

CHAPTER XVI

THE YOUNG MAN OF THE SEA

DIANE was to learn that the infernal persistence of the Old Man of the Sea of Arabian origin could find its match in youth. A week slipped by. Philip wove an unsatisfactory mat of sedge upon a loom of cord and stakes, whittled himself a knife and fork and spoon which he initialed gorgeously with the dye of a boiled alder, invented a camp rake of forked branches, made a broom of twigs, and sunk a candle in the floor of his tent which he covered with a bottomless milk bottle. All in all, he told Nero, he was evolving rapidly into an excellent woodsman, despite the peculiar appearance of the sedge mat.

When Diane was honestly indignant, Philip was quiet and industrious, and accomplished a great deal with his knife and bits of wood. When, finding his cheerful good humor irresistible, she was forced to fly the flag of truce, he was profoundly grateful.

“When do you think you’ll go?” demanded Diane pointedly one morning as she deftly swung her line into the river. “Unless you contrive to get stabbed again,” she added doubtfully, “I really don’t see what’s keeping you.”

"When I may help you break camp and escort you back to your aunt," replied Philip pleasantly, "I'll pack up my two shirts and my wildwood pipe and depart, exceedingly grateful for my stay in Arcadia."

Diane bit her lip and frowned.

"Suppose," she flashed, with angry scarlet in her cheeks, "suppose I break camp and leave you behind!"

"I'll go with you," shrugged Philip. "Don't you remember? I told you so before. And I'll sit on the rear steps of the van all the way to Florida and play a tin whistle."

Appalled by the thought of the spectacular vagaries which this Young Man of the Sea might develop if she took to the road, Diane said nothing.

"No matter how I view you," she indignantly exclaimed a little later, "you're a problem."

"Settle the problem," advised Philip. "It's simple enough."

"He'll go presently," she told herself resentfully. "He'll have to."

"How it amuses these fish to watch me murder worms!" exclaimed Philip in deep disgust. "Look at the audience over there! I attract 'em and you get 'em! Miss Westfall, are you a slave driver?"

"What do you mean?" asked Diane cautiously.

Philip's most innocent beginnings frequently led into argumentative morasses for his opponent.

"Does Johnny have complete freedom in your camp?"

"Certainly!" exclaimed Diane warmly. "Johnny is old and faithful. He may do as he pleases."

Philip changed an anæmic worm of considerable transparency for one of more interest to his river audience and smiled.

"Johnny," said he cheerfully, "has been good enough to invite me to stay in camp with him indefinitely. I'm his guest, in fact, until you go home. I imagine that as Johnny's guest I ought to enjoy immunity from sarcastic shafts, but I may be mistaken. I've washed and drained most of these worms. Will you lend me an inch or so of that stout invertebrate climbing out of the can by you?"

Thoroughly out of patience, Diane reeled in her line and returned to camp, whence she presently heard Philip blithely whistling a fisherman's hornpipe and urging Nero to retrieve certain sticks he had thrown into the river. A little later he caught a sunfish and swung into camp with such a smile of irresistible pride and good humor on his sun-browned face, that Diane laughed in spite of herself.

"How ridiculous it is!" she mused uncomfort-

ably. "Here I may not depart for fear a happy-go-lucky young man will play a tin whistle on the steps of the van, and I *will* not go home. What in the world am I to do with him? Are you an orphan?" she asked with guileful curiosity.

"No," said Philip.

"I'm sorry," said Diane maliciously. "For then I could take out papers of adoption—"

"I'll stay without them," promised Philip. And Diane added wood to the fire with cheeks like the scarlet sunset.

"I'm going to send for my aunt," she announced a few days later.

"Yes?" said Philip.

"Unconventionality of any sort shocks her dreadfully. Like as not she'll faint dead away at the sight of you domiciled in my camp as if you own it. She'll see that you go."

"Better not," advised Philip.

"Why?"

"I'll produce credentials proving I'm a reputable victim of circumstances. I'll suggest that in complete concurrence with her I deem it unsafe for a young and attractive girl to tour about the country—and that I do not feel that I can conscientiously depart. Between the two of us you'll likely have a most uncomfortable hour or so."

Aunt Agatha was impressionable. It needed

but a spark of concurrence to arouse her dreadfully. Diane dismissed the project.

"I think," she said hopefully, "that you'll most likely go to-night."

"In any circumstances," said Philip easily, "I fear that would be impossible. Johnny's behind with the laundry and I haven't a collarable shirt." Whereupon he whistled for Nero and set off amiably through the woods to gather an inaccessible flower he knew his lady would prize.

By nine that night Diane was asleep in the van. Philip, with whom she had indignantly crossed swords a little earlier, lay thoughtfully by the fire watching the snowy curtains of the van windows billowing lazily in the warm night wind. He felt restless and perturbed and presently sought his tent, where he lit the bottled candle to look for the predecessor of his insatiable wildwood pipe, but halted suddenly with a peculiar whistle.

The silk shirt he had worn from Sherrill's lay conspicuously upon the bed, washed and ironed and beautifully mended up the slashed sleeve and along the shoulder. As a laundress of parts, Johnny was a jewel, but he could not mend!

Now oddly enough as Mr. Poynter stared at the shirt upon the bed, his appearance was that of a young man decidedly out of sorts. Presently with an ominous glint of temper in his fine eyes, he noiselessly rearranged his tent, viciously

donned the offending shirt, whistled for Nero and leaving the camp of his lady as unexpectedly as he had entered it, set out for Sherrill's.

Even the most equable of tempers, it would seem, may now and then prove crotchety.

And who may say? Mr. Poynter was a young man of infinite resource. And there were other ways.