

## CHAPTER XXXI

### THE RECKONING

**T**HE reckoning of Ronador and the Baron came by the cypress pool.

“It is useless to rave and storm,” said Tregar quietly. “I hold the cards.”

“Was it necessary to humiliate me in the presence of Miss Westfall?” demanded Ronador bitterly. With all his sullenness there was in his tone a marked respect for the older man.

“It was necessary to end this romantic masquerade!” insisted Tregar. “Why are you here?”

“I—I came in a flash of panic. It seemed to me that after all I—I could not trust to other hands when the dead thing stirred.” Ronador’s face was white and haggard. In that instant his forty-four years lay heavily upon his shoulders.

“Have I ever misplaced your trust?” reminded Tregar sombrely. “Have I not even kept your secret from your father?”

“Yes.”

“Then tell me,” asked the Baron bluntly, “why you must come to America and hysterically complicate this damnable mess by—a bullet!”

Greatly agitated, Ronador fell to pacing to and

fro. Heavy cypress shadows upon the water moved like pointing fingers.

“Is there nothing I may keep from you?” broke from him a little bitterly.

“Why,” insisted the older man, “have you seen fit to conduct yourself with the irrationality of a madman by trundling a music-machine about the country and making love to a girl you tried in a moment of fright and frenzy — to kill?”

“I — I lost my head,” said the Prince with an effort. “It — it seemed at first that she must die. The other, I thought to myself, I will leave to Themar and the Baron. This I must do for myself. They will spare her and years hence the thing may stir again. I — I can not bear to think of it even now, Tregar. I have paid heavily for my moment of madness. For nights after, I did not sleep. Even now the memory is unspeakable torture!” And Ronador admitted with stiff, white lips that some nameless God of Malice had made capital of his bullet, stirring his heart into admiration for the fearless girl who had stood so gallantly by the fire in a storm-haunted wood. In the heart of the forest a happier solution had come to him and eliminated the sinister thought of murder.

The Baron coldly heard the passionate avowal through to the end.

“And the Princess Phaedra?” he begged for-

mally. "What of her? What of the marriage that is to dissolve the bitter feud of a century between Houdania and Galiturgia, this marriage to which already you are informally bound?"

"It is nothing to me. I shall marry Miss Westfall."

"So!" The Baron matched his heavy fingertips. "So! And this is another infernal complication of the freedom of marital choice we grant our princes!"

"Ten years ago," flamed Ronador passionately, "you and my father picked a wife for me! Is not that enough? Now that she is dead, I shall marry whom I choose. Has it not occurred to you that after all it is the sanest way out of this horrible muddle?"

"It is one way out," admitted Tregar, "and by that way lies war with Galiturgia." He fell silent, plucking at his beard. "I fancy," he said at last, "that you will not go back to the music-machine."

"It was—and is—my only means of following her."

"Do so again," said the Baron dryly, "and the American yellow papers shall blazon your identity to the world. 'Son of a prince regent—nephew of a king—trundles a music-machine about to win a beautiful gypsy!' And Galiturgia and the Princess Phaedra will read with interest." Then he blazed suddenly with one of his infre-

quent outbursts of passion, "Is it not enough to have Galituria laughing at a mad king whose claim to the throne by our laws may not be invalidated by his madness? A king so mad that the affairs of a nation must be administered by a prince regent—your father? Must you add to all this the disgrace of breaking faith with Galituria and plunging your country into war? Your father is an old man. With but his life and the life of an aging madman between you and the throne, it behooves you to walk with a full recognition of your future responsibilities. Your father knows you are here in America?"

"No. There was an Arctic expedition. He thinks I have gone hunting with that. At first I thought I could come to America and return with no one the wiser."

"Having murdered Miss Westfall!" completed the Baron quietly.

Ronador's face was ashen.

"Excellency," he choked suddenly, "my little son—"

"Yes," said Tregar with sudden kindness, "I know. Your great love and ambition for the boy drove you to madness." He paused. "You are fully decided to break faith with Phaedra, knowing what may come of it?"

"Yes. Even if my great love for Miss Westfall did not drive me on—"

“To indiscretion!” supplied the Baron dryly.

“As you will. Even then, to me it is now the one way out. With Granberry dead, with the treacherous paper in my possession —”

“It has been burned.”

Ronador did not hear.

“With Miss Westfall my wife,” he finished, “even if the dead thing stirs again, it can make no difference.”

“Then,” said the Baron formally, “I am through with it all, quite through. The task was never of my choosing, as you know. When the dead hand reached forth from the grave to taunt you, Ronador, I was willing at first to stoop to unutterable things to save you — and Houdania — from dishonor, but more and more there has been distaste in my heart for the blackness of the thing. Days back I warned you by letter that I would not see Miss Westfall coldly sacrificed for a muddle of which she knew absolutely nothing. There are things a man may not do even for his country — one is murdering women. Now, though I pledged myself through loyalty to my country, my king, my regent and yourself to spying and murder and petty thievery, with a consequent chain of discomfort and misunderstandings for myself, I am through and mightily glad of it!”

“And what have you accomplished?” flamed

Ronador passionately. "Granberry, for all your ciphered pledges, lives and mocks me as he did to-night, as he did months back. I could kill him for the indignities he has heaped upon me, if for nothing else. And he knows more than you think. What did he mean to-night?"

"Circumstances," said Tregar coldly, "have made you unduly sensitive and suspicious. Granberry's costume was planned maliciously as an impersonal affront to me. He knew of my plans through a telegram of mine to Themar and made his own accordingly. It was not your past to which he referred. Surely it is not difficult to catch his meaning?"

"Blunders and blunders and quixotic scruples," raved Ronador, "and now this crowning indignity to-night! What has Themar been doing? . . . What have you done? . . . Why is Granberry still alive? Hereafter, Tregar, Themar will report to me. I personally will see that the thing is cleared up and silenced forever. I may trust at least to your silence?"

"My word as a gentleman is sufficient?"

"It is."

"Consider me pledged to silence as I have been for a quarter of a century."

"Where is Themar?"

"He is here at my command to-night after an illness of weeks. He has been Granberry's pris-

oner. His illness alone won his release for him through some inconsistent whim of sympathy on the part of Granberry. He wears the garb of a gray monk."

"Send him here."

The Baron bowed and withdrew. At the path he turned.

"Ronador," he said quietly, "for the sake of the lifetime friendship I have borne your father, for the sake of the position of honor and trust I hold in your father's court, for the sake of my great love for Houdania, let me say that when you find you are sinking deeper and deeper into a pitfall of errors and unhappiness and treachery, I shall be ready and willing to aid and advise you as best I may. I think I know you better than you know yourself. You have an inheritance of wild passion, a nature that swayed by irresistible and fiery impulse, will for the moment dare anything and regret it with terrible suffering ever after. One such lesson you have had in early manhood. I hope you may not rush on blindly to another. Until you come to me, however," he added with dignity, "I shall not meddle again."

"I shall not come!" said Ronador imperiously. But the Baron was gone.

Later, by the cypress pool, the gray monk and the minstrel talked long and earnestly of one who knew overmuch of the affairs of both.

“There is but one thing more,” faltered Themar at the end. “I may speak with freedom?”

“Yes,” said Ronador impatiently, “what is it?”

“Miss Westfall—I spied upon her camp in Connecticut—”

“Yes?”

“It is well to know all. For days she lived with Poynter in the forest—”

Ronador’s eyes blazed.

“Go, go!” he cried, his face quite colorless, “for the love of God go before I kill you! I—I can not bear any more to-night.”

Who had scored! For Ronador, at least, in the guileful hands of a traitor who by reason of a strong maternal sympathy desired the alliance of Ronador and Princess Phaedra, there was doubt and bitter suffering. And he might not return to the music-machine.

Themar’s thin lips smiled but he wisely retreated.