

CHAPTER L

THE OTHER CANDLESTICK

THE closing of the outer door betokened the departure of Mr. Dorrigan.

Carl swiftly marked the second candlestick where the shallow receptacle in the other had begun and applied the thin, fine edge of a craftsman's saw. When at length the candled branches lay upon the table, the light of the lanterns overhead revealed, as he had hoped, a second paper.

He was to read the faded sheets, with staring, incredulous eyes, and learn that its contents were utterly unrelated to the contents of the other.

I am impelled by one of the damnable whims which sway me at times to my own undoing, to trust to some chance discovery that which under oath I may never deliberately reveal with my lips. It is the history of certain events which have heavily shadowed my life and brought me up with a tight rein from a life of reckless whim and adventure to one of terrible suffering. I write this with a wild hope that may never be gratified.

The first foreshadowing of this singular cloud came one night in the Adirondack hunting lodge of Norman Westfall, a young Southerner whose inheritance of a

childless uncle's millions had made him a conspicuous figure months before. He was living there with his sister and both, as usual, were at odds with the grim old father down South who resented the wild, unconventional strain that had come into his family through the blood of his wife.

They were a wild, handsome, reckless pair — Ann and Norman Westfall — inseparable companions in wild adventure for which another woman would have neither the endurance nor the inclination.

Ann was a strong, beautiful, impetuous woman with rich coloring; deliciously feminine in her quieter moments, incredibly daring in others; keen-brained, cultured, and utterly unconventional; generous, sympathetic and a splendid musician. Norman worshiped her. She was older than he and without the occasional strain of flippancy which so maddened his father.

Norman and Ann and I had traversed the whole length of the Mississippi to New Orleans on a raft and had traveled thence to this recently inherited Adirondack tract of Norman's to rest.

"Grant," he said one night after Ann had gone to bed, "you've more brains and brawn and breeding than any man I know, and you've splendid health."

Naturally enough, I flushed.

Norman narrowed his handsome, impudent eyes and regarded me intently.

"And you're sufficiently clear-cut and good-looking," he said thoughtfully, "for the purpose. Not so hand-

some as Ann to be sure, but Ann's an exceptionally beautiful woman."

I was utterly at a loss to understand his reference to a purpose and said so. He laughed and shrugged and enlightened me.

"My dear fellow," he said in answer to my stammered suggestion that marriage was simpler and less fraught with perilous possibilities, "Ann and I are not in the least hoodwinked by marriage. It has enervated the whole race of womankind and led to their complete economic dependence upon a polygamous sex who abuse the trust. Now Ann believes firmly in the holiness of maternity, but she flatly refuses to take upon herself the responsibility of an unwelcome tie. In this, as in everything, I cordially endorse her views. Ann is past the callow age. She has refused a number of men who were conspicuously her inferiors, though Dad has stormed a bit. Now you are the one man whom I consider her physical and mental equal, the one man to whom I may talk in this manner without fear of bigoted misunderstanding, but — while Ann's friendship for you is warm and wholly sincere — she doesn't love you. If she did," said my impudent young friend, "she'd likely shrug away her aversion to marital custom and marry you before you were well aware of it. As it is, she declines to sacrifice the maternal inheritance of her sex and she refuses to marry. And there you are!"

Looking back now after five years of readjustment and metamorphosis, I marvel at the cool philosophy with

which two adventurous young scapegraces settled the question of a little lad's unconventional birth.

I pass over now the heartbroken reproaches of Ann's father when my son was born. We told him the truth and he could not understand. He looked through the eyes of the world and it widened the gulf forever. Thereafter Norman and Ann lived in the lodge.

Ann was a wonderful mother and the boy as sturdy and handsome a little lad as the mother-heart of any woman ever worshiped. But I! How easy it had been to promise to make no particular advance of affection to my son — to suggest in no way my claim upon him — to take up the thread of my life again, as if he had never been born — to regard myself merely as the physical instrument necessary to his creation!

I was to learn with bitter suffering the truth that my act bound me irrevocably in soul and heart to my boy and his mother.

I shall not forget the night when I faced the truth. It was in the great room of the lodge, the blazing wood fire staining the bearskin rugs. Outside, in the early twilight, there was wind, and trees hung with snow, and the dull, frozen lap of a winter lake. I had come up to the lodge at Norman's invitation. As far as he and Ann were concerned, my claim upon Ann's boy was quite forgotten.

He had grown into a dark, ruddy, handsome little lad, this son of mine, with a brain and body far beyond his years, thanks to Ann's marvelous gift of motherhood, her care and her teaching.

Ann sat by the old, square piano singing some marvelous mother's lullaby of the Norseland, her full contralto ringing with splendid tenderness. Mother and son were alone when I entered. Carl was busily at play on a rug by the fire.

In that instant, with the plaint of the Norse mother in my ears, I knew. The tie was too strong to fight. I loved my little son — I loved his mother.

I do not remember how I stumbled across the room and told her. I only know that she was greatly shocked and troubled and very kind, that she told me as gently as she could that I must try to conquer it all — that there must be no one in Carl's life but herself — that man's part in the scheme of creation was but the act of a moment; a woman's part, her whole life.

I think now that her great love for the little chap had crowded everything else out of her mind; that living up there in those snowy acres of trees away from the world, she was so calmly contented and happy that she feared an intrusive breath of any sort. And she did not love me.

Suddenly in a moment of impulsive tenderness, she bent over and caught Carl up in her arms.

"My little laddie!" she cried, her face glorified, and he nestled his head in her full, beautiful throat and laughed.

An instant later he looked up and smiled and held out his hand with a curious instinct of kindliness he had, even as a very little fellow.

"Don't feel so awful bad, Uncle Grant!" he said shyly. "I love you too. Don't I, mother?" I don't know, but I think Ann cried.

I choked and stumbled from the room.

So, for me, ended the singular episode of my life that has condemned me again to the fate of a wanderer, drifting about like thistledown in the wind of fancy.

There is but one chance in many hundred that this paper, which bears upon the back the address of solicitors who will always know my whereabouts — sealed and buried after a whim of mine as it will be — will ever come to the eyes of him for whom it is intended, but maddened by the thought that I must go through life alone — and lonely — without hinting to my son the truth, I have desperately begged from Ann the boon of the single chance, forlorn as it is, that I may have some flickering hope to feed upon. And she, out of the compassionate recognition that for the single moment of creation I am entitled to this at least, has granted it. If this paper ever comes to the eyes of my son — and I am irrevocably pledged to drop no hint of its whereabouts — then — and not until then — are all my pledges void.

Who knows? In the years to come, some wild freak of destiny may guide the feet of my son to the secret of the candlestick. I shall live and pray and likely die a childless, unhappy old man, whose Fate lies buried profoundly in the sealed, invulnerable heart of a Spanish candlestick — a stranger to his son.

Grant Satterlee.

It was the name of a wealthy bachelor whose lonely austerity of life upon a yacht which rarely lingered in any port, whose quiet acts of philanthropy as he roved hermitlike about the world, had been the talk of continents.

Reading to the end, Carl dropped the scattering sheets and buried his face in his hands, unnerved and shaking.