

CHAPTER XXXV

THE WIND OF THE OKEECHOBEE

SOUTHWARD along the beautiful Kissimmee river, where the fabled young grandee of Spain kissed the plaintive Seminole maid, rumbled the great green van and the camp of Keela. Southward, unremittingly protective, followed the silent music-machine. For though the dear folly and humor were things of the past, like Arcadia, a true knight may surely see that his willful lady comes to no harm though he must worship from afar. And at length they came to the final fringe of civilization edging the Everglades where, despite repeated protests, Johnny must stay behind with the cumbrous van.

And now the Southern woods were gloriously a-riot with blossoms; with dogwood and magnolia, with wild tropical blossoms of orange and scarlet; and the moon hung wild and beautiful above the Everglades.

“Little Spring Moon!” said Keela softly in Seminole.

Diane thought suddenly of a late moon above a marsh.

“He—he can not follow me into those terrible

wilds ahead," she thought with sudden bitterness. "I shall be free at last from his dreadful spying."

At sunrise one morning they bade Johnny adieu and struck off boldly with the Indian wagon into the melancholy world of the Everglades.

"It is better," said Keela gravely, "if you wear the Seminole clothes you wore at Sherrill's. They are in the wagon. My people love not the white man."

"But—" stammered Diane.

"They will think," explained Keela shyly, "that you are a beautiful daughter of the sun from the wilderness of O-kee-fee-ne-kee. You are brown and beautiful. Such, they tell, was my grandmother. It is a legend of my mother's people, but I do not think," added Keela majestically, "that the wild and beautiful tribe of mystery who were sons and daughters of the Sun, are half so beautiful as you!"

To the dull baying of the alligators in the saw grass, and the melancholy croak of the great blue herons, Keela's wagon penetrated the weird and terrible wilds of the Everglades, winding by the gloomy border of swamps where the deadly moccasin dwelt beneath the darkling shadow of cypress, on by ponds thick with lilies and tall ghostly grasses, over tangled underbrush, past water-dark jungles of dead trees where the savage cascade of brush and vine and fallen branches had

woven a weird, wild lacery among the trees, through mud and saw grass, past fertile islands and lagoons of rush and flag—a trackless water-prairie of uninhabitable wilds which to Keela's keen and beautiful eyes held the mysteriously blazed home-trail of the Seminole.

As Keela knew the trail, so surely from the rank, tropical vegetation of the great Southern marshland she knew the art of wresting food. Bitter wild oranges, pawpaws, oily palmetto cabbage, wild cassava, starred gorgeously now with orange colored blossoms, and guavas; these, with the wild turkeys and mallard ducks, turtles and squirrels and the dark little Florida quail with which the wild abounded, gave them varied choice.

Cheerfully fording miles of mud and water, his discomforts not a few, came Philip, greatly disturbed by the incomprehensible whims of his lady. By day he followed close upon the trail of the canvas wagon, patterning his conquest of the aquatic wilderness about him after that of Keela, hunting the wild duck and the turkey and discarding the bitter orange with aggrieved disgust. And if Keela occasionally found a brace of ducks by the camp fire or a bass in a nest of green palmetto, she wisely said nothing, sensing the barrier between these two and wondering greatly.

By night when the great morass lay in white and sinister tangle under the wild spring moon,

when the dark and dreadful swamps were rife with horrible croaks and snaps, the whirring of the wings of waterfowl or the noise of a disturbed puff adder, Philip stretched himself upon the seat of the music-machine and slept through the twilight and the early evening. When the camp ahead, glimmering brightly through the live oaks, was silent, Philip awoke and watched and smoked, a solitary sentinel in the terrible melancholy of the moonlit waste of ooze and dead leaf and sinister crawling life.

So they came in time to the plains of Okeechobee and thence to the wild, dark waters of the great inland sea—a wild, bleak sea, mirroring cloud and the night-lamp of the Everglades. The wind wafting across on night-tipped wings rippled the great water shield and brought its message to the silent figure on the shore.

“So,” sighed the wind of the Okeechobee, “he still follows!”

“Yes,” said Diane, shuddering at the howl of a cat owl, “he has dared even that!”

“Brave and resolute to plunge into the wilds with a music-machine! Would he, think you, dare all this for the sake of—spying?”

“I—I do not know. I have wondered greatly. Still he has dared much for it before.”

“He asked you to remember—his love—”

“I—I dare not think of it. For every admis-

sion he made that night by the marsh tallied with the terrible tale of Ronador. I had thought he followed and watched by night for another reason."

"What reason?"

"I — do not know. A finer, holier reason —"

The wind fluttered and fell, and rose again with a plaintive sigh.

"You know, but you will not tell!"

"It — it may be so. He is false — he is false!" cried the voice of the girl's sore heart; "a false sentry and a false protector. I can not bear it. Philip! Philip! It was Themar's knife — and the bullet was his — and all that seemed fine and noble was black and false!"

"You will not trust him as he begged!"

"I can not. For he will not tell me the reason for all these things!"

"You will wed Prince Ronador?"

"Yes. It is the one way out."

"Why?"

"He is a gallant lover and the victim of much that is vile and unfair."

"Yes — he has said so."

"He has suffered much through me."

"Yes."

"And he is honorable and devoted."

"It may be."

"*He* told me all, though he found it difficult."

"He was not bound by a pledge."

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“No.”

“Well, there is wisdom, the wisdom of the world, in your choice. Flashing jewels, robes of state, maids of honor —”

“These things,” spurned Diane with beautiful insolence, “I may buy with gold.”

“Ah!” crooned the wind, “but the vassalage of this elfin nation that plays at empire, the romance and adventure of an imperial court! And when the mad King dies and the Prince Regent, then Ronador will be king —”

“I have thought of it all. I can not go back to the old shallow life with Aunt Agatha. No! No! And I am very lonely. If in the days to come wind and moon and the call of the wilderness stir my gypsy blood to rebellion — if I am ever to forget —”

“What must you forget?”

“It was foolish to speak so. I do not know. Then when the call of the wildwood comes I must have crowded days and fevered gayety to hush it. And surely this will come to me in the court of Ronador.”

The wild moon drifted behind a cloud, the sea darkened, something huge and shadowy lumbered down to the water and splashed heavily away, the cat owl hooted. A mist drooped trailing fingers over the water as the wind died away.

A profoundly dreary setting for a dream of empire!