

CHAPTER XXXVI

UNDER THE LIVE OAKS

“**S**EE!” said Keela shyly. “It is the camp of my people.”

It lay ahead, a fire-blot in the darkling swamp, a primitive mirage of primitive folk, of palmetto wigwams and log-wheel fires among the live oaks of a lonely island.

Keela’s wagon presently forded a shallow creek and crossed an island plain. Thence it came by a winding road to the village, where, with the halting of the wagon, the travelers became the hub of a vast and friendly wheel of excitement.

Hospitable hands were already leading Keela’s horses away when Mr. Poynter rode sedately into camp and, descending to terra firma in the light of the nearest camp fire, guilefully proceeded to assure himself of a welcome and immediate attention by spectacular means; he simply unwound the hullabaloo.

Cymbals clashed, the drum cannonaded fearfully and to the sprightly measures of “The Glowworm,” the Indians who had collected about Keela’s wagon to stare at Diane, decamped in a body to the side of Mr. Poynter, who smiled and

proceeded in pantomime to make friends with all about him.

This, by virtue of the entertaining music-machine, was not difficult. Having exhausted the repertoire of the hullabaloo, he initiated the turbaned warriors into the mystery of unwinding tunes, thereby cementing the friendship forever.

The general din and excitement grew fearful. Presently the Thunder-Man was warmly assigned a wigwam, made of palmetto and the skins of wild animals above a split-log floor, to which he retired at the heels of Sho-caw, a copper-colored young warrior who had learned a little English from the traders.

Already rumor was rife among the staring tribe that Diane had strayed from the legendary clan of beautiful Indians in the O-kee-fee-ne-kee wilderness. The assignment of her wigwam, therefore, had been made with marked respect.

Here, as the Indian camp settled into quiet and the fires died lower, as the wild night sounds of the Glades awoke in the marsh outside, Diane lay still and wakeful and a little frightened. Wilderness and Seminole were still primeval. The world seemed very far away. The thought of the music-machine brought with it somehow a feeling of security.

With the broad white daylight, courage returned. From her wigwam Diane watched the

silent village, wrapped in fog, wake to the busy life of the Glades. Somber-eyed little Indian lads carried water and gathered wood, fires brightened, there was a pleasant smell of pine in the morning air. Later, by Keela's fire, she furtively watched Philip ride forth with a band of hunters.

So at last in the heart of the wildwood, among primitive folk whose customs had not varied for a century, Diane drank deep of the wild, free, open life her gypsy heart had craved. There were times when a great peace dwarfed the memory of the moon above the marsh; there were times when the thought of Ronador and Philip sent her riding wildly across the plains with Keela; there were still other times when a nameless disquiet welled up within her, some furtive distrust of the gypsy wildness of her blood. But in the main the days were quiet and peaceful.

"It is a wild world of varied color and activity," she wrote to Ann. "The trailing air plants in the trees beside my wigwam weave a dense, tropical jungle of shadow shot with sunlight. Keela's wigwam lies but a stone's throw beyond. It is lined with beaded trinkets, curious carven things of cypress, pots of dye made of berries and barks, and pottery which she has patterned after the relics in the sand mounds. There is an old chief with all the terrible pathos of a vanishing race

in his eyes. I find in his wistful dignity an element of tragedy. He is very kind to Keela and talks much of her in his quaint broken English.

“Moons back, he declares, when E-shock-etom-isee, the great Creator, made the world of men by scattering seeds in a river valley, of those who grew from the sand, some went to the river and washed too pale and weak—the white man; some, enough—the strong red man; some washed not at all—the shiftless black man. But Keela came from none of these.

“Ann, the squaws are *hideous!* Their clothes, an indescribable *potpourri* of savage superstition and stray inklings (such as a disfiguring bang of hair across the forehead, a Psyche knot and a full skirt) from the white man’s world of fashion—years back. The pounds and pounds of bead necklaces they wear give the savage touch. I don’t wonder Keela’s delicate soul rebelled and drove her to the barbaric costume of a chief. It is infinitely more picturesque and beautiful.

“There are thrilling camp fire tales of Osceola, the brilliant, handsome young Seminole chief who blazoned his name over the pages of Florida history, but here among Osceola’s kinsmen, pages are unnecessary. The sagas of the tribe are handed down from mouth to mouth to stir the youth to deeds of daring. Keela, like Osceola, had a white father and a Seminole mother. Ann,

I sometimes wonder what opportunity might have done for Osceola. As great as Napoleon, some one said. What might opportunity do for this strange, exotic flower of Osceola's people? She has brains and beauty and instinctive grace enough to startle a continent. I am greatly tempted. Ann, I beg of you, don't breathe any of this to Aunt Agatha. Some day I may carry Keela away to the cities of the North for an experiment quite my own. Her delicate beauty—her gravity—her shy, sweet dignity, hold me powerfully. It would make life well worth the living—the regeneration of a life like hers.

“No, I am not mad. If I am, it is a delicious madness indeed, this craving to do something for some one else. I need the discipline of thinking for another.

“I don't know when you will get this. Once in a while an Indian rides forth to civilization, and this letter will perforce await such a messenger. I wrote to Aunt Agatha from the little hamlet where Johnny is waiting with the van. I know she is fussing.

“You wrote me something in one of your letters, that Dick and Carl were planning to camp and hunt wild turkeys in the Glades. Let me know what luck they had and all the news.

“Ever yours,
“Diane.”

Now, if Diane proved readily adaptable to the wild life about her, no less did Philip. At night he smoked comfortably by his camp fire, unwound the hullabaloo upon request or lent it to Sho-caw. He rode hard and fearlessly with the warriors, hunted bear and alligator, acquired uncommon facility in the making of sof-ka, the tribal stew, and helped in the tanning of pelts and the building of cypress canoes.

Presently the unmistakable whir of a sewing machine which Sho-caw had bought from a trader, floated one morning from Philip's wigwam. Keela reported literally that Mr. Poynter had said he was building himself a much-needed tunic, though he had experienced considerable difficulty in the excavation of the sleeves.