

CHAPTER XLIV

THE TALE OF A CANDLESTICK

THE friendship of Aunt Agatha and Mr. Poynter miraculously grew. Aunt Agatha, upon the following morning, took to wandering vaguely about the wooded shore and into Philip's camp, impelled by gracious concern for his health, which she insisted upon regarding as impaired, and by effusive gratitude for such trifling civilities as he had readily proffered the day before. From there she wandered vaguely back to her niece's camp fire in a chronic state of worry about Carl. Discontented, unflinching in her melancholy reminiscences of cannibalistic snakes and herons, Aunt Agatha plainly had no immediate intentions of any sort. She had no intention of lingering in camp, she said, accoutered solely with a hand bag! And she had no intention—no indeed!—of departing until Diane went back with her to the deserted Westfall house in St. Augustine, with the green mould and the cobwebs and cranky spiders and the croquet set in the cellar. Arcadia, if Diane had not crushed the memory out of her heart, had had a parallel.

Greatly disturbed by her aunt's melancholy state of uncertainty, Diane one morning watched

her set forth to gather lilies in the region of Philip's camp.

The woodland about was very quiet. Diane lay back against the tree trunk and closed her eyes, listening to the welcome gypsy voices of wind and water, to the noisy clapper rails in the island grass at the end of the lake and to the drone of a motor on the road to the north. Dimly conscious that Johnny was briskly scrubbing the rude table among the trees, she fell asleep.

When she awoke, with a nervous start, Johnny was down at the edge of the lake scouring pans with sand and whistling blithely. Off there to the west, with Aunt Agatha fussing at his heels, Philip was good-naturedly gathering the lilies at the water's edge. And some one was approaching camp from the northern road.

Diane glanced carelessly to the north and sprang to her feet with wild scarlet in her cheeks.

Ronador was coming through the forest.

His color was a little high, his eyes, beneath the peak of his motoring cap profoundly apologetic, but he was easier in manner than Diane.

"I'm offending, I know," he said steadily, "and I crave forgiveness, but muster an indifferent gift of patience as best I may, I can not wait. It is weeks, you recall—"

Diane flushed brightly.

"Yes," she said. "I know. I have been in the Everglades."

"Your aunt told me." Ronador searched her face suddenly with peculiar intentness. He might have added, with perfect truth, that to Aunt Agatha, who had indiscreetly afforded him a glimpse of her niece's letter, might be attributed the halting of the long, black car on the road to the north. "You have no single word of welcome, then!" he reproached abruptly and impatiently brushed his hair back from his forehead with a hand that shook a little.

From the north came the clatter of a motorcycle.

Diane held out her hand.

"Let us make a mutual compact!" she exclaimed frankly. "I have overstrained your patience—you have startled me. Let us both forgive. In a sense we have neither of us kept strictly to the letter of our agreement."

Ronador bent with deference over the girl's outstretched hand and brushed it lightly with his lips, unconscious that her face had grown very white and troubled. Nor in his impetuous relief was he aware that other eyes had witnessed the eloquent tableau and that Aunt Agatha had arrived in camp with an escort who quietly deposited an armful of dripping lilies upon the camp table and oddly enough made no effort to retire.

When at length, conscious of the electric constraint of the atmosphere, Ronador wheeled uncomfortably and met Philip's level glance, he stared and reddened, hot insolent anger in the flash of his eyes and the curl of his lips.

"Dear me!" faltered Aunt Agatha, guiltily conscious of the letter, "I am surprised, I am indeed! Who ever would have thought of seeing you here, Prince, among the trees and—and the ground doves and—and all the lilies!" The unfortunate lady, convinced by now that Ronador's apparent resentment concerned, in some inexplicable way, her escort, herself and the lilies, glanced beseechingly about her. "And what with the lilies," she burst forth desperately in apology for the inopportune arrival of herself and her escort, "what with the lilies, Prince, and the water so wet—though, dear me! it was not to be wondered at, of course—growing wild in the water that way—and only one gown and the hand bag—though to be sure I can't wear the hand bag, and wouldn't if I could—Mr. Poynter, with his usual courtesy was good enough to carry the lilies into camp when I asked him."

"Mr. Poynter was undoubtedly very good, Aunt Agatha," said Diane quietly, "but the lilies scarcely require any further attention."

Still Mr. Poynter did not stir.

"I regret exceedingly," he said formally to

Diane, "that I am unable to avail myself of your cordial permission to retire. Unfortunately, I have urgent business with Prince Ronador. Indeed, I have waited for just such an opportunity as this."

He was by far the calmest of the four. Ronador's violent temper was rapidly routing his studied composure. Diane's lovely face was flushed and indignant. Aunt Agatha, making a desperate pretense of sorting the lilies, was plainly in a flutter and willing to be tearfully repentent over their intrusion. Not so Philip. There was satisfaction in his steady glance.

"There is scarcely any business which I may have with — er — Tregar's secretary," said Ronador with deliberate insolence, "which may not be more suitably discharged by Tregar himself."

There was a biting suggestion of rank in his answer at which Philip smiled.

"My spread-eagle tastes," he admitted, "have always protected my eyes from the bedazzlement frequently incident to the sight of royalty. Nor do I wish to flaunt unduly my excellent fortune in being born an American and a democrat, but for once, Prince, we must overlook your trifling disadvantage of caste and meet on a common footing. Permit me to offer my humble secretarial apology that the business is wholly mine — and one other's — and not my chief's."

Here Aunt Agatha created a singular diversion by dropping the lilies and gurgling with amazement.

“God bless my soul!” she screamed hysterically, conscious that her indiscretion was rapidly weaving a web around her which might not find favor in her niece’s eyes, “it’s Baron Tregar! I know his beard.”

Now as it was manifestly impossible for the Baron and his beard to be secreted among the lilies which Aunt Agatha was wildly gathering up, Philip looked off in the wood to the north.

There was a motorcyclist approaching who had conceivably felt sufficient interest in the long black car to follow it.

The Baron arrived, gallantly swept off his cap and bowed, and suddenly conscious of an indefinable hostility in the attitudes of the silent quartet, stared from one to the other with some pardonable astonishment.

“Tregar!” shouted the Prince hotly, “you will account to me for this officious espionage.”

The Baron stroked his beard.

“One may pay his respects to Miss Westfall?” he begged with gentle sarcasm. “It is a sufficiently popular epidemic, I should say, to claim even me. Besides,” he added dryly, “in reality I have come in answer to a letter of Poynter’s. It

has interested me exceedingly to find you on the road ahead of me."

"Baron Tregar," said Diane warmly, "you are very welcome, I assure you. Mr. Poynter has been pleased to inject certain elements of melodrama into his chance intrusion. Otherwise you would not find us staring at each other in this exceedingly ridiculous manner!"

"Hum!" said the Baron blandly and glanced with interest at the undisturbed countenance of Mr. Poynter.

"A mere matter of justice and belated frankness to Miss Westfall!" said Philip quietly. "I must respectfully beg Prince Ronador to disclose to her the original motive of his singular and highly romantic courtship. I bear an urgent message of similar import from one who has had the distinction of playing—imperial chess!"

They were curious words but not so curious in substance as in effect. With a cry of startled anger, Ronador leaped back, his eyes flashing terrible menace at Philip. There was only one pair of eyes, however, quick and keen enough, for all their loveliness, to follow his swift movement or the glitter of steel in his hand.

With a cry of fear and horror, Diane leaped like a wild thing and struck his hand aside. A revolver fell at her feet. Aunt Agatha screamed and covered her eyes with her hands.

In the tense quiet came the tranquil lap of the lake, the call of a distant bird, the lazy murmur of many leaves in a morning wind. Philip stood very quietly by the table. He looked at Diane; he seemed to have forgotten the others, Tregar thought.

With terrible anger in her flashing eyes, Diane flung the revolver into the placid lake, and facing Ronador, her sweet, stern mouth contemptuous, she met his imploring gaze with one of scathing rebuke.

"Excellency," she said to Ronador, "whatever else Mr. Poynter may have in mind, there is surely now an explanation which it behooves you to make as a gentleman who is not a coward!"

Ronador moistened his white lips and looked away.

Trembling violently she turned to Philip.

"Philip!" she cried. "What is it?" As her eyes met his, her hand went to her heart and the color swept in brilliant tide from the slim brown throat to the questioning eyes. "Oh, Philip! Philip!" She choked and fell again to trembling. It was a cry of remorse and heart-broken apology for the memory of a moon above the marsh.

For somehow in that instant, by a freak of instinct, the rain and the wind of Okeechobee and the bird in the pines came into their own. Their

subtle messages dovetailed with the hurt look in Philip's eyes—with the conviction of the girl's sore heart, unconquerable for all she had desperately fought it—with the revelation of treachery which lay now at the bottom of the lake.

Philip was very white.

"But," he said gently, "you could not know."

"I could have waited and trusted," cried the girl. "I could have remembered Arcadia!"

Was Ronador forgotten? Tregar thought so. These two mutely avowing with blazing eyes their utter trust and loyalty had for the moment forgotten everything but each other.

Ronador stalked viciously away to the lake, restlessly turned on his heel with a curse and came slowly back. There was despair in his eyes. Tregar thought of the black moments of impulse and the tearing conscience and pitied him profoundly.

"Excellency," reminded Diane, "there is an explanation—"

But Ronador's pallid lips were set in lines of fierce denial.

"Philip!" appealed the girl.

"Well," said Philip looking away, "it's a tale of a candlestick."

"A candlestick!"

"And a hidden paper."

"Yes?"

Ronador seemed about to speak, thought bet-

ter of it and closed his lips in a tense white line of sullenness.

Philip glanced keenly at him, and his own mouth grew a little sterner.

“Excellency,” he said to Ronador, “that you may not feel impelled again to violence in the suppression of this curious fragment of family history, let me warn you that the story has been entrusted in full to Father Joda, who knew and loved your cousin. Any spectacular irrationality that you may hereafter develop in connection with Miss Westfall, will lead to its disclosure. He is pledged to that in writing.”

The color died out of Ronador’s face. The fire, roused by the specter he had fought this many a day, burned itself quite to ashes and left him cold and sullen. He had played and lost. And he was an older and quieter man for the losing. Whatever else lay at the bottom of his contradictory maze of dark moods and passions, he had courage and the curse of conscience. There were black memories struggling now within him.

Tregar moved quietly to Ronador’s side, an act of ready loyalty not without dignity in the eyes of Philip.

“Your letter hinted something of all this,” he said. “Let us be quite fair, Poynter. Ronador feared only for his little son.”

“Why must we talk in riddles?” cried Diane

with a flash of impatience. "Why does Ronador fear for his son? Where is the candlestick? And the paper? Who found it?"

"Carl found it," said Philip. "It was written nearly a quarter of a century ago, by one — Theodomir of Houdania."

Diane glanced in utter mystification at Ronador's ashen face—there was a great fear in his eyes—and thence to Baron Tregar.

"Excellency," she appealed, "it is all very hard to understand. Who is Theodomir? And why must his life touch mine after all these years?"

The Baron cleared his throat.

"Let me try to make it simpler," he said gravely. "Theodomir, Miss Westfall, was a lovable, willful, over-democratic young crown prince of Houdania who, many years ago, refused the responsibilities of a royal position whose pomp and pretensions he despised—quoting Buddha—and fled to America where in the course of time he married, divorced his wife and later died—incognito. He was Ronador's cousin, and his flight shifted the regency of the kingdom to Ronador's father."

"Yes," said the girl steadily, "that is very clear."

"Theodomir married—and divorced—your mother," said Philip gently.

Diane grew very white.

"And even yet," she said bravely, "I—can not see why we must all be so worked up. There is more?"

"Yes. Later, after her divorce from Theodimir, your mother married Norman Westfall—"

"My father," corrected Diane swiftly.

Philip looked away.

"Her second marriage," he said at last, "was childless."

"Philip!" Diane's face flamed. "And I?"

"You," said Baron Tregar, "are the child of Theodimir."

In the strained silence a bird sent a sweet, clear call ringing lightly over the water.

"That—that can not be!" faltered Diane. "It—it is too preposterous."

"I wish to Heaven it were!" said Philip quietly. "Whether or not it was Theodimir's wish that his daughter be reared, in the eyes of the world, as the daughter of Norman Westfall, to protect her from any consequences incident to his possible discovery and enforced return to Houdania, it is impossible to say. Hating royalty as he did, he may have sought thus to shield his daughter from its taint. Why he weakened and consigned the secret to paper—how or when he hid it in an ancient candlestick in the home of Norman Westfall, remains shrouded in utter

mystery. It is but one of the many points that need light."

Again the Baron cleared his throat.

"And," said he, "since unwisely, Miss Westfall, for eugenic reasons, we grant a certain freedom of marital choice to our princes—since wisely or not as you will, the Salic Law does not, by an ancient precedent, obtain with us, and a woman may come in the line of succession, the danger to Ronador's little son, is, I think, apparent."

"Surely, surely!" exclaimed Diane hopelessly, "there is some mistake. There is so much that is utterly without light or coherence. So much—"

For the first time Ronador spoke.

"What," said he sullenly to Philip, "would you have us do?"

"I would have you eliminate the secrecy, the infernal intrigue, the scheming to smother a fire that burned wilder for your efforts," said Philip civilly. "I would have you face this thing squarely and investigate it link by link. I would have you abandon the damnable man-hunt that has sent one man to his death in a Florida swamp and goaded another to a reckless frenzy in which all things were possible. Themar is dead. That Granberry is alive is attributable solely to the fact that he was cleverer and keener than any of those who hounded him. But he has paid heavily,

for the secret he tried in a drunken moment to sell to Houdania.”

“I do not understand Carl’s part in it,” said Diane. “Nor can I see—”

But whatever it was that Diane could not see was not destined for immediate revelation. At the mention of Carl’s name by her niece, Aunt Agatha came unexpectedly into the limelight with a gurgle and fainted dead away. Her white affrighted face had been turned upon Ronador in fearful fascination since Diane had struck his arm. Whether or not she had comprehended any of the talk that followed is a matter of doubt.

When at last, after an interval of flurry and excitement in the camp, Aunt Agatha gasped, sat up again and stared wildly at the sympathetic line of faces about her, Ronador was gone. When or where he had gone, no one knew. Only Diane caught the whir of his motor on the road to the north.

“It is better so,” said Tregar compassionately. “Though his love began in treachery, Miss Westfall, and drove him through the mire, it was, I think, genuine. A man may not see his hopes take wing with comfort. And Ronador’s life has not been of the happiest.”

“Excellency,” said Philip who had been wandering restlessly about among the trees, “I know that you are but an indifferent gypsy and

strongly averse to baked potatoes, but such as it is, let me extend to you the hospitality of my camp. Doubtless Miss Westfall will dispatch Johnny for your motorcycle."

The Baron accepted.

"There is one thing more, Miss Westfall," he added as they were leaving. "Frankness is such a refreshing experience for me, that I must drink of the fount again. Days back, a headstrong young secretary of mine of considerable nerve and independence and—er—intermittent disrespect for his chief—having come to grief through a knife of Themar's intended for another—refused, with a habit of infernal politeness he has which I find most maddening, refused, mademoiselle, to execute a certain little commission of mine because he quixotically fancied it savored of spying!"

"Tregar!" said Philip with an indignant flush. And added with an uncomfortable conviction of disrespect, "Er—Excellency!"

"I said—intermittent disrespect," reminded Tregar. "Moreover," he continued, stroking his beard and selecting his words with the precision of the careful linguist that he was, "this secretary of mine, after an interview of most disconcerting candor, took to the road and a hay-cart in a dudgeon, constituting himself, in a characteristic outburst of suspicion, quixotism, chivalry and

protection, a sentinel to whom lack of sleep, the discomforts of a hay-camp — and — er — spying black-and-tans were nothing. I have reason for suspecting that he may have been misrepresented and misjudged —”

“Excellency,” said Philip shortly, “my camp lies yonder. And Mrs. Westfall will doubtless rejoice when her niece’s camp is quiet.”

Diane met the Baron’s glance with a bright flush.

“Excellency,” she said, “I thank you.”

The two men disappeared among the trees.