

## CHAPTER VIII

### AFTER SUNSET

THE sun had set. Back from his flight over the hills with Sherrill, Philip had bathed and shaved, whistling thoughtfully to himself. Now as he descended the steep Sherrill lane to the valley, ravine and hollow were already dark with twilight. From the rustling trees arching the lane overhead came the occasional sleepy chirp and flutter of a bird. Off somewhere in the gathering dusk a lonely owl hooted eerily. Still there was storm in the warm, sweet air to-night and back yonder over the hills to the north, the sky brightened fitfully with lightning.

Slipping his hand carelessly into his coat pocket for a pipe, Philip laughed.

"My Lord!" said he lightly. "The hieroglyphical cuff! I should have given that to the Baron. . . . Themar," added Philip, packing his pipe, "is an infernal bounder!"

Diane's camp lay barely two miles to the west. Homing at sunset Philip had veered and circled over it. Now as he turned westward toward the river, the nature of his errand chafed him sorely.

"Nor can I see," mused Philip, puffing uncom-

fortably at his pipe, "why in the devil he wants to know!"

A soft, warm nose suddenly insinuated itself into his hand with a frank bid for attention and Philip turned. A shaggy, soft-footed shadow was wagging along at his heels, Dick's favorite setter.

"Hello, old top!" exclaimed Philip cheerfully. "When did you hit the trail?"

Old Top barked joyously but didn't appear to remember.

"Well," said Philip, lazily patting the dog's head, "you're welcome anyway. I'm a diplomat to-night," he added humorously, "bound upon a 'mission of exceeding delicacy' and only a companion of your extraordinary reticence and discretion would be welcome."

Man and dog turned aside into a crossroad. It was very dark now, the only spot of cheer save for the lightning behind the hills, the coal of Philip's pipe.

"Tell me, old man," begged Philip whimsically, "what would you do? May we not wander casually into camp and look at my beautiful gypsy lady without fussing unduly about this infernal mission? More and more do we dislike it. And in the morning we may respectfully rebel. Ah, an excellent point, Nero. To be sure our chief will be very smooth and insistent but we ourselves,

you recall, have possibilities of extreme firmness. And the lady is Diane, though we only call her that, old top, among ourselves.

"Splendid decision!" exclaimed Philip presently with intense satisfaction. "Nero, you've been an umpire. We'll rebel. Nevertheless, we must assure ourselves that the camp of our lady is ready for storm."

It was. Following a forest path, Philip presently caught the flicker of a camp fire ahead. There was a huge tarpaulin over the wagon and a canopy above the horses. Storm-proof tents loomed dimly among the trees. A brisk little man whose apple cheeks and grizzled whiskers Philip instantly approved, trotted importantly about among the horses, humming a jerky melody. Johnny was fifty and looked a hundred, but those unwary ones who had felt the steely grip of his sinewy fingers were apt evermore to respect him.

Diane was piling wood upon the fire with the careless grace of a splendid young savage. The light of the camp fire danced ruddily upon her slim, brown arms and throat bared to the rising wind. A beautiful, restless gypsy of fire and wind, she looked, at one with the storm-haunted wood about her.

There came a patter of rain upon the forest leaves. The tents were flapping and the fire

began to flare. There were curious wind crackles all about him, and Nero had begun to sniff and whine. Somewhere—off there among the trees—Philip fancied he caught the stealthy pad of a footfall and the crackle of underbrush. Every instinct of his body focusing wildly upon the thought of harm to Diane, he whirled swiftly about, colliding as he did so with something—vague, formless, heavy—that leaped, crouching, from the shadows and bore him to the ground. The lightning flared savagely upon steel. Philip felt a blinding thud upon his head, a sharp, stinging agony along his shoulder.

Somewhere in the forest—a great way off he thought—a dog was barking furiously.