handle him," predicted Irene, when the two girls had enjoyed a good laugh at Bub's expense. "He seems a queer mixture of simplicity and shrewdness."

The next day Agatha Lord appeared in her big touring car and after lifting Irene in and making her quite comfortable on the back seat they rolled gayly away to Millbank, where they had lunch at the primitive restaurant, visited the post-office in the grocery store and amused themselves until the train came in and brought Peter Conant, who was loaded down with various parcels of merchandise Aunt Hannah had ordered.

The lawyer was greatly pleased to find a car waiting to carry him to the Lodge and after being introduced to Miss Lord, whose loveliness he could not fail to admire, he rode back with her in the front seat and left Mary Louise to sit inside with Irene and the packages. Bill Coombs didn't approve of this method of ruining his stage business and scowled at the glittering auto as it sped away across the plain to the mountain.

On this day Miss Lord proved an exceedingly agreeable companion to them all, even Irene forgetting for the time the strange expression she had surprised on Agatha's face at the time she found the letter. Mary Louise seemed to have quite forgotten that letter, for she did not again refer to it; but Irene, who had studied it closely in the seclusion of her own room that very night, had it rather persistently in mind and her eyes took on an added expression of grave and gentle commiseration whenever she looked at Mary Louise's unconscious face.

"It is much more fun," observed Peter Conant at breakfast the next morning, "to ride to and from the station in a motor car than to patronize Bill Coombs' rickety, slow-going omnibus. But I can't expect our fair neighbor to run a stage line for my express accommodation."

"Will Morrison's motor car is here in the shed," said Mary Louise, and then she told of their conversation with Bub concerning it. "He says he has driven a car ever since he was eleven years old," she added.

"I wondered what that boy was good for," asserted the lawyer, "yet the very last thing I would have accused him of is being a chauffeur."

"Why don't you put on the tires and use the car?" asked Aunt Hannah.

"H-m. Morrison didn't mention the car to me. I suppose he forgot it. But I'm sure he'd be glad to have us use it. I'll talk with the boy."

Bub was found near the Talbot cottage in the gully. When Mr. Conant and Mary Louise approached him, soon after finishing their breakfast, he was--as usual--diligently whittling.

"They tell me you understand running Mr. Morrison's car," began the lawyer.

Bub raised his eyes a moment to the speaker's face but deemed an answer unnecessary.

"Is that true?" with an impatient inflection.

"Kin run any car," said Bub.

"Very well. Show me where the tires are and we will put them on. I want you to drive me to and from Millbank, hereafter."

Bub retained his seat and whittled.

"Hev ye got a order from Will Morrison, in writin'?" he demanded.

"No, but he will be glad to have me use the machine. He said everything at the Lodge was at my disposal."

"Cars," said Bub, "ain't like other things. A feller'll lend his huntin'-dog, er his knife, er his overcoat; but he's all-fired shy o' lendin' his car. Ef I runned it for ye, Will might blame ME."

Mr. Conant fixed his dull stare on the boy's face, but Bub went on whittling. However, in the boy's inmost heart was a keen desire to run that motor car, as had been proposed. So he casually remarked:

"Ef ye forced me, ye know, I'd jus' hev to do it. Even Will couldn't blame me ef I were forced."

Mr. Conant was so exasperated that the hint was enough. He seized the boy's collar, lifted him off the stump and kicked him repeatedly as he propelled his victim toward the house.

"Oh, Uncle Peter!" cried Mary Louise, distressed; but Peter was obdurate and Bub never whimpered. He even managed to close his knife, between kicks, and slip it into his trousers pocket.

When they came to the garage the lawyer halted, more winded than Bub, and demanded sharply:

"What is needed to put the car in shape to run?"

"Tires, gas'line, oil 'n' water."

"The tires are in the cellar, you say? Get them out or I'll skin you alive."

Bub nodded, grinning.

"Forcin' of me, afore a witness, lets me out," he remarked, cheerfully, and straightway went for the tires.

Irene wheeled herself out and joined Uncle Peter and Mary Louise in watching the boy attach the tires, which were on demountable rims and soon put in place. All were surprised at Bub's sudden exhibition of energy and his deft movements, for he worked with the assurance of a skilled mechanic.

"Now, we need gasoline," said Mr. Conant. "I must order that from Millbank, I suppose."

"Onless ye want to rob Will Morrison's tank," agreed Bub.

"Oh; has he a tank of gasoline here?"

Bub nodded.

"A undergroun' steel tank. I dunno how much gas is in it, but ef ye forced me I'd hev to measure it."

Peter picked up a stick and shook it threateningly, whereat Bub smiled and walked to the rear of the garage where an iron plug appeared just above the surface of the ground. This he unscrewed with a wrench, thrust in a rod and drew it out again.

"'Bout forty gallon," he announced. "Thet's 'nough fer a starter, I guess."

"Then put some of it into the machine. Is there any oil?"

"Plenty oil."

Half an hour later Bub started the engine and rolled the car slowly out of its shed to the graveled drive in the back yard.

"All right, mister," he announced with satisfaction. "I dunno what Will'll say to this, but I kin prove I were forced. Want to take a ride now?"

"No," replied Mr. Conant, "I merely wanted to get the car in shape. You are to take me to the station on Monday morning. Under the circumstances we will not use Morrison's car for pleasure rides, but only for convenience in getting from here to the trains and back. He surely cannot object to that."

Bub seemed disappointed by this decision. He ran the car around the yard two or three times, testing its condition, and then returned it to its shed. Mr. Conant got his rod and reel and departed on a fishing excursion.