

## CHAPTER IV

### THE VOICE OF THE OPEN COUNTRY

“**A**UNT Agatha!” Diane rapped lightly at her aunt’s bedroom door. “Are you asleep?”

“No, no indeed!” puffed Aunt Agatha forlornly. “Certainly not. When in the world did you come back from the farm, child? I’ve worried so! And like you, too, to come back as unexpectedly as you went.” She opened the door wider for her niece to enter. “But as for sleep, Diane, I hope I’m not as callous as that. I shan’t sleep a wink to-night, I’m sure of it.”

Aunt Agatha dabbed ineffectually at her round, aggrieved eyes.

“Carl’s a terrible responsibility for me, Diane,” she went on, “though to be sure there have been wild nights when I’ve put cotton in my ears and locked the door and if I’d only remembered to do that I wouldn’t have heard the glass crash—one of the Florentine set, too, I haven’t the ghost of a doubt. I feel those things, Diane. Mamma, too, had a gift of feeling things she didn’t know for sure—mamma did!—and the servants talk—of course they do!—who wouldn’t? I must

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say, though, Carl's always kind to me; I will say that for him but —"

The excellent lady whose mental convolutions permitted her to speculate wildly in words with the least possible investment of ideas, rambled by serpentine paths of complaint to a conversational *cul-de-sac* and trailed off in a tragic sniff.

Diane resolutely smothered her impatience.

"I—I only ran down overnight, Aunt Agatha," she said, "to—to tell you something—"

"You can't mean it!" puffed Aunt Agatha helplessly. "What in the world are you going back to the farm for? Dear me, Diane, you're growing notional—and farms are very damp in spring."

Diane walked away to the window and stood staring thoughtfully out at the metropolitan glitter of lights beyond.

"Oh, Aunt Agatha!" she exclaimed restlessly, "you can't imagine how very tired I grow of it all—of lights and cities and restaurants and everything artificial! Surely these city days and nights of silly frivolity are only the froth of life! Have you ever longed to sleep in the woods," she added abruptly, "with stars twinkling overhead and the moonlight showering softly through the trees?"

"I'm very sure I never have!" said Aunt

Agatha with considerable decision. "And it's not at all likely I ever shall. There are bugs and things," she added vaguely, "and snakes that wriggle about."

"I've always wanted to lie and dream by a camp fire," mused Diane, unconscious of a certain startled flutter of Aunt Agatha's dressing gown, "to hear the wind rising in the forest and the lap of the lake against the shore." She wheeled abruptly, her eyes bright with excitement. "And I'm going to try it."

"To sleep by a lake in springtime!" gasped Aunt Agatha in great distress. "Diane, I beg of you, *don't* do it! I once knew a man who slept out somewhere—such a nice man, too!—and something bit him—a heron, I think, or a herring. No! It couldn't have been either. Isn't it funny how I do forget! Strangest thing! But to sleep by a lake in springtime, think of that!"

"Oh, no, no, no, Aunt Agatha!" laughed Diane. "I didn't mean quite that. I'm merely going back to the Glade farm to-morrow to—" she glanced with furtive uncertainty at her aunt and halted. "Aunt Agatha, I've been planning a gypsy cart! There! It's out at last and I dreaded the telling! When the summer comes, I'm going to travel about in my wonderful house on wheels and live in the free, wild, open country!"

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"I can't believe it!" said Aunt Agatha, staring. "I can't—I won't believe it!"

"Don't be a goose!" begged the girl happily. "All winter the voice of the open country has been calling—calling! There's quicksilver in my veins. See, Aunt Agatha, see the spring moon—the 'Planting Moon' an Indian girl I used to know in college called it! How gloriously it must be shining over silent woods and lakes, flashing silver on the pines and the ripples by the shore. And the sea, the great, wide, beautiful, mysterious sea droning under a million stars!"

"Think of that!" breathed Aunt Agatha incredulously. "A million stars! I can't believe it. But dear me, Diane, there are seas and stars and moons and things right here in New York."

With a swift flash of tenderness Diane slipped her arm about Aunt Agatha's perturbed shoulders.

"You're not going to mind at all!" she wheedled gently. "I'm sure of it. I'd have to go anyway. It's in my blood like the hint of summer in the air to-night."

Aunt Agatha merely stared. The Westfalls were congenital enigmas.

"A gypsy cart!" she gurgled presently, rising phoenix-like at last from a dumb-struck supineness. "A gypsy cart! Well! A wheelbarrow

wouldn't have surprised me more, Diane, a wheelbarrow with a motor!"

"Don't you remember Mrs. Jarley's wagon?" reminded Diane. "It had windows and curtains—"

"Surely," broke in Aunt Agatha with strained dignity, "you're not going in for waxworks like Mrs. Jarley!"

"Dear, no!" laughed Diane, with a sparkle of amusement in her eyes. "There are so many wild flowers and birds and legends to study I shouldn't have time!"

"Great heavens," murmured Aunt Agatha faintly, "my ears have gone queer like mother's."

"And maybe I'll not be back for a year," offered Diane calmly. "I can work south through the winter—"

Aunt Agatha fell tragically back in her chair and gasped.

"Didn't we take a whole year to motor over Europe?" demanded Diane impetuously. "And that was nothing like so fascinating as my gypsy house on wheels."

"If I could only have looked ahead!" breathed Aunt Agatha, shuddering. "If only I could have foreseen what notions you and Carl were fated to take in your heads, I'd have refused your grandfather's legacy. I would indeed. Here I no more than get Carl safely home from hunting

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Esquimaux or whatever it was up there by the North Pole—walravens, wasn't it, Diane?—well, walrus then!—than you decide to become a gypsy and sleep by a lake in springtime under a planting moon and stay outdoors all winter, collecting birds, when I fancied you were safely launched in society until you were married.”

“But Aunt Agatha,” flashed the girl, “I'm not at all anxious to marry.”

Aunt Agatha burst into a calamitous shower of tears.

“Aunt Agatha,” said Diane kindly, “why not remember that you're no longer burdened with the terrible responsibility of bringing Carl and me up? We're both mature, responsible beings.”

Aunt Agatha dabbed defiantly at her eyes.

“Well,” she said flatly, “I shan't worry, I just shan't. I'm past that. There *was* a time, but at my time of life I just can't afford it. You can do as you please. You can go shoot alligators if you want to, Diane, I shan't interpose another objection. But the trials that I've endured in my life through the Westfalls, nobody knows. I was a cheerful, happy person until I knew the Westfalls. And your father was notional too. I was a Gregg, Diane, until I married your uncle—he wasn't really your uncle, but a sort of cousin—and the Greggs, thank heavens! are mild and quiet and never wander about. Dear me, if a

Gregg should take to sleeping by a lake in spring-time under a planting moon, I would be surprised, I would indeed! There was only one in our whole family who ever galloped about to any extent—Uncle Peter Gregg—and you really couldn't blame him. Bulls were perpetually running into him, and once he fell overboard and a whale chased him to shore. Isn't it funny? Strangest thing! But there, Diane, I wonder your poor dear grandfather doesn't turn straight over in his grave—I do indeed. Many and many a time your poor father tried him sorely—and Carl's mother too." Aunt Agatha sniffed meekly.

"Will you go alone?" she ventured, wiping her eyes.

"Bless your heart, Aunt Agatha, no!" laughed Diane radiantly. "I'm going to take old Johnny Jutes with me!"

Diane kissed her aunt lightly on the forehead.

"Well," said Aunt Agatha in melancholy resignation, "if you must turn gypsy, my dear, and wander about the country, Johnny Jutes is the best one to go along. He's old and faithful and used to your whims and surely after thirty years of service, he won't break into tantrums."

Silver-sweet through the quiet house came the careless ripple of a flute, showering light and sensuous music. There was a dare-devil lilt and

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sway to the flippant strains and Aunt Agatha covered her face with her hands.

"Oh, Diane," she whispered, shuddering, "when he plays like that he drinks and drinks and drinks until morning."

"Poor Aunt Agatha!" said the girl pityingly. "What troublesome folk we Westfalls are! And I no less than Carl."

"No, no, my dear!" murmured Aunt Agatha. "It's only when Carl plays like that—that I grow afraid."

Aunt Agatha went to bed to listen tremblingly while the dare-devil dance of the flute tripped ghostlike through the corridors. And falling asleep with the laughing demon of wind and melody cascading wildly through the mad scene from Lucia, she dreamt that Carl had captured an Esquimau with his flute and weaving a suit of basket armor for him, had dispatched him by aeroplane to lead Diane's gypsy cart into the Everglades of Florida, the home-state of Norman Westfall until his ill-fated marriage.