

CHAPTER XXVIII

THE NOMAD OF THE FIRE-WHEEL

IT HAD been an unforgettable day, this day in the pine woods. Diane had forded shallow streams and followed bright-winged birds, lunched by a silver lake set coolly in the darkling shade of cypress and found a curious nest in the stump of a tree. Now with a mass of creeping blackberry and violets strapped to her saddle she was riding slowly back through the pine woods.

Though the sun, which awhile back had filled the hollow of palmetto fronds with a ruddy pool of light, had long since dropped behind the horizon, the girl somehow picked the homeward trail with the unerring instinct of a wild thing. That one may be hopelessly lost in the deceptive flatwoods she dismissed with a laugh. The wood is kind to wild things.

It was quite dark when through the trees ahead she caught the curious glimmer of a cart wheel of flame upon the ground, hub and spokes glowing vividly in the center of a clearing. Curiously the girl rode toward it, unaware that the picturesque fire-wheel ahead was the typical camp fire of the southern Indian, or that the strange wild figure squatting gravely by the fire in lonely sil-

houette against the white of a canvas-covered wagon beyond in the trees, was a vagrant Seminole from the proud old turbaned tribe who still dwell in the inaccessible morasses of the Everglades.

The realization came in a disturbed flash of interest and curiosity. Though the Florida Indian harmed no one, he still considered himself proudly hostile to the white man. Wherefore Diane wisely wheeled her horse about to retreat.

It was too late. Already the young Seminole was upon his feet, keen of vision and hearing for all he seemed but a tense, still statue in the wildwood.

Accepting the situation with good grace, Diane rode fearlessly toward his fire and reined in her horse. But the ready word of greeting froze upon her lips. For the nomad of the fire-wheel was a girl, tall and slender, barbarically arrayed in the holiday garb of a Seminole chief. The firelight danced upon the beaten band of silver about her brilliant turban and the beads upon her sash, upon red-beaded deerskin leggings delicately thonged from the supple waist to the small and moccasined foot, upon a tunic elaborately banded in red and a belt of buckskin from which hung a hunting knife, a revolver and an ammunition pouch.

But Diane's fascinated gaze lingered longest

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upon the Indian girl's face. Her smooth, vivid skin was nearer the hue of the sun-dark Caucasian than of the red man, and lovelier than either, with grave, vigilant eyes of dusk, a straight, small nose and firm, proud mouth vividly scarlet like the wild flame in her cheeks.

Aloof, impassive, the Indian girl stared back.

"I wish well to the beautiful daughter of white men!" she said at length with native dignity. The contralto of her voice was full and rich and very musical, her English, deliberate and clear-cut.

Immensely relieved—for the keen glance of those dark Indian eyes had suddenly softened—Diane leaped impetuously from her horse; across the fire white girl and Indian maid clasped hands.

"Do forgive me!" she exclaimed warmly. "But I saw your fire and turned this way before I really knew what I was doing." Just as Diane won the confidence of every wild thing in the forest, so now with her winsome grace and unaffected warmth, she won the Indian girl.

Some subtle, nameless sympathy of the forest leaped like a spark from eye to eye—then with a slow, grave smile in which there was much less reserve, the Seminole motioned her guest to a seat by the fire.

Nothing loath, Diane promptly tethered her horse and squatted Indian fashion by the cart-

wheel fire, immensely thrilled and diverted by her picturesque adventure.

"My name," she offered presently with her ready smile, "is Diane."

"Di-ane," said the Indian girl majestically. And added naively, "She was the Roman goddess of light—and of hunting, is it not so?"

Diane looked very blank.

"Where in the world—" she stammered, staring, and colored.

The Indian girl smiled.

"From *so* high," she said shyly, "I have been taught by Mic-co. Like the white student of books, I know many curious things that he has taught me."

"And your name?" asked Diane, heroically mastering her mystified confusion. "May I—may I not know that too?"

"Shock-kil-law," came the ready reply.

"That readily becomes Keela!" exclaimed Diane smiling.

The girl nodded.

"So Mic-co has said. And so indeed he calls me."

"Tell me, Keela, what does it mean?"

"Red-winged blackbird," said Keela.

It was eminently fitting, thought Diane, and glanced at Keela's hair and cheeks.

There was a wild duck roasting in the hub of

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coals—from the burning spokes came the smell of cedar. The Indian girl majestically broke a segment of koonti bread and proffered it to her companion. With faultless courtesy Diane accepted and presently partook with healthy relish of a supper of duck and sweet potatoes.

The silence of the Indian girl was utterly without constraint.

“I wonder,” begged Diane impetuously, “if you’ll tell me who Mic-co is? I’m greatly interested. He taught you about Rome?”

Nodding, the Indian girl said in her quaint, deliberate English that Mic-co was her white foster father. The Seminoles called him Es-ta-chat-tee-mic-co—chief of the White Race. Most of them called him simply Mic-co. He was a great and good medicine man of much wisdom who dwelt upon a fertile chain of swamp islands in the Everglades. The Indians loved him.

Still puzzled, Diane diffidently ventured a question or two, marveling afresh at the girl’s beauty and singular costume.

“I am of no race,” said Keela sombrely. “My father was a white man; my mother not all Indian; my grandfather—a Minorcan. Six moons I live with my white foster father. And I live then as I wish—like the daughter of white men. Six moons I dwell with the clan of my mother. Such is my life since the old chief made

the compact with Mic-co. Come!" she added and led the way to the Indian wagon.

"When the night-winds call," she said wistfully, "I grow restless—for I am happiest in the lodge of Mic-co. Then the old chief bids me travel to the world of white men and sell." There was gentle pathos in her mellow voice.

Pieces of ancient pottery, quaint bleached bits of skeleton, beads and shells and trinkets of gold unearthed from the Florida sand mounds, moccasins and baskets, koonti starch and plumes, such were the picturesque wares which Keela peddled when the stir of her mingled blood drove her forth from the camp of her forbears.

Diane bought generously, harnessed her saddle with clanking relics and regretfully mounted her horse.

"Let me come again to-morrow!" she begged.

"Uncah!" granted the girl in Seminole and her great black eyes were very friendly.

Looking back as she rode through the flatwoods, Diane marveled afresh. It was a far cry indeed from the camp of a Seminole to the legends of Rome.

But the primeval flavor of the night presently dissolved in the glare of acetylenes from a long gray car standing motionless by the roadside ahead. The climbing moon shone full upon the

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face of a bareheaded motorist idly smoking a cigarette and waiting.

Diane reined in her horse with a jerk and a clank of relics.

“Philip Poynter!” she exclaimed.

The driver laughed.

“I wonder,” said he, “if you know what a shock you’ve thrown into your aunt by staying out in the flat-woods until dark. She once knew a man who lost himself. Incidentally they are mighty deceptive to wander about in. The trees are so far apart that one never seems to get into them. And then, having meanwhile effectively got in without knowing it, one never seems to get out.”

“Where,” demanded Diane indignantly, “did you come from anyway?”

“If you hadn’t been so ambitious,” Philip assured her with mild resentment, “you’d have seen me at breakfast. I arrived at Sherrill’s last night. As it is, I’ve been sitting here an hour or so watching you swap wildwood yarns with the aborigine yonder. And Ann Sherrill sent me after you in Dick’s speediest car. Ho, uncle!”

An aged negro appeared from certain shadows to which Philip had lazily consigned him.

“Uncle,” said Philip easily, “will ride your horse back to Sherrill’s for you. I picked him up on the road. You’ll motor back with me?”

Diane certainly would not.

"Then," regretted Philip, "I'm reduced to the painful and spectacular expedient of just grazing the heels of your fiery steed with Dick's racer all the way back to Sherrill's and matching up his hoof-beats on the shell-road with a devil's tattoo on the horn."

Greatly vexed, Diane resigned her horse to the waiting negro, who rode off into the moonlight with a noisy clank. Mr. Poynter's face was radiant.

"And after running the chance of a night in the pine barrens," he mused admiringly, "you amble out of the danger zone in the most matter-of-fact manner with your saddle clanking like a bone-yard. I don't wonder your aunt fusses. What made the racket?"

"Bones and shells and things."

"Well, for such absolute irresponsibility as you've developed since you've been out of the chastening jurisdiction of the hay-camp, I'd respectfully suggest that you marry the very first bare-headed motorist, smoking a cigarette, whom you happened to see as you rode out of the pine-woods."

"Philip," said Diane disdainfully, "the moon—"

"Is on my head again," admitted Philip. "I know. It always gets me. We'd better motor

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around a bit and clear my brain out. I'd hate awfully to have the Sherrills think I'm in love."

Almost anything one could say, reflected Diane uncomfortably, inspired Philip's brain to fresh fertility.

The camp of Keela, domiciled indefinitely in the flat-woods to sell to winter tourists, proved a welcome outlet for the fretting gypsy tide in Diane's veins. She found the Indian girl's magnetism irresistible.

Proud, unerringly truthful, fastidious in speech and personal habit, truly majestic and generous, such was the shy woodland companion with whom Diane chose willfully to spend her idle hours, finding the girl's unconstrained intervals of silence, her flashes of Indian keenness, her inborn reticence and naïve parade of the wealth of knowledge Mic-co had taught her, a most bewildering book in which there was daily something new to read.

There was a keen, quick brain behind the dark and lovely eyes, a faultless knowledge of the courtesies of finer folk. Mic-co had wrought generously and well. Only the girl's inordinate shyness and the stern traditions of her tribe, Diane fancied, kept her chained to her life in the Glades.

Keela, strangely apart from Indian and white man, and granted unconventional license by her

tribe, hungered most for the ways of the white father of whom she frequently spoke.

Diane learned smoke signals and the blazing and blinding of a trail, an inexhaustible and tragic fund of tribal history which had been handed down from mouth to mouth for generations, legends and songs, wailing dirges and native dances and snatches of the chaste and oathless speech of the Florida Indian.

"Diane, *dear!*" exclaimed Ann Sherrill one lazy morning, "what in the *world* is that exceedingly mournful tune you're humming?"

"That," said Diane, "is the 'Song of the Great Horned Owl,' my clever little Indian friend taught me. Isn't it plaintive?"

"It is!" said Ann with deep conviction. "*Entirely* too much so. I feel creepy. And Nathalie says you did some picturesque dance for her and your aunt—"

"The 'Dance of the Wild Turkey,'" explained Diane, much amused at the recollection. "Aunt Agatha insisted that it was some iniquitous and cunningly disguised Seminole species of turkey trot. She was horribly shocked and grew white as a ghost at my daring—"

"Fiddlesticks!" said Ann Sherrill. "She ought to have *all* the shock out of her by now after bringing up you and Carl! *I'm* going to ride out to the flat-woods with you, for I'm simply

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dying for a new sensation. Dick's as stupid as an owl. He does nothing but hang around the Beach Club. And Philip Poynter's tennis mad. He looks hurt if you ask him to do anything else except perhaps to trail fatuously after you. It's the flat-woods for mine."

Ann returned from her visit to the Indian camp scintillant with italics and enthusiasm.

"My dear," she said, "I'm *wild* about her—*quite* wild! . . . I'm going again and *again!* . . . If I knew *half* as much and were *half* as lovely— Why, do you know, Diane, she set me right about some ridiculous quotation, and I *never* try to get them straight, for *half* the time I find my own way so *much* more expressive. . . . There's Philip Poynter with a tennis racquet again! Diane, I'm losing patience with him."

From her madcap craving for new sensation, Ann was destined to evolve an inspiration which with customary energy and Diane's interested connivance she swept through to fruition, unaware that Fate marched, leering, at her heels.