

CHAPTER XXII.

SYLVAN SUITORS

SOUTHWARD wound the green and white van; southward the hay-camp with infrequent scurries to inn and barn for shelter; southward, his health still improving, went the musical nomad, unwinding his musical hullabaloo for the torture of musical crowds.

Now the world was a-riot with the life and color of midsummer. Sleepy cows browsed about in fields dotted with orange daisies, horses switched their tails against the cloudless sky on distant hillsides, sheep freckled the sunny pastures, and here and there beneath an apple tree heavy with fruit, lumbered a mother-sow with her litter of pigs. Sun-bleached dust clouded the highway and the swaying fields of corn were slim and tall.

The shuttle of Fate clicked and clicked as she wove and crossed and tangled the threads of these wandering, sun-brown nomads. How frequently the path of the music machine crossed the path of the van, no one knew so well perhaps as Philip, but Philip at times was tantalizing and mysterious and only evidenced his knowledge in peculiar and singularly aggravating ways.

For the friendship between Diane and the handsome minstrel was steadily growing. By what subtle hints, by what ingenuous bursts of confidence, by what bewildering flashes of inherent magnetism he contrived to cement it, who may say? But surely his romantic resources like his irresistible charm of speech and manner, were varied. A rare flower, an original and highly commendable bit of woodland verse, some luxury of fruit or camping device, in a hundred delicate ways he contrived to make the girl his debtor, talking much in his grave and courtly way of the gratitude he owed her. Adroitly then this romantic minstrel spun his shining, varicolored web, linking them together as sympathetic nomads of the summer road; adroitly too he banned Philip, who by reason of a growing and mysterious habit of sleeping by day had gained for himself a blighting reputation of callous indifference to the charm of the beautiful rolling country all around them.

"I'm exceedingly sorry," read a scroll of birch bark which Ras drowsily delivered to Diane one sunset, "but I'll have to ask you to invite me to supper. Ras bought an unhappy can of something or other behind in the village and it exploded.

"Philip."

"If I refuse," Diane wrote on the back, "you'll come anyway. You always do. Why write? Will you contribute enough hay for a cushion? Johnny's making a new one for Rex."

It was one of the vexing problems of Diane's nomadic life, just how to treat Mr. Philip Poynter. It was increasingly difficult to ignore or quarrel with him—for his memory was too alarmingly porous to cherish a grudge or resentment. When a man has had a bump upon his only head, held Mr. Poynter, things are apt to slip away from him. Wherefore one may pardon him if after repeated commands to go home, and certain frost-bitten truths about officious young men, he somehow forgot and reappeared in the camp of the enemy in radiant good humor.

Philip presently arrived with a generous layer of hay under his arm and a flour bag of tomatoes.

"Hello," he called warmly. "Isn't the sunset bully! It even woke old Ras up and he's blinking and grumbling like fury." Mr. Poynter fell to chatting pleasantly, meanwhile removing from his clothing certain wisps of hay.

"You're always getting into hay or getting out of it!" accused Diane.

Philip admitted with regret that this might be so and Diane stared hopelessly at his immaculate linen. Heaven alone knew by what ingenuity Mr. Poynter, handicapped by the peculiar limita-

tions of a hay-camp, contrived to manage his wardrobe. What mysterious toilet paraphernalia lay beneath the hay, what occasional laundry chores Ras did by brook and river, what purchases Mr. Poynter made in every village, and finally what an endless trail of shirts and cuffs and collars lay behind him, doomed, like the cheese and buns, as he feelingly put it, to one-night stands, only Ras and Philip knew; but certainly the hay-nomad combined the minimum of effort with the maximum of efficiency to the marvel of all who beheld him. Ras's problem was infinitely simpler. He never changed. There was much of the original load of hay, Philip said, dispersed about his ears and pockets and fringing the back of his neck.

"Where did you get tomatoes?" inquired Diane at supper.

"Well," said Philip, "I hate to tell you. I strongly suspect Ras of spearing 'em with a harpoon he made. Made it in his sleep, too. It's pretty long and he can spear whatever he wants from the wagon seat. Lord help the rabbits!" He lazily sprinkled salt upon a large tomato and bit into it with relish. "But why should I worry?" he commented smiling. "They're mighty good. Johnny, old top, see if you can rustle up a loaf of bread to lend me for breakfast, will you? I'm willing to trade three cucumbers for it. And tell

Ras when you take his supper over that there's a herring under the seat for Dick Whittington's supper. Tell me," he added humorously to Diane, "just how do you contrive to remember bread and salt?"

"I don't," said Diane, smiling. "Johnny does. Did the storm get you last night, Philip?"

"It did indeed. It's the third load of hay we've had this week. We're perpetually furling up the tarpaulin or unfurling it or skinning the mattress or watching the clouds. I'm a wreck."

"Where have you been all day?"

"Haying!" said Philip promptly.

"Sleeping!" corrected Diane with a critical sniff.

Mr. Poynter fancied they were synonyms.

"Do you know," he added pointedly, "I imagine I'd find ever so much more romance and adventure about it if I only had some interesting ailment and a music-mill. I did think I had a bully cough, but it was only a wisp of hay in my throat."

Philip's powers of intuition were most fearful. Diane colored.

"Just what do you mean?" she inquired cautiously.

"Nothing at all," replied Philip with a charming smile. "I never do. Why mean anything when words come so easy without? It has oc-

curred to me," he added innocently, "that it takes an uncommonly thick-skinned and unromantic dub to tour about covered with hay. Fancy sleeping through this wild and beautiful country when I might be grinding up lost chords to annoy the populace."

Diane had heard something of this sort before from quite another source. Acutely uncomfortable, she changed the subject. There was something uncanny in Philip's perfect comprehension of the minstrel's tactics.

A little later Mr. Poynter produced a green bug mounted eccentrically upon a bit of birch bark.

"I found a bug," he said guilelessly. "He was a very nice little bug. I thought you'd like him."

Diane frowned. For every flower the minstrel brought, Philip contrived a ridiculous parallel.

"How many times," she begged hopelessly, "must I tell you that I am not collecting ridiculous bugs?"

Philip raised expressive eyebrows.

"Dear me!" said he in hurt surprise. "You do surprise me. Why, he's the greenest bug I ever saw and he matches the van. He's a nomad with the wild romance of the woodland bounding through him. I did think I'd score heavily with him."

Diane discreetly ignored the inference. Whistling happily, Mr. Poynter poured the coffee and leaned back against a tree trunk. Watching him one might have read in his fine eyes a keener appreciation of nomadic life — and nomads — than he ever expressed.

There was idyllic peace and quiet in this grove of ancient oaks shot with the ruddy color of the sunset. Off in the heavier aisles of golden gloom already there were slightly bluish shadows of the coming twilight. Hungry robins piped excitedly, woodpeckers bored for worms and flaming orioles flashed by on golden wings. Black against the sky the crows were sailing swiftly toward the woodland.

With the twilight and a young moon Philip produced his wildwood pipe and fell to smoking with a sigh of comfort.

“Philip!” said Diane suddenly.

“Mademoiselle!” said Philip, suspiciously grave and courtly of manner. The girl glanced at him sharply.

“It annoys me exceedingly,” she went on finally, finding his laughing glance much too bland and friendly to harbor guile, “to have you trailing after me in a hay-wagon.”

“I’ll buy me a rumpus machine,” said Philip.

“It would bother me to have you trailing after

me so persistently in any guise!" flashed the girl indignantly.

"It must perforce continue to bother you!" regretted Philip. "Besides," he added absently, "I'm really the Duke of Connecticut in disguise, touring about for my health, and the therapeutic value of hay is enormous."

Now why Diane's cheeks should blaze so hotly at this aristocratic claim of Mr. Poynter's, who may say? But certainly she glanced with swift suspicion at her tranquil guest, who met her eyes with supreme good humor, laughed and fell to whistling softly to himself. Despite a certain significant silence in the camp of his lady, Mr. Poynter smoked most comfortably, puffing forth ingenious smoke-rings which he lazily sought to string upon his pipestem and busily engaging himself in a variety of other conspicuously peaceful occupations. All in all, there was something so tranquil and soothing in the very sight of him that Diane unbent in spite of herself.

"If you'd only join a peace tribunal as delegate-at-large," she said, "you'd eliminate war. I meant to freeze you into going home. I do wish I could stay indignant!"

"Don't," begged Philip humbly. "I'm so much happier when you're not.

"There *is* another way of managing me," he

said hopefully a little later. "I meant to mention it before—"

"What is it?" implored Diane.

"Marry me!"

"Philip!" exclaimed the girl with delicate disdain, "the moon is on your head—"

"Yes," admitted Philip, "it is. It does get me. No denying it. Doesn't it ever get you?"

"No," said Diane. "Besides, I never bumped my brain—"

"That could be remedied," hinted Philip, "if you think it would alter matters—"

Diane was quite sure it would not and later Philip departed for the hay-camp in the best of spirits. In the morning Diane found a conspicuous placard hung upon a tree. The placard bore a bombastic ode, most clever in its trenchant satire, entitled—"To a Wild Mosquito—by One who Knows!"

Since an ill-fated occasion when Mr. Poynter had found a neatly indited ode to a wild geranium written in a flowing foreign hand, his literary output had been prodigious. Dirges, odes, sonnets and elegies frequently appeared in spectacular places about the camp and as Mr. Poynter's highly sympathetic nature led him to eulogize the lowlier and less poetic life of the woodland, the result was frequently of striking originality.

Convinced that Mr. Poynter's eyes were upon

her from the hay-camp, Diane read the ode with absolute gravity and consigned it to the fire.

The minstrel's attitude toward the hay-nomad might be one of subtle undermining and shrugging ridicule, but surely with his imperturbable gift of satire, Mr. Poynter held the cards!

Still another morning Diane found a book at the edge of her camp.

"I am dropping this accidentally as I leave," read the fly leaf in Philip's scrawl. "I don't want you to suspect my classic tastes, but what can I do if you find the book!"

It was a volume of Herodotus in the original Greek!