

CHAPTER XLI

IN MIC-CO'S LODGE

THE rooms of Mic-co's lodge opened, in the fashion of the old Pompeian villas, upon a central court roofed only by the Southern sky. This court, floored with split logs, covered with bearskin rugs and furnished in handmade chairs of twisted palmetto and a rude table, years back Mic-co and his Indian aides had built above a clear, lazy stream. Now the stream crept beneath the logs to a quiet open pool in the center where lilies and grasses grew, and thence by its own channel under the logs again and out. Storm coverings of buckskin were rolled above the outer windows and above the doorways which opened into the court.

Here, when the moon rose over the lonely lodge and glinted peacefully in the liliated pool, Mic-co listened to the tale of his young guest. It was a record of bodily abuse, of passion and temptation, which few men may live to tell, but Mic-co neither condoned nor condemned. He smoked and listened.

"Let us make a compact," he said with his quiet smile. "I may question without reserve. You may withhold what you will. That is fair?"

"Yes."

"Have you ever endured hardship of any kind?"

"I have hunted in the Arctics," said Carl. "There was a time when food failed. We lived for weeks on reindeer moss and rock tripe. I have been in wild territory with naturalists and hunters. Probably I have known more adventurous hardship than most men."

Mic-co nodded.

"I fancied so," he said. "What is your favorite painting?" he asked unexpectedly.

The answer came without an instant's hesitation.

"Paul Potter's 'Bull.'"

"A thing of inherent virility and vigor, intensely masculine!" said Mic-co with a smile, adding after an interval of thought, "but there is a danger in over-sexing—"

"I have sometimes thought so. The over-masculine man is too brutal."

"And the over-feminine woman?"

"Kindly, sentimental, helpless and weak. I have lived with such an aunt since I was fifteen. No, I beg of you, do not misunderstand me! I blame nothing upon her. Like many good women whose minds are blocked off in conventional squares, she is very loyal and sympathetic—and very trying. The essence of her temperament is

ineffectuality. My cousin and I were a wild, unmanageable pair who rode roughshod over protest. That Aunt Agatha was not in fault may be proved by my cousin. She is a fine, true, splendid woman."

An ineffectual aunt in the critical years of adolescence! Mic-co did not suggest that his cousin's sex had been her salvation.

So nights by the pool Mic-co plumbed the depths of his young guest with the fine, tired eyes.

"Tell me," he said gently another night; "this inordinate sensitiveness of which you speak. To what do you attribute it?"

Carl colored.

"My mother," he said, "was courageous and unconventional. She recognized the fact that marriage and monogamy are not the ethical answers of the future—that though ideal unions sometimes result, it is not because of marriage, but in spite of it—that motherhood is the inalienable right of every woman with the divine spark in her heart, no matter what the disappointing lack of desirable marriage chances in her life may be. Therefore, when the years failed to produce her perfect and desirable human complement, she sought a eugenic mate and bore me, refusing to saddle herself to a meaningless, man-made partnership with infinite possibilities of domestic hell

in it, merely as a sop to the world-Cerberus of convention. Marriage could have added nothing to her lofty conceptions of motherhood—but I—I have been keenly resentful and sensitive—for her. I think it has been the feeling that no one understood. Then, after she died, there was no one—only Philip. I saw him rarely.”

“And your cousin?”

“She had been taught—to misunderstand. There was always that barrier. And she is very high spirited. Though we were much together as youngsters she could not forget.”

A singular maternal history, a beautiful, high-spirited, intolerant cousin who had been taught to despise his mother's morality! What warring forces indeed had gone to the making of this man before him.

“You have been lonely?”

“Yes,” said Carl. “My mother died when I needed her most. Later when I was very lonely—or hurt—I drank.”

“And brooded!” finished Mic-co quietly.

“Yes,” said Carl. “Always.” He spoke a little bitterly of the wild inheritance of passions and arrogant intolerance with which Nature had saddled him.

“All of which,” reminded Mic-co soberly, “you inflamed by intemperate drinking. Is it an inherited appetite?”

"It is not an appetite at all," said Carl.

"You like it?"

"If you mean that to abandon it is to suffer—no. I enjoyed it—yes."

The wind that blew through the open windows and doors of the lodge stirred the moonlit water lilies in the pool. To Carl they were pale and unreal like the wraith of the days behind him. Like a reflected censer in the heart of the bloom shone the evening star. The peace of it all lay in Mic-co's fine, dark, tranquil face as he talked, subtly moulding another's mind in the pattern of his own. He did not preach. Mic-co smoked and talked philosophy.

Carl had known but little respect for the opinions of others. He was to learn it now. He was to find his headstrong will matched by one stronger for all it was gentler; his impudent philosophy punctured by a wisdom as great as it was compassionate; his own magnetic power to influence as he willed, a negligible factor in the presence of a man whose magnetism was greater.

Mic-co had said quietly by the pool one night that he had been a doctor—that he loved the peace and quiet of his island home—that years back the Seminoles had saved his life. He had since devoted his own life to their service. They were a pitiful, hunted remnant of a great race who were kindred to the Aztec.

He seemed to think his explanation quite enough. Wherefore Carl as quietly accepted what he offered. There was much that he himself was pledged to withhold. Thus their friendship grew into something fine and deep that was stronger medicine for Carl than any preaching.

"My mother and I were *friends!*" said Carl one night. "When I was a lad of ten or so, as a concession to convention she married the man whose name I bear, a kindly chap who understood. He died. After that we were very close, my mother and I. We rode much together and talked. I think she feared for me. There was peace in my life then—like this. That is why I speak of it. I needed a friend, some one like her with brains and grit and balance that I could respect—some one who would understand. There are but few—"

"She spoke of your own father?"

"No. I do not even know his name. We were pledged not to speak of it. I fancied as I grew older that she was sorry—"

The subject was obviously painful.

"And you've never been honestly contented since?" put in Mic-co quickly.

"Once." Carl spoke of Wherry. "They were weeks of genuine hardship, those weeks at the farm, but it's singular how frequently my mind goes back to them."

"Ah!" said Mic-co with glowing eyes, "there is no salvation like work for the happiness of another. That I know."

So the quiet days filed by until Mic-co turned at last from the healing of the mind to the healing of the body.

"Let us test your endurance in the Seminole way," he said one morning by the island camp fire where his Indian servants cooked the food for the lodge. Beyond lay the palmetto wigwams of the Indian servants who worked in the island fields of corn and rice and sugar cane, made wild cassava into flour, hunted with Mic-co and rode betimes with the island exports into civilization by the roundabout road to the south which skirted the swamp. Off to the west, in the curious chain of islands, lay the palmetto shelter of the horses.

Mic-co placed a live coal upon the wrist of his young guest and quietly watched. There was no flinching. The coal burned itself out upon the motionless wrist of a Spartan.

Thereafter they rode hard and hunted, day by day. Carl worked in the fields with Mic-co and the Indians, tramped at sunset over miles of island path fringed with groves of bitter orange, disciplining his body to a new endurance. A heavy sweat at the end in a closed tent of buckskin which opened upon the shore of a sheltered inland lake, hardened his aching muscles to iron.

Upon the great stone heating in the fire within the sweat-lodge an Indian lad poured water. It rose in sweltering clouds of steam about the naked body of Mic-co's guest, who at length plunged from the tent into the chill waters of the lake and swam vigorously across to towels and shelter.

Carl learned to pole a cypress canoe dexterously through miles of swamp tangled with grass and lilies, through shallows and deep pools darkened by hanging branches. He learned to tan hides and to carry a deer upon his shoulders. Nightly he plunged from the sweat-lodge into the lake and later slept the sleep of utter weariness under a deerskin cover.

So Mic-co disciplined the splendid body and brain of his guest to the strength and endurance of an Indian; but the quiet hours by the pool brought with them the subtler healing.

Carl grew browner and sturdier day by day. His eyes were quieter. There was less of arrogance too in the sensitive mouth and less of careless assertiveness in his manner.

So matters stood when Philip rode in by the southern trail with Sho-caw.

Now Philip had wisely waited for the inevitable readjustment, trusting entirely to Mic-co, but with the memory of Carl's haggard face and haunted eyes, he was unprepared for the lean,

tanned, wholly vigorous young man who sprang to meet him.

“Well!” said Philip. “Well!”

He was shaken a little and cleared his throat, at a loss for words.

“You— you infernal dub!” said Carl. It was all he could trust himself to say.

It was a singular greeting, Mic-co thought, and very eloquent.