

## CHAPTER XXV

### A DECEMBER SNOW STORM

AS THE dusty wanderers wound slowly down into southern Georgia on a mild bright day, a December snow storm broke with flake and flurry over the Westfall farm. Whirling, crooning, pirouetting, the mad white ghost swept down from the hills and hurled itself with a rattle of shutters and stiffened boughs against the frozen valley. By nightfall the wind was wailing eerily through the chimneys; but the checkerboard panes of light one glimpsed through the trees of the Westfall lane were bright and cheery.

In the comfortable sitting room of the farmhouse, Carl rose and drew the shades, added a log to the great, open fireplace and glanced humorously at his companion who was industriously playing Canfield.

"Well, Dick," said he, "on with your overcoat. Now that supper's done, we've a tramp ahead of us."

Wherry rebelled.

"Oh, Lord, Carl!" he exclaimed. "Hear the wind!" He rose and drew aside the shade. "The lane's thick with snow. Heavens, man, it's no

night for a tramp. Allan's coming in with the mail and he looks like a snow man."

"You promised," reminded Carl inexorably. "How long since you've had a drink, Dick?"

"Nine weeks!" said Wherry, his boyish face kindling suddenly with pride.

"And your eyes and skin are clear and you're lean and hard as a race horse. But what a fight! What a fight!" Carl slipped his arm suddenly about the other's broad shoulders. "Come on, Dick," he urged gently. "It's discipline and endurance to-night. I want you to fight this icy wind and grit your teeth against it. Every battle won makes a force furrow in your will."

He met Wherry's eyes and smiled with a flash of the irresistible magnetism which somehow awoke unconscious response in those who beheld it. It flamed now in Wherry's clear young eyes, a look of dumb fidelity such as one sees now and then in the eyes of a faithful animal. Such a look had flashed at times in the bloated face of Hunch Dorrigan, in the eyes of young Allan Carmody here at the farm, and—in early manhood when Carl had lazily set a college by the ears—in the eyes of Philip Poynter. It was the nameless force which the faculty had dreaded, for it sent men flocking at the heels of one whose daring whims were as incomprehensible as they were unexpected and original.

Young Allan brought the mail in and Carl smilingly tossed a letter to Wherry, who colored and slipped it in his pocket with an air of studied indifference.

Carl slit the two directed to himself and rapidly scanned their contents. One was from Ann Sherrill jogging his memory about a promise to come to Palm Beach in January, the other from Aunt Agatha, whose trip to her cousin's in Indiana Carl had encouraged with a great flood of relief, for it had made possible this nine weeks with Wherry at the Glade Farm.

Two steps at a time, Wherry bounded up to his room. When he returned he was in better spirits than he had been for months.

"Come on, Carl," he exclaimed boyishly. "I'll walk down any gale to-night. And Allan says we're in for a blizzard."

Breasting the biting gale, the two men swung out through the snowy lane to the roadway.

Carl watched his companion in silence. It was a test—this wind—to see how much of a man had been made from the flabby, drunken wreck he had dragged to the Glade Farm weeks ago with a masterful command. It had been a bitter fight, with days of heavy sullenness on Wherry's part and swift apology when the mood was gone, days of hard riding and walking, of icy plunges after a racking grind of exercise for



which Carl himself with his splendid strength inexorably set the pace, days of fierce rebellion when he had calmly thrashed his suffering young guest into submission and locked him in his room, days of horrible choking remorse and pleading when Carl had grimly turned away from the pitiful wreck Starrett had made of his clever young secretary.

Once Starrett had motored up officiously to bully Wherry into coming back to him. Carl smiled. Starrett had stumbled back to his waiting motor with a broken rib and a bruised and swollen face. Starrett was a coward—he would not come again.

Carl glanced again at Wherry. It was a man who walked beside him to-night. The battle was over. Chin up, shoulders squared against the bitter wind, he walked with the free, full stride of health and new endurance, tossing the snow from his dark, heavy hair with a laugh. There was clear red in his face and his eyes were shining.

Five miles in the teeth of a sleety blizzard and every muscle ached with the fight.

“Dick,” said Carl suddenly, “I’m proud of you.”

Wherry swung sturdily on his heel.

“But you won for me, Carl,” he said quietly. “I’ll not forget that.”

In silence they tramped back through the heavy

drifts to the farmhouse and left their snowy coats in the great warm kitchen where the Carmodys — old Allan and young Allan, young, shy, pretty Mary and old Mary, the sole winter servants of the Glade — were mulling cider over a red-hot stove.

By the fire in the sitting room Dick faced his host with hot color in his face.

“Carl,” he said with an effort, “my letter tonight — it’s from a girl up home in Vermont. I — I’ve never spoken of her before — I wasn’t fit —”

“Yes?” said Carl.

“She’s a little bit of a girl with wonderful eyes,” said Wherry, his eyes gentle. “We used to play a lot by the brook, Carl, until I went away to college and forgot. I — I wrote her the whole wretched mess,” he choked. “She says come back.”

“Yes,” said Carl sombrely, “there are fine, big splendid women like that. I’m glad you know one. God knows what the world of men would do without them. You’ll go back to her?”

Wherry gulped courageously.

“If — if you think I’m fit,” he said, his face white. “If you feel you can trust me, I’ll go in the morning.”

“I know I can trust you,” said Carl with his swift, ready smile. “I know, old man, that you’ll not forget.”

"No," said Dick, "I can't forget."

"Tell me," Carl bent and turned the log. "What will you do now, Dick? I know your head was turned a bit by the salary Starrett gave you, but you'll not go back to that sort of work for a while anyway, will you?"

"No," said Dick. "If I knew something of scientific farming," he added after a while, "I think I'd stay home. Dad's a doctor, a kindly, old-fashioned chap. I—I'd like to have you know him, Carl—he's a bully sort. He's living up there in Vermont on a farm that's never been developed to its full possibilities. It's the best farm in the valley, but, you see, he hasn't the time and he's growing old—"

"Why not take a course at an agricultural college?"

Wherry colored.

"I haven't the money, Carl," he acknowledged honestly. "Most of Dad's savings went to see me through college. I've a little—"

"Would a thousand a year see you through, with what you've got?" asked Carl quietly.

But Wherry did not answer. He had walked away to the window, shaking. Presently he turned back to the table, but his face was white and his eyes dark with agony. Dropping into a chair he buried his face in his hands, unnerved at the end of his fight by Carl's offer.



Wisely the man by the fire let him fight it out by himself and for an interval there was no sound in the quiet room save the crackle of the log and the great choking breaths of the boy by the table, whose head had fallen forward on his outstretched arms.

Carl threw his cigar into the fire and rose.

“Brace up, Dick!” he said at length. “We’ve been touching the high spots up here and you were strung to a tension that had to break.” He crossed to Wherry and laid his hand heavily on the boy’s heaving shoulder. “Now, Dick, I want you to listen to me. I’m going to see you through an agricultural college and you’re not going to tell me I can’t afford it. I know it already. But I’ve four thousand a year and that’s so far off from what I need to live in my way — that a thousand or so one way or the other wouldn’t make any more difference than a snowflake in hell. I owe you something anyway — God knows! — for supplying the model that sent you to perdition. If you hadn’t paid me the ingenuous compliment of unremitting imitation, you’d have been a sight better off. . . . And you’re going to marry the white little girl with the beautiful eyes and the wonderful, sweet forgiving decency of heart, and bring up a crowd of God-fearing youngsters, make over the old doctor’s farm for him — and

likely his life—and begin afresh. That's all I ask. Now to bed with you."

Wherry wrung Carl's hand, and after a passionate, incoherent storm of gratitude stumbled blindly from the room.

The old house grew very quiet. Presently to the crackle of the fire and the wild noise of the wind outside was added the soft and melancholy lilt of a flute. There was no mockery or impudence in the strain to-night. It was curiously of a piece with the creaking loneliness of the ancient farmhouse and so soft at times that the clash of the frozen branches against the house engulfed it utterly.

Sombre, swayed by a surge of deep depression, the flutist lay back in his chair by the fire, piping moodily upon the friend he always carried in his pocket. To-morrow Dick would be off to the girl in Vermont—

The clock struck twelve. The rural world was wrapped in slumber. Above-stairs Dick was sleeping the sound, dreamless sleep of healthy weariness, and most likely dreaming of the girl by the brook. A cleansed body and a cleansed mind, thank God! So had he slept for nights while the inexorable master of his days, with no companion but his flute, drank and drank until dawn, climbing up to bed at cockcrow—sometimes



drunk and morose, sometimes a grim and conscious master of the bottle.

Carl had been drinking wildly, heavily for months. That in flagellating Wherry's body day by day he spared not himself, was characteristic of the man and of his will. That he preached and dragged a man from the depths of hell by day and deliberately descended into infernal abysses by night, was but another revelation of the wild, inconsistent humors which tore his soul. Youth and indomitable physique gave him as yet clear eyes and muscles of iron, for all he abused them, but the humors of his soul from day to day grew blacker.

Kronberg, a new servant Carl had brought with him to the Glade for personal attendance, presently brought in his nightly tray of whiskey.

Carl glanced at the bottle and frowned.

"Take it away!" he said curtly.

Kronberg obeyed.

A little later, white and very tired, Carl went up to bed.

Dick went in the morning. At the door, after chatting nervously to cover the surge of emotion in his heart, he held out his hand. Neither spoke.

"Carl," choked Wherry at last, meeting the other's eyes with a glance of wild imploring, "so help me God, I'll run straight. You know that?"

"Yes," said Carl truthfully, "I know it."

An interval of desperate silence, then: "I—I can't thank you, old man, I—I'd like to but—"

"No," said Carl. "I wish you wouldn't."

And Wherry, wildly wringing his hand for the last time, was off to the sleigh waiting in the lane, a lean, quivering lad with blazing eyes of gratitude and a great choke in his throat as he waved at Carl, who smiled back at him with lazy reassurance through the smoke of a cigarette.

Carl's day was restless and very lonely. By midnight he was drinking heavily, having accepted the tray this time and dismissed Kronberg for the night. Though the snow had abated some the night before, and ceased in the morning, it was again whirling outside in the lane with the wild abandon of a Bacchante. The wind too was rising and filling the house with ghostly creaks.

It was one of those curious nights when John Barleycorn chose to be kind—when mind and body stayed alert and keen. Carl lazily poured some whiskey in the fire and watched the flame burn blue. He could not rid his mind of the doctor's farm and the girl in Vermont.

Again the wind shook the farmhouse and danced and howled to its crazy castanetting. There was a creak in the hallway beyond. Last night, too, when he had been talking to Wherry, there had been such a creak and for the moment,

he recalled vividly, there had been no wind. Then, disturbed by Dick's utter collapse, he had carelessly dismissed it. Now with his brain dangerously edged by the whiskey and his mind brooding intently over a series of mysterious and sinister adventures which had enlivened his summer, he rose and stealing catlike to the door, flung it suddenly back.

Kronberg, his dark, thin-lipped face ashen, fell headlong into the room with a revolver in his hand.

With the tigerish agility which had served him many a time before Carl leaped for the revolver and smiling with satanic interest leveled it at the man at his feet.

"So," said he softly, "you, too, are a link in the chain. Get up!"

Sullenly Kronberg obeyed.

"If you are a good shot," commented Carl coolly, "the bullet you sent from this doorway would have gone through my head. That was your intention?"

Kronberg made no pretense of reply.

"You've been here nine weeks," sympathized Carl, "and were cautious enough to wait until Wherry departed. What a pity you were so delayed! Caution, my dear Kronberg, if I may fall into epigram, is frequently and paradoxically the mother of disaster. As for instance



your own case. I imagine you're a blunderer anyway," he added impudently; "your fingers are too thick. If you hadn't been so anxious to learn when Wherry was likely to go," guessed Carl suddenly, "you wouldn't have listened and creaked at the keyhole last night. And more than likely you'd have gotten that creak over on me to-night."

Kronberg's shifting glance roved desperately to the doorway.

"Try it," invited Carl pleasantly. "Do. And I'll help you over the threshold with a little lead. Do you know the way to the attic door in the west wing?"

Kronberg, gulping with fear, said he did not. He was shaking violently.

"Get the little lamp on the mantel there," commanded Carl curtly, "and light it. Bring it here. Now you will kindly precede me to the door I spoke of. I'll direct you. If you bolt or cry out, I'll send a bullet through your head. So that you may not be tempted to waste your blood and brains, if you have any, and my patience, pray recall that the Carmodys are snugly asleep by now in the east wing and the house is large. They couldn't hear you."

It was the older portion of the house and one which by reason of its draughts was rarely used in winter, to which Carl drove his shaking

prisoner. In summer it was cool and pleasant. In winter, however, it was cut off from heat and habitation by lock and key.

At Carl's curt direction Kronberg turned the key in the door and passed through the icy file of rooms beyond to the second floor, thence to a dusty attic where the sweep of the wind and snow seemed very close, and on to an ancient cluster of storerooms. Years back when the old farmhouse had been an inn, shivering servants had made these chill and dusty rooms more habitable. Now with the deserted wing below and the wind-feet of the Bacchante on the roof above, they were inexpressibly lonely and dreary.

Kronberg bit his lip and shuddered. His fear of the grim young guard behind him had been subtly aggravated by the desolation of his destined jail.

Halting in the doorway of an inner room, Carl held the light high and nodded with approval.

Its dim rays fell upon dust and cobwebs, trunks and the nondescript relics of years of hoarding. There were no windows; only a skylight above clouded by the whirl of the storm.

Carl seated himself upon a trunk, placed the lamp beside him and directed his guest to a point opposite. Kronberg, with dark, fascinated eyes glued upon the glittering steel in his jailer's hand, obeyed.

"Kronberg," said Carl coldly, "there's a lot I want to know. Moreover, I'm going to know it. Nor shall I trust to drunken jailers as I did a while back with a certain compatriot of yours. Late last spring when you sought employment at my cousin's town-house, you were already, I presume, a link in the chain. If my memory serves me correctly, you were dismissed after ten days of service, through no fault of your own. The house was closed for the summer. You came to me again this fall with a letter of recommendation from Mrs. Westfall. Knowing my aunt," reflected Carl dryly, "that is really very humorous. What were you doing in the meantime?"

Carl shifted the lamp that its pale fan of light might fall full upon the other's face.

"Let me tell you—do!" said he. "For I'm sure I know. During the summer, my dear Kronberg, I was the victim of a series of peculiar and persistent attacks. To a growing habit of unremitting vigilance and suspicion, I may thank my life. As for the peaceful monotony of the last nine weeks, doubtless I may attribute that to the constant companionship of Wherry, the fact that you were much too unpopular with the Carmodys as a foreigner to find an opportunity of poisoning my food, and that I've fallen into the discreet and careful habit of always drinking



from a fresh bottle, properly sealed. There was a chance even there, but you were not clever enough to take it. You're overcautious and a coward. But how busy you must have been before that," he purred solicitously, "bolting about in various disguises after me. How very patient! Dear, dear, if Nature had only given you brains enough to match your lack of scruples—"

The insolent purr of his musical voice whipped color into Kronberg's cheeks. Abruptly he shifted his position and glared stonily.

"Venice," murmured Carl impudently, "Venice called them *bravi*; here in America we brutally call them gun-men, but honestly, Kronberg, in all respect and confidence, you really haven't brains and originality enough for a clever professional murderer. Amateurish killing is a sickly sort of sport. And the danger of it! Take for instance that night when you fancied you were a motor bandit and waylaid me on the way to the farm. I was very drunk and driving madly and I nearly got you. A pretty to-do that would have been! To be killed by an amateur and you a paid professional! My! My! Kronberg, I blush for you. I really do!"

He rose smiling, though his eyes were dangerously brilliant.

"Just when," said he lazily, "did you steal the paper I found in the candlestick? It's gone—"

He had struck fire from the stone man at last. A hopeless, hunted look flamed up in Kronberg's eyes and died away.

"Ah!" guessed Carl keenly, "so you're in some muddle there, too, eh?" Kronberg stared sullenly at the dusty floor.

"A silence strike?" inquired Carl. "Well we'll see how you feel about that in the morning. As for the skylight, Kronberg, if you feel like skating down an icy roof to hell, try it."

Whistling softly, Carl backed to the door and disappeared. An instant later came the click of a key in the lock. He had taken the lamp with him.

Groping desperately about, Kronberg searched for some covering to protect him from the icy cold. His search was unsuccessful. When the skylight grayed at dawn, he was pacing the floor, white and shaking with the chill.