

# Myrtle Albertina's Secret



by LILLIAN POHLMANN

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*To my mother*

M. A. G.

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## CHAPTER 1

# A Few Troubles

THE NOONDAY SUN was as warm as rabbit fur against Myrtle Albertina's skin, and she knew about such warmth because she had just held the wildly trembling softness of a rabbit in her arms. Major had trapped it in a hollow stump, and his joyous excited barking had echoed all through the pine woods before she could make him listen.

"Major, quiet! Sit down!" And when he had, she'd grasped his collar firmly with one hand while she released the clawing frightened little thing with the other.

Almost every Saturday as they went through the

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woods with Papa's lunch Major frightened some small wood creature. But Mama insisted that he go along just the same, to protect Myrtle Albertina.

"There's nothing in the woods," she'd told Mama, "but furry soft things like rabbits, or flying feathered things like birds, or skittery scaly things like lizards."

"Yes, I know," Mama had smiled. "I can't seem to forget that the bandit who robbed the stagecoach ten years ago came out of those woods. Thank goodness we don't have such things happening nowadays," she'd added cheerfully.

Thinking of Mama, Myrtle Albertina remembered the problem with which she'd been struggling before Major started to bark. Her footsteps grew slower and slower as she swung Papa's lunch pail back and forth, and thought.

Papa worked at the Red Dog Gold Mine. On most days he took his lunch with him in the special deep pail which the miners used. But on sunny Saturdays he went to work without it so that Myrtle Albertina could take it to him and visit with him while he ate. She never tired of the mine, of seeing the little dump cars toil up the hoist to drop their loads on the already huge pile of rocks. Or of hearing the thumpety-thump-thump of the stamp mill where the rocks were crushed so that the gold could more easily be removed from them.

Once she had even gone down in the "cage" with Papa. The "cage" was an elevator which dropped



down a deep shaft into the earth, letting the miners out at the "cross-cuts" or tunnels where they were to dig for gold. Clinging to Papa's hand, she had stumbled along beside him through the cold dark passage lighted only by the short flickering flames of the candles the men wore in holders on the front of their caps.

"Want to see something pretty, Ed?" a man had called to Papa. He put his pick down and turned his light so that they could see the gold running like a shining ribbon through the rock.

"Will you just look at that, Chicken?" Papa had exclaimed, and then he and the man had laughed together when she said, "Yes, Papa, but let's go back to the sunshine, please."

Papa often showed her sample ore, rock which was especially rich in gold, or rounded yellow-gold nug-

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gets like the ones he had had made into a necklace for Mama after their first lucky year in California. That had been in 1881, the year Myrtle Albertina was born.

Major liked to go to the mine too, because he could nose around the "diggings" and chase rats and ground squirrels from under the old "dry-house" where the miners changed their clothes before and after working underground.

But now, as she walked slowly in the rabbit-warm sunlight, she was not paying attention as she usually did to Major scolding at a blue jay who scolded right back at him. She didn't even scold him when he barked at a horned toad. For she was busy with her trouble. In fact, she was busy with her double trouble.

One trouble was that she couldn't think of something very special to give to Mama for her birthday, and the other trouble, and her hardest, was that she couldn't tell anyone about the first trouble. For Papa always teased her and insisted that she couldn't seem to keep a secret even if she tried. And Aunt Eva said so too. Now she was going to prove to them that she could, but . . .

Toot — T-O-O-O-O-T — *TOOT*. The mine whistles blew for lunchtime and Myrtle Albertina cried, "Oh, Major, we're late!" She tightened her hold on the lunch pail and ran with him at her heels.

Papa was waiting. He hugged her in greeting as he took his lunch and led her to a grassy spot by the creek above the mine.

"We were slow, Papa," she said. "I'm sorry."





"I don't think you were so very slow," Papa replied, feeling the bottom of his lunch pail. "The tea is still warm."

"That's good." She settled down beside him and waited as she always did for him to share his lunch with her. "I was thinking of Mama's birthday."

"Fine," said Papa. But he didn't say it as gladly as usual. In fact he seemed to be thinking of something else as he stood up, threw a pine cone for Major to chase, and waited for him to retrieve it.

"Major scared a rabbit in the woods, Papa. It was trapped in a log till I got it out and held it in my arms for a minute. It was the softest trembling little thing."

Watching his face she was sure he hadn't heard. The lights which usually danced in his brown eyes were quiet. "What's the matter, Papa?" she asked.

He sat beside her, told Major to lie down, and took

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the top tray from his lunch pail. This held a piece of pie, so he set it to one side and took a big meat pasty from the next compartment. "What makes you think something's the matter?" He smiled as he broke an end from the pasty and handed it to her.

"Your face says so," she said.

"You mean my face can't keep secrets any better than you can?" He laughed, pulled her braids, and took a big bite of pasty.

She nodded. "Is it something bad, Papa?"

"Little rabbit scared to death, old Major out of breath," he sang.

"Oh, Papa, you're changing the subject. I thought you didn't hear me telling about Major."

"Mmmmm," grinned Papa. He took a long drink of tea and turned back to her, serious again. "Well, do you remember what highgrading is, Chick?"

"Of course, Papa." Highgrading was the miner's word for stealing gold from the mines. Many times she had heard about workers hiding gold away in the linings of their coats or the toes of their shoes. Papa had told about one man who had sneaked gold home from the mine in a piece of cake saved from his lunch, and of another who had hidden a gold nugget under his tongue.

"There's some highgrading going on in our mine right now," Papa told her, "and until they find the fellow who's doing it I guess we'll all look like thieves to the mine bosses."

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"Who would ever do such a thing?" Myrtle Albertina pulled dry pine needles in and out through her shoelaces and wondered. "Your trouble is bigger than mine," she said.

Papa stopped right in the middle of a bite. "You've got trouble?" he asked in surprise.

Then Myrtle Albertina remembered and pressed her hands quickly to her mouth. She mustn't tell. This time she was going to keep a secret. "Here, Major," she called. "Where's Major gone, Papa?"

"Now who's changing the subject, I'd like to know," Papa teased, looking at his watch. "And just when I have to hurry back to the mine, too." He gulped the last of his tea, fitted his lunch pail together, and got to his feet just as the whistles blew to remind the workers that lunchtime was over. He called Major, who came running toward them, and tossed Myrtle Albertina high in the air as he kissed her good-bye.

"Go right home, Chicken," he said. "Take care of her, Major dog."

Then he went back to work while they ran down the sloping path from the mine toward home.



## CHAPTER 2

### Meeting in the Woods

THE WOODS WERE STILL now except for the sound of the stamp mill. Even Major walked quietly, without barking, at Myrtle Albertina's side. A startled lizard or two scampered out of their way, but the furry things or the flying things were nowhere to be seen.

As they walked Myrtle Albertina thought of what Papa had told her. A man who stole from the mines was like the bandit who had once held up the stage-coach and disappeared into these very woods. They both wanted gold which belonged to someone else.

One day while Mama was doing business with the Wells Fargo Express Company on Main Street, Myr-



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the Albertina had read some of the old handbills posted inside on the walls. And one, she remembered, had said: \$800.00 REWARD! FOR ARREST OF STAGE ROBBER—BIG BART.

Just reading it had made her feel strange, so she'd hurried outside to wait for Mama. There she'd leaned against the sun-warmed red bricks of the building and watched the familiar street. What if that Big Bart should come right now, shooting into town? What would happen to the friendly, familiar people walking along the high board sidewalks, stopping to talk or looking up to see who was driving by in an occasional horse and buggy?



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"Do you think they'll catch that man?" she'd asked as Mama joined her.

"What man?"

"That stage robber, Big Bart."

"Oh, him!" Mama had laughed. "All he ever wanted was gold and more gold. Why, he's been in prison for years now, so you don't have to worry. They just never take those old handbills down."

Myrtle Albertina had stopped worrying about stage robbers right then. But now she was worrying about highgraders, who were robbers too. Shivering suddenly, she looked over her shoulder and tightened her hold on Major's collar.

A breeze moved through the maple trees and their yellow leaves rained slowly down. These were gold, too, but how different from the gold in the mines, thought Myrtle Albertina as she reached to catch some. She let the leaves fall from her hands over Major's reddish fur. "This gold's prettier," she told him.

Then her thoughts swung once again to Mama and her birthday. Myrtle Albertina had one big silver dollar to spend, but on what? Papa thought a pin cushion would be nice. She'd seen a blue satin one shaped like a bird which she'd liked, but Mama had a pin cushion. Aunt Eva had suggested a handkerchief. But that didn't seem special enough for the gift that was going to be her first, really first, untold secret.

Suddenly Major barked wildly and broke away



from her. Her heart jumped as she ran, calling, after him. "Major! Come here, Major. Major!"

Then she saw a man and a boy coming toward her from a side trail. The man was carrying a strange box on his back, and the boy — why the boy was in Aunt Eva's class at school. In the very next grade above Myrtle Albertina's.

"Hello," he called and bent to rub Major, whose red plume of a tail was already swaying in friendly wagging.

The man swept off his hat and nodded. "Good afternoon," he said, and the smile under his black mustache was quick and friendly.

Myrtle Albertina murmured, "Good afternoon," but she couldn't take her eyes from the box on his back.

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Long stiff legs reached out of it and a black cloth was draped over it.

"Where are you going on this fine, bright day?" the man asked. "We are on our way to the Red Dog Mine to take pictures."

"Oh," exclaimed Myrtle Albertina, "then that box you are carrying is . . ."

"It's a camera," the boy said.

"Yes, ma'am." The man smiled. "I am Harvey Stevens and I happen to be a pretty good photographer. And this is my son Tuley, who is a very good helper."

"My Aunt Eva is his schoolteacher," Myrtle Albertina announced proudly.

"Ah," said Mr. Stevens, "so Miss Eva is your aunt. She is a very lovely young lady and has been most kind to Tuley. You see, he gets a little behind in his lessons sometimes because we have to move a great deal from one place to another to take pictures."

"I don't suppose you know anyone who wants a picture taken, do you . . . say, what's your name anyway?" Tuley demanded.

"Myrtle Albertina." She shook her head and started to say that she didn't know of anyone at all who might want a picture taken. But a new thought came to her and stopped her, and her trouble rose right there like a bubble and melted away in the sunlight. "It would



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make a very special present for someone, wouldn't it?"

"It most certainly would," Mr. Stevens agreed.

"Would it cost more than a dollar?"

"It would not. As a matter of fact, six bits would take care of it unless you want it in color." He looked hard at her and rubbed his hand thoughtfully over his pleasant dark face. "For one dollar we could do it in color," he said.

"Color is one-fifty," Tuley reminded his father.

"Usually," Mr. Stevens smiled, "but this is different — a bargain to a young lady because we met her in the woods on a sunny afternoon. Now, this is to be a picture of whom, may I ask?"

"Oh, of me. It would be a picture of me for Mama."

What a wonderful idea. What a beautiful day. What kind people. "I think that would be fine," she cried and Major, hearing the happiness in her voice, caught a golden leaf in his mouth and ran in silly circles around them. "When can you take the picture, Mr. Stevens? Because it has to be a surprise."

"We could do it now."

Myrtle Albertina looked down at the red calico dress she was wearing. "Not in this old thing," she said, and felt grown-up and excited to be deciding such things for herself. She tossed her head. "And not in these old braids, either."

So Mr. Stevens told her about their tent a short dis-