

CHAPTER II

AN INDOOR TEMPEST

“IF YOU’RE broke,” said Starrett, leering, “why don’t you marry your cousin?”

Carl Granberry stared insolently across the table.

“Pass the buck,” he reminded coolly. “And pour yourself some more whiskey. You’re only a gentleman when you’re drunk, Starrett. You’re sober now.”

Payson and Wherry laughed. Starrett, not yet in the wine-flush of his heavy courtesy, passed the buck with a frown of annoyance.

A log blazed in the library fireplace, staining with warm, rich shadows the square-paneled ceiling of oak and the huge war-beaten slab of table-wood about which the men were gathered, both feudal relics brought to the New York home of Carl Granberry’s uncle from a ruined castle in Spain.

“If you’ve gone through all your money,” resumed Starrett offensively, “I’d marry Diane.”

“*Miss* Westfall!” purred Carl correctively. “You’ve forgotten, Starrett, my cousin’s name is Westfall, *Miss* Westfall.”

"Diane!" persisted Starrett.

With one of his incomprehensible whims, Carl swept the cards into a disorderly heap and shrugged.

"I'm through," he said curtly. "Wherry, take the pot. You need it."

"Damned irregular!" snapped Starrett sourly.

"So?" said Carl, and stared the recalcitrant into sullen silence. Rising, he crossed to the fire, his dark, impudent eyes lingering reflectively upon Starrett's moody face.

"Starrett," he mused, "I wonder what I ever saw in you anyway. You're infernally shallow and alcoholic and your notions of poker are as distorted as your morals. I'm not sure but I think you'd cheat." He shrugged wearily. "Get out," he said collectively. "I'm tired."

Starrett rose, sneering. There had been a subtle change to-night in his customary attitude of parasitic good-fellowship.

"I'm tired, too!" he exclaimed viciously. "Tired of your infernal whims and insults. You're as full of inconsistencies as a lunatic. When you ought to be insulted, you laugh, and when a fellow least expects it, you blaze and rave and stare him out of countenance. And I'm tired of drifting in here nights at your beck and call, to be sent home like a kid when your

mood changes. Mighty amusing for us! If you're not vivisectioning our lives and characters for us in that impudent, philosophical way you have, you're preaching a sermon that you couldn't—and wouldn't—follow yourself. And then you end by messing everybody's cards in a heap and sending us home with the last pot in Dick Wherry's pocket whether it belongs there or not. I tell you, I'm tired of it."

Carl laughed, a singularly musical laugh with a note of mockery in it.

"Who," he demanded elaborately, "who ever heard of a treasonous barnacle before? A barnacle, Starrett, adheres and adheres, parasite to the end as long as there's liquid, even as you adhered while the ship was keeled in gold. Nevertheless, you're right. I'm all of what you say and more that you haven't brains enough to fathom. And some that you can't fathom is to my credit—and some of it isn't. As, for instance, my inexplicable poker *penchant* for you."

To Starrett, hot of temper and impulse, his graceful mockery was maddening. Cursing under his breath, he seized a glass and flung it furiously at his host, who laughed and moved aside with the litheness of a panther. The glass crashed into fragments upon the wall of the marble fireplace. Payson and Wherry hurriedly

pushed back their chairs. Then, suddenly conscious of a rustle in the doorway, they all turned.

Wide dark eyes flashing with contempt, Diane Westfall stood motionless upon the threshold. The aesthete in Carl thrilled irresistibly to her vivid beauty, intensified to-night by the angry flame in her cheeks and the curling scarlet of her lips. There were no semi-tones in Diane's dark beauty, Carl reflected. It was a thing of sable and scarlet, and the gold-brown satin of her gypsy skin was warm with the tints of an autumn forest. Carelessly at his ease, Carl noted how the bold eyes of the painted Spanish grandee above the mantel, the mild eyes of the saint in the Tintoretto panel across the room and the flashing eyes of Diane seemed oddly to converge to a common center which was Starrett, white and ill at ease. And of these the eyes of Diane were loveliest.

With the swift grace which to Carl's eyes always bore in it something of the primitive, Diane swept away, and the staring tableau dissolved into a trio of discomfited men of whom Carl seemed but an indifferent onlooker.

"Well," fumed Starrett irritably, "why in thunder don't you say something?"

"Permit me," drawled Carl impudently, with a lazy flicker of his lashes, "to apologize for my cousin's untimely intrusion. I really fancied she

was safe at the farm. Unfortunately, the house belongs to her. Besides, your crystal gymnastics, Starrett, were as unscheduled as her arrival. As it is, you've nobly demonstrated an unalterable scientific fact. The collision of marble and glass is unvaryingly eventful."

Bellowing indignantly, Starrett charged into the hallway, followed by Payson. Presently the outer door slammed violently behind them. Wherry lingered.

Carl glanced curiously at his flushed and boyish face.

"Well?" he queried lightly.

Wherry colored.

"Carl," he stammered, "you've been talking a lot about parasites to-night and I'd like you to know that—money hasn't made a jot of difference to me." He met Carl's laughing glance with dogged directness and for a second something flamed boyishly in his face from which Carl, frowning, turned away.

"Why don't you break away from this sort of thing, Dick?" he demanded irritably. "Starrett and myself and all the rest of it. You're sapping the splendid fires of your youth and inherent decency in unholy furnaces. Yes, I know Starrett drags you about with him and you daren't offend him because he's your chief, but you're clever and you can get another job.

In ten years, as you're going now, you'll be an alcoholic ash-heap of jaded passions. What's more, you have infernal luck at cards and you haven't money enough to keep on losing so heavily. Half of the poker sermons Starrett's been growling about were preached for you."

Now there were mad, irreverent moments when Carl Granberry delivered his poker sermons with the eloquent mannerisms of the pulpit, save, as Payson held, they were infinitely more logical and eloquent, but to-night, husking his logic of these externals, he fell flatly to preaching an unadorned philosophy of continence acutely at variance with his own habits.

Wherry stared wonderingly at the tall, lithe figure by the fire.

"Carl," he said at last, "tell me, are you honestly in earnest when you rag the fellows so about work and decency and all that sort of thing?"

Carl yawned and lighted a cigar.

"I believe," said he, "in the eternal efficacy of good. I believe in the telepathic potency of moral force. I believe in physical conservation for the eugenic good of the race and mental dominance over matter. But I'm infernally lazy myself, and it's easy to preach. It's even easier to create a counter-philosophy of condonance and individualism, and I'm alternately an ethical ego-

ist, a Fabian socialist and a cynic. Moreover, I'm a creature of whims and inconsistencies and there are black nights in my temperament when John Barleycorn lightens the gloom; and there are other nights when he treacherously deepens it—but I'm peculiarly balanced and subject to irresistible fits of moral atrophy. All of which has nothing at all to do with the soundness of my impersonal philosophy. Wherefore," with a flash of his easy impudence, "when I preach, I mean it—for the other fellow."

Wherry glanced at the handsome face of his erratic friend with frank allegiance in his eyes.

Carl flung his cigar into the fire, poured himself some whiskey and pushed the decanter across the table.

"Have a drink," he said whimsically.

Dick obeyed. It was an inconsistent supplement to the sermon but characteristic.

"Carl," he said, flushing under the ironical battery of the other's eyes, "I don't think I understand you—"

Carl laughed.

"Nobody does," he said. "I don't myself."