

CHAPTER VI

BARON TREGAR

LILAC and wistaria flowered royally. Carpenter, wheelwright and painter departed. The trim green wagon, picked out gayly in white, windowed and curtained and splendidly equipped for the fortunes of the road, creaked briskly away upon its pilgrimage, behind a pair of big-boned piebald horses from the Westfall stables, with Johnny at the reins. On the seat beside him Diane radiantly waved adieu to her aunt, who promptly collapsed in a chair on the porch and dabbed violently at her eyes.

“I shall never get over it,” sniffed Aunt Agatha tragically. “Carl may say what he will, I never shall. But now that I’ve come up here to see her off, I’ve done my duty, I have indeed. And I do hope Carl hasn’t any wild ideas for the summer—I couldn’t stand it. Allan, as long as Miss Diane is camping within reasonable distance of the farm, you’d better take the run-about each night and find her and see if she’s all right—and brush the snakes and bugs and things out of camp. If everything wild in the forest collected around the camp fire, like as not she wouldn’t see them until they bit her.”

The boy shifted a slim, bare leg and sniggered.

"Miss Westfall," he said, "Miss Diane she says she's a-goin' to a spot by the river and camp a week an'—an' if she finds anybody a-follerin' or spyin' on her from the farm, she'll skin him alive an'—an' them black eyes o' her'n snapped fire when she said it. An' Johnny, he's got weepions 'nough with him to fight pirates."

Aunt Agatha groaned and rocking dolorously back and forth upon the porch reviewed the calamitous possibilities of the journey.

But the restless young nomad on the road ahead, sniffing the rare, sweet air of early summer, had already relegated the memory of her long-suffering aunt to the forgotten things of civilization. For the summer world, sweet with the scent of wild flowers, was very young, with young leaves, young grass and flowering, sun-warm hedges, and beyond the Sherrill place on the wooded hill, the sun flamed yellow through the hemlocks.

"Oh, Johnny Jutes! Oh, Johnny Jutes!" sang the girl happily, with the color of the wild rose in her sun-brown cheeks. "It's good—it's good to be alive!"

With a chuckle of enthusiasm Johnny cracked his whip and opined that it was.

Now even as the great green van rolled forth upon the country roads, bound for an idyllic

spot by the river where Diane had planned to camp a week, two men appeared upon the wide, white-pillared Sherrill porch, smoking and idly admiring the bluish hills and the rolling meadowlands below bright with morning sunlight. To the east lay the silver glimmer of a tree-fringed lake; beyond, a church spire among the trees and a winding country road traveled by the solitary van of green and white.

"A singular conveyance, is it not, Poynter?" inquired the older man, his careful articulation blurred by a pronounced foreign accent. Staring intently at the sunlit road, he added: "Is it a common mode of travel — here in America?"

The younger man, a lean, sinewy chap with singularly fine eyes of blue above lean, tanned cheeks, frowned thoughtfully.

"By no means," said he pleasantly. "Indeed it's quite new to me. Seems to have blowy white things at the sides like window curtains, doesn't it?"

"A nomadic young woman, I am told," shrugged the older man carelessly. He stood watching the dusty trail of the nomad with narrowed, thoughtful eyes, unaware that his companion's eyes had wandered somewhat expectantly to the Westfall lake.

"Baron Tregar!" whispered Ann Sherrill in a remote corner of the veranda to a girl she had

brought up to the farm with her late the night before. "Has a *real* air of distinction, hasn't he, Susanne? And such deep, dark, *compelling* eyes. Rather Arabic, I think, but mother says Magyar. Dick says he's immensely interested in the war possibilities of aeroplanes and fearfully patriotic. Touring the States, I believe. Dad picked him up in Washington. Philip's teaching him to fly. Philip was up once before, you know, in the spring and Dad urged him to come up again and bring the Baron along to learn aeroplaning. Philip *Poynter*, of course, the Baron's secretary!" in scandalized italics. "Didn't you know, *really?* . . . *The Philip Poynter.* . . . And I say it's absolutely *sinful* for a man to be so good-looking as long as the world's monogamous."

"Quarreled with his father or something, didn't he?" asked Susanne vaguely.

"Quarreled!" exclaimed Ann righteously. "Well, I should say he did. My dear, the young man's temper simply splintered into a million pieces and he hasn't found them yet. Flatly refused to take a *cent* of his father's money because he'd discovered it was made dishonestly. *Think* of it! And Dad says it's true. Old Poynter *is* a pirate, an unscrupulous, money-mad, villainous old pirate and he did something or other most unpleasant to Dad in Wall Street. And would you *believe* it, Susanne, Philip went fuming off

huffily to some ridiculous little mountain kingdom in Europe that he was awfully keen about — Houdania — and rented himself out as a secretary to Baron Tregar. Just *imagine!* Dick says he organized an aviation department there and won some kind of a prize for an improved model and in the midst of it all, Susanne, Philip's grandfather up and died, after quarreling for years and *years* with the whole family, and left Philip *all* his money! *I* think Philip's quarrel with his father pleased him. But the very queerest part is that Philip actually *likes* to work and dabble in foreign politics and he flatly refused to give up his job! Isn't it romantic? Philip was *always* keen for adventure. Dick says you never *could* put your finger on a spot on the map and say comfortably, 'Philip Poynter's here!' for most likely Philip Poynter was bolting furiously somewhere else!"

Unaware of Susanne's furtive interest in his career, Philip scanned the calm, unruffled waters of the Westfall lake and sighing turned back to his chief. There was a tempting drone of motors back among the hangars.

"We fly this morning?" he inquired smiling.

"Unfortunately not," regretted the Baron, and led the way indoors to a room which Mrs. Sherrill had hospitably insisted upon re-

garding as a private den of work and consultation for the Baron and his secretary.

"There is a mission of exceeding delicacy," began Baron Tregar slowly, "which I feel I must inflict upon you." His deep, penetrating eyes lingered intently upon Philip's face. "It concerns the singular conveyance of green and white and the lady within it."

Philip looked frankly astonished.

"I take it then," he suggested, "that you know the nomadic lady, Baron Tregar?"

"No," said the Baron.

Philip stared.

"Your Excellency is pleased to jest," he said politely.

"On the contrary," said the Baron, "I am at a loss for suitable words in which to express my singular request. I am assured of your interest, Poynter?"

"Of my interest, assuredly!" admitted Philip. "My compliance," he added fairly, "depends, of course, upon the nature of the mission."

"It is absurdly simple," said the Houdanian suavely. "Merely to discover whether or not the nomadic lady feels any exceptional interest—in Houdania. For the information to be acquired in a careless, disinterested manner without arousing undue interest, requires, I think, an American of brains and breeding, a compatriot of the

nomad. It has occurred to me that you are equipped by a habit of courtesy and tact to—arrive accidentally in the path of the caravan—”

“I thank you!” said Philip dryly. “I prefer,” he added stiffly, “to confine my diplomatic activities to more conventional channels.”

“When I assure you,” purred the Baron with his maddening precision of speech, “that this information is of peculiar value to me and without immediate significance to the lady herself, I am sure that you will not feel bound to withhold your—hum—your coöperation in so slight a personal inconvenience, singular as it may all seem to you. I am right?”

Philip reddened uncomfortably.

“I am to understand that I would undertake this peculiar mission equipped with no further information than you have offered?”

“Exactly so,” said the Baron. “I must beg of you to undertake it without question.”

“Pray believe,” flashed Philip, “that I am not inclined to question. That fact,” he added coldly, “is in itself a handicap.”

“The lady’s name,” explained the Baron quietly, “is Westfall—Diane Westfall.”

“Impossible!” exclaimed Philip and savagely bit his lip.

“Ah, then you know the lady!” said the Baron softly.

"I regret," said Philip formally, "that I have not had the honor of meeting Miss Westfall." But he saw vividly again a girl straight and slender as a silver birch, with firm, wind-bright skin and dark, mocking eyes. There were hemlocks and a dog—and Dick Sherrill had been talkative over billiards the night before.

"Miss Westfall," added Philip guilelessly, "is the owner of the Glade Farm below here in the valley."

"Ah, yes," nodded Tregar. "It is so I have heard." His glance lingered still upon Philip's face in subtle inquiry. Bending its Circean head, Temptation laughed lightly in Philip Poynter's eyes. The girl in the caravan was winding away by dusty roads—out of his life perhaps. And singular as the mission was, its aim was harmless.

"Our lady," said the Baron smoothly, "camps by night. From an aeroplane one may see much—a camp—a curl of smoke—a caravan. Later one may walk and, walking, one may lose his way—to find it again with perfect ease by means of a forest camp fire."

Somehow on the Baron's tongue the escapade became insidious duplicity. Philip flushed, acutely conscious of a significant stirring of his conscience.

"I may fly with Sherrill this afternoon," he said with marked reluctance.

“And at sunset?”

“I may walk,” said Philip, shrugging.

“Permit me,” said the Baron gratefully as he rose, “to thank you. The service is — ah — invaluable.”

Uncomfortably Philip accepted his release and went lightly up the stairs.

“I am a fool,” said Philip. “But surely Walt Whitman must have understood for he said it all in verse. ‘I am to wait, I do not doubt, I am to meet you again,’” quoted Philip under his breath; “‘I am to see to it that I do not lose you!’”