

CHAPTER XXXIV

THE MOON ABOVE THE MARSH

THE MOON silvered the marsh and the creek. Off to the east rippled a silent, moon-white stretch of sea, infinitely lonely, murmuring in the star-cool night.

Restless and wakeful Diane watched the stream glide endlessly on, each reed and pebble silvered. Rex lay on the bank beside her, whither he had followed faithfully a very long while ago, snapping at the insects which rose from the grass. So colorless and fixed was the face of his mistress that it seemed a beautiful graven thing devoid of life.

Now presently as Diane stared at the moonlit pebbles glinting at her feet, a shadow among the cedars, having advanced and retreated uncertainly a score of times before, suddenly detached itself from the wavering stencil of tree and bush upon the moonlit ground and resolved itself into the figure of a tall, determined sentinel who approached and seated himself beside her.

"What's wrong?" begged Philip gently. "I've been watching you for hours, Diane, and you've scarcely moved an inch."

"Nothing," said Diane. But her voice was so

lifeless, her lack of interest in Philip's sudden appearance so pointed, that he glanced keenly at her colorless face and frowned.

"There is something, I'm sure," he insisted kindly. "You look it." Finding that she did not trouble to reply, he produced his wildwood pipe and fell to smoking.

"Likely I'll stay here," said Philip quietly, "until you tell me. Surely you know, Diane, that in anything in God's world that concerns you, I stand ready to help you if you need me."

It was manfully spoken but Diane's lips faintly curled. Philip's fine frank face colored hotly and he looked away.

In silence they sat there, Philip smoking restlessly and wondering, Diane staring at the creek, with Ronador's impassioned voice ringing wildly in her ears.

In the east the sky turned faintly primrose, the creek glowed faintly pink. The great moon glided lower by the marsh with the branch of a dead tree black against its brilliant shield. Marsh and oak were faintly gray. The metallic ocean had already caught the deepening glow of life. Where the stream stole swampwards, a mist curled slowly up from the water like beckoning ghosts draped in nebulous rags.

Suddenly in the silence Diane fell to trembling. "Philip!" she cried desperately.

"Yes?" said Philip gently.

"Why are you following me with the music-machine?"

"I could tell you," said Philip honestly, "and I'd like to, but you'd tell me again that the moon is on my head."

The girl smiled faintly.

"Tell me," she begged impetuously, "what was that other reason why I must not journey to Florida in the van? You spoke of it by the lily pool in Connecticut. You remember?"

"Yes," said Philip uncomfortably. "Yes, I do remember."

"What was it?" insisted Diane, her eyes imploring. "Surely, Philip, you can tell me now! I — I did not ask you then —"

"No," said Philip wistfully. "I — I think you trusted me then, for all our friendship was a thing of weeks."

"What was it?" asked Diane, grown very white.

"I am sorry," said Philip simply. "I may not tell you that, Diane. I am pledged."

"To whom?"

"It is better," said Philip, "if I do not tell."

Diane sharply caught her breath and stared at the sinister wraiths rising in floating files from the swamp stream.

"Philip — was it — was it Themar's knife?"

"Yes," said Philip.

"And the man to whom you are pledged is—
Baron Tregar!"

"Yes," said Philip again.

"Why were you in the forest that night of storm and wind?"

Philip glanced keenly at the girl by the creek. Her profile was stern and very beautiful, but the finely moulded lips had quivered.

"What is it, Diane?" he begged gently. "Why is it that you must ask me all these things that I may not honorably answer?"

"I—I do not see why you may not answer."

"An honorable man respects his promise scrupulously!" said Philip with a sigh. "You would not have me break mine?"

"Why," cried Diane, "did you fight with Themar in the forest? Why have you night after night watched my camp? Oh, Philip, surely, surely, you can tell me!"

Philip sighed. With his infernal habit of mystery and pledges, the Baron had made this very hard for him.

"None of these things," he said quietly, "I may tell you or anyone."

Diane leaned forward and laid her hand upon his arm.

"Philip," she whispered with dark, tragic eyes fixed upon his face, "who—who shot the bullet that night? Do you know?"

"Yes," said Philip. "I—I am very sorry. I think I know—"

"You will not tell me?"

"No."

Diane drew back with a shudder.

"I know the answers to all my questions!" she said in a low voice, and there was a great horror in her eyes. "Oh, Philip, Philip, go! If—if you could have told me something different—"

"Is it useless to ask you to trust me, Diane?"

"Go!" said Diane, trembling.

By the swamp the gray ghosts fell to dancing with locked, transparent hands.

Blood-red the sun glimmered through the pines and struck fire from a gray, cold world.

Philip bent and caught her hands, quietly masterful.

"What you may think, Diane," he said unsteadily, "I do not know. But part of the answer to every question is my love for you. No—you must listen! We have crossed swords and held a merry war, but through it all ran the strong thread of friendship. We must not break it now. Do you know what I thought that day on the lake when I saw you coming through the trees? I said, I have found her! God willing, here is the perfect mate with whom I must go through life, hand in hand, if I am to live fully and die at the last having drained the cup of life

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to the bottom. If, knowing this, you can not trust me and will tell me so—”

But Ronador's eloquent voice rang again in the girl's ears. Her glance met Philip's inexorably. And there was something in her eyes that hurt him cruelly. For an instant his face flamed scarlet, then it grew white and hard and very grim.

“Go!” said Diane and buried her face in her hands.

With no final word of extenuation Philip went.

Diane stumbled hurriedly through the trees to Keela's camp and touched the Indian girl frantically upon the shoulder.

“Keela,” she cried desperately, “wake! wake! It's sunrise. Let us go somewhere—anywhere—and leave this treacherous world of civilization behind us. I—I am tired of it all.”

Keela stared.

“Very well,” she said sedately a little later. “You and I, Diane, we will journey to my home in the Glades. There—as it was a century back—so it is now.”