

CHAPTER XIII

A WOODLAND GUEST

THERE was gray beyond the flap of Philip's tent, a velvet stillness rife with the melody of twittering birds. Already the camp fire was crackling. Philip rose and dressed.

Beyond, through the ghostly trees where the river glimmered in the gray dawn with a pearly iridescence, a girl was fishing. There were deeper shadows in the hollows but the sky behind the wooded ridge to the east was softly opaline. As the river grew pink, mists rose and curled upward and presently the glaring searchlight of the sun streamed brilliantly across the river and the forest, flinging a banner of shadow tracery over the wakening world.

The girl by the river caught a fish, deftly strung it on a willow shoot beside some others and bathed her hands in the river. Turning she smiled and waved. Philip went to meet her.

"Let me take your fish," he offered.

"Your arm—" began Diane.

"Pshaw!" insisted Philip. "It's ever so much better. I can even use my hand."

To prove it, Philip presently armed himself with a fork and developed considerable helpful

interest in a pan of fish. Whereupon a general atmosphere of industry settled over the camp. Rex and Nero acrobatically locked forepaws and rolled over and over in a clownish excess of congeniality. Johnny trotted busily about feeding the horses. Diane made the coffee, arousing the frank and guileless interest of Mr. Poynter.

The fish began to sizzle violently. Considerably aggrieved by a variety of unexpected developments in the pan, Philip harpooned the smoking segments with indignant vim, burned his fingers, made reckless use of the wounded arm and regretfully resigned the task to Johnny who furtively bestowed certain hot sable portions of the rescued fish upon the dogs, thereby arousing a snarling commotion of intense surprise.

"That's a wonderful bed of mine," commented Philip at breakfast. "Tell me where in the world did you get your camp equipment?"

"I made the bed myself," said Diane happily, "of red willow shoots from the swamp, and I carved these forks and spoons out of wood Johnny gathered."

"I do wish I were clever!" grumbled Philip in acute discontent. "After breakfast I'm going to whittle out a wildwood pipe and make a birch canoe, and likely I'll weave a rush mat and a willow bed and carve some spoons and forks and a sundial."

"Will you be through by noon?" asked Diane politely.

Philip laughed.

"As a matter of fact," he said easily, "I'm going with you to lamp birds. I want to duck that fool doctor."

"You'll do nothing of the sort," said Diane with decision, "for I'm going to stay in camp and bake bread."

The bread was baking odorously and a variety of shavings flying ambitiously from an embryo pipe by ten o'clock. At noon the doctor had not yet arrived. Philip dexterously served a savory fish chowder from a pot hanging within a tripod of saplings and refused to dwell upon the thought of his eventual departure.

A man appeared among the trees to the east, switching absently at the underbrush with a cane.

Philip sniffed.

"I thought so," he nodded. "That medical dub carries a cane on his professional rounds! Like as not he wears a flowing tie, a monocle and pink socks."

The man approached and raised his hat, smiling urbanely. It was Baron Tregar.

Philip leaped to his feet, reddening.

"Excellency!" he stammered.

"Pray be seated!" exclaimed the Baron with sympathy. "Such a disturbing experience as you have had affords one privileges."

"Permit me," said Philip uncomfortably to Diane, "to present my chief, Baron Tregar. Excellency, Miss Westfall, to whom I am eternally indebted." And Philip's eyes sparkled with laughter as he uttered her name.

There was an old world courtliness in the Baron's bow and murmured salutation.

"Ah," said he with gallant regret, "Fate, Miss Westfall, has never seen fit to temper misfortune so pleasantly for me. Poynter, you have been exceedingly fortunate."

Diane laughed softly. It was hers to triumph now.

"*Mr. Poynter*," she said with relish, flashing a sidelong glance at that discomfited young man, "Mr. Poynter has been good enough to make the chowder. It would gratify me exceedingly, Baron Tregar, to have you test it."

Heartily anathematizing his chief, who was gratefully expressing his interest in chowder, Mr. Poynter stared perversely at his cuff.

"I wonder," he reflected uneasily, "just what he wants and how in thunder he knew!"

The Baron, gracefully adapting himself to woodland exigencies, supplied the answer.

"Dr. Wingate," he boomed, "is at the Sheril farm. Themar officiously fancied he could fly and had a most distressing fall yesterday from the smaller biplane." His deep, compelling

eyes lingered upon Philip's face. "Dr. Wingate spoke some of an unlucky young man marooned in a forest with a knife wound in his shoulder—described him—and behold!—my missing secretary is found after considerable bewilderment and uneasiness on my part. Wingate will stop here later."

Philip civilly expressed regret that he had not thought to dispatch Johnny to the Sherrill farm with a message.

"It is nothing!" shrugged Tregar smoothly. "One forgets under less mitigating causes." And, having begged the details of Philip's adventure, he listened with careful attention.

"It is exceedingly mysterious," he rumbled, after a frowning interval of thought. "But surely one must feel much gratitude to you, Miss Westfall. A night in the storm without attention and we have complications."

Over his coffee, which he sipped clear with the appreciation of an epicure, the Baron, in his suave, inscrutable way, grew reminiscent. He talked well, selecting, discarding, weighing his words with the fastidious precision of a jeweler setting precious stones. Subtly the talk drifted to Houdania.

There was a mad king—Rodobald—upon the throne. Doubtless the Baron's hostess had heard? No? Ah! So must the baffling twist

of a man's brain complicate the destiny of a kingdom. And Rodobald was hale at sixty-five and mad as the hare of March. There had been much talk of it. Singular, was it not?

Followed a sparkling anecdote or so of court life and shrugging reference to the jealous principality of Galituria that lay beyond in the valley. To Galiturians the madness of King Rodobald was an exquisite jest.

Philip grew restless.

"Confound him!" he mused resentfully. "One would think I had deliberately contrived to linger here merely to give him a graceful opportunity to accomplish his infernal errand himself. Thank Heaven this lets me out!" He glanced furtively at Diane. The girl's interest was wholesomely without constraint.

"Great guns!" decided Philip fretfully. "I doubt if she's ever heard of his toy kingdom before and yet he's probing her interest with every atom of skill he can command." Puzzled and annoyed he fell quiet.

"It is somewhat inaccessible—my country," Tregar was saying smoothly. "One climbs the shaggy mountain by a winding road. You have climbed it perhaps—touring?"

"Excellency, no!" regretted Diane. "I fear it is quite unknown to me."

"Ah!" exclaimed the patriotic Baron, "that

is indeed unfortunate. For it is well worth a visit." He turned to Philip. "You are pale and quiet, Poynter," he added kindly. "A day or so more perhaps here where it is quiet —"

Philip flushed hotly.

"Excellency!" he protested feebly.

The Baron bowed courteously to Diane.

"If I may crave still further hospitality and indulgence," he begged regretfully. "There is already much excitement at the Sherrill place owing to the officious act of my man, Themar, and his accident. Another invalid — my secretary — one flounders in a dragnet of unfortunate circumstances. And I am sensitive in the disturbance of my host's guests —"

Diane's eyes as they rested upon Philip were very kind.

"Excellency," she said warmly, "Mr. Poynter's tent lies there among the trees. I trust he will not hesitate to use it until he is strong again. Fortunately we are equipped for emergency."

The Baron bowed gratefully.

"You are a young woman of exceeding common sense!" he said with deep respect.

Philip was very grateful that the Baron had not misunderstood; a breath might shatter the idyllic crystal into atoms.

Later, when the Baron had departed, Philip flushed suddenly at the ugly suspicion rising

wraithlike in his mind. He was accustomed to the Baron's subtleties.

"Mr. Poynter!" called Diane.

Mr. Poynter perversely went on whittling out the hollow of his wildwood pipe.

"Mr. Poynter!"

The bowl, already sufficient for a Titan's smoke, grew a trifle larger and somewhat irregular. Carving had conceivably injured Mr. Poynter's hearing, for he kept on whistling.

"Philip!" said Diane and stamped her foot.

"Yes?" replied Philip respectfully, and instantly discarded the Titan's pipe to listen.

"Why are you so quiet?" flashed Diane.

"Well, for one thing," explained Philip cheerfully, "I'm mighty busy and for another, I'm thinking."

"Do you withdraw into a sound-proof shell when you think?"

"Mr. Poynter does!" regretted Philip. "I do not."

"I do hope," said the girl demurely, "that you'll be able to hear when the doctor gets here. He's coming through the trees."