

CHAPTER XXI

AT THE GRAY OF DAWN

IT WAS very quiet in the wood by the river. A late moon swung its golden censer above the water by invisible chains, marking checkered aisles of light in the silent wood, burnishing elfin rosaries of dew, touching with cool, white fingers of benediction the leaf-cowled heads of stately trees. Like lines of solemn smoke they stood listening raptly to the deep, full chant of the moving river. The sylvan mass of the night was a thing of infinite peace and mystery, of silence and solemnity.

Into the hush of the moonlit night came presently a jarring note, the infernal racket of a motorcycle. Philip, a lone sentry by the camp of his lady, stirred and frowned. The clatter ceased. Once again the lap of the restless river and the rustle of trees were the only sounds in the silent wood. Philip glanced at the muffled figure of the minstrel asleep on the ground by the dead embers of the camp fire, and leaning carelessly upon his elbow, fell again into the train of thought disturbed by the clatter.

“Herodotus!” said Philip. “Hum!” And roused to instant alertness by the crackle of a

twig in the forest, he glanced sharply roadwards where the trees thinned.

There was something moving stealthily along in the shadows. With narrowed eyes the sentry noiselessly flattened himself upon the ground and fell to watching.

A stealthy crackle—and silence. A moving shadow—a halt!

A patch of moonlight lay ahead. For an interval which to Philip seemed unending, there was no sound or movement, then a figure glided swiftly through the patch of moonlight and approached the camp. It was a man in the garb of a motorcyclist.

Noiselessly Philip shifted his position. The cyclist crept to the shelter of a tree and halted.

The moon now hung above the wood. Its light, showering softly through the trees as the night wind swayed the branches, fell presently upon the camp and the face of the cyclist.

It was Themar.

Now as Philip watched, Themar crouched suddenly and fell to staring at the muffled figure by the camp fire. For an interval he crouched motionless; then with infinite caution he moved to the right. A branch swept his cap back from his forehead and Philip saw now that his face was white and staring.

And in that instant as he glanced at the horri-

fied face of the Houdanian, Philip knew. The stained skin, the smooth-shaven chin and lip of the minstrel — if Themar had found them puzzling, the revelation had come to him, as it had come to Philip, in a flash of bewilderment.

With a bound, the startled American was on his feet, stealing rapidly toward the man by the tree. To the spying, the mystery, the infernal trickery and masquerading which dogged his lady's trail, Themar held the key, wherefore —

Cursing, Philip forged ahead. The carpet of dry twigs beneath him had betrayed his approach and Themar was running wildly through the forest.

On and on they went, stumbling and flying through the moonlit wood to the towpath. But Philip was much the better runner and soon caught the fleeing cyclist by the collar with a grip of steel.

“Poynter!” panted Themar, staring.

“At your service!” Mr. Poynter assured him and politely begged instant and accurate knowledge of a number of things, of a knife and a bullet, of Themar's spying, of a cuff, of the man by the fire who read Herodotus, of a motorcyclist seeking for days to overtake a nomad.

“I — I dare not tell,” faltered Themar, moistening his lips. “I — I am bound by an oath —”

“To spy and steal and murder!”

Themar stared sullenly at the river, gray now with the coming dawn. His dark face was drawn and haggard.

And again Mr. Poynter shot a volley of questions and awaited the answers with dangerous quiet.

Shaking, Themar refused again to answer. With even more quietness and courtesy Philip obligingly gave him a final opportunity and finding Themar white and inexorable, smiled.

"Very well, then," said Mr. Poynter warmly, "I'll take it out of your hide." Which he proceeded to do with that consummate thoroughness which characterized his every action, husbanding the strength of his long, lean arms until a knife appeared in Themar's hand. Then in deadly silence Mr. Poynter reduced his treacherous assailant to a battered hulk upon the towpath.

A mule bell tinkled in the quiet.

Upstream on the path between canal and river two mules appeared with a man slouching heavily behind them. The towline led to a grimy scow which loomed out of the misty stillness like a heavier drift of the dawn itself.

"Hello!" Philip hailed the mule driver.

"What's wantin'?" asked the man and halted.

Philip indicated Themar with his foot.

"Here is a gentleman," he explained, "whom I discovered lurking about my camp a while ago.

He showed me his knife and I've mussed him up a bit."

The mule-driver bent over Themar and sharply scanned the dark, foreign face.

"One o' them damned black-and-tans, eh?" he growled. "They're too ready with their knives. What ye goin' to do with him?"

"I'm wondering," shrugged Philip, smoothing his rumpled hair back from his forehead with the palm of his hand, "if you'll permit me to pay his passage to a hospital, the farther away, the better."

The mule-driver glanced searchingly at Mr. Poynter's face. Apparently satisfied, he cupped his mouth with his hands and called "Ho, Jem!"

"Jem" jerked sharply at the tiller and presently the scow scraped the shore. The mule-driver consigned the care of his mules to Philip and scrambled down the grassy bank to the edge of the water.

"Where ye want him took?" demanded Jem, scratching a bristling shock of hair which glimmered through the dawn like a thicket of spikes.

"Well," said Mr. Poynter indifferently, "where are you going?"

Jem named a town many miles away. The mule-driver looked hard again at Philip.

"Gawd, young feller," he admired, "you're a cool un all right!"

“Take him there,” said Philip with the utmost composure. “Deliver him somewhere a reasonable distance off for repairs and I’ll pay you fifty dollars.”

“See here,” broke in Jem, somewhat staggered by the careless manner in which Mr. Poynter handled fortunes, “hain’t no foul play about this here, eh? Asher says he’s mussed up considerable.”

“Asher’s right,” admitted Mr. Poynter modestly. “I did the best I could, of course. Come up and look him over. He’s decorated mournfully with fist marks, but nothing worse. There’s his knife.”

After a somewhat cautious inspection, Themar was hoisted aboard the scow and harnessed discreetly with ropes. Jem shared his companion’s distrust of black-and-tans. With a tinkle of mule-bells the cortege faded away into the gray of dawn.

Later, Mr. Poynter discovered an abandoned motorcycle by the roadside, which with some little malice he had crated at the nearest town and dispatched to Baron Tregar.

Thereafter, after a warning talk with Johnny, Philip slept by day and watched by night.