

CHAPTER XII

A BULLET IN ARCADIA

“IT’S time you were in bed,” said Diane. “Johnny’s out staring at the moon and that’s the final chore of the evening. Besides, it’s nine o’clock.”

“I shan’t go to bed,” Philip protested. “Johnny spread this tarpaulin by the fire expressly for me to recline here and think and smoke and b’jinks! I’m going to! After buying me two shirts yesterday and tobacco to-day—to say nothing of bringing home an unknown chicken for invalid stew, I can’t with decency offend him.”

“I can’t see why he’s taken such a tremendous shine to you!” complained Diane mockingly.

“Nor I!” agreed Philip, knocking the ashes from his pipe.

“You’ve been filling his pockets with money!” accused Diane indignantly. “It’s the only explanation of the demented way he trots around after you.”

“Disposition, beauty, singular grace and common sense all pale in the face of the ulterior motive,” Philip modestly told his pipe. “What

a moon!" he added softly. "Great guns, what a moon!"

Beyond, through the dark of the trees, softly silvered by the moon above the ridge, glimmered the river, winding along by peaceful forest and meadows edged with grass and mint. There was moon-bright dew upon the clover and high upon the ridge a tree showed dark and full against the moon in lonely silhouette. It was an enchanted wood of moonlit depth and noisy quiet, of shrilling crickets, the plaintive cries of tree frogs, the drowsy crackle of the camp fire, or the lap of water by the shore, with sometimes the lonely hoot of an owl.

"A while back," mused Diane innocently, "there was a shooting star above the ridge—"

"Yes?" said Philip puffing comfortably at his pipe.

"I meant to call your attention to it but 'Hey!' and 'Look!' were dreadfully abrupt."

"There is always—'Philip!'" insinuated that young man. Diane bit her lip and relapsed into silence.

"You didn't tell me," said Philip presently, "whether or not you found any more flowers this morning."

"Only heaps of wild blackberry," Diane replied briefly. "But the trees were quite as devoid of new birds as Johnny's detective trip of clues."

"Too bad!" sympathized Philip. "I'll go with you in the morning."

"The bump on your head," suggested Diane pointedly, "is growing malignant!"

"By no means!" said Philip lazily. "With the exception of certain memory erasures, it's steadily improving."

"Why," demanded Diane with an unexpected and somewhat resentful flash of reminiscence, "why did you tell me your motor was deaf and dumb and insane when it wasn't?"

"I didn't," said Philip honestly. "If you'll recall our conversation, you'll find I worded that very adroitly."

Thoroughly vexed Diane frowned at the fire.

"Was it necessary to affect callow inexperience and such a happy-go-lucky, imbecile philosophy?" she demanded cuttingly.

"Hum!" admitted Philip humbly. "I'm a salamander."

"And you said you were waiting to be rescued!" she accused indignantly.

Philip sighed.

"Well, in a sense I was. I saw you coming through the trees—and there are times when one must talk." He met her level glance of reproach with one of frank apology. "If I see a man whose face I like, I speak to him. Surely Nature

does not flash that subtle sense of magnetism for nothing. If I am to live fully, then must I infuse into my insular existence the electric spark of sympathetic friendship. Why impoverish my existence by a lost opportunity? If I had not alighted that day upon the lake and waited for you to come through the trees —” he fell suddenly quiet, knocking the ashes from his pipe upon the ground beside him.

“The moon is climbing,” said Diane irrelevantly, “and Johnny is waiting to bandage your shoulder.”

“Let him wait,” returned Philip imperturbably. “And no matter what I do the moon will go on climbing.” He lazily pointed the stem of his pipe at a firelit tree. “What glints so oddly there,” he wondered, “when the fire leaps?”

“It’s the bullet,” replied Diane absently and bit her lip with a quick flush of annoyance.

“What bullet?” said Philip with instant interest. “It’s odd I hadn’t noticed it before.”

“Some one shot in the forest last night while Johnny was off chasing your assailant. Likely the second man he saw cranking the car. It struck the tree. Johnny and I made a compact not to speak of it and I forgot. My aunt is fussy.”

“Where were you?” demanded Philip abruptly.

“By the tree. It—it grazed my hair—”

Philip’s face grew suddenly as changeless as the white moonlight in the forest.

“Accidental knives and bullets in Arcadia!” said he at length. “It jars a bit.”

“I do hope,” said Diane with definite disapproval, “that you’re not going to fuss. I didn’t. I was frightened of course, for at first I thought it had been aimed straight at me—and I was quite alone—but startling things do happen now and then, and if you can’t explain them, you might as well forget them. I hope I may count on your silence. If my aunt gets wind of it, she’ll conjure up a trail of accidental shots to follow me from here to Florida and every time it storms, she’ll like as not hear ghost-bullets. She’s like that.”

“Florida!” ejaculated Philip—and stared.

“To be sure!” said Diane. “Why not? Must I alter my plans for somebody’s stray bullet?”

Philip frowned uneasily. The instinctive protest germinating irresistibly in his mind was too vague and formless for utterance.

“I beg your pardon,” he stammered. “But I fancied you were merely camping around among the hills for the summer.”

The girl rose and moved off toward the van looming ghostlike through the trees.

"Good night — *Philip!*" she called lightly, her voice instinct with delicate irony.

Philip stirred. His voice was very gentle.

"Thank you!" he said simply.

Diane hastily climbed the steps at the rear of the van and disappeared.

"I hate men," thought Diane with burning cheeks as she seated herself upon the cot by the window and loosened the shining mass of her straight black hair, "who ramble flippantly through a conversation and turn suddenly serious when one least expects it."

By the fire, burning lower as the moon climbed higher, Philip lay very quiet. Somehow the moonlit stillness of the forest had altered indefinitely. Its depth and shadows jarred. Fair as it was, it had harbored things sinister and evil. And who might say — there was peace of course in the moon-silver rug of pine among the trees, in the gossamer cobweb there among the bushes jeweled lightly in dew, in the faint, sweet chirp of a drowsy bird above his head — but the moon-ray which lingered in the heart of the wild geranium would presently cascade through the trees to light the horrible thing of lead which had menaced the life of his lady.

Well, one more pipe and he would go to bed. Johnny must be tired of waiting. Philip slipped his hand into his pocket and whistled.

“So,” said he softly, “the hieroglyphic cuff is gone! It’s the first I’d missed it.”

“Like as not it dropped out of my pocket when I fell last night,” he reflected a little later. “I’d better go to bed. I’m beginning to fuss.”