

CHAPTER XXXIX

UNDER THE WILD MARCH MOON

SOUTHWARD under the watery moon and the wild, dark clouds rode the Indian girl, following a trail blazed only for Indian eyes. The aquatic world about them had grown steadily wilder, more remote from the haunts of men. Forging miry creeks, silver-streaked with moonlight, trampling through dense, dark, tangled brakes and on, under the wild March moon, followed Carl, a prey to the memory of the Indian girl as he had seen her that night at Sherrill's.

Keela's face, vividly dark and lovely, had mocked his restless slumbers this many a day. Keela's eyes, black like a starless night or the cloud-black waters of Okeechobee had lured and lured to sensual conquest.

But a great shame was adding its torment to the terrible pain in his head and the fevered singing of his pulses. In the torture of his self-abasement, the over-strung ligament in his head fell ominously to droning again. Everything seemed remote and unreal. He hated the awful silence about him—the crash of his horse's feet through the matted brush and the twist of palmetto, resolved itself into dancing ciphers.

Ahead Keela stopped. Motionless, like a beautiful sculptured thing, she sat listening as Carl rode up beside her.

"What is it?" he asked.

"I fancied some one followed," said Keela soberly. "It may not be." She rode forward, glancing keenly at the trail behind her.

Thus they rode onward until the east grew pale and gray. A bleak dawn was breaking in melancholy mists over the Everglades. The lonely expanse of swamp and metallic water, of grass-flats and tangled wilds, loomed indistinctly out of the half light in sinister skeleton.

Keela glanced with furtive compassion at the haggard face of the rider behind her. Since midnight he had ridden in utter silence, growing whiter it seemed as the night waned.

"Another hour!" said Keela in her soft, clear voice. "Be of courage. When the sun rises there behind the cypress, we shall be at our journey's end."

"I—I am all right," stammered Carl courageously, but he bit his lips until they bled, and swayed so violently in the saddle that Keela slid to the ground in alarm.

"Put your arms about my shoulders—so!" she commanded imperiously. "You will fall! Philip surely could not know how ill you are. Can you get down?"

With an effort Carl dismounted and fell forward on his knees.

“You must sleep for a while,” said Keela. “I will build a fire. We can breakfast here and rest as long as you like.” She took a blanket from his saddle and spread it on the ground.

Carl crept on hands and knees to the Indian blanket and lay very still. A drowsiness numbed his senses. When he awoke after a brief interval of restless slumber, it was not yet daylight, though the sky in the east was softly streaked with color. The moon hung low.

A fire crackled in the center of a clearing. The horses were tethered to a tree. Keela was off somewhere with bow and arrow to hunt their breakfast.

Now suddenly as he lay there, tired and apathetic, Carl was conscious of a face leering from among the trees close at hand, a dark, thin-lipped foreign face with eyes black with hate and malicious triumph. There was a horse hitched to a tree in the thicket beyond. In that instant Carl knew that the Houdanian had furtively followed the camp of the traders into the wilds of the Everglades, spurred on by the fierce command of Ronador. But he did not move. A terrible apathy made him indifferent to the knife of the assassin. He had had his day of masterful torment back there in the attic of the farm, he

told himself. Now he must pay. The knife would quiet this unbearable agony in his head.

Themar met his eyes, smiled evilly and raised his knife. But the weapon fell suddenly from his hand. With an ominous hum an arrow whizzed fiercely through the trees and anchored in the flesh above his heart.

Themar stumbled and fell forward on his face. Like the stricken moose who seeks to press his wound against the earth, he drove the arrow home to his heart. He sobbed, and choked and lay very still, a scarlet wound dying his flannel shirt.

Carl's horrified eyes turned slowly to the west.

Keela was coming through the trees, proud eyes fierce with terrible anger; halting beside the dead man, she spurned him with moccasined foot.

The tense, droning string in Carl's head whirred again — and snapped. He lay in a heavy stupor, dozing fitfully until the moon climbed high again above the Glades.