

CHAPTER III

A WHIM

THE fire in the marble fireplace died down, leaping in fitful shadow over the iron-bound doors riveted in nail-heads. They too were relics from the Spanish castle which Norman Westfall had stripped of its ancient appurtenances to fashion an appropriate setting for the beautiful young Spanish wife whose death at the birth of Diane had goaded him to suicide. That Norman Westfall had regarded the vital spark within him as an indifferent thing to be snuffed out at the will of the clay it dominated, was consistent with the Westfall intolerance of custom and convention.

By the fire Carl smoked and stared at the dying embers. For all his insolent habit of dominance and mockery he was keenly sensitive and to-night the significant defection of Starrett and Payson after months of sycophantic friendship, had made him quiver inwardly like a hurt child. Only Wherry had stayed with him when his career of reckless expenditure had arrived at its inevitable goal of ruin.

There remained, financially, what? Barely

four thousand a year in securities so iron-bound by his mother's will that he could not touch them.

Black resentment flamed hotly up in his heart at the memory of the Westfall custom of willing the bulk of the great estate to the oldest son. It had left his mother with a patrimony which Carl, inheriting, had chosen contemptuously to regard as a dwarfish thing of gold sufficient only for the heedless purchase of one flaming, brilliant hour of life. That husbanded it might purchase a lifetime of gray hours tinged intermittently with rose or crimson, Carl had dismissed with a cynical laugh, quoting Omar Khayyam.

Starrett had sneeringly suggested that, to remedy his fallen fortunes—he might marry Diane! Carl laughed softly but recalling suddenly how Diane had looked as she stood in the doorway, the flame of her honest anger setting off her primitive grace, he frowned thoughtfully at the fire, swayed by one of the mad, reckless whims which frequently rocketed through his brain to heedless consummation. Wherefore he presently dispatched a servant to Diane with a note scribbled carelessly upon the face of the ace of diamonds.

"May I see you?" it ran. "I am still in the library. If you like, I'll come up."

She came to the library, frankly surprised. Carl rarely saw fit to apologize or seek advice.

With his ready gallantry, habitually colored

by a subtle sex-mockery, Carl rose, drew a chair for her and leaned against the mantel, smiling.

"I'm sorry," said he civilly, "I'm sorry Starrett so far forgot himself."

"So am I," said Diane. "Bacchanalian tableaux are not at all to my liking."

"Nor mine," admitted Carl. "As an aesthete I must own that Starrett is too fat for a really graceful villain. I fancied you were indefinitely domiciled at the farm. Aunt Agatha has been fussing—"

"I was," nodded Diane. "A whim of mine brought me home."

Carl dropped easily into a chair and glanced at his cousin's profile. The delicate oval of her face was firelit; her night-black hair one with the deeper shadows of the room. There was mystery in the lovely dusk of Diane's eyes—and discontent—and something mute and wistful crying for expression.

"I've a proposition to make," said Carl lightly. "It's partly commercial, partly belated justice, partly eugenic and partly personal."

"Your money is quite gone, is it not?" asked Diane, raising finely arched expressive eyebrows.

"It is," admitted Carl ruefully. "My career as a bibulous meteor is over. Last night, after an exquisite shower of golden fire, I came tumbling to earth in the fashion of meteors, a disil-

lusioned stone. In other words—stone broke. May I smoke?"

"Assuredly."

Carl lighted a cigarette.

"And the proposition which is at the same time commercial, eugenic and—er—personal?" reminded Diane curiously. Carl ignored the delicate note of sarcasm.

"It is merely," he said with a flash of impudence, "that you will marry me."

Diane's eyes widened.

"How frankly commercial!" she murmured.

"Isn't it?" said Carl. "And an excellent opportunity for belated justice as well. My mother, save for our infernal Salic law of inheritance, was entitled to half the Westfall estate."

Diane stared curiously at the fire-rimmed hem of her satin skirt. There was something of Carl's lazy impudence in the arch of her eyebrows.

"There yet remains the eugenic inducement and, I believe, a personal one!" she hinted.

"Thank heaven," exclaimed Carl devoutly, "that we're both logicians. The eugenic consideration is that by birth and brains and breeding I am your logical mate."

Diane's eyes flashed with swift contempt.

"Birth!" she repeated.

The black demon of ungovernable temper leaped brutally from Carl's eyes. Leaning for-

ward he caught the girl's hands in a vicious grip that hurt her cruelly though for all her swift color she did not flinch.

"Listen, Diane," he said, his face very white; "if there is one thing in this rotten world of custom and convention and immoral morality which I honestly respect, it is the memory of my mother. Therefore you will please abstain from contemptuous reference to her by look or word."

Diane met the clear, compelling rebuke of his fine eyes with unwavering directness.

"My mother," said Carl steadily, "was a fine, big, splendid woman, unconventional like all the Westfalls, and a century ahead of her time. Moreover, she had a code of morality quite her own. If Aunt Agatha's shocked sensibilities had not eliminated her from your life so early, contact with her broad understanding of things would have tempered your sex insularity." He glanced pityingly at Diane. "You've fire and vision, Diane," he said bluntly, "but you're intolerant. It's a Westfall trait." He laughed softly. "How scornfully you used to laugh and jeer at boys, because you were swifter of foot and keener of vision than any of them, because you could leap and run and swim like a wild thing! Intolerance again, Diane, even as a youngster!"

He rose restlessly, smiling down at her with a lazy expression of deference in his eyes.

"Wonderful, beautiful lady of fire and

ebony!" he said gently, with a bewildering change of mood which brought the vivid color to Diane's dark cheek. "There's the wild, sweet wine of the forest in your very blood! And it's always calling!"

"Yes," nodded Diane wistfully, "it's always calling. How did you know?"

"By the wizardry of eye and intuition!" he laughed lightly. "And the personal consideration," he added pleasantly; "we've come at last to that."

A tide of color swept brightly over Diane's face.

"Surely, Carl," she exclaimed with a swift, level glance, "you don't mean that you care?"

"No," said Carl honestly, "I don't. I mean just this. Will you permit me to care? To-night as you stood there in the doorway I knew for the first time that, if I chose, I could love you very greatly."

"Love isn't like that," flashed Diane. "It comes unbidden."

"To different natures come different dawns of the immortal white fire!" shrugged Carl. "My love will be largely a matter of will. I'm armored heavily."

"For a golden key!" scoffed Diane, rising.

"Ah, well," said Carl impudently, "it was well worth a try! I'm sure I could love with all the fiery appurtenances of the Devil himself if I shed the armor."