

## CHAPTER XXXVII

### IN THE GLADES

WHAT the devil is the matter with you, Carl?" demanded Dick Sherrill irritably. "If I'd known you were going to moon under a tree and whistle through that infernal flute half the time, I'd never have suggested camping. Are you coming along to-night or not?"

"No. I've murdered enough wild turkeys now."

Sherrill plunged off swampwards with the guides.

Left to himself Carl laid aside his flute and sat very quiet, staring at the cloud-haunted moon which hung above the Glades. He had been drinking and gaming heavily for weeks. Now floundering deeper and deeper into the mire of debt and dissipation, forced to a fevered alertness by distrust of all about him, he found the weird gloom of the Everglades of a piece with the blackness of his mood. For days he had taken wild chances that horrified Sherrill inexpressibly; drinking clear whiskey in the burning white tropical sunlight, tramping off into trackless wilds without a guide, conducting himself, as

Sherrill aggrievedly put it, with the general irrationality of a drunken madman.

“The climate or a moccasin will get you yet!” exclaimed Sherrill heatedly. “And it will serve you right. Or you’ll get lost. And to lose your way in this infernal swamp is sure death. They used to enter runaway niggers who came here, on the undertaker’s list. I swear I won’t tell your aunt if you do disappear. That’s a job for a deaf mute. And only yesterday I saw you corner a moccasin and tantalize him until the chances were a hundred to one that he’d get you, and then you blazed your gun down his throat and walked away laughing. Faugh!”

With the perversity of reckless madmen, however, Carl went his foolhardy way unharmed. But his nights were fevered and sleepless and haunted by a face which never left him, and the locked hieroglyphics on Themar’s cuff danced dizzily before his eyes.

Carl presently lighted a lantern, seated himself at the camp table and fell moodily to poring over the tormenting hieroglyphics which had haunted him for days.

The night was cloudy. Only at infrequent intervals the moon soared turbulently out from the somber cloud-hills and glinted brightly through the live oaks overhead.

Carl had been drinking heavily since the morn-

ing, with vicious recourse to the flute when his mood was darkest. Now he felt strung to a curious electric tension, with pulse and head throbbing powerfully like a racing engine. Still there was satanic keenness in his mind to-night, a capacity for concentration that surprised him. Somewhere in his head, taut like an overstrung ligament or the string of a great violin, something sinister droned and hummed and subtly threatened. For the hundredth time he made a systematic list of recurrent symbols, noting again the puzzling similarity of the twisted signs, but no sign appeared frequently enough to do vowel work.

To-night somehow the cipher mocked and gibed and goaded him to frenzy. The mad angles pointing up and down and right and left—it was impossible to sort them. They danced and blurred and crept irresistibly into the wrong list.

And in error came solution. Carl glanced intently at the jumbled list and fell feverishly to working from a different viewpoint. From the cryptic snarl came presently the single English word in the cipher—his name. The keen suspicion of his hot brain had, at last, been right. For every letter in the alphabet, four symbols had been used interchangeably but whether they pointed up or down or right or left, their signifi-



cance was the same. There were no word divisions.

When at last Ronador's frantic message to the Baron lay before him, Carl was grateful for the quiet monastery days in Houdania with Father Joda. They had given him an inkling of the language.

Some of the message, to be sure, was missing — for Themar had been interrupted — and some of it unintelligible. But clear and cold before his fevered eyes lay the words which marked him irrevocably for the knife of a hired assassin. There was no suggestion of sealing his lips with gold, as in a drunken moment he had suggested in his letter. The seal of death was safer than the seal of gold. Seeing the sinister command there before him, even though the knowledge was not new, Carl felt a nameless fury rise in his reeling brain. He must live — live — live! he told himself fiercely. With the vivid, lovely face of Keela tormenting him to sensual conquest, he must live no matter what the price! How safeguard his life from the men who were hunting him?

What if Diane were to — *die*? Carl shuddered. Then the sirocco of fear and hate centering about her, would blow itself out forever and his own life would be safe, for the secret would be worthless. These men — Tregar, Ronador, Themar —

scrupled for vastly different reasons to take the life of a woman.

Money! Money! He must have money! And if Diane were to *die*, the great estate of Norman Westfall would revert to him of course; there was no other heir. Why had he not thought of that before? In that instant he knew that barely a year ago the treacherous thought would have been for him impossible, that slowly, insistenty he had been sliding deeper and deeper into the dark abyss of degradation where all things are possible.

There had been intrigue and dishonor of a sort in the letter to Houdania, but not this—Oh, God! not this horrible, beckoning Circe with infamous eyes and scarlet robes luring him to the uttermost pit of the black Inferno.

But Diane had flashed and mocked him as a child when he was sensitive and lonely. She had always mocked the memory of his mother. Brown and lovely his cousin's face rose before him in a willful moment of tenderness—and then from the shadows came again the flash of topaz and Venetian lamps and the lovely face of Keela.

Something in Carl's haunted brain snapped. With a groan of horror and suffering, he pitched forward upon the ground, breathing Philip Poynter's name like an invocation against the things of evil crowding horribly about him.

It was Dick Sherrill who at last found him.

"Nick!" he called in horror to one of the guides. "For God's sake bring some brandy! No! he's had too much of that already. Water! Water—can't somebody hurry!"

"Leave him to me, Mr. Sherrill!" said Nick with quiet authority. And bending over the motionless figure under the oak, he gently loosened the flannel shirt from the throat, laid a wet cloth upon the forehead and fell to rubbing the rigid limbs.

Presently, with a long, shuddering sigh, Carl opened his eyes, stared at the scared circle of faces about him and instantly tried to rise.

"Don't, don't, Carl," exploded Dick Sherrill solicitously. "Lie still, man! I was afraid something would get you."

Carl fell back indifferently.

Presently with a slight smile he sat up again.

"I'm all right now, Dick," he insisted. "It's nothing at all. I've had something like it once before. Don't mention it to my aunt. She'd likely fuss."

Dick readily promised.

"Nevertheless," he insisted, "we're going to break camp in the morning. This infernal bog's got on my nerves. There are more creepy, oozy things in that cypress swamp over there than a man can afford to meet in the dark. To the devil



with your wild turkeys, Nick! Quail and duck are good enough for me."

The camp wagons drove back to Palm Beach in the morning. Carl was very quiet and evaded Sherrill's anxious eyes. He seemed to be brooding morosely over some inner problem which frequently furrowed his forehead and made him very restless.

"Cheer up!" exclaimed Dick reassuringly. "You'll feel better when you get a shower and some other clothes. As for me, I'm going to hunt field mice and ground doves from now on. Lord, Carl, I'll never forget that beastly swamp. Did I tell you that last night, after all our discomfort, I got nothing but a smelly buzzard? Ugh!" Dick's hunting interest was steadily on the wane. He finally came down to birds and bumble bees, though when they started he had talked magnificently of alligators and bears.

Carl laughed and relapsed into brooding silence.

A little later on the Sherrill porch he found himself listening with tired patience to Aunt Agatha's opinion of camping in the Everglades.

"What with your Esquimaux," she puffed tearfully, "and the immigrant who wasn't an immigrant—and I must say this once, Carl, for all I promised to ask no further questions, that you never attempted to explain that performance to my satisfaction—the young man with the

eye, you know, and the immigrant with his feet on the lace spread—to say nothing at all of Diane's losing herself in the flat-woods over a cart wheel of flame, I wonder I'm not crazy, I do indeed! And riding off to Jacksonville with the Indian girl, for all I've lain awake night after night seeing her scalp lying by the roadside! It was bad enough to have you in those horrible Glades, but Diane—"

"Aunt Agatha," said Carl patiently, "what in thunder are you driving at anyway?"

"Why," said Aunt Agatha in aggrieved distress, "Diane's gone and left Johnny at some funny little hamlet and she's gone into the Everglades to a Seminole village with the Indian girl. There's a letter in my room. You can read for yourself."

Aunt Agatha burst into tears. Carl patiently essayed a comforting word of advice and followed Dick indoors to seek relief in less calamitous showers. Before he did so, however, he read his cousin's letter.

For that night and the night following Carl did not sleep. On the morning of the third day, after a careless inquiry he went to West Palm Beach and interviewed some traders who were reported to be on the eve of an expedition into the Everglades with a wagonload of scarlet calico and beads to trade for Indian products.

The fourth day he was missing.