

CHAPTER XXXIII

BY THE WINDING CREEK

AT DAWN one morning a long black car shot out from Jacksonville and took to the open road. It glided swiftly past arid stretches of pine barrens streaked with stagnant water, past bogs aglow with iris, through quaint little cities smiling under the shelter of primeval oaks and on, stopping only long enough for the driver to ask a question of a negro on a load of wood—or a mammy singing plaintively in the flower-bright dooryard of a house.

Sometimes losing, sometimes finding, the trail of a green and white van, the long black car shot on, through roads of pleasant windings flanked by forest and river, beyond which lay the line of green-fringed sand hills which parallel the rolling Atlantic. Past placid lakes skimmed by purple martins, past orange groves heavy with fruit, past fences overrun with Cherokee roses, and on, but the driver, abroad with the sunrise glow, seemed somehow to see little or none of it. Sometimes he stared sombrely at a ghostly palmetto, tall and dark against the sky. Once with a grinding shudder of brakes he halted on the border of a cypress swamp and stared frowningly

at the dark, dank trees knee-deep in stagnant water above which the buzzards flew, as if the loathsome spot matched his mood. As indeed it did.

For the words of Themar had done cruel work. Torn by black suspicion, Ronador saw no peace in this tranquil Florida world of sun and flower, of warm south wind and bright-winged bird. He saw only the buzzards, birds of evil omen. Swayed by fiery gusts of passion, of remorse, of sullenness and jealousy, he rode on, a prey to sinister resolution. To confront Diane with his knowledge of those days by the river, this resolution alternated as frequently with another—to put his fate to the test and passionately avow his utter trust in one immeasurably above the rank and file of women. He had racked Themar with insistent questions, he had quarreled again and again with the Baron since that night by the pool, until now he had at his finger-ends, the ways and days of Philip Poynter since the day the Baron had dispatched his young secretary upon the ill-fated errand to Diane. And as there were finer moments when his faith in the girl was unmarred by suspicion, so there were wild, unscrupulous hours of jealousy when he could have killed Philip and taunted her with insults.

Driving steadily, he came in course of time to a narrow, grass-banked creek. The nomads

on the winding road beside it were many and beautiful. Here were yellow butterflies, sandpipers and kingfishers, and now and then an eagle cleaved the dazzling blue overhead with magnificent wing-strokes. Sand hills reflected the white sunlight. Beyond glistened a stretch of open sea with a flock of beautiful gannets of black and white whipping its surface. But Ronador did not thrill to the peaceful picture. He glanced instead at the buzzard which seemed curiously to hang above the long black car.

Now presently as he eyed the road ahead for a glimpse of the van, Ronador saw the familiar lines of a music-machine and drove by it with a glance of interest. Instantly the blood rushed violently to his face. For, as the horse and music-machine had been familiar, so was the driver, who swept a broad sombrero from his head and revealed the face of Philip Poynter.

With a curse Ronador abruptly brought the car to a standstill. The very irony of this masquerade fired him with terrible anger.

"You!" he choked. "You!"

Philip nodded.

"I guess you're right," he said.

The blazing dark eyes and the calm, unruffled blue ones met in a glance of implacable antagonism. Not in the least impressed Philip replaced

his sombrero and spoke to his horse. Fish crows flew overhead with croaks of harsh derision.

Another buzzard! With a terrible jerk, Ronador drove on, his face scarlet.

So Poynter still dared to follow! By a trick he had bought the music-machine, by a trick he had given the Regent's Hymn to the curious ears at Sherrill's. Very well, there were tricks and tricks! And if one man may trick, so, surely, may another.

Passion had always hushed the voice of the imperial conscience, though indeed it awoke and cried in a terrible voice when passion was dead. So now with stiff white lips fixed in unalterable resolution, Ronador drove viciously on, turning over and over in his fevered brain the ways and days of Philip Poynter. . . . So at last he came to the camp he sought.

It was pitched upon the upland bank of the winding creek and as the car shot rapidly toward it, a great blue heron flapped indignantly and soared away to the marsh beyond the trees. Ronador jumped queerly and colored with a sense of guilt.

There was yellow oxalis here carpeting the ground among the low, dark cedars, yellow butterflies flitted about among the trees where Johnny was washing the van, and the inevitable buzzard floated with upturned wings above the

camp. Ronador had grown to hate the ubiquitous bird of the South. Superstition flamed hotly up in his heart now at the sight of it.

Diane was sewing. He had caught the flutter of her gown beneath a cedar as he stopped the car. There was no one visible in the camp of the Indian girl. Ronador sprang from his car and waved to the girl; smiling, she came to meet him.

Now as Ronador smiled down into the clear, unfaltering eyes of the girl before him, he knew suddenly that he trusted her utterly, that the mad suspicion, sired by the words of Themar and mothered by jealousy, was but a dank mist that melted away in the sunlight of her presence. Only jealousy remained and a smouldering, unscrupulous hate for the persistent young organ-grinder behind him.

Chatting pleasantly they returned to camp.

Imperceptibly their talk of the fortunes of the road took on a more intimate tinge of reminiscence and presently, with searching eyes fixed upon the vivid, lovely face of the wind-brown gypsy beneath the cedar, Ronador asked the girl to marry him.

Very gently Diane released her hands from his grasp, her cheeks scarlet.

"Indeed, indeed," she faltered, "I could not with fairness answer you now, for I do not in the least know what I think. You will not misunder-

stand me, I am sure, if I tell you that not once in the long, pleasant days we journeyed the same roads, did I ever dream of the nature of your pleasant friendship." Her frank, dark eyes, alive with a beautiful sincerity, met his honestly. "There was always tradition—" she reminded.

Ronador's reply was sincere and gallant. Diane was lovelier than any princess, he said, and in Houdania, tradition had been replaced years back by a law which granted freedom.

"Though to be sure," he added bitterly, "each generation seeks to break it. Tregar tried, urging me persistently for diplomatic reasons to take a wife of his choosing. And when I—I fled to America to escape his infernal scheming and spying—he followed. Even here in America I have been haunted by spies—"

His glance wavered.

"And then," he went on earnestly, "I saw you and I knew that Princess Phaedra was forever impossible. There was a night of terrible wind and storm when I planned to beg shelter in your camp and make your acquaintance. . . . You are annoyed?"

"No," said Diane honestly. "Why fuss now?"

"Tregar must have suspected. I met his—his spy in the forest and we quarreled wildly. He tried to kill me but the bullet went wild."

Again his glance wavered but the lying words came smoothly. "My servant, Themar, leaped and stabbed him in the shoulder —"

"No! No!" cried Diane. "Not that—not that!" Her eyes, dark with horror in the colorless oval of her face, met Ronador's with mute appeal. "It—it can not be," she added quietly. "The man was Philip Poynter."

Ronador caught her hands again with fierce resolve. His eyes were blazing with excitement and anger at the utter faith in her voice.

"Why do you think I adopted the stained face—the disguise of a wandering minstrel?" he demanded impetuously. "It was to free myself from his infernal spying—to afford myself the opportunity of gaining your friendship without his knowledge! Why did he follow—always follow? Because at the command of his chief, he must needs obstruct my plan of winning you. There was always Princess Phaedra! Why did he watch by night in the forest. To spy! Can you not see it?"

"Surely, surely," said Diane, "you must be wrong!"

But Ronador could not be wrong. Themar, his servant, whom he had dispatched to seek employment with the Baron when the fortunes of the road had made further attendance upon himself inconvenient, had learned of the hay-camp and of

Poynter's pledge to make his victim's advances ridiculous in the eyes of Diane.

"And when Themar followed—to warn me—Poynter beat him brutally," he went on fiercely, "beat him and sent him in a dirty barge to a distant city. All the while when I fancied my disguise impenetrable, he was laughing in his sleeve, for he is as clever as he is unscrupulous. He was even meeting his chief in a Kentucky woods to report. Tregar admitted it. Why did he make me ridiculous at the Sherrill fête? Purely because your eyes, Miss Westfall, were among those who watched the indignity! Why is he driving about now in the music-machine to mock me? Because having forced me from the road, he must needs see to it that I do not return. When I do, he must be near at hand to report to the Baron."

It was an artful network. Somehow, by virtue of the sinister skeleton of facts underlying the velvet of his logic, it rang true. Diane, as colorless as a flower, sat utterly silent, slender brown fingers tightened against the palms of her hands.

Philip false! Philip a spy! Philip—almost a murderer! It could not be!

Yet how insistently he had striven to force her to return to civilization. Away from Ronador? It might be. How insistently the Baron had urged him to linger in her camp! *To spy?* A

great wave of faintness swept over her. And there was Arcadia and the hay-camp and the mildly impudent indignities—they all slipped accurately into place.

“I—I do not know!” she faltered at last in answer to his impetuous pleading. “If you will not see me again until I may think it all out—”

But there was danger in waiting. A hot appeal flashed in Ronador’s eyes and eloquently again he fell to pleading.

But Diane had caught the clatter of the music-machine up the road where Philip was good-humoredly unwinding the hullabaloo for a crowd of gleeful young darkies, and suddenly she turned very white and stern.

“No! No!” she said. “It must be as I said.”

And presently, with faith in his poisoned arrows Ronador went, pledged to await her summons.

Diane sat very still beneath the cedars, with the noise of the music-machine wild torture to her ears.