

BAUM LYMAN FRANK

AUNT JANE'S NIECES AND
UNCLE JOHN

Lyman Baum
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Aunt Jane's Nieces and Uncle John:

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L. Frank Baum Aunt Jane's Nieces and Uncle John

CHAPTER I INTRODUCING "MUMBLES"

Major Gregory Doyle paced nervously up and down the floor of the cosy sitting room.

"Something's surely happened to our Patsy!" he exclaimed.

A little man with a calm face and a bald head, who was seated near the fire, continued to read his newspaper and paid no attention to the outburst.

"Something has happened to Patsy!" repeated the Major, "Patsy" meaning his own and only daughter Patricia.

"Something is always happening to everyone," said the little man, turning his paper indifferently. "Something is happening to me, for I can't find the rest of this article. Something is happening to you, for you're losing your temper."

"I'm not, sir! I deny it."

"As for Patsy," continued the other, "she is sixteen years old and knows New York like a book. The girl is safe enough."

"Then where is she? Tell me that, sir. Here it is, seven o'clock, dark as pitch and raining hard, and Patsy is never out after six. Can you, John Merrick, sit there like a lump o' putty and do nothing, when your niece and my own darlin' Patsy is lost – or strayed or stolen?"

"What would you propose doing?" asked Uncle John, looking up with a smile.

"We ought to get out the police department. It's raining and cold, and – "

"Then we ought to get out the fire department. Call Mary to put on more coal and let's have it warm and cheerful when Patsy comes in."

"But, sir – "

"The trouble with you, Major, is that dinner is half an hour late. One can imagine all sorts of horrible things on an empty stomach. Now, then – "

He paused, for a pass-key rattled in the hall door and a moment later Patsy Doyle, rosy and animated, fresh from the cold and wet outside, smilingly greeted them.

She had an umbrella, but her cloak was dripping with moisture and in its ample folds was something huddled and bundled up like a baby, which she carefully protected.

"So, then," exclaimed the Major, coming forward for a kiss, "you're back at last, safe and sound. Whatever kept ye out 'til this time o' night, Patsy darlin'?" he added, letting the brogue creep into his tone, as he did when stirred by any emotion.

Uncle John started to take off her wet cloak.

"Look out!" cried Patsy; "you'll disturb Mumbles."

The two men looked at her bundle curiously.

"Who's Mumbles?" asked one.

"What on earth is Mumbles?" inquired the other.

The bundle squirmed and wriggled. Patsy sat down on the floor and carefully unwound the folds of the cloak. A tiny dog, black and shaggy, put his head out, blinked sleepily at the lights, pulled his fat, shapeless body away from the bandages and trotted solemnly over to the fireplace. He didn't travel straight ahead, as dogs ought to walk, but "cornerwise," as Patsy described it; and when he got to the hearth he rolled himself into a ball, lay down and went to sleep.

During this performance a tense silence had pervaded the room. The Major looked at the dog rather gloomily; Uncle John with critical eyes that held a smile in them; Patsy with ecstatic delight.

"Isn't he a dear!" she exclaimed.

"It occurs to me," said the Major stiffly, "that this needs an explanation. Do you mean to say, Patsy Doyle, that you've worried the hearts out of us this past hour, and kept the dinner waiting, all because of a scurvy bit of an animal?"

"Pshaw!" said Uncle John. "Speak for yourself, Major. I wasn't worried a bit."

"You see," explained Patsy, rising to take off her things and put them away, "I was coming home early when I first met

Mumbles. A little boy had him, with a string tied around his neck, and when Mumbles tried to run up to me the boy jerked him back cruelly – and afterward kicked him. That made me mad."

"Of course," said Uncle John, nodding wisely.

"I cuffed the boy, and he said he'd take it out on Mumbles, as soon as I'd gone away. I didn't like that. I offered to buy the dog, but the boy didn't dare sell him. He said it belonged to his father, who'd kill him and kick up a row besides if he didn't bring Mumbles home. So I found out where they lived and as it wasn't far away I went home with him."

"Crazy Patsy!" smiled Uncle John.

"And the dinner waiting!" groaned the Major, reproachfully.

"Well, I had a time, you can believe!" continued Patsy, with animation. "The man was a big brute, and half drunk. He grabbed up the little doggie and threw it into a box, and then told me to go home and mind my business."

"Which of course you refused to do."

"Of course. I'd made up my mind to have that dog."

"Dogs," said the Major, "invariably are nuisances."

"Not invariably," declared Patsy. "Mumbles is different. Mumbles is a good doggie, and wise and knowing, although he's only a baby dog yet. And I just couldn't leave him to be cuffed and kicked and thrown around by those brutes. When the man found I was determined to have Mumbles he demanded twenty-five dollars."

"Twenty-five dollars!" It startled Uncle John.

"For that bit of rags and meat?" asked the Major, looking at the puppy with disfavor. "Twenty-five cents would be exorbitant."

"The man misjudged me," observed Patsy, with a merry laugh that matched her twinkling blue eyes. "In the end he got just two dollars for Mumbles, and when I came away he bade me good-bye very respectfully. The boy howled. He hasn't any dog to kick and is broken-hearted. As for Mumbles, he's going to lead a respectable life and be treated like a dog."

"Do you mean to keep him?" inquired the Major.

"Why not?" said Patsy. "Don't you like him, Daddy?"

Her father turned Mumbles over with his toe. The puppy lay upon its back, lazily, with all four paws in the air, and cast a comical glance from one beady bright eye at the man who had disturbed him.

The Major sighed.

"He can't hunt, Patsy; he's not even a mouser."

"We haven't a mouse in the house."

"He's neither useful nor ornamental. From the looks o' the beast he's only good to sleep and eat."

"What's the odds?" laughed Patsy, coddling Mumbles up in her arms. "We don't expect use or ornamentation from Mumbles. All we ask is his companionship."

Mary called them to dinner just then, and the girl hurried to her room to make a hasty toilet while the men sat down at the table and eyed their soup reflectively.

"This addition to the family," remarked Uncle John, "need not make you at all unhappy, my dear Major. Don't get jealous of Mumbles, for heaven's sake, for the little brute may add a bit to Patsy's bliss."

"It's the first time I've ever allowed a dog in the house."

"You are not running this present establishment. It belongs exclusively to Patsy."

"I've always hated the sight of a woman coddling a dog," added the

Major, frowning.

"I know. I feel the same way myself. But it isn't the dog's fault. It's the woman's. And Patsy won't make a fool of herself over that frowsy puppy, I assure you. On the contrary, she's likely to get a lot of joy out of her new plaything, and if you really want to make her happy, Major, don't discourage this new whim, absurd as it seems. Let Patsy alone. And let Mumbles alone."

The girl came in just then, bringing sunshine with her. Patsy Doyle was not very big for her years, and some people unkindly described her form as "chubby." She had glorious red hair – really-truly red – and her blue eyes were the merriest, sweetest eyes any girl could possess. You seldom noticed her freckles, her saucy chin or her turned-up nose; you only saw the laughing eyes and crown of golden red, and seeing them you liked Patsy Doyle at once and imagined she was very good to look at, if not strictly beautiful. No one had friends more loyal, and these two old men – the stately Major and round little Uncle John – fairly worshiped

Patsy.

No one might suspect, from the simple life of this household, which occupied the second corner flat at 3708 Willing Square, that Miss Doyle was an heiress. Not only that, but perhaps one of the very richest girls in New York. And the reason is readily explained when I state the fact that Patsy's Uncle John Merrick, the round little bald-headed man who sat contentedly eating his soup, was a man of many millions, and this girl his favorite niece. An old bachelor who had acquired an immense fortune in the far Northwest, Mr. Merrick had lately retired from active business and come East to seek any relatives that might remain to him after forty years' absence. His sister Jane had gathered around her three nieces – Louise Merrick, Elizabeth De Graf and Patricia Doyle – and when Aunt Jane died Uncle John adopted these three girls and made their happiness the one care of his jolly, unselfish life. At that time Major Doyle, Patsy's only surviving parent, was a poor bookkeeper; but Uncle John gave him charge of his vast property interests, and loving Patsy almost as devotedly as did her father, made his home with the Doyles and began to enjoy himself for the first time in his life.

At the period when this story opens the eldest niece, Louise Merrick, had just been married to Arthur Weldon, a prosperous young business man, and the remaining two nieces, as well as Uncle John, were feeling rather lonely and depressed. The bride had been gone on her honeymoon three days, and during the last two days it had rained persistently; so, until Patsy came home

from a visit to Beth and brought the tiny dog with her, the two old gentlemen had been feeling dreary enough.

Patsy always livened things up. Nothing could really depress this spirited girl for long, and she was always doing some interesting thing to create a little excitement.

"If she hadn't bought a twenty-five cent pup for two dollars," remarked the Major, "she might have brought home an orphan from the gutters, or a litter of tomcats, or one of the goats that eat the tin cans at Harlem. Perhaps, after all, we should be thankful it's only – what's his name?"

"Mumbles," said Patsy, merrily. "The boy said they called him that because he mumbled in his sleep. Listen!"

Indeed, the small waif by the fire was emitting a series of noises that seemed a queer mixture of low growls and whines – evidence unimpeachable that he had been correctly named.

At Patsy's shout of laughter, supplemented by Uncle John's chuckles and a reproachful cough from the Major, Mumbles awakened and lifted his head. It may be an eye discovered the dining-table in the next room, or an intuitive sense of smell directed him, for presently the small animal came trotting in – still traveling "cornerwise" – and sat up on his hind legs just beside Patsy's chair.

"That settles it," said the Major, as his daughter began feeding the dog. "Our happy home is broken up."

"Perhaps not," suggested Uncle John, reaching out to pat the soft head of Mumbles. "It may be the little beggar will liven us

all up a bit."

CHAPTER II

UNCLE JOHN'S IDEA

Two hours later Uncle John, who had been dozing in his big chair by the fire while Patsy drummed on the piano, sat up abruptly and looked around him with a suddenly acquired air of decision.

"I have an idea," he announced.

"Did you find it in your dreams, then?" asked the Major, sharply.

"Why, Daddy, how cross you are!" cried Patsy. "Can't Uncle John have an idea if he wants to?"

"I'm afraid of his ideas," admitted the Major, suspiciously. "Every time he goes to sleep and catches a thought, it means trouble."

Patsy laughed, looking at her uncle curiously, and the little man smiled at her genially in return.

"It takes me a long time to figure a thing out," he said; "and when I've a problem to solve a bit of a snooze helps wonderfully. Patsy, dear, it occurs to me we're lonely."

"We surely are, Uncle!" she exclaimed.

"And in the dumps."

"Our spirits are at the bottom of the bottomless pit."

"So what we need is – a change."

"There it goes!" said the Major ruefully. "I knew very well any idea of John Merrick's would cause us misery. But understand this, you miserable home-wrecker, sir, my daughter Patsy steps not one foot out of New York this winter."

"Why not?" mildly inquired Uncle John.

"Because you've spirited her away from me times enough, and deprived her only parent of her society. First you gallivanted off to Europe, and then to Millville, and next to Elmhurst; so now, egad, I'm going to keep the girl with me if I have to throttle every idea in your wicked old head!"

"But I'm planning to take you along, this time. Major," observed Uncle

John reflectively.

"Oh. Hum! Well, I can't go. There's too much business to be attended to – looking after your horrible money."

"Take a vacation. You know I don't care anything about the business. It can't go very wrong, anyhow. What does it matter if my income isn't invested properly, or the bond coupons cut when they're due? Drat the money!"

"That's what I say," added Patsy eagerly. "Be a man, Major Doyle, and put the business out of your mind. Let's go somewhere and have a good romp. It will cheer us up."

The Major stared first at one and then at the other.

"What's the programme, John?" he asked stiffly.

"It's going to be a cold winter," remarked the little man, bobbing his head up and down slowly.

"It is!" cried Patsy, clasping her hands fervently. "I can feel it in my bones."

"So we're going," said Uncle John, impressively, "to California – where they grow sunshine and roses to offset our blizzards and icicles."

"Hurrray!" shouted Patsy. "I've always wanted to go to California."

"California!" said the Major, amazed; "why, it's farther away than

Europe. It takes a month to get there."

"Nonsense." retorted Uncle John. "It's only four days from coast to coast. I have a time-table, somewhere," and he began searching in his pockets.

There was a silence, oppressive on the Major's part, ecstatic as far as Patsy was concerned. Uncle John found the railway folder, put on his spectacles, and began to examine it.

"At my time of life," remarked Major Doyle, who was hale and hearty as a boy, "such a trip is a great undertaking."

"Twenty-four hours to Chicago," muttered Uncle John; "and then three days to Los Angeles or San Francisco. That's all there is to it."

"Four days and four nights of dreary riding. We'd be dead by that time," prophesied the Major.

Uncle John looked thoughtful. Then he lay back in his chair and spread his handkerchief over his face again.

"No, no!" cried the Major, in alarm. "For mercy's sake, John,

don't go to sleep and catch any more of those terrible ideas. No one knows where the next one might carry us – to Timbuktu or Yucatan, probably. Let's stick to California and settle the question before your hothouse brain grows any more weeds."

"Yucatan," remarked Mr. Merrick, composedly, his voice muffled by the handkerchief, "isn't a bad suggestion."

"I knew it!" wailed the Major. "How would Ethiopia or Hindustan strike you?"

Patsy laughed at him. She knew something good was in store for her and like all girls was enraptured at the thought of visiting new and interesting scenes.

"Don't bother Uncle John, Daddy," she said. "You know very well he will carry out any whim that seizes him; especially if you oppose the plan, which you usually do."

"He's the most erratic and irresponsible man that ever lived," announced her father, staring moodily at the spread handkerchief which covered Uncle John's cherub-like features. "New York is good enough for anybody, even in winter; and now that you're in society, Patsy – "

"Oh, bother society! I hate it."

"True," he agreed; "it's a regular treadmill when it has enslaved one, and keeps you going on and on without progressing a bit. The object of society is to tire you out and keep you from indulging in any other occupation."

"You know nothing about it," observed Patsy, demurely, "and that is why you love to rail at society. The things you know,

Daddy dear, are the things you never remark upon."

"Huh!" grunted the Major, and relapsed into silence.

Mumbles had finished his after-dinner nap and was now awakening to activity. This dog's size, according to the Major, was "about 4x6; but you can't tell which is the 4 and which the 6." He was distressingly shaggy. Patsy could find the stump of his tail only by careful search. Seldom were both eyes uncovered by hair at the same time. But, as his new mistress had said, he was a wise little dog for one who had only known the world for a few months, and his brain was exceedingly alert. After yawning at the fire he rubbed his back against the Major's legs, sat up beside Patsy and looked at her from one eye pleadingly. Next he trotted over to Uncle John. The big white handkerchief attracted him and one corner hung down from the edge of the reclining chair. Mumbles sat up and reached for it, but could not quite get it in his teeth. So he sat down and thought it over, and presently made a leap so unexpectedly agile that Patsy roared with merriment and even the Major grinned. Uncle John, aroused, sat up and found the puppy rolling on the floor and fighting the handkerchief as if it had been some deadly foe.

"Thank goodness," sighed the Major. "The little black rascal has providently prevented you from evolving another idea."

"Not so," responded Mr. Merrick amiably. "I've thought the thing all out, and completed our programme."

"Is it still to be California?" anxiously inquired Patsy.

"Of course. I can't give up the sunshine and roses, you know.

But we won't bore the Major by four solid days of railway travel. We'll break the journey, and take two or three weeks to it – perhaps a month."

"Conquering Caesar! A month!" ejaculated the old soldier, a desperate look on his face.

"Yes. Listen, both of you. We'll get to Chicago in a night and a day. We will stop off there and visit the stockyards, and collect a few squeals for souvenirs."

"No, we won't!" declared Patsy, positively.

"We might sell Mumbles to some Chicago sausage factory," remarked the Major, "but not for two whole dollars. He wouldn't make more than half a pound at twenty cents the pound."

"There are other sights to be seen in Chicago," continued Uncle John. "Anyhow, we'll stop off long enough to get rested. Then on to Denver and Pike's Peak."

"That sounds good," said Patsy.

"At Denver," said Uncle John, "we will take a touring car and cross the mountains in it. There are good roads all the way from there to California."

"Who told you so?" demanded the Major.

"No one. It's a logical conclusion, for I've lived in the West and know the prairie roads are smoother than boulevards. However, Haggerty told me the other day that he has made the trip from Denver to Los Angeles by automobile, and what others can do, we can do."

"It will be glorious!" prophesied Patsy, delightedly.

The Major looked grave, but could find no plausible objection to offer. He really knew nothing about the West and had never had occasion to consider such a proposition before.

"We'll talk to Haggerty," he said. "But you must remember he's a desperate liar, John, and can't be trusted as a guidepost. When do you intend to start?"

"Why not to-morrow?" asked Uncle John mildly.

Even Patsy demurred at this.

"Why, we've got to get ready, Uncle," she said. "And who's going? Just we three?"

"We will take Beth along, of course." Beth was Elizabeth De Graf, another niece. "But Beth is fortunately the sort of girl who can pull up stakes and move on at an hour's notice."

"Beth is always ready for anything," agreed Patsy. "But if we are going to a warm climate we will need summer clothes."

"You can't lug many clothes in a motor car," observed the Major.

"No; but we can ship them on ahead."

"Haggerty says," remarked Uncle John, "that you won't need thin clothes until you get out to California. In fact, the mountain trip is rather cool. But it's perpetual sunshine, you know, even there, with brisk, keen air; and the whole journey, Haggerty says, is one of absolute delight."

"Who is Haggerty?" asked Patsy.

"A liar," answered the Major, positively.

"He's a very good fellow whom we sometimes meet in the

city," said Uncle John. "Haggerty is on the Board, and director in a bank or two, and quite respectable. But the Major – "

"The Major's going to California just to prove that Haggerty can't speak the truth," observed that gentleman, tersely heading off any threatened criticism. "I see there is no opposing your preposterous scheme, John, so we will go with you and make the best of it. But I'm sure it's all a sad mistake. What else did Haggerty tell you?"

"He says it's best to pick up a motor car and a chauffeur in Denver, rather than ship them on from here. There are plenty of cars to be had, and men who know every inch of the road."

"That seems sensible," declared Patsy, "and we won't lose time waiting for our own car to follow by freight. I think, Uncle John, I can be ready by next Tuesday."

"Why, to-morrow's Saturday!" gasped the Major. "The business – "

"Cut the business off short," suggested his brother-in-law. "You've to cut it somewhere, you know, or you'll never get away; and, as it's my business, I hereby authorize you to neglect it from this moment until the day of our return. When we get back you can pick up the details again and worry over it as much as you please."

"Will we ever get back?" asked the Major, doubtingly.

"If we don't, the business won't matter."

"That's the idea," cried Patsy, approvingly. "Daddy has worked hard all summer, Uncle John, looking after that annoying

money of yours, and a vacation will do him oodles of good."

Major Doyle sighed.

"I misdoubt the wisdom of the trip," said he, "but I'll go, of course, if you all insist. Over the Rocky Mountains and across the Great American Desert in an automobile doesn't sound very enticing, but – "

"Haggerty says – "

"Never mind Haggerty. We'll find out for ourselves."

"And, after all," said Patsy, "there are the sunshine and roses at the end of the journey, and they ought to make up for any amount of bother in getting there."

"Girl, you're attempting to deceive me – to deceive your old Daddy," said the Major, shaking his head at her. "You wouldn't have any fun riding to California in a palace car; even the sunshine and roses couldn't excite you under such circumstances; but if there's a chance for adventure – a chance to slide into trouble and make a mighty struggle to get out again – both you and that wicked old uncle of yours will jump at it. I know ye both. And that's the real reason we're going to travel in an automobile instead of progressing comfortably as all respectable people do."

"You're a humbug," retorted Mr. Merrick. "You wouldn't go by train if

I'd let you."

"No," admitted the Major; "I must be on hand to rescue you when you and Patsy go fighting windmills."

CHAPTER III

MYRTLE DEAN

"We were due in Denver three hours ago, and it's an hour's run or more yet," remarked Beth De Graf, walking briskly up and down the platform of a way station where the train had stopped for orders.

"And it's beginning to snow," observed Patricia Doyle, beside her. "I'm afraid this weather isn't very propitious for an automobile trip."

"Uncle John doesn't worry," said Beth. "He believes there is perpetual sunshine west of Denver."

"Yes; a man named Haggerty told him. But you'll notice that Daddy doesn't seem to believe the tale. Anyhow, we shall soon know the truth, Beth, and the trip is somewhat on the order of a voyage of discovery, which renders it fascinating to look forward to. There is such fun in not knowing just what is going to happen next."

"When one travels with Uncle John," returned Beth, smiling, "she knows exactly – nothing. That is why I am always eager to accept if he invites me to go anywhere with him."

The passengers thronging the platform – "stretching their legs" after the confinement of the tedious railway journey – eyed these two girls admiringly. Beth was admitted a beauty,

and one of the society journals had lately announced that she had few peers in all the great metropolis. Chestnut brown hair; dark, serious and steady eyes; an exquisite complexion and rarely regular features all conspired to render the young girl wonderfully attractive. Her stride was athletic, free and graceful, her slender form well poised and dignified. Patsy, the "plug-ugly," as she called herself, was so bright and animated and her blue eyes sparkled so constantly with fun and good humor, that she attracted fully as much attention as her more sedate and more beautiful cousin, and wherever she went was sure to make a host of friends.

"See!" she cried, clasping Beth's arm; "there is that lovely girl at the window again. I've noticed her ever since the train left Chicago, and she is always in the same seat in that tourist coach. I wonder why she doesn't get out for a bit of fresh air now and then."

Beth looked up at the fair, girlish face that gazed wistfully from the window. The unknown seemed very young – not more than fourteen or fifteen years of age. She wore a blue serge suit of rather coarse weave, but it was neat and becoming. Around the modest, sweet eyes were deep circles, denoting physical suffering or prolonged worry; yet the lips smiled, wanly but persistently. She had evidently noticed Uncle John's two nieces, for her eyes followed them as they marched up and down the platform and when Patsy looked up and nodded, a soft flush suffused her features and she bowed her head in return.

At the cry of "all aboard!" a scramble was made for the coaches and Beth and Patsy, re-entering their staterooms, found their Uncle and the Major still intent upon their interminable game of cribbage.

"Let's go back and talk to the girl," suggested Patsy. "Somehow, the poor thing seems lonely, and her smile was more pathetic than cheerful."

So they made their way through the long train to the tourist coach, and there found the girl they were seeking. The surrounding seats were occupied by groups of passengers of rather coarse caliber, many being foreign laborers accompanied by their wives and children. The air in the car was close and "stuffy" and the passengers seemed none too neat in their habits and appearance. So the solitary girl appeared like a rose blooming in a barnyard and her two visitors were instantly sorry for her. She sat in her corner, leaning wearily against the back of the cane seat, with a blanket spread over her lap. Strangely enough the consideration of her fellow passengers left the girl in undisturbed possession of a double seat.

"Perhaps she is ill," thought Patsy, as she and Beth sat down opposite and entered into conversation with the child. She was frankly communicative and they soon learned that her name was Myrtle Dean, and that she was an orphan. Although scarcely fifteen years of age she had for more than two years gained a livelihood by working in a skirt factory in Chicago, paying her board regularly to a cross old aunt who was her only relative

in the big city. Three months ago, however, she had met with an accident, having been knocked down by an automobile while going to her work and seriously injured.

"The doctors say," she confided to her new friends, "that I shall always be lame, although not quite helpless. Indeed, I can creep around a little now, when I am obliged to move, and I shall get better every day. One of my hips was so badly injured that it will never be quite right again, and my Aunt Martha was dreadfully worried for fear I would become a tax upon her. I cannot blame her, for she has really but little money to pay for her own support. So, when the man who ran over me paid us a hundred dollars for damages – "

"Only a hundred dollars!" cried Beth, amazed.

"Wasn't that enough?" inquired Myrtle innocently.

"By no means," said Patsy, with prompt indignation. "He should have given you five thousand, at least. Don't you realize, my dear, that this accident has probably deprived you of the means of earning a livelihood?"

"I can still sew," returned the girl, courageously, "although of course I cannot get about easily to search for employment."

"But why did you leave Chicago?" asked Beth.

"I was coming to that part of my story. When I got the hundred dollars Aunt Martha decided I must use it to go to Leadville, to my Uncle Anson, who is my mother's only brother. He is a miner out there, and Aunt Martha says he is quite able to take care of me. So she bought my ticket and put me on the train and I'm now

on my way to Leadville to find Uncle Anson."

"To *find* him!" exclaimed Patsy. "Don't you know his address?"

"No; we haven't had a letter from him for two years. But Aunt Martha says he must be a prominent man, and everybody in Leadville will know him, as it's a small place."

"Does he know you are coming?" asked Beth, thoughtfully.

"My aunt wrote him a letter two days before I started, so he ought to receive it two days before I get there," replied Myrtle, a little uneasily. "Of course I can't help worrying some, because if I failed to find Uncle Anson I don't know what might happen to me."

"Have you money?" asked Beth.

"A little. About three dollars. Aunt gave me a basket of food to last until I get to Leadville, and after paying for my ticket and taking what I owed her for board there wasn't much left from the hundred dollars."

"What a cruel old woman!" cried Patsy, wrathfully. "She ought to be horsewhipped!"

"I am sure it was wrong for her to cast you off in this heartless way," added Beth, more conservatively.

"She is not really bad," returned Myrtle, the tears starting to her eyes. "But Aunt Martha has grown selfish, and does not care for me very much. I hope Uncle Anson will be different. He is my mother's brother, you know, while Aunt Martha is only my father's sister, and an old maid who has had rather a hard

life. Perhaps," she added, wistfully, "Uncle Anson will love me – although I'm not strong or well."

Both Patsy and Beth felt desperately sorry for the girl.

"What is Uncle Anson's other name?" asked the latter, for Beth was the more practical of Uncle John's nieces and noted for her clear thinking.

"Jones. Mr. Anson Jones."

"Rather a common name, if you have to hunt for him," observed the questioner, musingly. "Has he been in Leadville long?"

"I do not know," replied Myrtle. "His last letter proved that he was in Leadville two years ago, and he said he had been very successful and made money; but he has been in other mining camps, I know, and has wandered for years all over the West."

"Suppose he should be wandering now?" suggested Patsy; but at the look of alarm on Myrtle's face she quickly changed the subject, saying: "You must come in to dinner with us, my dear, for you have had nothing but cold truck to eat since you left Chicago. They say we shall be in Denver in another hour, but I'm afraid to believe it. Anyhow, there is plenty of time for dinner."

"Oh, I can't go, really!" cried the girl. "It's – it's so hard for me to walk when the train is moving; and – and – I wouldn't feel happy in that gay, luxurious dining car."

"Well, we must go, anyway, or the Major will be very disagreeable," said Patsy. "Good-bye, Myrtle; we shall see you again before we leave the train."

As the two girls went forward to their coach Beth said to Patsy: "I'm afraid that poor thing will be greatly disappointed when she gets to Leadville. Imagine anyone sending a child on such a wild goose chase – and an injured and almost helpless child, at that!"

"I shudder to think what would become of her, with no uncle to care for her and only three dollars to her name," added Patsy. "I have never heard of such an inhuman creature as that Aunt Martha, Beth. I hope there are not many like her in the world."

At dinner they arranged with the head waiter of the dining car to send in a substantial meal, smoking hot, to Myrtle Dean, and Patsy herself inspected the tray before it went to make sure everything was there that was ordered. They had to satisfy Uncle John's curiosity at this proceeding by relating to him Myrtle Dean's story, and the kindly little man became very thoughtful and agreed with them that it was a cruel act to send the poor girl into a strange country in search of an uncle who had not been heard of in two years.

When the train pulled into the station at Denver the first care of John Merrick's party was to look after the welfare of the lame girl. They got a porter to assist her into the depot waiting room and then Uncle John inquired about the next train for Leadville, and found it would not start until the following morning, the late overland train having missed that day's connections. This was a serious discovery for poor Myrtle, but she smiled bravely and said:

"I can pass the night in this seat very comfortably, so please don't worry about me. It is warm here, you know, and I won't mind a bit the sitting up. Thank you all very much for your kindness, and good-bye. I'll be all right, never fear."

Uncle John stood looking down at her thoughtfully.

"Did you engage a carriage, Major?" he asked.

"Yes; there's one now waiting," was the reply.

"All right. Now, then, my dear, let's wrap this blanket around you tight and snug."

"What are you going to do?" asked Myrtle with a startled look.

"Carry you outside. It's pretty cold and snowy, so we must wrap you up.

Now, Major, take hold on the other side. Here we go!"

Patsy smiled – rather pitifully – at the expression of bewilderment on Myrtle's face. Uncle John and the Major carried her tenderly to a carriage and put her in the back seat. Patsy sprang in next, with Mumbles clasped tightly in her arms, the small dog having been forced to make the journey thus far in the baggage car. Beth and the Major entered the carriage next, while Uncle John mounted beside the driver and directed him to the Crown Palace Hotel.

It was growing dark when they reached the dingy hostel, which might have been palatial when it was named but was now sadly faded and tawdry. It proved to be fairly comfortable, however, and the first care of the party was to see Myrtle Dean safely established in a cosy room, with a grate fire to cheer her.

Patsy and Beth had adjoining rooms and kept running in for a word with their protégé, who was so astonished and confused by her sudden good fortune that she was incapable of speech and more inclined to cry than to laugh.

During the evening Uncle John was busy at the telegraph booth. He sent several messages to Leadville, to Anson Jones, to the Chief of Police and to the various hotels; but long before midnight, when the last replies were received, he knew that Anson Jones had left Leadville five months ago, and his present whereabouts were unknown. Having learned these facts the little man went to bed and slept peacefully until morning.

Myrtle had begged them to see that she was called at five o'clock, that she might have ample time to get to the depot for her train, but no one called her and the poor child was so weary and worn with her trip that the soft bed enthralled her for many hours after daybreak.

Patsy finally aroused her, opening the blinds to let in the sunshine and then sitting beside Myrtle's bed to stroke her fair hair and tell her it was nearly noon.

"But my train!" wailed the girl, greatly distressed.

"Oh, the train has gone hours ago. But never mind that, dear. Uncle John has telegraphed to Leadville and found that Anson Jones is not there. He left months ago, and is now wandering; in fields and pastures unknown."

Myrtle sat up in bed and glared at Patsy wild-eyed.

"Gone!" she said. "Gone! Then what am I to do?"

"I can't imagine, dear," said Patsy, soothingly. "What do you think you will do?"

The girl seemed dazed and for a time could not reply.

"You must have thought of this thing," suggested her new friend, "for it was quite possible Anson Jones would not be in Leadville when you arrived there."

"I did not dare think of it," returned Myrtle in a low, frightened tone. "I once asked Aunt Martha what I could do in case Uncle Anson wasn't to be found, and she said he *must* be found, for otherwise I would be obliged to earn my own living."

"And she knew you to be so helpless!"

"She knows I can sew, if only I can get work to do," said the girl, simply. "I'm not really a cripple, and I'm getting better of my hurt every day. Aunt Martha said I would be just as well off in Denver or Leadville as in Chicago, and made me promise, if the worst came, not to let any charitable organization send me back to her."

"In other words," exclaimed Patsy, indignantly, "she wanted to get rid of you, and did not care what became of you."

"She was afraid I would cost her money," admitted the poor child, with shamed, downcast eyes.

Patsy went to the window and stood looking out for a time. Myrtle began to dress herself. As she said, she was not utterly helpless, moving the upper part of her body freely and being able to walk slowly about a room by holding on to chairs or other furniture.

"I'm afraid I'm causing you a lot of worry over me," said she, smiling sadly as Patsy turned toward her; "and that is ungrateful when I remember how kind you have all been. Why, these hours since I met you have seemed like fairyland. I shall treasure them as long as I live. There must be another train to Leadville soon, and I'll take that. As soon as I am ready I will go to the depot and wait there."

Patsy looked at her reflectively. The poor child was called upon to solve a queer problem – one which might well have bewildered the brain of a more experienced person.

"Tell me," she said; "why should you go to Leadville at all, now that you have no friend or relative there to care for you?"

"My ticket is to Leadville, you know," replied Myrtle. "If I did not go I would waste the money it cost."

Patsy laughed at this.

"You're a wonderfully impractical child," she said, deftly assisting Myrtle to finish dressing. "What you really need is some one to order you around and tell you what to do. So you must stop thinking about yourself, for a time, and let *us* do the thinking. Here – sit in this chair by the window. Do you want Mumbles in your lap? All right. Now gaze upon the scenery until I come back. There's a man washing windows across the street; watch and see if he does his work properly."

Then she went away to join a conference in Uncle John's sitting room. Major Doyle was speaking when she entered and his voice was coldly ironical.

"The temperature outside is six degrees above freezing," he observed. "The clerk downstairs says the snow is nine feet deep over the mountain trails and the wind would cut an iron beam in two. If you take an automobile to California, John, you must put it on snowshoes and connect it with a steam heating-plant."

Uncle John, his hands thrust deep in his pockets, paced thoughtfully up and down the room.

"Haggerty said – "

"Didn't I give you Haggerty's record, then?" asked the Major. "If you want the exact truth it's safe to go directly opposite to what Haggerty says."

"He's a very decent fellow," protested Mr. Merrick, "and is considered in the city to be strictly honest."

"But after this?"

"You can't blame him for the weather conditions here. I've been talking with Denver people myself, this morning, and they all say it's unusual to have such cold weather at this time of year. The thermometer hasn't been so low in the past twenty-six years, the natives say."

"Are they all named Haggerty?" asked the Major, scornfully.

"If you will kindly allow me to speak, and tell you what Haggerty said," remarked Uncle John tersely, "I shall be able to add to your information."

"Go ahead, then."

"Haggerty said that in case we ran into cold weather in Denver, which was possible – "

"Quite possible!"

"Then we had best go south to Santa Fe and take the route of the old Santa Fe Trail as far as Albuquerque, or even to El Paso. Either way we will be sure to find fine weather, and good roads into California."

"So Haggerty says."

"It stands to reason," continued Mr. Merrick, "that on the Southern route we will escape the severe weather. So I have decided to adopt that plan."

"I think you are quite wise in that," broke in Patsy, before her father could object.

"All those queer Spanish names sound interesting," said Beth. "When do we start, Uncle?"

"In a day or two. I have some things here to attend to that may delay us that long. But when once we are started southward we shall bowl along right merrily."

"Unless we run into more snowstorms." Of course it was the Major who said that, and pointedly ignoring the remark Uncle John turned to Patsy and said:

"How did you find Myrtle Dean this morning?"

"She is rested, and seems very bright and cheerful, Uncle; but of course she is much distressed by the news that her Uncle Anson has vanished from Leadville. Yet she thinks she will continue her journey by the next train, as she has paid for her ticket and can't afford to waste the money."

"It would be absurd for the child to go to Leadville on that

account.

A mining camp is no place for such a frail thing," returned Mr. Merrick. "What would you suggest, Patsy?"

"Really, Uncle John, I don't know what to suggest."

"She can never earn her living by sewing," declared Beth. "What she ought to have is a trained nurse and careful attention."

"I'll have a doctor up to look her over," said Uncle John, in his decisive way. He was a mild little man generally, but when he made up his mind to do a thing it was useless to argue with him. Even Major Doyle knew that; but the old soldier was so fond of arguing for the sake of argument, and so accustomed to oppose his wealthy brother-in-law – whom he loved dearly just the same – that he was willing to accept defeat rather than permit Mr. Merrick to act without protest.

CHAPTER IV

AN INTERESTING PROTÉGÉ

A young physician was appointed by the management to attend any guest who might require his services, and Uncle John had a talk with him and sent him to Myrtle's room to give her a thorough examination. This he did, and reported that the girl's present condition was due largely to mismanagement of her case at the time she was injured. With care she would get better and stronger rapidly, but the hip joint was out of its socket and only a skillful operation would serve to permanently relieve her of lameness.

"What she needs just now," continued the doctor, "is a pair of crutches, so she can get around better and be in the fresh air and sunshine as much as possible. She is a very frail little woman at present and must build up her health and strength before submitting to the operation I have mentioned. Then, if it is properly done, she ought to recover completely and be as good as new."

"I must inform you," said Uncle John, "that Myrtle Dean is just a little waif whom my nieces picked up on the train. I believe she is without friends or money. Such being the circumstances, what would you advise?"

The doctor shook his head gravely.

"Poor thing!" he said. "She ought to be rich, at this juncture, instead of poor, for the conditions facing her are serious. The operation I speak of is always an expensive one, and meantime the child must go to some charitable institution or wear out her feeble strength in trying to earn enough to keep the soul in her body. She seems to have a brave and beautiful nature, sir, and were she educated and cared for would some day make a splendid woman. But the world is full of these sad cases. I'm poor myself, Mr. Merrick, but this child interests me, and after you have gone I shall do all in my power to assist her."

"Thank you," said Uncle John, thoughtfully nodding his bald head.

"I'll think it over and see you again, doctor, before I leave."

An hour later Myrtle was fitted with crutches of the best sort obtainable, and was overjoyed to find how greatly they assisted her. The Major, a kindly man, decided to take Myrtle out for a drive, and while they were gone Uncle John had a long conversation with Beth and Patsy.

"Here is a case," said he, "where my dreadful money can do some good. I am anxious to help Myrtle Dean, for I believe she is deserving of my best offices. But I don't exactly know what to do. She is really *your* protégé, my dears, and I am going to put the affair in your hands for settlement. Just tell me what to do, and I'll do it. Spend my money as freely upon Myrtle as you please." The girls faced the problem with enthusiasm.

"She's a dear little thing," remarked Patsy, "and seems very

grateful for the least kindness shown her. I am sure she has never been treated very nicely by that stony-hearted old aunt of hers."

"In all my experience," said Beth, speaking as if her years were doubled, "I have never known anyone so utterly helpless. She is very young and inexperienced, with no friends, no money, and scarcely recovered from an accident. It is clearly our duty to do something for Myrtle, and aside from the humane obligation I feel that already I love the child, having known her only a day."

"Admitting all this, Beth," returned her uncle, "you are not answering my question. What shall we do for Myrtle? How can we best assist her?"

"Why not take her to California with us?" inquired Patsy, with sudden inspiration. "The sunshine and roses would make a new girl of her in a few weeks."

"Could she ride so far in an automobile?" asked Beth, doubtfully.

"Why not? The fresh air would be just the thing for her. You'll get a big touring car, won't you, Uncle John?"

"I've bought one already – a seven-seated 'Autocrat' – and there will be plenty of room in it for Myrtle," he said.

"Good gracious! Where did you find the thing so suddenly?" cried

Patsy.

"I made the purchase this morning, bright and early, before you were up," replied Mr. Merrick, smilingly. "It is a fine new car, and as soon as I saw it I knew it was what I wanted. It is now

being fitted up for our use."

"Fitted up?"

"Yes. I've an idea in my head to make it a movable hotel. If we're going to cross the plains and the mountains and the deserts, and all that sort of thing, we must be prepared for any emergencies. I've also sent for a chauffeur who is highly recommended. He knows the route we're going to take; can make all repairs necessary in case of accident, and is an experienced driver. I expect him here any minute. His name is Wampus."

"But about Myrtle," said Beth. "Can we make her comfortable on a long ride?"

"Certainly," asserted Uncle John. "We are not going to travel day and night, my dear, for as soon as we get away from this frozen country we can take our time and journey by short stages. My notion is that we will have more fun on the way than we will in California."

"Myrtle hasn't any proper clothes," observed Patsy, reflectively. "We'll have to shop for her, Beth, while Uncle is getting the car ready."

"Are you sure to leave to-morrow, Uncle John?" inquired Beth.

"To-morrow or the next day. There's no use leaving before the 'Autocrat' is ready to ship."

"Oh; we're not going to ride in it, then?"

"Not just yet. We shall take the train south to Santa Fe, and perhaps to Albuquerque. I'll talk to Wampus about that. When

we reach a good climate we'll begin the journey overland – and not before."

"Then," said Patsy, "I'm sure we shall have time to fit out Myrtle very nicely."

Mr. Wampus was announced just then, and while Uncle John conferred with the chauffeur his two nieces went to their room to talk over Myrtle Dean's outfit and await the return of the girl from her ride.

"They tell me," said Mr. Merrick, "that you are an experienced chauffeur."

"I am celebrate," replied Wampus. "Not as chauffeur, but as expert automobilist."

He was a little man and quite thin. His legs were short and his arms long. He had expressionless light gray eyes and sandy hair cropped close to his scalp. His mouth was wide and good-humored, his chin long and broad, his ears enormous in size and set at right angles with his head. His cheek bones were as high and prominent as those of an Indian, and after a critical examination of the man Uncle John was impelled to ask his nationality.

"I am born in Canada, at Quebec Province," he answered. "My father he trapper; my mother squaw. For me, I American, sir, and my name celebrate over all the world for knowing automobile like father knows his son." He paused, and added impressively: "I am Wampus!"

"Have you ever driven an 'Autocrat' car?" asked Mr. Merrick.

"'Autocrat?' I can take him apart blindfold, an' put him

together again."

"Have you ever been overland to California?"

"Three time."

"Then you know the country?"

"In the dark. I am Wampus."

"Very good, Wampus. You seem to be the man I want, for I am going to California in an 'Autocrat' car, by way of the Santa Fe Trail and – and – "

"No matter. We find way. I am – "

"I know. Now tell me, Wampus: if I employ you will you be faithful and careful? I have two girls in my party – three girls, in fact – and from the moment you enter my service I shall expect you to watch over our welfare and guide us with skill and intelligence. Will you do this?"

The man seemed somewhat offended by the question.

"When you have Wampus, what more you want?" he inquired. "Maybe you not know Wampus. You come from far East. All right. You go out and ask automobile man about Wampus. Ask ever'body. When you have inquire you feel more happy. I come again."

He started to go, but Mr. Merrick restrained him.

"You have been highly recommended already," said he. "But you cannot expect me to have as high an opinion of you as you have of yourself; at least, until I know you better. Would you like to undertake this engagement?"

"Yes. Just now I free. My business is expert automobilist. I am

Wampus. But perhaps you want cheap man. My price high."

"What is your price?"

"Fifty dollar week. You eat me an' sleep me."

"I do not object to your price. Come out with me to the garage and I will show you my car and explain what is being done to it."

Although all the automobile men seemed to defer most respectfully to Wampus, Mr. Merrick did not neglect to make proper inquiries in regard to the man. Locally he really was "celebrate" and Uncle John was assured on all sides that he was fortunate to get so intelligent and experienced a chauffeur as this same Wampus.

"He seems to have instinctive knowledge of all machinery," said one informant, "and can handle perfectly any car that is made. The only trouble with the fellow is that he is conceited."

"I've noticed that," returned Mr. Merrick.

"Another thing," said the gentleman; "don't believe implicitly all that Wampus tells you. He has a habit of imagining things. But he is a faithful, honest fellow, for all that, and will handle your car better than any other man you could get in Denver – or anywhere in the West, I imagine."

So Wampus was engaged, and putting the man's references and indorsements all together Mr. Merrick felt that he had gained a prize.

When the big Major, returning from his drive, escorted Myrtle Dean to the elevator, the girl was joyously using her new crutches. Patsy and Beth met her and said they had important news to

communicate. Not until she was in her own room, seated in a comfortable chair and gazing at them anxiously, did they tell the poor waif of the good fortune in store for her.

"Uncle John," announced Patsy, "has invited you to join our party and go to California with us."

Myrtle stared a moment, as if trying to realize what that meant. The tiny Mumbles, sitting beside the chair with his head cocked to one side, suddenly made a prodigious leap and landed in Myrtle's lap, where he began licking her chin and wagging his stumpy tail as if seconding the invitation. As the girl stroked his soft hair her eyes filled with tears.

"Oh, you are all so kind to me!" she sobbed, losing her composure.

"But I can't go! Of course I can't go."

"Why not?" asked Beth, smiling.

"It would be an – impersition!" Poor Myrtle sometimes stumbled over big words. "I know that. I can't let you burden your happy party with a poor cripple, just because your hearts are kind and you pity me!"

"Nonsense!" said Beth. "You're not a cripple, dear; you're just an invalid, and will soon be as strong as any of us. We have invited you, Myrtle, because we all like you, and shall soon learn to love you. We are selfish enough to want your companionship. It isn't pity, at all, you see."

"I'm mighty glad," added Patsy, "your Uncle Anson ran away from Leadville. If he hadn't done that we should have had to give

you up; but now we may keep you as long as we wish, for you haven't any particular engagement to interfere with our plans."

All this was said so frankly and unaffectedly that little Myrtle was led to abandon her suspicion and grew radiant with delight. Indeed, she hugged and squeezed the squirming Mumbles until he resented such strenuous fondling and escaped to Patsy's more moderate embraces. Myrtle had never yet ridden in an automobile, and the prospect of a long journey across the country in a big touring car, with California's roses and sunshine at the end of it, was certainly alluring enough to intoxicate one far more accustomed to pleasure than this friendless, impoverished girl.

After the cousins had explained all their plans to Myrtle and assured her she was to be their cherished guest for a long time – until she was well and strong again, at the least – they broached the subject of her outfit. The poor child flushed painfully while admitting the meagerness of her wardrobe. All her possessions were contained in one small canvas "hold-all," and she lacked many necessities which her callous aunt had suggested that Uncle Anson might be induced to buy for her once she had joined him in Leadville. Uncle John's nieces grew more and more indignant as they discovered the details of this selfish woman's crime – for Patsy declared it was nothing less than a crime to send a helpless child far into the West to search for an unknown uncle whose whereabouts were only conjectural.

That very afternoon Beth and Patsy began shopping for Myrtle, and presently all sorts of parcels, big and little, began

to arrive for their new protégé. Myrtle was amazed and awed by the splendor of her new apparel, and could scarcely believe her good fortune. It seemed like a fairy tale to her, and she imagined herself a Cinderella with two fairy godmothers who were young and pretty girls possessing the purse of Fortunatus and the generosity of Glinda the Good. At night, when she was supposed to be asleep, Myrtle crept from her bed, turned on the electric light and gloated over her treasures, which she had almost feared might vanish into thin air and leave her as desolate as before.

Next morning, as soon as breakfast was over, the girls took Myrtle out with them to some of the shops, fitting her to shoes and gloves and having her try on some ready-made gowns so that they might be quickly altered for her use. Patsy also bought her a set of soft and pretty furs, thinking she might need them on the journey if the weather continued cool, and this seemed to cap the climax of Myrtle's happiness.

"What 'stonishes me most," gasped the child, trying to get her breath between the surprises she experienced, "is how you can think of so many things to do for me. Of course I know you are rich; but I've never before heard of rich people being so very generous to poor ones."

"Once," said Beth, gravely, "we were poor ourselves, Patsy and I, and had to work hard for our living. That was before our Uncle John came and gave us a share of his money, together with his love and sympathy. Isn't it natural, my dear, that we should

now be eager to share our good fortune with you, since we have more money than we can use otherwise, and you are to be our little friend and companion?"

"Perhaps so," replied Myrtle, smiling gaily and much comforted by the explanation. "But, oh dear! I'm so glad you found me!"

"We are glad, too," said Patsy. "But here it is, time for luncheon, and we've wasted the whole morning in shopping. I'm sure the Major will be cross if we do not hurry back to the hotel."

CHAPTER V

A WONDER ON WHEELS

But the Major was not cross when they met him in Uncle John's sitting room. He beamed upon the three girls most genially, for he liked Myrtle and fully approved all that was being done for her.

"Of course it's like Patsy," he had said to Mr. Merrick that morning. "She couldn't help being a sweet ministering angel if she tried; and Beth is growing more and more like her. It will do those girls good, John, to have some human being to coddle and care for. If Patsy could have a fault, it would be wasting so much affection on that bunch o' rags Mumbles, who audaciously chewed up one of my pet slippers while I was at dinner last evening. No dog is a fit thing to occupy a girl's time, and this imp o' mischief Mumbles must take a back seat from now on."

Uncle John laughed, for he knew his brother-in-law had never conquered his antipathy for poor Mumbles, and realized why.

"Take care that you do not get jealous of Myrtle," he replied. "You're a selfish old beast, and don't wish Patsy to love anyone but yourself."

"And why should she?" was the inquiry. "Any dutiful daughter ought to be satisfied with loving such a father as I am."

"And in that," remarked Uncle John, whimsically, "you

remind me of Wampus. You should strut around and say: 'Behold me! I am Patsy's father!'"

The Major was full of news at luncheon time.

"What do you think, my dears?" he said, addressing the girls. "Your crazy uncle must have had another snooze, unbeknown to us, for he's got the wildest idea into his head that human brains – or lack of them – ever conceived."

"You are not very respectful, sir," retorted Mr. Merrick stiffly, as he ate his salad. "But we must not expect too much of a disabled soldier – and an Irishman to boot – who has not been accustomed to good society."

Major Doyle looked at his brother-in-law with an approving smile.

"Very well put, John," he said. "You're improving in repartee. Presently you'll add that I'm unlettered and uncivilized, and no fit associate for a person who has made an egregious fortune out of tin cans in the wilds of Oregon."

"But what's the news?" asked Patsy impatiently. "What new idea has

Uncle John conceived?"

"First," replied the Major, "he has bought an automobile as big as a baggage car. Next he has engaged a chauffeur who is a wild Canadian Indian with a trace of erratic French blood in his veins – a combination liable to result in anything. Mr. Wampus, the half-breed calls himself, and from the looks of him he's murdered many a one in his day."

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

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