

CHAPTER XXVII

THE SONG OF THE PINE-WOOD SPARROW

WITH the dawn a laggard breeze came winging drowsily in from the southern sea, the first thing astir in the spectral world of palm and villa. Warm and deliciously fragrant, it swept the stiff wet Bermuda grass upon the lawn of the Sherrill villa at Palm Beach, rustled the crimson hedge of hibiscus, caught the subtle perfume of jasmine and oleander and swept on to a purple-flowered vine on the white walls of the villa, a fuller, richer thing for the ghost-scent of countless flowers.

Into this gray-white world of glimmering coquina and dew-wet palm rode presently the slim, brisk figure of a girl astride a fretful horse. A royal palm dripped cool gray rain upon her as she galloped past to the shell-road looming out of the velvet stillness ahead like a dim, white ghost-trail.

The gray ocean murmured, the still gray lagoon was asleep! Here and there a haunting, elusive splash of delicate rose upon the silver promised the later color of a wakening world. It was a finer, quieter world, thought Diane, than the later day world of white hot sunlight.

With pulses atune to the morning's freshness, the girl galloped rapidly along the shell-road, the clattering thud of her horse's hoofs startling in the quiet. As yet only a sleepy bird or two had begun to twitter. There was a growing noise of wind in the grass and palms.

A century back it seemed to this girl in whom the restless gypsy tide was subtly fretting, she had left Johnny and the van at Jacksonville to come into this sensuous, tropical world of color, fashionable life and lazy days.

Coloring delicately, the metallic gray bosom of the lake presently foretold the sunrise with a primrose glow. When at length the glaring white light of the sun struck sparks from the dew upon the pine and palmetto, Diane was riding rapidly south in quest of the Florida flat-woods. There was a veritable paradise of birds in the pine barren, Dick Sherrill had said, robins and bluebirds, flickers and woodpeckers with blazing cockades, shrikes and chewinks.

It was an endless monotony of pine trees, vividly green and far apart, into which Diane presently rode. A buzzard floated with uptilted wings above the sparse woodland to the west. A gorgeous butterfly, silver-spangled, winged its way over the saw palmetto and sedge between the trees to an inviting glade beyond, cleft by a shallow stream. Swamp, jungle, pine and pal-

metto were vocal with the melody of many birds.

Diane reined in her horse with a thrill. This was Florida, at last, not the unreal, exotic brilliance of Palm Beach. Here was her father's beloved Flowerland which she had loved as a child. Here were pines and tall grass, sun-silvered, bending in the warm wind, and the song of a pine-wood sparrow!

From the scrub ahead came his quiet song, infinitely sweet, infinitely plaintive like the faint, soft echo of a fairy's dream. A long note and a shower of silver-sweet echoes, so it ran, the invisible singer seeming to sing for himself alone. So might elfin bells have pealed from a thicket, inexpressibly low and tender.

Diane sat motionless, the free, wild grace of her seeming a part of the primeval quiet. For somehow, by some twist of singer's magic, this Florida bird was singing of Connecticut wind and river, of dogwood on a ridge, of water lilies in the purple of a summer twilight, of a spot named forever in her mind—Arcadia.

Now as the girl listened, a beautiful brown sprite of the rustling pine wood about her, a great flood of color crept suddenly from the brown full throat to the line of her hair, and the scarlet that lingered in her cheeks was wilder than the red of winter holly.

Surely—surely there was no reason under

Heaven why the little bird should sing about a hay-camp!

But sing of it he did with a swelling throat and a melodic quiver of nerve and sinew, and a curious dialogue followed.

"A hay-camp is a very foolish thing, to be sure!" sang the bird with a dulcet shower of plaintive notes.

"To be sure," said the voice of the girl's conscience, "to be sure it is. But how very like him!"

"But—but there was the bullet—"

"I have often thought of it," owned the Voice.

"A gallant gentleman must see that his lady comes to no harm. 'Tis the way of gallant gentlemen—"

"Hum!"

"And he never once spoke of his discomfort on the long hot road, though a hay-camp is subject to most singular mishaps."

"I—I have often marveled."

"He is brave and sturdy and of charming humor—"

"A superlative grain of humor perhaps, and he's very lazy—"

"And fine and frank and honorable. One may not forget Arcadia and the rake of twigs."

"One may not forget, that is very true. But he seeks to make himself out such a very great fool—"

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"He cloaks each generous instinct with a laughing drollery. Why did you hum when you cooked his supper and called to him through the trees?"

"I—I do not know."

"'Twas the world-old instinct of primitive woman!"

"No! No! No! It was only because I was living the life I love the best. I was very happy."

"Why were you happier after the storm?"

"I—I do not know."

"You have scolded with flashing eyes about the hay-camp—"

"But—I—I did not mind. I tried to mind and could not—"

"That is a very singular thing."

"Yes."

"Why have you not told him of the tall sentinel you have furtively watched of moonlit nights among the trees, a sentinel who slept by day upon a ridiculous bed of hay that he might smoke and watch over the camp of his lady until peep o' day?"

"I—do not know."

"You are sighing even now for the van and a camp fire—for the hay-camp through the trees—"

"No!" with a very definite flash of perversity.

“Where *is* this persistent young nomad of the hay-camp anyway?”

“I—I have wondered myself.”

But with a quiver of impatience the horse had pawed the ground and the tiny bird flew off to a distant clump of palmetto.

Diane rode hurriedly off into the flat-woods.



White girl and Indian maid then clasped hands.

