

CHAPTER XI

IN THE CAMP OF THE GYPSY LADY

FROM a garish dream of startling unpleasantness, Philip Poynter stirred and opened his eyes.

“Well, now,” he mused uncomfortably, “this is more like it! This is the sort of dream to have! I wonder I never had sufficient wit to carve out one like this before. Birds and trees and wind fussing pleasantly around a fellow’s bed—and by George! those birds are making coffee!”

There was a cheerful sound of flapping canvas and vanishing glimpses of a woodland shot with sun-gold, of a camp fire and a pair of dogs romping boisterously. Moreover, though his bed was barely an inch from the ground to which it was staked over a couple of poles, it was exceedingly springy and comfortable. Not yet thoroughly awake, Philip put out an exploring hand.

“Flexible willow shoots!” said he drowsily, “and a rush mat! Oberon had nothing on me. Hello!” A dog romped joyfully through the flapping canvas and barked. Philip’s dream boat docked with a painful thud of memory. Wincing painfully he sat up.

“Easy, old top!” he advised ruefully, as



Diane swung lightly up the forest path.

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the dog bounded against him. "It would seem that we're an invalid with an infernal bump on the back of our head and a bandaged shoulder." He peered curiously through the tent flap and whistled softly. "By George, Nero," he added under his breath, "we're in the camp of my beautiful gypsy lady!"

There was a bucket of water by the tent flap. Philip painfully made a meager toilet, glanced doubtfully at the coarse cotton garment which by one of the mystifying events of the previous night had replaced the silk shirt he had worn from Sherrill's, and emerged from the tent.

It was early morning. A fresh fire was crackling merrily about a pot of coffee. Beyond through the trees a river of swollen amber laughed in the morning sunlight under a cloudless sky. The ridge of a distant woodland was deeply golden, the rolling meadow lands of clover beyond the river bright with iridescent dew. But the storm had left its trail of broken rush and grasses and the heavy boughs of the woodland dripped forgotten rain.

A girl presently emerged from the trees by the river and swung lightly up the forest path, her scarlet sweater a vivid patch in the lesser life and color all about her.

"Surely," she exclaimed, meeting Philip's glance with one of frank and very pleasant con-

cern, "surely you must be very weak! Why not stay in bed and let Johnny bring your breakfast to you?"

"Lord, no!" protested Philip, reddening. "I feel ever so much better than I look."

"I'm glad of that," said Diane, smiling. "You lost a lot of blood and bumped your head dreadfully on a jagged rock. Would you mind," her wonderful black eyes met his in a glance of frank inquiry, "would you mind—explaining? There was so much excitement and storm last night that we haven't the slightest notion what happened."

"Neither have I!" exclaimed Philip ruefully. The girl's eyes widened.

"How very singular!" she said.

"It is indeed!" admitted Philip.

"You must be an exceedingly hapless young man!" she commented with serious disapproval. "I imagine your life must be a monotonous round of disaster and excitement!"

"Fortuitously," owned Philip, "it's improving!"

Piqued by his irresistible good humor in adversity, Diane eyed him severely.

"Are you so in the habit of being mysteriously stabbed in the shoulder whenever it storms," she demanded with mild sarcasm, "that you can retain an altogether pernicious good humor?"

Philip's eyes glinted oddly.

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“I’m a mere novice,” he admitted lightly. “If my shoulder didn’t throb so infernally,” he added thoughtfully, “I’d lose all faith in the escapade—it’s so weird and mysterious. A crackle—a lunge—a knife in the dark—and behold! I am here, exceedingly grateful and hungry despite the melodrama.”

To which Diane, raising beautifully arched and wondering eyebrows, did not reply. Philip, furtively marking the firm brown throat above the scarlet sweater, and the vivid gypsy color beneath the laughing dusk of Diane’s eyes, devoutly thanked his lucky star that Fate had seen fit to curb the air of delicate hostility with which she had left him on the Westfall lake. Well, Emerson was right, decided Philip. There is an inevitable law of compensation. Even a knife in the dark has compensations.

“Johnny,” said Diane presently, briskly disinterring some baked potatoes and a baked fish from a cairn of hot stones covered with grass, “is off examining last night’s trail of melodrama. He’s greatly excited. Let me pour you some coffee. I sincerely hope you’re not too fastidious for tin cups?”

“A tin cup,” said Philip with engaging candor, “has always been a secret ambition of mine. I once acquired one at somebody’s spring but—er—circumstances compelled me to relinquish

it. It was really a very nice cup too and very new and shiny. Since then, until now, my life, alas! has been tin-cupless."

Diane carved the smoking fish in ominous silence.

"Do you know," she said at length, "I've felt once or twice that your anecdotes are too apt and —er— sparkling to be overburdened with truth. Your mechanician, for instance —"

Philip laughed and reddened. The mechanician, as a desperate means of prolonging conversation, had served his purpose somewhat disastrously.

"Hum!" said he lamely.

"I shan't forget that mechanician!" said Diane decidedly.

"This now," vowed Philip uncomfortably, "is a *real* fish!"

Diane laughed, a soft clear laugh that to Philip's prejudiced ears had more of music in it than the murmur of the river or the clear, sweet piping of the woodland birds.

"It is," she agreed readily. "Johnny caught him in the river and I cooked him."

"Great Scott!" exclaimed Philip, inspecting the morsel on his wooden plate with altered interest, "you don't—you can't mean it!"

"Why not?" inquired Diane with lifted eyebrows.

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Philip didn't know and said so, but he glanced furtively at the girl by the fire and marveled.

"Well," he said a little later with a sigh of utter content, "this is Arcadia, isn't it!"

"It's a beautiful spot!" nodded Diane happily, glancing at the scarlet tendrils of a wild grapevine flaming vividly in the sunlight among the trees. There was yellow star grass along the forest path, she said absently, and yonder by the stump of a dead tree a patch of star moss woven of myriad emerald shoots; the delicate splashes of purple here and there in the forest carpet were wild geranium.

"There are alders by the river," mused Diane with shining eyes, "and marsh marigolds; over there by a swampy hollow are a million violets, white and purple; and the ridge is thick with mountain laurel. More coffee?"

"Yes," said Philip. "It's delicious. I wonder," he added humbly, "if you'd peel this potato for me. A one cylinder activity is not a conspicuous success."

"I should have remembered your arm," said Diane quickly. "Does it pain much?"

"A little," admitted Philip. "Do you know," he added guilelessly, "this is a spot for singularly vivid dreams. Last night, for instance, exceedingly gentle and skillful hands slit my shirt sleeve with a pair of scissors and bathed my shoulder

with something that stung abominably, and somehow I fancied I was laid up in a hospital and didn't have to fuss in the least, for my earthly affairs were in the hands of a nurse who was very deft and businesslike and beautiful. I could seem to hear her giving orders in a cool, matter-of-fact way, and once I thought there was some slight objection to leaving her alone—and she stamped her foot. Odd, wasn't it?"

"Must have been the doctor," said Diane, rising and adding wood to the fire. "Johnny went into the village for him."

"Hum!" said Philip doubtfully.

"He had very nice hands," went on Diane calmly. "They were very skillful and gentle, as you say. Moreover, he was young and exceedingly good-looking."

"Hum!" said Philip caustically. "With all those beauty points, he must be a dub medically. What stung so?"

"Strong salt brine, piping hot," said the girl discouragingly. "It's a wildwood remedy for washing wounds."

"Didn't the dub carry any conventional antiseptics?"

"You are talking too much!" flashed Diane with sudden color. "The wound is slight, but you bled a lot; and the doctor made particular reference to rest and quiet."

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“Good Lord!” said Philip in deep disgust. “There’s your pretty physician for you! ‘Rest and quiet’ for a knife scratch. Like as not he’ll want me to take a year off to convalesce!”

“He left you another powder to take to-night,” remarked Diane severely. “Moreover, he said you must be very quiet to-day and he’d be in, in the morning, to see you.”

Something jubilant laughed and sang in Philip’s veins. A day in Arcadia lay temptingly at his feet.

“Great Scott,” he protested feebly. “I can’t. I really can’t, you know—”

“You’ll have to,” said Diane with unsmiling composure. “The doctor said so.”

“After all,” mused Philip approvingly, “it’s the young medical fellows who have the finest perceptions. I *do* need rest.”

Off in the checkered shadows of the forest a crow cawed derisively.

“Did you like your shirt?” asked Diane with a distracting hint of raillery under her long, black lashes.

“It’s substantial,” admitted Philip gratefully, “and democratic.”

“You’ve still another,” she said smiling. “Johnny bought them in the village.”

“Johnny,” said Philip gratefully, “is a trump.”

Diane filled a kettle from a pail of water by the tree and smiled.

"There's a hammock over there by the tent," she said pleasantly. "Johnny strung it up this morning. The trees are drying nicely and presently I'm going to wander about the forest with a field glass and a notebook and you can take a nap."

Philip demurred. Finding his assistance inexorably refused, however, he repaired to the hammock and watched the camp of his lady grow neat and trim again.

On the bright embers of the camp fire, the kettle hummed.

"There now," said Philip suddenly, mindful of the hot, stinging wound-wash, "that is the noise I heard last night just after you stamped your foot and *before* the doctor came."

"Nonsense!" said Diane briskly. "Your head's full of fanciful notions. A bump like that on the back of your head is bound to tamper some with your common sense." And humming lightly she scalded the coffeepot and tin cups and set them in the sun to dry. Philip's glance followed her, a winsome gypsy, brown and happy, to the green and white van, whence she presently appeared with a field glass and a notebook.

"Of course," she began, halting suddenly with heightened color, "it doesn't matter in the least

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—but it does facilitate conversation at times to know the name of one's guest—no matter how accidental and mysterious he may be.”

“Philip!” he responded gravely but with laughing eyes. “It's really very easy to remember.” Diane stamped her foot.

“I *do* think,” she flashed indignantly, “that you are the most trying young man I've ever met.”

“I'm trying of course—” explained Philip, “trying to tell you my name. I greatly regret,” he went on deferentially, “that there are a number of exceptional circumstances which have resulted in the brief and simple—Philip. For one thing, a bump which muddles a man's common sense is very likely to muddle his memory. And so, for the life of me, I can't seem to conjure up a desirable form of address from you to me except Philip. And Philip,” he added humbly, “isn't really such a bad sort of name after all.”

There was the whir and flash of a bird's wing in the forest the color of Diane's cheek. An instant later the single vivid spot of crimson in Philip's line of vision was the back of his lady's sweater.