

Diane of the Green Van

CHAPTER I

OF A GREAT WHITE BIRD UPON A LAKE

SPRING was stealing lightly over the Connecticut hills, a shy, tender thing of delicate green winging its way with witch-rod over the wooded ridges and the sylvan paths of Diane Westfall's farm. And with the spring had come a great hammering by the sheepfold and the stables where a smiling horde of metropolitan workmen, sheltered by night in the rambling old farmhouse, built an ingenious house upon wheels and flirted with the house-maids.

Radiantly the spring swept from delicate shyness into a bolder glow of leaf and flower. Dogwood snowed along the ridges, Solomon's seal flowered thickly in the bogs, and following the path to the lake one morning with Rex, a favorite St. Bernard, at her heels, Diane felt with a thrill that the summer itself had come in the night with a wind-flutter of wild flower and the fluting of nesting birds.

The woodland was deliciously green and cool

and alive with the piping of robins. Over the lake which glimmered faintly through the trees ahead came the whir and hum of a giant bird which skimmed the lake with snowy wing and came to rest like a truant gull. Of the habits of this extraordinary bird Rex, barking, frankly disapproved, but finding his mistress's attention held unduly by a chirping, bright-winged caucus of birds of inferior size and interest, he barked and galloped off ahead.

When presently Diane emerged from the lake path and halted on the shore, he was greatly excited.

There was an aeroplane upon the water and in the aeroplane a tall young man with considerable length of sinewy limb, lazily rolling a cigarette. Diane unconsciously approved the clear bronze of his lean, burned face and his eyes, blue, steady, calm as the waters of the lake he rode.

The aviator met her astonished glance with one of laughing deference even as she marveled at his genial air of staunch philosophy.

"I beg your pardon," stammered Diane, "but — but are you by any chance waiting — to be rescued?"

"Why — I — I believe I am!" exclaimed the young man readily, apparently greatly pleased

at her common sense. "At your convenience, of course!"

"Are you — er — sinking or merely there?"

"Merely here!" nodded the young man with a charming smile of reassurance. "This contraption is a — er — I — I think Dick calls it an hydro-aeroplane. It has pontoons and things growing all over it for duck stunts and if the water wasn't so infernally still, I'd be floating and smoking and likely in time I'd make shore. That's a delightful pastime for you now," he added with a lazy smile of the utmost good humor, "to float and smoke on a summer day and grab at the shore."

"I was under the impression," commented Diane critically, "that in an hydro-aeroplane one could rise from the water like a bird. I've read so recently."

"One can," smiled the shipwrecked philosopher readily, "provided his motor isn't deaf and dumb and insanely indifferent to suggestion. When it grows shy and silent, one swims eventually and drips home, unless a dog barks and a rescuer emerges from the trees equipped with sympathy and common sense. I've a mechanic back there," he added sociably. "He — he's in a tree, I think. I — er — mislaid him in a very dangerous air current."

"Are you aware," inquired the girl, biting her lip, "that you're trespassing?"

"Lord, no!" exclaimed the aviator. "You don't mean it. Have you by any chance a reputable rope anywhere about you?"

"No," said Diane maliciously, "I haven't. As a rule, I do go about equipped with ropes and hooks and things to — rescue trespassing hydro-aviators, but —" she regarded him thoughtfully. "Do you like to float about and smoke?"

The sun-browned skin of the young aviator reddened a trifle, but his eyes laughed.

"I'm an incurable optimist," he lightly countered, "or I wouldn't have tried to fly over a private lake in a borrowed aeroplane."

"I believe," said Diane disapprovingly, "that you were cutting giddy circles over the water and dipping and skimming, weren't you?"

"I did cut a monkeyshine or two," admitted the young man. "I was having a devil of a time until you — until the — er — catastrophe occurred."

"And Miss Westfall, the owner," murmured Diane with sympathy, "is addicted to firearms. Hadn't you heard? She *hunts!* The Westfalls are all very erratic and quick-tempered. Didn't you know she was at the farm?"

The young man looked exceedingly uncomfortable.

"Great guns, no!" he exclaimed. "I presumed she was safe in New York. . . . And this is her lake and her water and her waves, when there are any, and no matter how I engineer it, I've got to poach some of her property. Some of it," he added conversationally, "is in my shoe. Lord, I am in a pickle! Are you a guest of hers?"

"Yes," said Diane calmly.

"I'm staying over yonder on the hill there with Dick Sherrill," offered the young man cordially. "They are opening their place with a party of men, some crack amateur aviators — and myself. Do you know the Sherrills?"

"Perhaps I do," said Diane discouragingly. "Why didn't you float about and smoke on Mr. Sherrill's lake?" she added curiously. "It's ever so much bigger than this."

"Circumstances," began the young man with dignity, and lighted another cigarette. "My mechanician," he added volubly, after an uncomfortable interval of silence, "is an exceedingly bold young man. He'll fly over anything, even a cow. Isn't really mine either; he's borrowed, too. Dick keeps a few extra mechanicians on hand, like extra cigars. It's Dick's fault I'm out alone. He lent my mechanician to another chap and nobody else would come with me."

"I thought," flashed Diane pointedly, "I

thought your mechanician was somewhere in a tree."

The aviator coughed and reddened uncomfortably.

"Doubtless he is," he said lamely. "He—he most always is. Do you know, he spends a large part of his spare time in trees — and swamps — and once, I believe, he was discovered in a chimney. I — I'd like to tell you more about him," he went on affably. "Once —"

"Thank you," said Diane politely, "but you've really entertained me more now than one could expect from a gentleman in your distressing plight. Come, Rex." She turned back again at the hemlocks which flanked the forest path. "I'll ask Miss Westfall to send some men," she added and halted.

For Diane had surprised a look of such keen regret in the young aviator's face that they both colored hotly.

"Beastly luck!" stammered the young man lamely. "I *am* disappointed. I — I don't seem to have another match."

"Your cigarette is burning splendidly," hinted Diane coolly, "and you've a match in your hand."

For a tense, magnetic instant the keen blue eyes flashed a curious message of pleading and apology, then the aviator fell to whistling softly,

struck the match and finding no immediate function for it, dropped it in the water.

"I don't in the least mind floating about," he stammered, his eyes sparkling with silent laughter, "and possibly I'll make shore directly; but Lord love us! don't send the sharp-shooteress — please! Better abandon me to my fate."

Slim and straight as the silver birches by the water, Diane hurried away up the lake-path.

"The young man," she flashed with a stamp of her foot, "is a very great fool."

"Johnny," she said a little later to a little, be-whiskered man with cheeks like hard red winter apples, "there's a sociable, happy-go-lucky young man perched on an aeroplane in the middle of our lake. Better take a rope and rescue him. I don't think he knows enough about aeroplanes to be flying so promiscuously about the country."

Johnny Jutes collected a band of enthusiasts and departed.

"Nobody there, Miss Diane," reported young Allan Carmody upon returning; "leastwise nobody that couldn't take care of himself. Only a chap buzzin' almighty swift over the trees. Swooped down like a hawk when he saw us an' waved his hand, laughin' fit to kill himself, an' dropped Johnny a fiver an' gee! Miss Diane, but he could drive some! Swift and cool-headed

as a bird. He's whizzin' off like mad toward the Sherrill place, with his motor a-hummin' an' a-purrin' like a cat. Leanish, sunburnt chap with eyes that 'pear to be laughin' a lot."

Diane's eyes flashed resentfully and as she walked away to the house her expression was distinctly thoughtful.