

CHAPTER XLIII

THE RIVAL CAMPERS

NORTHWARD by lazy canal and shadowy hummock, northward by a river freckled with sand bars, Diane came in time to a quiet lake where purple martins winged ceaselessly over a tangled float of lilies—where now and then an otter swam and dipped with a noiseless ripple of water—where ground doves fluttered fearlessly about the camp as Johnny pitched the tents at noonday.

But for all the whir and flash of brilliant bird-life above the placid water—for all the screams of the fish hawks and the noise of crows and grackle in the cypress—for all the presence of another camper among the trees to the west, the days were quiet and undisturbed. And at night when the birds were winging to the woods now black against the yellow west, and the lonely lake began to purple, the fires of the rival camps were the single spots of color in the heavy darkness along the shore.

Diane wrote of it, with disastrous results, to Aunt Agatha.

At sunset, one day, a carriage produced an aggrieved rustle of silk, a voice and a hand bag.

Each fluttered a little as the driver accepted his fare and rolled away. The hand bag, in accordance with a sensational and ill-conditioned habit which had roused more than one unpopular commotion in crowded department stores and thoroughfares, leaped unexpectedly from a gloved and fluttering hand.

Aunt Agatha possessed herself of the bag with a sniff and rustled heedlessly into the nearest camp.

It was, of course, Mr. Poynter's.

Utterly confounded by the unexpected sight of a tall young man who was cooking a fish over the fire, Aunt Agatha gurgled fearfully and backed precipitately into the nearest tree, whence the ill-natured hand bag forcibly opened a grinning mouth, leaped into space and disgorged a flying shower of nickels and dimes, smelling salts and hairpins and a variety of fussy contrivances of sentimental value.

"God bless my soul!" bleated Aunt Agatha with round, affrighted eyes, "there's a dime in the fish! And I do beg your pardon, young man, but will you be so good as to poke the smelling salts out of the fire before they explode."

There was little likelihood of the final catastrophe, but Mr. Poynter obeyed. Laughing a little as he collected the scattered cargo, he good-humoredly suggested that he was not nearly so

dangerous as Aunt Agatha's petrified gaze suggested, and that possibly she might remember him — his name was Poynter — and that Miss Westfall's camp lay a little farther to the east.

Aunt Agatha departed, greatly impressed by his gallantry and common sense. Arriving in the camp of her niece, she roused an alarming commotion by halting unobserved among the trees, staring hard at her niece's back-hair, dropping her hand bag, and bursting into tears that brought the startled campers to her side in a twinkling.

"Great Scott, Johnny!" exclaimed Diane, aghast. "It's Aunt Agatha!"

Aunt Agatha dangerously motioned them away with the hand bag Johnny had returned.

"I'll be all right in a minute!" she sniffed tearfully. "Mamma was that way, too — mamma was. Tears would burst right out of her, especially when she grew so stout. I can't help it! When I think of all I've gone through with you off in the Green-glades or the Never-glades or whatever they are — and worrying all the time about your scalp and alligators — and you sitting there so peaceful, Diane, with your hair still on — I've got to cry — I just have and I will. And Carl's mysteriously disappeared — Heaven knows where! I've not seen him for weeks. Nor did he condescend to write me — as I must say you did — and very good of you too!" Whether

Aunt Agatha was crying because her mother was stout and eruptively lachrymose, or because Diane's hair was still where it belonged, or because Carl was missing, Diane could not be sure.

Aunt Agatha puffed presently to a seat by the fire, with hair and hat awry, and dropped her hand bag.

"Johnny," she said severely, "don't stare so. I'm sorry of course that I made you drop the kettle when I came, I am indeed, but I'm here and there's the kettle — and that's all there is to it."

"Of course it is!" exclaimed Diane, kissing her heartily. "And I'm mighty glad to see you, Aunt Agatha, tears and all!"

There was some little difficulty in persuading Aunt Agatha of the truth of this, but she presently removed her hat, narrowly escaped dropping it into the fire, and consigned it, along with the athletic hand bag, to Johnny.

Now Diane with a furtive glance at Philip's camp, had been hostilely considering the discouraging effect of Aunt Agatha's presence upon the rival camper. That Aunt Agatha would presently discern degenerative traces of criminality in his face by reason of his reprehensible proximity to her niece's camp, Diane did not doubt. That the aggrieved lady would call upon him within a day or so and air her rigid notions

of propriety and convention, was well within the range of probability. Wherefore—

Aunt Agatha broke plaintively in upon her thoughts.

“If you would only listen, Diane!” she complained. “I’ve spoken three times of your grandfather’s old estate and dear knows you ought to remember it—”

“I beg your pardon, Aunt!” stammered the girl sincerely.

“Certainly,” said Aunt Agatha with dignity, “I deserve some attention. What with the dark, gloomy rooms of the house and the cobwebs and cranky spiders—and the people of St. Augustine believing it to be haunted—so that I could scarcely keep a servant—and green mould in the cellar—and a croquet set—and waiting down South when I distinctly promised to go back with the Sherrills in March—I take it very hard of you, Diane, to be so absent-minded. Ugh! How dark the lake has grown and the wind and the noise of the water. There’s hardly a star. Diane, I do wonder how you stand it. The shore looks like bands of mourning crepe. And in the midst of it all, Diane, there in St. Augustine, the Baron aeroplaned the top off the Carroll’s orchard—”

“Aunt Agatha!” begged the girl helplessly. “What in the world is it all about?”

Aunt Agatha flushed guiltily.

“Why is it,” she demanded, “that no one ever seems to understand what I’m saying? Dear knows I haven’t a harelip or even a lisp. Why, Baron Tregar, my dear. He’s been staying in St. Augustine, too. It almost seemed as if he had deliberately followed me there—though of course that couldn’t be. And the Prince too. And the Baron bought an aeroplane to amuse himself and annoy the Carrolls—”

Aunt Agatha flushed again, cleared her throat and looked away. Why Ronador was in St. Augustine she knew well enough. He had waited near her, successfully, for news of Diane. And though the Baron had been very quiet, he had kept his eye upon the Prince. Aunt Agatha had for once been the startled hub of intrigue.

“And what with the driver mumbling to himself this afternoon because I lost my umbrella and made him go back, and the horse having ribs,” she complained, shying from a topic which contained dangerous possibilities of revealing a certain indiscretion, “I do wonder I’m here at all. And the young man was very decent about the dime in his fish—though I’m sure he burned his fingers digging for the smelling salts—for they’d already begun to sizzle—but dear me! Diane, you can’t imagine how I jarred my spine and my switch—I did think for a minute it would tumble off—and he was so quick and pleasant to collect

the nickels and hairpins. Such a pleasant, comfortable sort of chap. I remember now he was at the Sherrill's and very good-looking, too, I must say, and very lonely too, I'll wager, camping about for his health. He didn't say anything about his health, but one can see by his eyes that he's troubled about it."

"Aunt Agatha!" begged Diane helplessly in a flash of foreboding, "what in creation are you trying to say?"

"Why, Mr. Poynter, of course!" exclaimed Aunt Agatha. "The hand bag shot into his camp and spilled nickels, and I bumped into a tree and jarred my switch. And a very fine fellow he is, to be sure!"

Diane stared.

It was like Aunt Agatha to blunder into the wrong camp. And surely it was like Philip to win her favor by chance.