

CHAPTER XIX

A NOMADIC MINSTREL

STRIKING west into New York State, Diane had come into Orange County, whence she wound slowly down into northern Jersey, through the Poconos. For days now the dusty wanderers had followed the silver flash of the Delaware, coming at length from a rugged, cooler country of mountain and lake into a sunny valley cleft by the singing river. It was a goodly land of peaceful villages tucked away mid age-old trees, of garrulous, kindly folks and covered bridges, of long, lazy canals with grassy banks banding each shore of the rippling river, of tow-paths padded by the feet of bargemen and bell-hung mules and lock-tenders.

At sunset one night Diane paid her toll at a Lilliputian house built like an architectural barnacle on to the end of a covered bridge, and with a rumble of boards wound slowly through the dusty, twilight tunnel into Pennsylvania. A little later a drowsy negro passed through with a load of hay, a barking dog and a mysterious voice, with a lazy drawl, which directed the payment of the toll from among the hay. Still later a musical nomad driving an angular horse from

the seat of a ramshackle cart, accoutered, among other orchestral devices, with clashing cymbals, a drum and a handle which upon being turned a trifle by the curious tollgate keeper aroused a fearful musical commotion in the cart.

From her camp on a wooded spot by the river, Diane presently watched the hay-camp anchor with maddening ease for the night. Ras built a fire, unhitched the horses, produced a variety of things from the seat of the pantry and took his table equipment from his hat. Philip smoked, removed an occasional wisp of hay from his hair and shied friendly pebbles at Richard Whittington.

Diane was busy making coffee when the third nomad appeared with his music machine, and, halting near her, alighted and fell stiffly to turning the eventful crank.

Instantly two terrible drumsticks descended and with globular extremities thumped, by no visible agency, upon the drum. The cymbals clashed—and a long music record began to unfold in segments like a *papier-mâché* snake.

“Well,” exclaimed Diane fervently, “I do wish he’d stop! For all we’ve seen him so often he’s never bothered us like this before.”

The unfortunate and frequently flagellated “Glowworm,” however, continued to glow fearfully, impelled to eruptive scintillation by the

crank, and the vocal lady "walked with Billy," and presently the minstrel came through the trees with his hat in his hand, his dark eyes very humble and deferential.

Now as Diane nodded pleasantly and smiled and held forth a coin, the wandering minstrel suddenly swayed, clapped his hand to his forehead with a choking groan and pitched forward senseless upon the ground at her feet. Diane jumped.

"Johnny!" she exclaimed in keen alarm, "we've another invalid. Turn him over!" But it was not Johnny who performed this service for the unfortunate minstrel. It was Mr. Poynter.

"Hum!" said Philip dryly. "That's most likely retribution. A man can't unwind all that hullabaloo without feeling the strain. Water, Johnny, and if you have some smelling salts handy, bring 'em along."

After one or two vigorous attentions on the part of Mr. Poynter, the nomad of the music machine opened his eyes and stared blankly about him. That he was not yet quite himself, however, was readily apparent, for meeting Mr. Poynter's unsmiling glance, he grew very white and faint and begged for water.

Philip supplied it without a word. After an interval of unsympathetic silence, during which the minstrel's eyes roved uncertainly about the

camp and returned each time to Philip's face in a fascinated stare, he feebly strove to rise but fell back groaning.

"If—if I might stay here for but the night," he begged pathetically, his accent slightly foreign.

"That's impossible!" said Philip curtly. "I'll help you to your rumpus machine and back there in the village you will find an inn. My man will go with you."

"Philip!" exclaimed Diane with spirit. "The man is ill."

"I'm not denying it," averred Philip stubbornly. "Nor is there any denying the existence of the inn."

"How can you be so heartless!"

"One may also be prudent."

"He'll stay here of course if he wishes. The inn is a mile back."

"Diane!"

"Is he the first?" flashed Diane impetuously.

Philip reddened but his eyes were sombre. The knife and the bullet had engendered a certain cynicism.

"As you will!" said he. And consigning to Johnny the care of the invalid, who watched him depart with furtive relief, Philip strode off through the woods. Hospitality, reflected Philip

unquietly, was all right in its place, but Diane was an extremist. After supper, however—for Philip was inherently kind hearted and sympathetic—he dispatched Ras to unhitch the minstrel's snorting steed and remove the eccentric music machine from the highway. Johnny had already accomplished both.

Smoking, Philip stared at the firelit hollow where his lady's fire-tinted tents glimmered spectrally through the trees. He was relieved to see that the camp's unbidden guest lay comfortably upon his own blankets by the fire.

Somehow the minstrel's face, clean-shaven, strikingly brown of skin and unmistakably foreign beneath the thatch of dark hair sparsely veined in grey, lingered hauntingly in his memory.

"Where in thunder have I seen him before?" wondered Philip restlessly. "There's something about his eyes and forehead—on the road probably, for of course I've passed him a number of times. Still—Lord!" added Philip with a burst of impatience, "what a salamander I am, to be sure! Whittington, old top, ever since I've known our gypsy lady, I've done nothing but fuss."

But, nevertheless, when Diane's camp finally settled into quiet for the night, there was a watch-

ful sentry in the forest who did not retire to his bed of hay until Johnny was astir at daybreak.

And Philip was to find his bearings in a staggering flash of memory and know no peace for many a day to come.