

CHAPTER XXX

THE UNMASKING

AT MIDNIGHT a mellow chime rang somewhere by the cypress pool. Laughing and jesting, calling to one another, the masked crowd moved off to the vine-hung villa ahead, gleaming moon-white through the shrubbery.

Somewhat reluctantly the minstrel followed. It had been his intention to unmask in some secluded corner whence, presently, he might slip away to his room, but finding himself jostled and pushed on by a Greek and a Bedouin who, to do them justice, seemed quite unaware of their importunities, he surrendered to the press about him and presently found himself in an unpleasantly conspicuous spot in the great room which the Sherrills occasionally used as a ballroom.

All about him girls and men were unmasking amid a shower of laughing raillery. That the Seminole chief with her tunic and beaded sash and her brilliant turban was very near him, was a pleasant and altogether accidental mitigation of his mishap. That a Greek and a Bedouin were just behind him—a fact not in the least accidental—and that a gray monk was slipping about among the guests whispering to receptive

ears, did not interest him in the least. A string orchestra played softly in an alcove. The leader's eyes, oddly enough, were upon the ancient Greek.

Now suddenly a curious hush swept over the room. Uncomfortably aware that he was a spectacular object of interest by reason of his mask and that every unmasked eye was full upon him, the minstrel, following the lines of least resistance, removed the bit of cambric from his eyes. After all, in the sea of faces before him, there were none familiar.

As the mask dropped—the ancient Greek thoughtfully adjusted his tunic.

Instantly without pause or warning the soft strain of the orchestra swept dramatically into a powerful melody of measured cadences. It was the tune Carl had played upon his flute to Jokai of Vienna months before. The minstrel, mask in hand, stared at the orchestra, blanched and bit his lip.

“God bless my soul!” exclaimed Queen Elizabeth to Jethro, “it's the immigrant, Jethro, and there he was on the lace spread with his feet tied and gurgling. I'll never forget his eyes.”

“Jokai of Vienna!” said the Black Palmer, whistling. “By Jove, they've trapped him nicely.”

For an uncomfortable instant, the silence con-

tinued, then came the saving stir of laughter and chatting.

The Bedouin with an unrelenting air of dignity and command, removed his mask and bowed low to Diane in whose startled eyes below the Seminole turban flashed sympathy and acute regret.

"Miss Westfall," said he gravely, "permit me to present to you, Prince Ronador of Houdania."

White and stern, his fine eyes flashing imperially, Ronador bowed.

"Rest assured, Miss Westfall," he said, "that I know you have not betrayed my confidence. Baron Tregar is an ardent patriot who by virtue of his office must needs object to democratic masquerading."

The Baron stroked his beard.

"For inspiring the musical ceremony due your rank, Prince," he said dryly, "I crave indulgence."

Smiling, the ancient Greek at the Baron's elbow unmasked, to show the cheerful face of Mr. Poynter.

"Prince," said Mr. Poynter, "I sincerely trust I have made no error in transcribing the Regent's Hymn for our excellent musicians. Having heard it so many times in your presence in Houdania, I could not well forget. At your service," with a glance at his Grecian attire, "Herodotus, father of nomads!"

But Ann Sherrill in the gorgeous raiment of a Semiramis was already at hand, sparkling italics upon her royal guest, and Philip moved aside.

"I am *overwhelmed!*" whispered Ann a little later. "I am *indeed!* I was not in the *least* aware that our mysterious incognito was a prince, were you, Diane?"

"Yes," said Diane. Her color was very high and she deliberately avoided the imploring eyes of Mr. Poynter.

"What in the *world* is it all about?" begged Ann helplessly. "And *who* was the grayish monk who flitted about so mysteriously telling us that the minstrel was a *prince!* It spread like wild-fire. As for you, Philip Poynter, it's exactly like you! To depart night before last and suddenly reappear is *quite* of a piece with your mysterious habit of fading periodically out of civilization. Baron Tregar, how *exceedingly* delightful of you to come this way and surprise me when I fancied you were so keen about those horrid tarpon that you wouldn't leave them for all I *wrote* and *wrote.*"

There was a sprightly nervousness in Ann's manner. She was uncomfortably aware of a subtle undercurrent.

"And I've another unexpected guest," she added to Diane. "Carl's here. Wandering in from Heaven knows where, as he always does. He's making his peace with your aunt—"

Herodotus, who had been trying for some time to get into friendly communication with his lady, suddenly murmured "Frost in Florida!" with audible regret and moved off good-humoredly to look for Carl.

He found that young man listening attentively to his aunt's reproaches.

"And that costume, Carl," fluttered Queen Elizabeth in aggrieved disapproval. "Why, dear me, it's enough to make a body shudder, it's so sort of sinister—it is indeed! And I do hope you don't set your hair on fire with that extraordinary light in your turban. Is it a candle or an electric bulb?"

"A forty horse power glowworm!" Carl assured her gravely, and the portly Jethro sniggered to the danger of his seams.

Philip's hand came down heavily upon the Palmer's broad shoulder and Carl wheeled. In that instant as he grasped Philip's hand in a silence more eloquent than words, every finer instinct of his queerly balanced nature flashed in his face. The two hands tightened and fell apart.

"Come, smoke!" invited Carl, smiling. "I'm glad you're here. I haven't been ragged and abused for so long there's a lonely furrow in my soul."

But Dick Sherrill, looking very warm and dis-

grunted in a costume he informed them bitterly was meant for Claude Duval, came up as they were turning away and insisted upon presenting Carl to the guest of the evening.

"Ann sent me," he added. "And you've got to come. And I want to say right now that Ann makes me tired. She's as notional as a lunatic. *She* planned this rig and now she doesn't like it. And if I don't look like a highwayman you can wager your last sou I feel like one, and that's sufficient. The whole trouble is that Ann's been so busy with hair-dressers and manicurists and *corsetières* and dressmakers and the Lord knows what not over that stunning Indian girl, who'll likely run off with the family topazes, that she's had no time for her brother, and rubs it in now by laughing at the shape of my legs. What's the matter with my legs, Carl?"

"Too ornamental," said Carl. "Curvilinear grace is all very well but—"

"Shut up!" said Sherrill viciously. "Have you ever met this king-pin I'm exploiting?"

"I've seen him," said Carl. "Once when he was riding up the mountain road to Houdania with a brilliant escort and one—er—other time. Think I told you I'd spent a month or so in a Houdanian monastery several years ago, didn't I, Dick?"

"Yes," said Dick. "That's why I asked. Poynter, who in blue blazes are you looking for?"

Philip flushed.

"Dry up!" he advised. "You're grouchy."

Sherrill was still heatedly denying the charge when they halted near the Baron.

"You wear a singular costume," suggested Ronador stiffly, when the formalities of presentation were at an end. He glanced at the luminous turban and thence to the chains. Carl, though he had primarily intended the singular rig for the eyes of Tregar, had subtly invited the remark. His eyes were darkly ironic.

"Prince," he said guilelessly, "it is a silent parable."

"Yes?"

"I am 'The Ghost of a Man's Past!'" explained the Palmer lightly—and clanked his chains. The level glances of the two met with the keenness of invisible swords.

"The heavy, sinister black," suggested the Palmer, "the flashes of forbidden scarlet—the hours of a man's past are scarlet, are they not?—the cloud above the head, with a treacherous heart of fire, the clanking chains of bondage—they are all here. And the skeleton in the closet—Sire—behold!" He laughed and flung back his mantle, revealing a perfect skeleton cun-

ningly etched in glaring white upon a close-fitting garment of black.

Did the Baron's eyes flash suddenly with a queer dry humor? Philip could not be sure.

With a clank of symbolic chains Carl bowed and withdrew, and coming suddenly upon his cousin, halted and stared. Long afterward Diane was to remember that she had caught a similar look in the eyes of Ronador.

"Well?" she begged, slightly uncomfortable.

Carl smiled. Once more his fine eyes were impassive. With ready grace he admired the delicately-thonged tunic and the beaded sash, the bright turban with the beaten band of silver and the darkly lovely face beneath it.

"It's a duplicate of the rig my little Indian friend wears," she explained, smiling. "Hasn't Ann told you? She's quite wild about it."

"Ann's very busy soothing Dick," laughed Carl and to the malicious satisfaction of that worthy Greek who had been trailing along in his wake, presented Herodotus. Diane nodded, smiled politely—and sought delicately to ignore the ancient Greek. It was a hopeless task. Mr. Poynter insisted upon considering himself included in every word she uttered.

"Isn't mother a *dear!*" exclaimed Ann Sherrill joining them. "After ragging me *desperately* for days about Keela, until I threatened to

kill myself, and giving me an *exceedingly* horrid little book on the advisability of curbing one's most *interesting* impulses, she's taken her under her wing to-night and they're excellent friends. Philip, dear, go unruffle Dick. He's *horribly* fussed up about something or other. Carl, I want you to meet Keela. It's the most *interesting* thing I've dared in ages and Dad's been very decent about it. Dad always *did* understand me. He has a sense of humor."

Diane and Carl followed, laughing, at her heels. Ann presently found her mother and Keela and unaware of the astonished interest in Carl's eyes, presented him.

"The Black Palmer!" said Keela naïvely.

"Lady of Gold and Black!" said Carl and bowed profoundly.