

CHAPTER XL

THE VICTORY

WHEN consciousness and a restful sense of returning strength came at last Keela was bending anxiously over him.

"You have been quiet so long," she said gravely, "that I grew afraid. Drink." She held forth a cup of woven leaves, and the glance of her great black eyes was very soft and gentle.

Carl flushed and taking the cup with shaking hand, drank. There was a flash of gratitude in his eyes.

"Themar?" he whispered. "Where is he?" He looked toward the trees beyond.

"In the swamp!" said Keela, her face stern and beautiful. "It is better so."

"You — you dragged him there?"

"I am very strong," said Keela simply. "The vultures will get him. It is the Indian way with one who murders."

Their eyes met, a great wave of crimson suddenly dyed Keela's throat and face and swept in lovely tide to the brilliant turban. A constrained silence fell between them, broken only by the whirl of a great heron flapping by on snowy wings. And there was something in Keela's eyes

that sent the blood coursing furiously through Carl's fevered veins.

The Indian girl busied herself with the wild duck roasting in the hub of coals. Carl ate a little and lay down again. He saw now that Themar's horse was tethered beside Keela's—that the dead man's saddlebags lay by the fire. Furtive recourse to the drug in his pocket presently flushed his veins with artificial calm. He fell asleep to find his dreams haunted again by the lovely face of Keela, kinder and gentler now than that proud, imperious face above the line of flashing topaz.

He awoke with a start.

The Indian girl lay asleep on a blanket by the fire. The world of moon-haunted jungle and water was very quiet. Firelight faintly haloed Keela's face and brought mad memories of the soft light of the Venetian lamp at the Sherrill fête. He noted the pure, delicate regularity of feature, the delicate, vivid skin—it was paler than Diane's—and flaming through his brain went the dangerous reflection that conquest lay now perhaps in the very hollow of his hand.

Desire had driven him on to things unspeakable. It had clouded his brain, fired his blood to ugly resolve, blinded every finer instinct with its turbulent call, until the siren who beckons men

onward through the marshland of passion had flung the gift at his feet in the haunted wilds.

Staring at the tranquil, delicate face of the sleeper by the camp fire, a great horror of the scarlet hours behind him awoke suddenly in Carl's heart. There had been a girl who cried. And he had laughed and shrugged and voiced an ironical philosophy of sex for her consolation. There was no philosophy of sex, only a hideous injustice which Man, the Hunter, willfully ignored. There were faces in the fire — faces like that of Keela, that had lured to sensual conquest and faded.

Trembling violently, Carl stared long and steadily at the Indian girl. There had been a time, before he sank to the bottom of the pit, when her face had awakened in him an eager deference. The moon darkened. A white wall of mist settled thickly over the Glades. Then came other thoughts. Philip trusted him. He must not forget. And the immortal spark of control lay somewhere within him. Unbridled passion of mind and body had made him very ill. Very well, then, it behooved him to exorcise the demon while this tormenting clarity of vision whirled the dread kaleidoscope of his careless life before him in honest colors.

Unleashed by drug and drink and ceaseless brooding, nerve centers had rebelled, an infernal blood pressure born of mental agony had inspired

the droning, his will had slipped its moorings. That his body was not ill, he now knew for the first time. Fever, nausea, pain and droning, they had all leaped at the infernal manipulation of his disordered mind with sickening intensity. Now with a terrible effort he summoned each tattered remnant of the splendid mental strength he had indifferently abused, disciplined his fleeing faculty of concentration and sat very quiet.

Philip trusted him. He must not forget! Keela's face had made its delicate appeal to his finer side until that appeal had been hushed by the call of his blood. And there were times when Diane had been kind. He must not forget. Like the stirring of a faint shadow, he felt the first dawning sense of self-mastery he had known for days.

The horrible Circe with infamous eyes and scarlet robes no longer lured . . . the terrible sirocco of unbridled passion which had dominated his body almost to destruction was burning itself out . . . the droning in his head was very faint. He must not forget Philip, truest and best of friends.

Carl lay down again beside the fire with a great sigh. He was very tired—very sleepy.

He slept soundly until morning.

When he awoke it was broad daylight. There was a curious sense of utter rest in his veins and



"No, I may not take your hand."

meeting Keela's solicitous glance, he said, a little diffidently, that he was better and that he thought they might go on. After a breakfast of quail and wild cassava they rode on, Keela on Themar's horse. Her own obediently followed.

An hour later they came to an aquatic jungle haunted by noisome reptiles. Here fallen trees and a matted underbrush of poisonous vines lay submerged in dank black water. Cypress gloomed in forbidding shadow above the stagnant water; the swamp itself was rife with horrible quacks and croaks and off somewhere the distant bellow of an alligator.

So dense and dark this terrible haunt of snake and bird and brilliant lizard that Carl shuddered, but Keela, dismounting, tethered her horses to the nearest tree and struck off boldly across a narrow trail of dry land above the level of the water. Carl followed. Presently the matted jungle thinned and they came to a rude foot-bridge made of twisted roots. It led to the first of a series of fertile islands which threaded the terrible swamp with a riot of color. Here royal poinciana flared gorgeously beside the orange-colored blossoms of wild cassava, and hordes of birds flamed by on brilliant wings.

Through rude avenues of palm and pine and cypress, through groves of wild orange and banana fringed with mulberry and persimmon

trees, over rustic bridges which led from island to island, they came at last to a larger hummock and the wild, vine-covered log lodge of Mic-co, the Indians' white friend.

It was thatched like the Seminole wigwams in palmetto and set in a cluster of giant trees. Trailing moss and ferns and vines hung from the boughs, weaving a dense, cool shade about the dwelling. The exuberant air plants brought memories of Lanier's immortal poem:

“Glooms of the live oaks, beautiful-braided and woven
With intricate shades of the vines that myriad-cloven
Clamber the forks of the multiform boughs, —”

There were brilliant vistas of bloom beyond the shadow. The odor of orange hung heavily in the still, warm air. A pair of snowy herons flapped tamely about among the pines.

Utter peace and quiet, alive with the chirp of many birds, brilliant sunshine and deep, dark shadow! But Carl stared most at the figure that came to greet them, a tall, broad man of dark complexion and wonderful, kindly eyes of piercing darkness. His hair and beard were snow-white and reached nearly to his waist, his attire buckskin, laced at the seams. But his slender, sensitive hands caught and held attention.

"Mic-co," said Keela gravely, "he is very tired in his head. Philip would have him rest."

Mic-co held out his hand with a quiet smile. Whatever his searching eyes had found in the haggard face of his young guest was reflected in his greeting.

"You are very welcome," he said simply.

"No," said Carl steadily, "I may not take your hand, sir, until you know me for what I am. There are none worse. I have been through the mire of hell itself. I have dishonorably betrayed a kinsman in the hope of gold. I had thought to kill. Only a freak of fate has stayed my hand. And there is more that I may not tell—"

"So?" said Mic-co quietly.

Flushing, Carl took the outstretched hand.

"I—I thank you," he said, and looked away.