

CHAPTER XVIII

NOMADS

“**J**OHNNY!” said Diane in crisp, distinct tones, “Mr. Poynter has slept long enough. You’d better call him.”

Now it is a regrettable fact that ordinarily this attack would have provoked a reply of mild impudence from Mr. Poynter’s tent, but this morning a surprising silence lay behind the flapping canvas. Diane began to hum. When presently investigation proved that Mr. Poynter’s tent was in exemplary order—that Mr. Poynter and his mended shirt were missing—she went on humming—but to Johnny’s amazement, burned her fingers on the coffeepot; sharply reproved Johnny for staring, and then curtly suggested that he prepare to break camp that morning, as it was high time they were on the road.

“As for Mr. Philip Poynter,” reflected Diane with delicate disdain, as she bent over the fire and rolled some baked potatoes away with a stick, “what can one expect? Men are exceedingly peculiar and inconsistent and impudent. I haven’t the ghost of a doubt that he found that ridiculous shirt and went off in a huff. And I’m very glad he did—very glad indeed. I meant he should,

though I didn't suppose with his unconscionable nerve it would bother him in the least. If a man's sufficiently erratic to blow a tin whistle all the way to Florida — as Philip certainly is — and maroon himself on somebody else's lake for fear he'd miss an acquaintance, he'd very likely fly into a rage when one least expected it and go tramping off in the night. I do dislike people who fall into huffs about nothing."

Diane burned her fingers again, felt that the fire was unnecessarily hot upon her face, and indignantly resigning the preparation of breakfast to Johnny, went fishing.

"He should have gone long ago," mused Diane, flinging her line with considerable force into the river. "It's a great mercy as it is that Aunt Agatha didn't appear and weep all over the camp about him. I'm sorry I mended the shirt. Not but that I was fortunate to find something that would make him go, but a shirt's such a childish thing to fuss about. And, anyway, I preferred him to leave in a friendly, conventional sort of way!"

There are times, alas, when even fish are perverse! Thoroughly out of patience, Diane presently unjointed her rod, emptied the can of worms upon the bank, and returned to camp, where she found Johnny industriously piling up a heap of litter.

“What are you going to do with these?” demanded Diane, indicating an eccentric woodland broom and a rake of forked twigs and twine. “Throw them out?”

Johnny nodded.

“Well, I guess you’re not!” sniffed Diane indignantly. “They’re mighty convenient. That rake is really clever.”

Johnny’s round eyes showed his astonishment. He had heard his perverse young mistress malign these inventions of Philip’s most cruelly.

Then what a woodland commotion arose after breakfast! What a cautious stamping out of fire and razing of tents! What a startled flutter of birds above and bugs below! What an excited barking on the part of Rex, who after loafing industriously for a week or so, felt called upon to sprint about and assist his mistress with a dirt-brown nose! What a trampling of horses and a creaking of wheels as the great green wagon wound slowly through the shadowy forest road and took to the open highway with Rex at his mistress’s feet haughtily inspecting the wayside.

And what a wayside, to be sure! Past fields of young rye from which a lazy silver smoke seemed to rise and follow the wind-billowing grain; past fields of dark red clover rife with the whir and clatter of mowing machines as the

farmers felled the velvety stalks for clover hay; past snug white farmhouses where perfumed peonies drooped sleepily over brick walks; on over a rustic bridge, skirting now a tiny village whose church spire loomed above the trees; now following a road which lay rough and deeply rutted, among golden fields of buttercups fringed with bunch grass.

Farmers waved and called; housewives looked and disapproved; children stared and jealous canines pettishly barked at the haughty Rex; but Johnny only chuckled and cracked his whip. Day by day the green and white caravan rumbled serenely on, camping by night in field and forest.

A country world of peace and sunshine—of droning bees and the nameless fragrance of summer fields it was! And the struggling nomads of the dusty road! Diane felt a kindred thrill of interest in each one of them. Now a Syrian peddler woman, squat and swarthy, bending heavily beneath her pack amid a flurry of dust from the sun-baked roads her feet had wearily padded for days; now a sleepy negro on a load of hay, an organ grinder with a chattering monkey or a clumsy bear, another sleepy negro with another load of hay, and a picturesque minstrel with an elaborate musical contrivance drawn by a horse. Now a capering Italian with a bagpipe, who danced grotesquely to his own piping, and piped

the pennies out of rural pockets as if they had been so many copper rats from Hamelin!

Peddlers and tramps and agents, country drummers and country circuses, medicine men who shouted the versatile merits of corn salve by the light of flaring torches, eccentric orators of eccentric theology, tent-shows of "Uncle Tom's Cabin," with real bloodhounds and unreal painted ice, gypsies who were always expected to steal some one's children and never did, peddlers with creaking, clinking wagons, hucksters and motorcyclists, motorists and dusty hikers—one by one in the days to come Diane was to meet them all and learn that the nomads of the summer road were a happy-go-lucky guild of peculiar and coöperative good humor.

But the girl herself was a truer nomad than many to whom with warm friendliness she nodded and spoke.

Late one afternoon Diane espied a woodland brook. Shot with gold and shadow, it laughed along, under a waving canopy of green, freckled with cool, clean pebbles and hiding roguishly now and then beneath a trailing branch. A brook was a luxury. It was mirror and spring and lullaby in one.

By six the tents of the nomad were pitched by the forest brook and the nomad herself was

smoothing back her ruffled hair over a crystalline mirror.

A drowsy negro on a load of hay drove by on the road beyond.

Diane studied him with critical interest.

"Johnny," she said, "just why are there so many drowsy negroes about driving loads of hay? Or is that the same one? And if it is, where under Heaven has he been driving that hay for the last three days?"

Johnny didn't know. Wherefore he pursed his lips and shook his head.

The hay wagon turned off into the forest on the farther side of the road and halted. The drowsy negro leisurely alighted and shuffled through the trees until he stood before Diane with a square of birch bark in his hand. Greatly astonished—for this negro was apparently too lazy to talk when he deemed it unnecessary—Diane took the birch bark and inspected it in mystification. A most amazing message was duly inscribed thereon.

"Erastus has acquired a sinewy chicken from somebody's barn yard," it read. "Why not bring your own plate, knife, fork, spoon and a good saw over to my hay-camp and dine with me?"

"Philip."

Diane stared with rising color at the load of hay. From its ragged, fragrant bed, a tall, lean

young man with a burned skin, was rising and lazily urging a nondescript yellow dog to do the same. The dog conceivably demurred, for Philip removed him, yelping, by the simple process of seizing him by the loose skin at the back of his neck and dropping him overboard. Having brushed his clothes, the young man came, with smiling composure, through the forest, the yellow dog wagging at his heels.

"I've read so much about breaking the news gently," apologized Philip, smiling, "that I thought I'd better try a bit of it myself. Hence the sylvan note. Ras, if you go to sleep by that tree, I'll like as not let you sleep there until you die. Go back to camp and build a fire and hollow out the feathered biped."

Ras slouched obediently off toward the hay-camp.

"You've hay in your ears!" exclaimed Diane, biting her lips.

"I'm a nomad!" announced Philip calmly. "So's Erastus—so's Dick Whittington here. I'm likely to have hay in my ears for months to come. Dick Whittington," explained Philip, patting the dog, "is a mustard-colored orphan I picked up a couple of days ago. He'd made a vow to gyrate steadily in a whirlwind of dust after a hermit flea who lived on the end of his tail, until somebody adopted him and—er—cut off the

grasping hermit. I fell for him, but, like Ras, a sleep bug seems to have bitten him."

"Most likely he unwinds in his sleep," suggested Diane politely. And added acidly, "Where are you going?"

"Florida!" said Philip amiably.

The girl stared at him with dark, accusing eyes.

"The trip is really no safer now," reminded Philip steadily, "than it was when I left camp."

"In a huff!" flashed Diane disparagingly.

"In a huff," admitted Philip and dismissed the dangerous topic with a philosophic shrug.

"I won't have you trailing after me on a hay-wagon!" exclaimed Diane in honest indignation.

"Hum! Just how," begged Philip, "does one go about effecting a national ordinance to keep hay-carts off the highway?"

As Philip betokened an immediate desire to name over certain rights with which he was vested as a citizen of the United States, Diane was more than willing to change the subject. Persistence was the keynote of Mr. Poynter's existence.

"Johnny," begged Philip, "get Miss Diane some chicken implements, will you, old man? And lend me some salt. You see," he added easily to Diane, "Ras and I are personally responsible for an individual and very concentrated grub equipment. It saves a deal of fussing. I

carry mine in my pocket and Ras carries his in his hat, but he wears a roomier tile than I do and never climbs out of it even when he sleeps. Thank you, Johnny. I'll send Ras over with your supper. But if it seems to be getting late, look him up. He may fall asleep."

After repeated indignant refusals which Mr. Poynter characteristically splintered, Diane, intensely curious, went with Mr. Poynter to the hay-camp for supper.

Now although the somnolent Ras had been shuffling drowsily about a fresh fire with no apparent aim, he presently contrived to produce a roasted chicken, fresh cucumbers, some caviare and rolls, coffee and cheese and a small freezer of ice cream, all of which he appeared to take at intervals from under the seat of the hay-cart.

"Ice cream and caviare!" exclaimed the girl aghast. "That's treason."

"I've my own notions of camping," admitted Philip, "and really our way is exceedingly simple and comfortable. Ras loads up the seat pantry at the nearest village and then we cast off all unnecessary ballast every morning. Of course we couldn't very well camp twice in the same place — we decorate so heavily — but that's a negligible factor. Oh, yes," added Philip smiling, "we've blazed our trail with buns and cheese for miles back. Ras thinks whole processions of birds

and dogs and tramps and chickens are already following us. If it's true, we'll most likely eat some of 'em."

"Where," demanded Diane hopelessly, "did you get this ridiculous outfit?"

"Well," explained Philip comfortably, "Ras was drowsing by Sherrill's on a load of hay and I bought the cart and the hay and the horses and Ras at a bargain and set out. Ras is a free lance without an encumbrance on earth and I can't imagine a more comfortable manner of getting about than stretched out full length on a load of hay. You can always sleep when you feel like it. And every morning we peel the bed—that is, we dispense with a layer of mattress and *presto!* I have a fresh bed until the hay's gone. We bought a new load this morning."

Swept by an irresistible spasm of laughter, Diane stared wildly about the hay-camp.

"And Ras?" she begged faintly.

"Well," said Philip slowly, "Ras is peculiarly gifted. He can sleep anywhere. Sometimes he sleeps stretched out on the padded seat of the wagon, and sometimes he sleeps under it—the wagon I mean; not in the pantry. And then of course he sleeps all day while he's driving and once or twice I've found him in a tree. I don't like him to do that," he added with gravity,

“for he’s so full of hay I’m afraid the birds will begin to make nests in his ears and pockets.”

“Mistah Poynteh,” reflected Ras, scratching his head through his hat, “is a lunatic. He gits notions. I cain’t nohow understan’ him but s’long as he don’ get ructious I’se gwine drive dat hay-cart to de Norf Pole if he say de word. I hain’t never had a real chanst to make my fortune afore.”

“And what,” begged Diane presently, “do you do when it rains?”

Mr. Poynter agreed that that had been a problem.

“But with our accustomed ingenuity,” he added modestly, “we have solved it. Back there in a village we induced a blacksmith with brains and brawn to fit a tall iron frame around the wagon and if the sun’s too hot, or it showers, we shed some more hay and drape a tarpaulin or so over the frame. It’s an excellent arrangement. We can have side curtains or not just as we choose. In certain wet circumstances, of course, we’ll most likely take to barns and inns and wood-houses and corncribs and pick up the trail in the morning. You can’t imagine,” he added, “how ready pedestrians are to tell us which way the green moving van went.”

Whereupon the nomad of the hay-camp and his ruffled guest crossed swords again over a pot

of coffee, with inglorious defeat for Diane, who departed for her own camp in a blaze of indignation.

"I'll ignore him!" she decided in the morning as the green van took to the road again. "It's the only way. And after a while he'll most likely get tired and disgruntled and go home. He's subject to huffs anyway. It's utterly useless to talk to him. He thrives on opposition."

Looking furtively back, she watched Mr. Poynter break camp. It was very simple. Ras, yawning prodigiously, heaved a variety of unnecessary provisions overboard from the seat pantry, abandoned the ice-cream freezer to a desolate fate by the ashes of the camp fire and peeled the hay-bed. Philip slipped a small tin plate, a collapsible tin cup, a wooden knife, fork and spoon into his pocket. Ras put his in his hat, which immediately took on a somewhat bloated appearance. Having climbed languidly to the reins, the ridiculous negro appeared to fall asleep immediately. Mr. Poynter, looking decidedly trim and smiling, summoned Dick Whittington, climbed aboard and, whistling, disappeared from view with uncommon grace and good humor. The hay-wagon rumbled off.

Diane bit her lips convulsively and looked at Johnny. Simultaneously they broke into an immoderate fit of laughter.

“Very well,” decided the girl indignantly a little later, “if I can’t do anything else, I can lose him!”

But even this was easier of utterance than accomplishment. Diane was soon to learn that if the distance between them grew too great, Mr. Poynter promptly unloaded all but a scant layer of hay, took the reins himself, and thundered with expedition up the trail in quest of her, with Dick Whittington barking furiously. It was much too spectacular a performance for a daily diet.

Diane presently ordered her going and coming as if the persistent hay-gypsy on the road behind her did not exist, but every night she caught the cheerful glimmer of his camp fire through the trees, and frowned.