

CHAPTER XX

THE ROMANCE OF MINSTRELSY

“I AM glad to see that you are better,” said Diane pleasantly.

The minstrel, who had bathed his hands and face in the river until they were darkly ruddy, bowed with singular grace and ease. That he was grave and courtly of manner and strikingly handsome to boot, Diane had already noticed with a flash of wonder.

“I owe you much,” said he simply. “My life perhaps —”

“I am sure,” protested Diane, “that you greatly overrate my small service.”

“Day by day,” exclaimed the minstrel sombrely, “I travel the summer roads in quest of health.”

Not a little interested, Diane raised frankly sympathetic eyes to his in diffident question.

“The music?” said the minstrel with his slow, grave smile. “Is there not more romance and adventure in the life of a wandering minstrel than in that of an idle seeker after health? In the open one finds happiness, health, color and life!”

Diane felt a sudden tie of sympathy link her

subtly to this mysterious nomad of the summer road. Simply and naturally she spoke of her own love of the wild things that filled the sylvan world with life and color.

“You look much then at the wild flowers!” he exclaimed delightedly. “There was a leaf back there on a mountain, the edge of white, a white blossom in the heart like a patch of snow—”

“Snow-on-the-mountain!” exclaimed Diane. “I’ve looked for it for days.”

“It shall be my ambition to bring you some,” said the minstrel gallantly. “I shall not forget.”

Diane glanced furtively at the picturesque attire which her nomadic guest wore with a certain dashing grace, and marveled afresh. It was of ragged corduroy with a brightly colored handkerchief about the throat which foiled his vivid skin artistically. Indeed there was more of sophistication in the careful blending of colors than even the normal seeker after health might deem expedient for his purpose.

“It is to few—to none indeed save you that I have confided the secret of my minstrelsy,” he said deferentially a little later. “Illness, love of adventure, a longing to brush elbows with the world, a hunger for the woodland—in the eyes of unromantic men these things are weaknesses. You and I know differently, but nevertheless it is best that I seem but a poor vagrant grinding

forth a hapless tune for the coppers by the wayside."

The minstrel gazed idly at the hay-camp.

"One does not quite understand," he suggested raising handsome eyebrows in subtle disapproval; "the negro, the hay—the curious camp?"

Diane recalled Philip's unfeeling attitude of the night before.

"A happy-go-lucky young man with a taste for hay," she said. "I know little of him."

"One treasures one's confidence from the unsympathetic," ventured the minstrel. "Now the young man of the hay, I take it, is intensely practical and let us say—unromantic. Lest he laugh and scoff—" he shrugged and glanced furtively at the girl's face. It was brightly flushed and very lovely. The velvet dusk of Diane's eyes was sparkling with the zest of woodland adventure. To repose a confidence in one so spirited and beautiful was fascinating sport—and safe.

Now the minstrel found as the morning waned that he was not so strong as he had fancied. Wherefore he lay humbly by the fire and talked of his fortunes by the roadside. Bits of philosophy, of sparkling jest, of vivid description, to these Diane listened with parted lips and eyes alive with wholesome interest as her guest con-

trived to veil himself in a silken web of romance and mystery.

It was sunset before the girl felt uncomfortably that he ought to go. A little later, on her way to the van, she found a volume of Herodotus in the original Greek which with a becoming air of guilt the minstrel owned that he had dropped.

"Ah, Herodotus!" he murmured, smiling. "After all, was he not the wandering, romantic father of all of us who are nomads!"

"I wonder," said a lazy voice among the trees, "I wonder now if old Herodotus ever heard of a hay-camp."

Removing a wisp of hay from his shoe with a certain matter-of-fact grace characteristic of him, Mr. Poynter, who had been invisible all day, arrived in the camp of the enemy. Diane saw with a fretful flash of wonder that he was immaculate as usual. She saw too that the minstrel was annoyed and that he dropped the volume of Herodotus into his pocket with a flush and a frown.

"I trust," said Philip politely, "that you are better?"

Save for a slight dizziness, the minstrel said, he was.

"And yet," urged Philip feelingly, "I'm sure you'll not take to the road to-night, feeling wobbly. The inn back there in the village is immensely attractive. And a bed is the place for a sick man."

"He will remain where he is," flashed Diane perversely, "until he feels quite able to go on."

"Will you?" asked Philip pointedly.

The minstrel rose weakly and glanced at Diane with profound gratitude.

"After all," he said hurriedly, "he is doubtless right. Ill or not I must go on."

"An excellent notion!" approved Philip cordially. "I'll go with you."

Now whether or not the hurry and excitement of rising in these somewhat frictional circumstances brought on a recurrence of the nomad's singular disease, Diane did not know, but certainly he staggered and fell back, faint and moaning by the fire, thereby arousing an immediate commotion.

Philip grimly took his pulse and met Diane's sympathetic glance with one of honest indignation.

"Diane," he said in a low voice, "he is tricking you into sympathy merely for the comfort of your camp. Twice now his fainting has been attended by an absolutely normal pulse. Let Ras and Johnny carry him back to his rumpus machine and I'll drive him to the inn."

"You'll do nothing of the sort!" exclaimed the girl with flaming color. "Why are you so suspicious?"

Philip sighed.