

CHAPTER XIV

BY THE BACKWATER POOL

THE sun had set with a primrose glory of reflection upon the river and the ridge. Over there in the west now there was a pale after-glow of marigold. It streamed across the dark, still waters of the backwater pool by the river and faintly edged the drowsy petals of white and yellow lilies. Already distant outline and perspective were hazy, there was purple in the forest, and birds were winging swiftly to the woods.

By the pool with a great mass of dripping lilies at his side to carry back to camp, Philip stared frowningly at the tangled float of foliage at his feet. Somehow that ugly flash of suspicion had persisted. Why had the Baron wished him to stay in the camp of Diane? . . . What was the portent of his peculiar interest anyway?

Philip sighed.

“Do you know, Nero,” he confided suddenly, patting the dog’s shaggy head, “my life is developing certain elements of intrigue and mystery exceedingly offensive to my spread-eagle tastes. There’s a knife and a bullet now, Johnny’s two men and the auto, and a cuff and a most mysterious link between our lady and the Baron. I’ll

be hanged if I like any of it. And why in thunder did Themar crib an aeroplane and bump his fool head?" He fell suddenly thoughtful.

"As for you, old top," he added presently, "you ought to go home. Dick will be fussing."

Nero waggled ambiguously. Philip nodded.

"Right, old man," he admitted with sudden gravity. "I can always depend upon you to set me right. It's nothing like so essential for you to go as it is for me. You did right to mention it. I ought to dig out—all the more because the Baron wants me to stay—but I've been thinking a bit this afternoon and unusual problems demand unusual solutions. You'll grant that?" Nero politely routed an excursive bug from his path and lay down to listen.

"Mr. Poynter!" called a voice from the darkling trees behind him.

Mr. Poynter smiled and fell deliberately to filling the bowl of his wildwood pipe. Gnarled and twisted and marvelously eccentric was this wildwood pipe and therefore an object of undoubted interest. The bowl had somehow eluded Philip's desperate effort to keep it of reasonable dimensions and required a Gargantuan supply of tobacco.

"Mr. Poynter!"

"My Lord!" murmured Philip, staring ruefully into the pipe-bowl, "the infernal thing is

bottomless! Exit another can of tobacco. I'll have to ask Johnny to buy me a barrel." And Philip flung the empty can into the pool whence a frog leaped with a frightened croak.

"Philip!"

"Mademoiselle!" said Philip pleasantly.

Darkly lovely, Diane's eyes met his with a glance of indignant reproach. Somehow her lips were like a scarlet wound in the gypsy brown skin and her cheeks were hot with color.

"A wildwood elf of scarlet and brown!" thought Philip and hospitably flicked away a twig or so with his handkerchief that she might sit down.

"There's water plantain over there in the bog," he said lazily, "and swamp honeysuckle. And see," he turned out his pockets, "swamp apples. Queer, aren't they? Johnny says they're good to eat. The honeysuckle was full of them."

Diane bit daintily into the peculiar juicy pulp.

"A man of your pernicious good humor," she said greatly provoked, "is a menace to civilization. You sap all the wholesome fire of one's most cherished resentment."

"I know," admitted Philip humbly. "I'll be hanged yet."

"I can't see what in the world you find so absorbing over here," she commented with marked disapproval. "All the while I was getting supper

I watched you. And you merely smoked and flipped pebbles in the pool and kept supper waiting."

"You're wrong there," said Philip. "I've been thinking, too."

"I'd like to know just why you've been thinking so deeply!"

"Honest Injun?"

"Honest Injun!"

"Well," said Philip slowly, "I've been reviewing the possible mishaps incident to a caravan trip to Florida."

"Mishaps!" Diane studied him in frank displeasure. "Are you a fussy pessimist?"

"By no means. Merely—prudent." Philip's eyes narrowed thoughtfully and he fell silent.

The iris shadows beyond the river deepened. A firefly or so flickered brightly above the fields of clover. In the soft clear twilight, fragrant with the smell of clover and water lily and rimmed now by the rising moon, Philip found his resolution of the afternoon difficult to utter. The pool at his feet was a motionless mirror of summer stars. Surely there could be nothing but peace in this tranquil world of tree and grass and murmuring river. And yet—

"Do take that ridiculous pipe out of your mouth and say something!" exclaimed Diane restlessly. "You look as if you were smoking a

pumpkin! Besides, the supper's all packed up in hot stones and grass to keep it hot. Why moon so and shoot pebbles at the frogs?"

"Well," said Philip abruptly, "do you mind if I say that your trip seems a most imprudent venture?"

"By no means!" replied Diane with maddening composure. "But it's only fair to warn you that my aunt's already said all there is to say on the subject. The horses may drop dead," she reviewed swiftly on her slim brown fingers, "Johnny may fall heir to an apoplectic fit and fall on a horse thereby inducing him to run away into a swamp and sink in quicksand. I may be kidnapped and held for ransom in the wilds of Connecticut and the van may burn up some night when I'm asleep in it. Then I may eat poison berries in a fit of absent-mindedness, I may fall into a river while I'm fishing, forget how to swim, and drown, Johnny may gather amanitas and kill us both, and something or other may bite me. There are one or two other little things like forest fires, floods and brigands —"

"Help!" murmured Philip.

"Can you add anything to that?" demanded Diane politely.

Philip laughed. Diane, delicately sarcastic, was irresistible.

"There is the bullet —" he reminded gravely.

"*Please!*" begged Diane faintly.

Philip flushed with a sense of guilt.

"Well," he owned, "I have bothered you a lot about it, that's a fact! But it sticks so in my mind. There's something else—"

"Yes?" said Diane discouragingly.

"Didn't you tell me yesterday that you'd had a feeling some one had been spying on your camp?"

"Yes," said Diane in serious disapproval. "I did. I get seizures of confidential lunacy once in a while. Are you going to fuss about that?"

"No," said Philip gently. "But the knife and the bullet and that have made me wonder—a lot. After all," he regretted sincerely, "my notions are very vague and formless, but I feel so strongly about them that—urging my friendship for Carl as my sole excuse for unmasked advice to his cousin—"

"Yes?"

Philip laid aside his pipe with a sigh. The crisp music of his lady's voice was not encouraging.

"I do hope you'll forgive me," he said quietly, "but I'm going to urge you to abandon your trip to Florida!"

"Mr. Poynter!" flashed Diane indignantly. "The bump on your head has had a relapse. Better let Johnny go for the doctor again."

"I know I'm infernally presumptuous," acknowledged Philip flushing, "but I'm terribly in earnest."

Diane's eyes, wide, black, rebuking, scanned his troubled face askance.

"I ought to be exceedingly angry," she said slowly, "and if it wasn't for the bump, like as not I would be—but I'm not."

"I'm truly grateful," said Philip with a sigh of relief. And added to himself, "Philip, old top, you're in for it."

"Why," exclaimed Diane, "I've never been so happy in my life as I have been here by this beautiful river!"

"Nor I!" said Philip truthfully.

Diane did not hear.

"Every wild thing calls," she went on impetuously. "It always has. Fish—bird—wild flower—the smell of clover—the hum of bees—I can't pretend to tell you what they all mean to me. Even as a youngster I frightened my aunt half to death by running away to sleep in the forest. I'm sorry I'll ever have to go back to civilization!"

"And yet," insisted Philip inexorably, "to me it seems that you should go back—to-morrow!"

"I do seem to feel a stir of temper!" said Diane reflectively. "Maybe I'd better go back

and look at supper. You can come after you're through pelting that frog."

"There's still another reason," said Philip humbly, "which I can't tell you. Indeed, I ought not mention it. I can only beg you to take it on trust and believe that it's another forcible argument against your trip. Somehow, everything in my mind weaves into a gigantic warning. So disturbing is the notion," added Philip unquietly, "that —"

"Yes?" queried Diane politely.

"That after much thought, I have decided to stay here in camp until you abandon your nomadic scheme and break camp for home. There'll come a time, I'm sure, when you'll think as I do to get rid of me."

Diane rose with suspicious mildness.

"I'm hungry," she said, "and Johnny's yodeling."

"Well," said Philip provokingly, "I don't believe I want any supper after all. The atmosphere's too chilly."