

CHAPTER XXIII

LETTERS

BUCKWHEAT was cut, harvest brooded hazily over the land and the fields were bright with goldenrod when Diane turned sharply across Virginia to Kentucky.

“It is already autumn,” she wrote to Ann Sherrill. “The summer has flown by like a bright-winged bird. For days now the forests have been splashed with red and gold. The orchards are heavy with harvest apples, the tassels of the corn are dark and rusty, and the dooryards of the country houses riot gorgeously in scarlet sage and marigold, asters and gladiolas. The twilight falls more swiftly now and the nights are cooler but before the frost sweeps across the land I shall be in Georgia.

“For all it is autumn elsewhere, here in this wonderful blue grass land, it is spring again, a second spring. The autumn sunlight over the woods and pastures is deeply, richly yellow. There are meadow larks and off somewhere the tinkle of a cow bell. Oh, Ann, how good it is to be alive!

“Ages ago, in that remote and barbarous past when I lived with a roof above my head, there

were times when every pulse of my body cried and begged for life—for gypsy life and gypsy wind and the song of the roaring river! Now, somehow, I feel that I have lived indeed—so fully that a wonderful flood tide of peace and happiness flows strongly in my veins. I am brown and happy. Each day I cook and tramp and fish and swim and sleep—how I sleep with the leaves rustling a lullaby of infinite peace above me! Would you believe that I lived for two days and nights in a mountain cave? I did indeed, but Johnny was greatly troubled. Aunt Agatha stuffed his head with commands.

“The South thrills and calls. After all, though I was born in the Adirondacks, I am Southern, every inch of me. The Westfalls have been Florida folk since the beginning of time.

“There is an interesting nomad in a picturesque suit of corduroy who crosses my path from time to time with an eccentric music-machine. Sometimes I see him gravely organ-grinding for a crowd of youngsters, sometimes—with an innate courtliness characteristic of him—for a white-haired couple by a garden gate. He is wandering about in search of health. Oddly, his way lies, too, through Kentucky and Tennessee, to Florida. He—and Ann, dear, this confidence of his I must beg you to respect, as I know you will—is a Hungarian nobleman, picturesquely

disguised because of some political quarrel with his country. He writes excellent verse in French and Latin, is a clever linguist, and has a marvelous fund of knowledge about birds and flowers. Altogether he is a cultured, courtly, handsome man whom I have found vastly entertaining. Romantic, isn't it?

"A letter to Eadsville, Kentucky, will reach me if you write as soon as this reaches you.

"Ever yours,
"Diane."

Let him who is more versed in the science of a nomad's mind than I, say why there was no mention of the hay-camp!

Ann's answer came in course of time to Eadsville. As Ann talked in sprightly italics, so was her letter made striking and emphatic by numberless underlinings.

"How very romantic!" ran a part of it. "I am mad about your nobleman! Isn't it wonderful to have such unique and thrilling adventures? I suppose you hung things up on the walls of the cave and built a delightfully smoky fire and that the Hungarian—bless his heart!—trimmed his corduroy suit with an ancestral stiletto, and paid his courtly respects to the beautiful gypsy hermit and fell desperately in love with her, as well he might. I would myself!

"Diane, I simply must see him! I'm dying

for a new sensation. Ever since Baron Tregar's car was stolen from the farm garage and his handsome secretary mysteriously disappeared (by the way, it's Philip Poynter—Carl knows him—do you?) and then reappeared with a most unsatisfactory explanation which didn't in the least explain where he had been—only to up and disappear again as strangely as before, and the very next morning—life has been terribly monotonous. And mother had a rustic seizure and made us stay at the farm all summer. Imagine! Dick's aeroplaned the tops off all the trees!

“Do beg your Hungarian to join us at Palm Beach in January. It would be most interesting and novel and I'll swear on the ancestral stiletto to preserve his incognito! You remember you solemnly promised to come to me in January, no matter where you were! My enthusiasm grows as I write—it always does. I'm planning a *fête de nuit*—masked of course. Do please induce the romantic musician to attend. I must have him. I'm sure he'll enjoy a few days of conventional respectability and so will you. I'll lend you as many gowns as you need, you dear, delightful gypsy!”

To which Diane's answer was eminently satisfactory.

“Last night as Johnny was getting supper,”

she wrote, "our minstrel appeared with a great bunch of silver-rod and I begged him to stay to supper. He was greatly gratified and when later I confessed my indiscreet revelation to you—and your invitation—he accepted it instantly. He will be honored to be your guest, he said, provided of course he may depend upon us to preserve his incognito. That is very important. Do you know it is astonishing how I find myself keyed up to the most amazing pitch of interest in him—he's so mysterious and romantic and magnetic.

"Your constant craving for new and original sensations brings back a lot of memories. Will you never get over it?

"I shall probably leave the van with Johnny at Jacksonville and go down by rail. There are certain spectacular complications incident to an arrival at Palm Beach in the van which would be very distasteful, to say the least. Besides, I'd be later than we planned."

For most likely, reflected Diane, nibbling intently at the end of her pen, most likely Palm Beach had never seen a hay-camp and much Mr. Poynter would care!