

CHAPTER XXIX

THE BLACK PALMER

CURIOUS things may happen when masked men hold revel under a moonlit sky.

Thus in a tropical garden of palm and fountain, of dark, shifting shadows and a thousand softly luminous Chinese lanterns swaying in a breeze of spice, a Bedouin talked to an ancient Greek.

“He is here?” asked the Bedouin with an accent slightly foreign.

“Yes,” said the Greek. “He is here and immensely relieved, I take it, to be rid of the jurisdiction of the hay-camp.”

“I fancied he would not dare—”

“A man in love,” commented the Greek dryly, “dares much for the sake of his lady. One may conceivably lack discretion without forfeiting his claim to courage.”

“The disguise of his stained and shaven face,” hinted the Bedouin grimly, “has made him overconfident. Having tested it with apparent success upon you—”

“Even so. But he has forgotten that few men have such striking eyes.”

“If he has taken the pains to assure himself

of my whereabouts," rumbled the Bedouin, "as he surely has, I am of course still blistering in extreme southern Florida, hunting tarpon. I have a permanent Washington address which I have taken pains to notify of my interest in tarpon and to which he writes. These incognito days," added the Bedouin with a slight smile, "my cipher communications cross an ocean and return immediately by trusted hands to America, though I, of course, know nothing of it. Those from my charming minstrel to me—make similar tours."

"And I?"

"You—my secretary—having spent a few days with the Sherrills on your way to join me after months of frivolling with a hay-camp, have been forced by telegram to depart before the *fête de nuit* to which Miss Sherrill begged our attendance. Rest assured he knows that too. Therefore, to unmask unobtrusively and slip away to his room, and in the absence of other guests to linger for a week of incognito quiet—*voilà!* he is quite safe though imprudent!"

Greek and Bedouin fell silent, watching the laughing pageant in the garden.

Venetian lamps glowed like yellow witch-lights in the branches; fountains tossed moon-bright sprays of quicksilver aloft and tinkled with the splash; the waters of a sunken pool, jeweled in

stars, glimmered darkly green through files of cypress. All in all, an entrancing moon-mad world of mystery and dusk-moths, heavy with the scent of jasmine and orange. And the moon played brightly on curious folk, on spangles and jewels and masked and laughing eyes.

A gray mendicant monk with sombre, thin-lipped face beneath a grayish mask slipped furtively by with a curious air of listening intently to the careless chatter about him; a fat and plaintive Queen Elizabeth followed, talking to a stout courtier who was over-trusting the seams of his satin breeches.

“I doubt if you’ll believe me,” puffed Queen Elizabeth dolorously, “but every day since that time she deliberately went out and lost herself all day in the flat-woods and stopped to look at that ridiculous cart with the wheel of flame when I was sure a buzzard had bitten her — No! No! I don’t know, Jethro; I’m sure I don’t. How should I know why it was burning? But it was. She said plainly that it was a cart wheel of fire and if it was a wheel it must certainly have been on something and what on earth would a wheel be on but a cart? Certainly one wouldn’t buy a bale of cart wheels to make fires in the flat-woods. Well, it’s the strangest thing, Jethro, but nearly every day since, she’s visited the flat-woods and wandered about with that terrible Indian girl who

isn't an Indian girl. Seems that she's a most extraordinary girl with a foster-father and she sells sand mounds — no, that's not it — the things they find in them besides the sand — and she has a queer, wild sort of culture and her father was white. Like as not Diane will come home some night scalped and she has such magnificent hair, Jethro. To her knees it is and so black! And what must she and Ann do to-night but — there, I promised Diane faithfully to keep it a secret, for they've been working for days and days and she *is* distractingly lovely. With the Sherrill to-pazes too. And now that she's sold all the sand mounds, or whatever it is, do you know, Jethro, she's going to drive Diane north to Jacksonville in the Indian wagon. They start to-morrow morning. I think it's because they're both so mad about trees and things — I can't for the life of me make it out. Jethro, Diane will drive me mad — she will indeed. Well, all I can say, Jethro, is that if you don't know what I'm talking about you must be very stupid to-night. No! No! do I ever know, Jethro? He may be here and he may not. He may be off in Egypt shooting scarabs by now. He was at the farm when he wrote to me in Indiana. Well, *collecting* scarabs, then, Jethro. Why do you fuss so about little things? Isn't it funny — strangest thing!"

Queen Elizabeth passed on with her aged dandy.

A dark figure by the cypress pool laughed and shrugged. He was a singular figure, this man by the pool, with a hint of the Orient in his garb. His robe was of black, with startling and unexpected flashes of scarlet lining when he walked. Black chains clanked drearily about his waist and wrists. There was a cunningly concealed light in his filmy turban which gave it the singular appearance of a dark cloud lighted by an inner fire. As he wandered about with clanking chains, he played strange music upon a polished thing of hollow bones. Sometimes the music laughed and wooed when eyes were kind; sometimes when eyes were over-daring it was subtly impudent and eloquent. Sometimes it was so unspeakably weird and melancholy that along with the clanking chains and the strangely luminous turban, many a careless stroller turned and stared. So did a slender, turbaned Seminole chief with a minstrel at his heels.

It was upon this picturesque young Seminole that the eyes of the Greek by the hibiscus lingered longest, but the eyes of the Bedouin scanned every line of the minstrel's ragged corduroy with grim amusement.

"A romantic garb, by Allah!" said the Bedouin dryly.

"It has served its purpose," reminded the Greek sombrely. And laughed with relish.

For the Seminole chief had fled perversely through the lantern-lit trees, her soft, mocking laughter proclaiming her sex and her mood.

"And still he follows!" boomed the Bedouin. "With or without the music-machine, he is consistently fatuous."

The man with the luminous turban spoke suddenly to a girl in trailing satin with a muff of flowers in her hand. Shoulders and throat gleamed superbly above the line of golden satin; there were flashing topazes in her hair and about her throat; and the slender, arched foot in the satin slipper was small and finely moulded.

"Tell me," he begged insistently, "who you are! You've grace and poise enough for a dozen women. And who taught you how to walk? Few women know how."

The girl, with a delicate air of hauteur, flung back her head imperiously and turned away.

"And you've wonderful eyes — black and wistful and tragic and beautiful!" persisted the man impudently. "Wonderful, sparkling lady of gold and black, tell me who you are!"

"Who," said the girl gravely in a clear, rich contralto, "who are you?"

The man laughed but his eyes lingered on the firm, proud scarlet lips and the small even teeth.

"Call me the 'Black Palmer,'" said he. "There's a tremendous significance in my rig to be sure, but it's only for one man."

"What," asked the girl seriously, "is a palmer?"

Mystified the Black Palmer stared.

"You honestly mean that you don't know?"

"I speak ever the truth," said the proud scarlet lips below the golden mask. "When I ask, I mean that I do not know."

"And this in a world of sophistication!" murmured the man blankly, but the girl was moving off with graceful majesty through the trees, the jewels in her hair alive in the lantern-lit dusk. The Black Palmer sprang after her.

"Tell me, I beg of you," he exclaimed earnestly, "you who are so grave and beautiful and apart from this world of mine, like a fresh keen wind in a scorching desert, in Heaven's name tell me who you are!"

But the girl's dark, fine eyes flashed quick rebuke.

Nothing daunted the Black Palmer impudently stripped the golden mask from her face. The soft yellow light of the Venetian lamp in the tree above her fell full upon the lovely oval of a face so peculiar in its striking beauty of line and vivid coloring that he fell back staring.

“Lord, what a face!” exclaimed the Greek, too taken aback to resent the Palmer’s insolence.

And the Bedouin rumbled: “Exquisite! But she is not of your land. Italian, Spanish, or some bizarre mingling of strange races, but none of your colder lands!”

Now as the Black Palmer stared at the dark, accusing eyes of the girl, a singular thing occurred. His cloak of impudence fell suddenly from his shoulders and returning the golden mask, he bowed and begged her pardon with unmistakable deference.

“Let a humbled Palmer,” he said quietly, “pay his sincerest homage to the most beautiful woman he has even seen.” And as the girl moved proudly away, the strain of fantastic music which followed her was subtly deferential.