

CHAPTER XXXVIII

IN PHILIP'S WIGWAM

FOR hours now, Carl had lain hidden in the waist-high grass, staring at the Seminole camp. The sun had set in a wild red glory in the west, staining dank pool and swamp with the color of blood. The twilight came and with it the eerie hoot of the great owls whirring by in the darkness. Unseen things crept silently by. Once a great winged wraith of ghostly white flapped by with a croak, a snowy heron, winging like a shape of Wrath Incarnate, above the crouching man in the grass. The wheel fires of the Seminoles flared among the live oaks, silhouetting dusky figures and palmetto wigwams.

By the swamp the night darkened. Carl had thrown himself upon the grass now, his white, haggard face buried upon his arm. Back there scarcely a mile to the east lay the camp of the traders. In the morning they would ride into the Indian camp saddled with bright beads and colored calicoes. In the morning — Carl shuddered and lay very quiet, fighting again the ghastly torment that had racked and driven him into the melancholy solitude of the Everglades. Now the firelit palmetto roof of the wigwam he knew to

be Diane's seemed somehow, to his distorted fancy, redder than the others — the color of blood. There, too, was the wigwam of Keela, bringing taunting desire.

A crowd of Seminoles rode into camp and, dismounting, led their horses away. Carl watched them gather about the steaming sof-ka kettles on the fires, handing the spoon from mouth to mouth. One, a tall, broad young warrior in tunic and trousers and a broad sombrero — disappeared in a wigwam on the fringe of camp.

A great wave of dizziness and burning nausea swept over Carl. Again he was conscious of the taut, over-strung ligament droning, droning in his head. The camp ahead became a meaningless blur of sinister scarlet fire, of bloodred wigwams and dusky figures that seemed to dance and lure and mock. The wild wind that bent the grasses, the horrible persistent hoot of the owl in the cypress tree, the night noises of the black swamp to the west, all mocked and urged and whispered of things unspeakable.

The camp fell quiet. A black moonless sky brooded above the dying camp fires. Not until this wild world of swamp and Indian seemed asleep did the man in the grass stir.

Silently then he crept forward upon hands and knees until he had passed the first of the Indian wigwams. Here he dropped for a silent interval

of caution into shadow and lay there scarcely breathing. On toward the door of Diane's shelter he crept and once more lay inert and quiet.

Thunder rumbled disquietingly off to the east. The wind was rising over the Glades with a violent rustle of grass and leaves. Now that his arm was nerved at last to its terrible task, it behooved him to hurry, ere the rain and thunder stirred the camp.

Noiselessly he crawled forward again. As he did so a ragged dart of lightning glinted evilly in his eyes. With a leap something bounded from the shadows behind him and bore him to the ground.

In the thick pall of darkness, he fought with infernal desperation. The rain came fiercely in great gusts of tearing wind. There was the strength of a madman to-night in Carl's powerful arms. Relentlessly he bore his assailant to the ground and raised his knife. The lightning flared brilliantly again. With a great, choking cry of unutterable horror, Carl fell back and flung his knife away.

"Oh, God!" he cried, shaking. "Philip!" He flung himself face downward on the ground in an agony of abasement.

With a roar of wind and rain the hurricane beat gustily upon the wigwams. Neither man seemed aware of it. Philip, his face white, had risen.

Now he stood, tall, rigid, towering above the man upon the ground, who lay motionless save for the shuddering gusts of self-revulsion which swept his tortured body.

It was Philip at last who spoke. Bending he touched the other's shoulder.

"Come," he said. "Diane must not know."

"No," said Carl dully. "No—she must not know. I—I am not myself, Philip, as God is my witness—" He choked, unable to voice the horror in his heart. A man may not raise the knife of death to his one friend and speak of it with comfort.

Rising, Carl stumbled blindly in the wake of the tall figure striding on ahead. They halted at last at a wigwam on the fringe of the camp. Philip lighted a lantern, his white face fixed and expressionless as stone.

"You were going to kill her!" he said abruptly.

"Yes," said Carl. He shuddered.

In the silence the storm battered fiercely at the wigwam.

Philip wheeled furiously.

"What is it?" he demanded. "In God's name what threatens her, that even here in these God-forsaken wilds she is not safe?" He towered grim above the crouching man on the floor of the wigwam. "For months I have guarded her day and night," he went on fiercely, "from some

damnable mystery and treachery that has almost muddled my life beyond repair. What is it? Why were you creeping to her wigwam to-night with a knife in your hand?"

Carl flinched beneath the blazing anger and contempt in his eyes. The droning in his head grew suddenly to a roar. The nausea flamed again over his body. For a dizzy interval he confused the noise of the storm with the drone in his head. Philip seized the lantern and bending, stared closely into his white face and haunted eyes.

"You're ill!" he said gently.

"Yes," said Carl. "I—I think so." He met Philip's glance of sympathy with one of wild imploring. It was the man's desperate effort to keep this one friend from sweeping hostilely out of his life on the wings of the dark, impious tempest he had roused himself. To his disordered brain nothing else mattered. Philip had trusted him always—and his knife had menaced Philip. In Philip's hand lay then, though he could not know it, the future of the man at his feet. In the silence Carl fell pitifully to shaking.

"Steady, Carl!" exclaimed Philip kindly and setting the lantern down, slipped a strong, reassuring arm about the other's shoulders.

In that second Philip proved his caliber. With big inherent generosity he saw beyond the bloated

mask of brutal passion and resolve. Miraculously he understood and said so. This white, haggard face, marked cruelly with dissipation and suffering, was the face of a man at the end of the way. In his darkest hour he needed — not an inexorable censor — but a friend. With heroic effort Philip put aside the evil memory of the past hour, though his sore heart rebelled.

“Carl,” he said gently, “you’ve got to pull up. You’ve come to the wall at last. You know what lies on the other side?”

Carl shuddered.

“Yes,” he whispered. “Madness — or — or suicide. One of the two must come in time.”

“Madness or suicide!” repeated Philip slowly and there was a great pity in his eyes.

Carl caught the look and his face grew whiter beneath its tan. Chin and jaw muscles went suddenly taut.

“Philip,” he choked, unnerved by the other’s gentleness, “you don’t — you can’t mean — you believe in me — *yet?*”

“Yes,” said Philip steadily. “God help me, I do.”

Carl flung himself upon the floor, torn by great dry sobs of agony. Shaking, Philip turned away. Presently Carl grew quieter and fell to pouring forth an incoherent recital about a candlestick. From the meaningless raving of the

white, drawn lips came at last a single sentence of lucid revelation. Philip leaped and shook him roughly by the shoulder.

“Carl, think! think!” he cried fiercely. “For God’s sake, think! You—don’t know what you are saying!”

But Carl repeated the statement again and again, and Philip’s eyes grew sombre. With quick, keen questions he reduced the chaotic yarn to order.

The wild tale at an end, Carl fell back, limp and very tired.

“In God’s name,” thundered practical Philip, “why didn’t you look in the other candlestick?”

Carl stared. Then suddenly without a word of warning, he pitched forward senseless upon the floor.

Philip loosened his clothing, rubbed his icy hands and limbs and bathed his forehead, but the interval was long and trying before the stark figure on the floor shuddered slightly and struggled weakly to a sitting posture.

“I’m all right now,” said Carl dully. “And I’ve got to go on. I—I can’t meet Diane.” He drew something from his pocket and jabbed it in his arm.

Philip looked on with disapproval.

“No,” said Carl, meeting his glance. “No, not so very often, Philip. Just lately, since Sherrill

and I camped in the Glades. There's something — something very tight here in my head whenever I grow excited. When it snaps I'm done for a while, but this helps."

Philip's fine, frank mouth was very grim.

"Carl," he said quietly, "off there to the south is the eccentric swamp home of a singular man, a philosopher and a doctor. He's Keela's foster father. I've met and smoked with him. I want you to go to him and rest. The Indians do that. He's what you need. And tell him you're down and out. You'll go — for me?"

"Anywhere," said Carl.

"Tell him about the dope and every other hell-conceived abuse with which you've tormented your body. Tell him about the infernal tightness in your head."

"Yes," said Carl.

"But this thing of the candlestick," added Philip bitterly, "tell to no man. You're strong enough to start now?"

"Yes."

Philip left the wigwam. When at length he returned, there was a dark, slight figure at his heels, turbaned and tunicked, a guide whom he trusted utterly.

A burning wave swept suddenly over Carl's body and left him very cold. Philip could not know, of course.

“Keela will guide you,” said Philip. “She could follow the trail with her eyes closed. The horses are saddled at the edge of camp. You’ll be there by daylight.”

He smiled and held out his hand and his eyes were encouraging. The hands of the two men tightened. Carl stumbled blindly away at the heels of the Indian girl. Philip watched them go — watched Keela lead the way with the lithe, soft tread of a wild animal, and mount — watched Carl swing heavily into the saddle and follow. Silhouetted darkly against the watery moon, the silent riders filed off into the swamp-world to the south. For an instant Philip experienced a sudden flash of misgiving but Philip was just and honorable in all things and having disciplined himself to faith in his friend, maintained it.

Then his eyes wandered slowly to the wigwam of Diane. Thinking of the story of the candlestick, with his mouth twisted into a queer, wry smile, Philip fumbled for his pipe.

“*Requiescat in pace,*” said Philip, “the hopes of Philip Poynter!”