

CHAPTER XLVI

IN THE FOREST

WITH the darkening of the night a wind sprang up over the bleak, black expanse of lake and swept with a sigh through the forest on the shore. It was a wind from the east which drove a film of cloud across the stars and bore a hint of rain in its freshness. The rain itself pattering presently through the forest fell upon the huddled figure of a girl who lay face downward upon the ground among the trees.

She lay inert, her head pillowed upon her arm, face to face with the unspeakable shadow that had haunted Carl. Not married, Aunt Agatha had said, but just a mother! Now the pitiful fragments of a hallowed shrine lay mockingly at her feet. How scornfully she had flashed at Carl!

Diane quivered and lay very still, torn by the bitter irony of it.

And the Indian mother! Carl had known and Ronador. She had caught a startled look in the eyes of each at the Sherrill *fête*. Every wild instinct, if she had but heeded the warning, had pointed the way; the childhood escapade in the forest, the tomboy pranks of riding and running and swimming that had horrified Aunt Agatha to

the point of tears, and later the persistent call of the open country.

What wonder if the soft, musical tongue of the Seminole had come lightly to her lips? What wonder if Indian instincts had driven her forth to the wild? What wonder if the nameless stir of atavism beneath a Seminole wigwam had frightened her into flight. Indian instincts, Indian grace, Indian stoicism and courage, Indian keenness and hearing—all of these had come to her from the Indian mother with the blood of white men in her veins.

But the stain of illegitimacy—

That brought the girl's proud head down again with a strangled sob of grief. Shaking pitifully, she fell forward unconscious upon the ground.

Some one was calling. There was rain and a lantern.

Diane stirred.

"Diane! Diane!" called the voice of Philip.

At the memory of Philip and Arcadia, Diane choked and lay very still.

"Diane!" The lantern shone now in her face and Philip was kneeling beside her, his face whiter than her own.

"Great God!" said Philip and stared into her haunted eyes with infinite compassion.

But Philip, as he frequently said, was pre-eminently a "practician," wherefore he gently

covered the girl with his coat, busied himself with the lantern and, for various reasons, sought to create a general atmosphere of commonplace reality.

“Your aunt sent me,” he said at length. “She’s awfully upset.”

“She told you?”

“Yes.”

“Of — of the Indian mother?”

“I knew,” said Philip. “Carl told me. I withheld it this morning purposely. Why fuss about it, Diane? Lord Almighty!” added this exceedingly practical and democratic young man, “I shouldn’t worry myself if my grandfather was a salamander! . . . And, besides, your true Indian is an awfully good sport. He’s proud and fearless and inherently truthful —”

“I know,” said Diane. “It isn’t that I mind — so much. It — it’s the other.”

“Of course!” said Philip gently, “but, somehow, I can’t believe it’s true, Diane. There’s logic against it. Why, Great Scott!” he added cheerfully, for all there was a lump in his throat at the wistful tragedy in the girl’s eyes, “there’s Theodomir’s own statement in the candlestick — have you forgotten?”

“It spoke of — of marriage?”

“It said that Theodomir had gone into the Glades hunting and had come upon the Indian vil-

lage. There he met and married your mother and later divorced her."

"If I could only be sure!" faltered Diane.

"You can," said Philip, "for I am going back to the Glades to-morrow to hunt this thing to earth. The old chief will know."

"But the trail, Philip?"

"There are ways of finding it," said Philip reassuringly.

He was so cool and matter-of-fact, so entirely cheerful and resourceful, that Diane found his comfortable air of confidence contagious. Only for a time, however. A little later she glanced mutely into his face, met his eyes, flushed scarlet and fell to shaking again.

"Philip!" she whispered.

"Yes?" There was a wonderful gentleness in Philip's voice.

"I—I can't go back to camp yet, for all it's raining."

"Well," said Philip comfortably, "rain be hanged. We'll wait a bit."

Diane gave a sigh of relief and lay very quiet.

Philip wisely said nothing. He shifted the lantern so his own face might be in the shadow and for some reason of his own, fell to speaking of Carl. He told of Mic-co, of the quiet hours of healing by the pool, of another night of storm

and stress when Carl had gone forth into the wilds with the Indian girl.

For the first time now he felt that he had pierced the girl's shell of tragic introspection and caught her interest. Though the rain came faster and the lantern flickered, Philip went on with his quiet story.

He spoke of the forces that had fired Carl to drunken resentment, the defection of his comrades, his conviction of injustice in the apportionment of the Westfall estate, the climax of his sensitive rebellion against Diane's attitude toward his mother, the morose and morbid loneliness which had driven him relentlessly to ruin.

"What did he hope to gain by writing to Houdania?" asked the girl a little bitterly.

"Money!" said Philip firmly. "He fancied he could frighten them and put a heavy price upon his silence. Later when his letter to Houdania was ignored he altered his plans. If he could prove that you were the daughter of Theodmir and not of Norman Westfall—then the great estate of his uncle would revert to him. Before he could act further, things began to happen. And then," added Philip thoughtfully, "comes another dark patch in the mystery. Carl's story must have crossed wires with something else—something that frightened them and made his death imperative. The hysterical desperation

of these men was out of all proportion to the cause. Baron Tregar, baffling as he is at times, is not the man to lend himself to deliberate assassination merely to keep the succession of Ronador's son free from incumbrances. Later still, Carl planned to sell the secret to the rival province of Galituria, but the net closed in so rapidly and he fell to drinking so heavily, that brain and body revolted and the first shadow of insanity whispered another way — ”

“To murder me!” flashed the girl. For the first time there was warmth and color in her face.

Philip was glad. He had struck fire from her stony calm at last.

“Yes,” he said, and catching her chilled hands, compelled the glance of her wistful eyes. “Diane,” he said deliberately, “let us withhold our censure. Carl has a curious and tragic psychology and he has paid in full. Thanks to a habit of wonderful alertness and ingenuity, he has made his enemies respect and fear him. But the tangle aroused the blackest instincts of his soul.”

But the girl was very bitter. The old impatience and intolerance flashed suddenly in her face.

Philip fell silent for an instant. Then he shot his final barb with deliberate intention—not so much to reproach—though there was utter hon-

esty and loyalty to Carl in what he said—but more to touch the girl's tragedy with something sharp enough to pierce her morbidness.

“Carl blames no one but himself,” he said gently. “But—but if you had been a little kinder, Diane—”

“Philip!” He had hurt and knew it.

“Yes, I know!” said Philip quickly, “but you're not going to misunderstand, I'm sure. Let me say it with all gentleness and without reproach. If you could have forgotten his mother's history and made him feel that he was not quite alone—that there was some one to whom his careless whims made a difference! But you were a little scornful and indifferent. I wonder if you'll believe that he can tell you each separate moment in his life when you were kind to him.”

“I too was alone and lonely!” defended the girl. “And the call of the forest had made me most unhappy.”

“Yes. But Carl was not mocking any sensitive spot in your life—”

“No—I was cruel—cruel!”

“I remember in college,” said Philip, “he talked so much of his beautiful cousin, and the rest of us were wild to see her. We used to rag him a lot, but you held aloof and we told him we didn't believe he had a cousin. We discovered after a while that he was sensitive because you

didn't come when he asked you, and we quit ragging him about it. You didn't even come when he took his degree."

"No. I—Oh, Philip! I am sorry."

"Your aunt," went on Philip, "was not mentally adapted to inspire his respect. He merely laughed and petted her into tearful subjection. You were the only one, Diane, who was his equal in body and brain, and you failed him at a period when your influence would have been tremendous. I can't forget," added Philip soberly, "that much of this I knew in college and carelessly enough I ignored it all later. I let him drift when I might have done much to help him."

Philip's instinct was right and kindly.

He had provided a counter wound to dwarf, at saving intervals, the sting of Aunt Agatha's frightened revelation. Thereafter, the memory of Philip's loyal rebuke was to trouble her sorely, temper a little the old intolerance and arouse her keen remorse. The consciousness that Philip disapproved was quite enough.

With a sudden gesture of solicitude, Diane touched the sleeve of his shirt. It was very wet.

"Philip!" she exclaimed, springing to her feet. "We must go back."

"Lord," said Philip lazily, "that's nothing at all. I'm a hydro-aviator."

She glanced wistfully up into his face.

"You're right about Carl," she said. "I'm very sorry."

Philip felt suddenly that it behooved him to remember a certain resolution.

Later, as he hurried through the rainy wood to his own camp, where the Baron sat huddled in the Indian wagon in a state of deep disgust about the rain, he halted where the trees were thick and lighted his pipe.

"There's the Baron's aeroplane at St. Augustine," he said. "We can go there in the morning. And the old chief will know. His memory's good for half a century." Philip flung away his match. "But I can't for the life of me see which is the lesser of the two evils. If her mother wasn't married, it was bad enough, of course. But with Theodomir a crown prince—it's worse if she was!"

And a little later with a sigh—

"A princess! God bless my soul, with my spread-eagle tastes I shouldn't know in the least what to do with her!"

Huddled in the Indian wagon, the Baron and his secretary talked until daybreak.