

CHAPTER XXIV

THE LONELY CAMPER

THE WEST was yellow. High on the mountain where a mad little waterfall sprayed the bushes of laurel and rhododendron with quicksilver, the afterglow of the sunset on the tumbling water made a streak of saffron. The wings of a homing eagle were golden-black against the sky. Over there above the cornfields to the west there was a cliff and a black and bushy ravine over which soared a buzzard or two. Presently when the moon rose its splendid alchemy would turn the black to glowing silver.

A Kentucky brook chuckled boisterously by the hay-camp, tumbling headlong over mossy logs and stones and a tangled lacery of drenched ferns.

Philip laid aside a bow and arrow upon which he had been busily working since supper and summoned Dick Whittington. Beyond, through oak and poplar, glowed the camp fire of his lady.

“Likely we’ll tramp about a bit, Richard, if you’re willing,” said he. “Somehow, we’re infernally restless to-night and just why our lady has seen fit to pile that abominable silver-rod in such a place of honor by her tent, we can’t for

the life of us see. It's nothing like so pretty as the goldenrod. By and by, Whittington," Philip felt for his pipe and filled it, "we'll have our wildwood bow and arrows done and we fancy somehow that our gypsy's wonderful black eyes are going to shine a bit over that. Why? Lord, Dick, you do ask foolish questions! Our beautiful lady's an archer and a capital one too, says Johnny—even if she does like beastly silver-rod."

Somewhat out of sorts the Duke of Connecticut set off abruptly through the trees with the dog at his heels.

Having climbed over log and boulder to a road which cleft the mountain, he kept on to the north, descending again presently to the level of the camp, smoking abstractedly and whistling now and then for Richard Whittington, who was prone to ramble. Philip was debating whether or not he had better turn back, for the moon was already edging the black ravine with fire, when a camp fire and the silhouette of a lonely camper loomed to the west among the trees. Philip puffed forth a prodigious cloud of smoke and seated himself on a tree stump.

"My! My!" said he easily. "Must be our invalid and his rumpus machine. Whittington, we're just in the mood to-night, you and I, to wander over there and tell him that he's not get-

ting half so much over on us as he thinks he is. I've a mind to send you forward with my card."

Philip's eyes narrowed and he laughed softly. Tearing a sheet of paper from a notebook he took from his pocket, he scribbled upon it the following astonishing message:

"The Duke of Connecticut desires an audience. Do not kick the courier!"

Accustomed by now to carry birch-bark messages to Diane, Richard Whittington waggled in perfect understanding and trotted off obediently toward the fire with Philip close at his heels.

Conceivably astonished, the camper presently picked up the paper which Mr. Whittington dropped at his feet, and read it. As Philip stepped lazily from the trees he turned.

It was Baron Tregar. Both men stared.

"The Duke of Connecticut!" at length rumbled the Baron with perfect gravity. "I am overwhelmed."

Philip, much the more astonished of the two, laughed and bowed.

"Excellency," said he formally, "I am indeed astonished."

"Pray be seated!" invited the Baron, his eyes more friendly than those of his guest. "I, too, have taken to the highway, Poynter, on yonder motorcycle and I have lost my way." He sniffed

in disgust. "I am dining," he added dryly, "if one may dignify the damnable proceeding by that name, on potatoes which I do not in the least know how to bake without reducing them to cinders. I bought them a while back at a desolate, God-forsaken farmhouse. Heaven deliver me from camping!"

With which pious ejaculation the Baron inspected his smudged and blistered fingers and read again the entertaining message from the Duke of Connecticut.

"Why take to the highway," begged Philip guilelessly, "when the task is so unpleasant?"

"Ah!" rumbled the Baron, more sombre now, "there is a man with a music-machine—"

"There is!" said Philip fervently.

The Baron looked hard at His Highness, the Duke of Connecticut. The latter produced his cigarette case and opening it politely for the service of his chief, smiled with good humor.

"There is," said he coolly, "a man with a music-machine, a mysterious malady, a stained skin and a volume of Herodotus! Excellency knows the—er—romantic ensemble?"

Excellency not only knew him, but for days now, taking up the trail at a certain canal, he had traveled hard over roads strangely littered with hay and food and linen collars—to find that romantic ensemble. He added with grim humor

that he fancied the Duke of Connecticut knew him too. The Duke dryly admitted that this might be so. His memory, though conveniently porous at times, was for the most part excellent.

"What is he doing?" asked the Baron with an ominous glint of his fine eyes.

"Excellency," said Philip, staring hard at the end of his cigarette, "by every subtle device at his command, he is making graceful love to Miss Westfall, who is sufficiently wholesome and happy and absorbed in her gypsy life not to know it—yet!"

The Baron's explosive "Ah!" was a compound of wrath and outraged astonishment. Philip felt his attitude toward his chief undergoing a subtle revolution.

"His discretion," added Philip warmly, "has departed to that forgotten limbo which has claimed his beard."

The Baron was staring very hard at the camp fire.

"So," said he at last,— "it is for this that I have been—" he searched for an expressive Americanism, and shrugging, invented one, "thunder-cracking along the highway in search of the man Themar saw by the fire of Miss Westfall. 'It is incredible—it can not be!' said I, as I blistered about, searching here, searching there, losing my way and thunder-cracking about

in dead of night—all to pick up the trail of a green and white van and a music-machine! ‘It is unbelievable—it is a monstrous mistake on the part of Themar!’ But, Poynter, this love making, in the circumstances, passes all belief!” The Baron added that twice within the week he had passed the hay-camp but that by some unlucky fatality he had always contrived to miss the music-machine.

“Days back,” rumbled the Baron thoughtfully, “I assigned to Themar the task of discovering the identity of the man who—er—acquired a certain roadster of mine and who, I felt fairly certain, would not lose track of Miss Westfall but Themar, Poynter, came to grief—”

“Yes?” said Philip coolly. “You interest me exceedingly.”

“He made his way back to me after many weeks of illness,” said the Baron slowly, “with a curious tale of a terrible thrashing, of a barge and mules, of rough men who kicked him about and consigned him to a city jail under the malicious charge of a mule-driver who swore that he loved not black-and-tans—”

“Lord!” said Philip politely; “that was tough, wasn’t it?”

“Just what, Poynter,” begged the Baron, “is a black-and-tan?”

Mr. Poynter fancied he had heard the term before. It might have reference to the color of a man's skin and hair.

An uncomfortable silence fell over the Baron's camp. The Baron himself was the first to break it.

"Poynter," said he bluntly, "the circumstances of our separation at Sherrill's have engendered, with reason, a slight constraint. There was a night when you grievously misjudged me—"

"I am willing," admitted Philip politely, "to hear why I should alter my views."

"*Mon Dieu, Poynter!*" boomed the Baron in exasperation, "you are maddening. When you are politest, I fume and strike fire—here within!"

"Mental arson!" shrugged the Duke of Connecticut, relighting his cigarette with a blazing twig. "For that singular crime, Excellency, my deepest apologies."

The Baron stared, frowned, and laughed. One may know very little of one's secretary, after all.

"You are a curious young man!" said he.

The Duke of Connecticut admitted that this might be so. Hay, therapeutically, had effected an astonishing revolution in a nature disposed congenitally to peace and trustfulness. Local applications of hay had made him exceedingly suspicious and hostile. So much so indeed that

for days now he had slept by day, to the total wreck of his aesthetic reputation, and watched by night, convinced that Miss Westfall's camp was prone to strange and dangerous visitors. Excellency no doubt remembered the knife and the bullet.

The Baron sighed.

"Poynter," he said simply, "to a man of my nature and diplomatic position, a habit of candor is difficult. I wonder, however, if you would accept my word of honor as a gentleman that I know as little of this treacherous bullet as you; that for all I am bound to secrecy, my sincerest desire is to protect Miss Westfall from the peculiar consequences of this damnable muddle, to clear up the mystery of the bullet, and for more selfish reasons to protect her from the romantic folly of the man with the music-machine!"

Philip, his frank, fine face alive with honest relief, held out his hand.

"Excellency," said he warmly, "one may learn more of his chief over a camp fire, it seems, than in months of service. Our paths lie parallel." There was a subtle compact in the handshake.

"What," questioned the Baron presently, "think you, are my fine gentleman's plans, Poynter?"

Philip reddened.

"Excellency," he admitted, "I have definite information of his plans which I did not seek."

"And the source?"

"Miss Westfall's servant."

"Ah!"

"There are certain atmospheric conditions," regretted Philip, "intensely bad for hay-camps, wherefore I found myself obliged to seek an occasional understudy who would not only blaze the trail for me but do faithful sentry duty in my absence. And Johnny, Excellency, whom I pledged to this secret service, uncomfortably insists upon reporting to me much unnecessary detail. He has developed a most unreasoning dislike for music-machines and musical gypsies."

"There appears to be a general prejudice against them," admitted the Baron grimly.

"A while back, then," resumed Philip, "Johnny chanced upon the information that in January Miss Westfall will be a guest of Ann Sherrill's at Palm Beach. So will our minstrel — still incognito —"

"Excellent!" rumbled the Baron with relish. "Excellent. If all this be true," he added, muddling an Americanism, "we have then, of the horse another color!"

"Later," said Philip, "when Miss Westfall returns to her house on wheels, I imagine he too

will take to the road again—and resume his charming erotics.”

“That,” said the Baron with decision, “is most undesirable.”

“I agree with you!” said Philip feelingly.

“I too have promised to be a guest at Miss Sherrill’s *fête de nuit!*” purred the Baron suavely. “And you, Poynter?”

“Unfortunately Miss Sherrill knows absolutely nothing of my whereabouts.”

“Sherrill days ago entrusted me with a cordial invitation for you. He was unaware of our disagreement and expected you to accompany me. As my official secretary, Poynter, for, let us say the month of January, it is possible for me to command your attendance at Palm Beach.”

“Excellency,” said Philip slowly, “singular as it may seem in my present free lance state, I am greatly desirous of hearing such a command.”

“Poynter,” boomed the Baron formally, “in January I shall be overweighted with diplomatic duties at Palm Beach. I regret exceedingly that I am forced to command your attendance. This frivolling about must cease.” He shook suddenly with silent laughter. “Doubtless,” said he, meeting Philip’s amused glance with level significance, “doubtless, Poynter, we can—”

"Yes," said Philip with much satisfaction, "I think we can."

They fell to chatting in lower voices as the fire died down.

"Meanwhile," shrugged the disgusted Baron a little later, "I shall abandon that accursed music-machine to its fate, and rest. God knows I am but an indifferent nomad and need it sorely. Night and day have I thunder-cracked the highways, losing my way and my temper until I loathe camps and motor machines and dust and wind and baked potatoes. I sincerely hope, Poynter, that you can find me the road to an inn and a bed, a bath and some iced mint—to-night."

Philip could and did. Presently standing by his abominated motorcycle on a lonely moonlit road, the Baron adjusted his leather cap and stroked his beard.

"Do you know, Poynter," said he slowly, "this is a most mysterious motorcycle. It was crated to me from an unknown village in Pennsylvania by the hand of God knows whom!"

"Excellency," said Philip politely as he cordially shook hands with his chief, "The world, I find, is full of mystery."

Rumbling the Baron mounted and rode away. With a slight smile, Philip watched him thunder-cracking disgustedly along the dusty road back to civilization.