

CHAPTER LII

EXTRACTS FROM THE LETTERS OF NORMAN WESTFALL

RELUCTANTLY, Diane opened the letters of long ago and read them:

Grant and I have had wild sport killing alligators with the Seminoles. A wild, dark, unexplored country, Ann, these Florida Everglades! How I wish you were with us! Tyson had an Indian guide, evoked somewhere from the wild by smoke signals, waiting for us. We traversed miles and miles of savage, uninhabitable marsh before at last we came to the isolated Indian camp. Small wonder the Seminole is still unconquered. It is a world here for wild men. I'll write as I feel inclined and bunch the letters when there is an Indian going out to the fringe of civilization.

We hunt the 'gators by night in cypress canoes. Grant sat in the bow of our boat to-night with a bull's-eye lantern in his cap. The fan of it over the silent, black water, the eyes of the 'gators blazing in the dark, these cool, bronze, turbaned devils with axes to sever the spinal cord and rifles to shatter the skull — it's a wild and thrilling scene.

I'm sorry Carl was not so well. Now that Dad is kinder to the little chap, we could have left him at St.

Augustine if he'd been well enough to make the trip. It bothers me that you're not along. It's my first time without you, and you're a better shot than Grant and more dependable in mood. I can't make out what's come over him of late. He's so moody and reckless that the Indians think he's a devil. He's more prone to wild whims than ever. We've shot wild turkey and bear but I like the 'gator sport the best.

There's a curious white man here who's lived a good part of his life with the tribe. He's a Spaniard, a dark-skinned, bitter, morose sort of chap — really a Minorcan — whose Indian wife is dead. He has a daughter, a girl of twenty or so whom the Seminoles call Nan-ces-wee. He calls her simply Nanca. She speaks Spanish fluently. The morose old Spaniard has taught her a fund of curious things. Her heavy hair, black as a storm-cloud, falls to her knees. Grant says her wonderful eyes remind him somehow of midnight water. Her eyebrows have the expressive arch of the Seminole. Her color is dark and very rich, but it's more the coloring of the Spanish father than the Seminole mother. Altogether, she's more Spanish than Indian, I take it, though she's a tantalizing combination of each in instinct. Her grace is wild and Indian — and she walks lightly and softly like a doe. Ann, her face haunts me.

Young as she is, this Nanca of whom I have written so much to you, has, they tell me, had a most romantic history. With her beauty it was of course inevitable. Men are fools. At eighteen, urged into proud revolt against her Seminole suitors by her father, who

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for all his singular way of life can not forget his white heritage, she married a young foreigner who came into the Glades hunting. He seems to have been utterly without ties and decided to live with the Indians in the manner of the Spaniard. A year or so later, a young artist imitator of Catlin's made his way to the Seminole village with a guide. He had been traveling about among the Indians of the reservations painting Indian types, and had heard of this old turbaned tribe buried in the Everglades. Nanca's beauty must have driven him quite mad, I think. At any rate he wooed and won. Nanca begged the young foreigner to divorce her, which he did. The Seminole divorce custom is lenient when the marriage is childless. The artist, I fancy, was merely a wild, reckless, inconstant sort of chap who did not regard the simple Seminole marriage tie as binding. After the birth of his daughter, a tiny little elf whom Nanca has named "Red-winged Blackbird," he tried to run away, and the Indians killed him.

Red-winged Blackbird! Keela then was the child of the artist!

The old Spaniard in his gruff and haughty way has been kind to Grant and me. He's not well — some obscure cardiac trouble from which he suffers at times most horribly. He has confided to me a singular secret. The young foreigner who divorced Nanca is the crown prince of some obscure little mountain kingdom called Houdania. His name is Theodomir. He had wild rev-

olutionary notions, hated royalty and fled at the death of his father. But America and its boasted liberty had cankers and inequalities too, and heartsick, Theodomir roamed about until at length on a hunting trip he came into the village of the Seminoles. Here was the communistic organization of which this aristocratic young socialist had dreamed — tribal ownership of lands, coöperative equality of men and women — no jails, no poor-houses, no bolts or bars or locks — honorable old age and perfect moral order without law. What wonder that he lingered? Now that he is divorced from Nanca he wanders about from tribe to tribe. I'd like to see him.

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Ann, I must write the truth. The face of this Spanish girl haunts me day and night. There is a madness in my blood. I wish you were here! I am tormented by terrible doubts and misgivings. If Dad were not so intolerant!

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Nanca has fled from the Indian village with Grant and me. Oh, Ann, it had to come! I lost my head. The old Spaniard died three days ago. That was the cause of it. Nanca's grief was wild and terrible. Her wailing dirge was all Indian, yet immediately she cried out that the Indian way of life for her was impossible without her father. She begged me to take her away. And yet — Oh, Ann, Ann! How could I take that other man's child? We left her outside the old chief's wigwam.

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Much as I have scoffed at marriage, I have married Nanca. Grant insisted. He was a little bitter. I do not know what makes him so.

I have seen Dad. We quarreled bitterly. Agatha was there with him. I can hardly write what followed. By some God-forsaken twist of Fate, a jealous, sullen-eyed young Indian who had loved Nanca and had been spurned by her father, followed us relentlessly from the Glades to St. Augustine. He told Dad that Nanca had not been married to the artist — that she was a mother and not a wife — and Dad believed it. I told him patiently enough that there is no ceremony among the Seminoles — that the man goes forth to the home of the girl at the setting of the sun, and that he is then as legally her husband as if all the courts in Christendom had tied the knot. Dad can not see it. I shall be in New York in two weeks. Nanca and I are going to Spain. I can not forget Dad's white, horror-struck face nor what he said. He is bigoted and unjust. God help me, I hope that I may never set eyes upon him again!

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We have been very happy here in Spain. I have run across a wonderful old room in a Spanish castle. Ceiling, doors, fireplace, paintings, table, chairs and lanterns, I am transplanting. What a setting for Nanca!

We are sailing for home. Nanca is not so well as I could hope. She grieves, I think, for the little girl in Florida. There are times when I am bitterly jealous of those two other men.

There was a lapse of weeks in the letters. Then came a long one from New York.

Grant came that night just after you had gone. He has been with me a week. His notions are more erratic than ever. For instance, last night, while we were smoking, I told him the story of Prince Theodimir. He was greatly interested.

“What a chance!” said he softly. “What a chance, Norman, for wild commotion in your ridiculous little court. I’ve been there. It’s a kingdom of crazy patriots who grant freedom of marital choice to their princes to freshen and strengthen the royal blood; and they boast an ancient line of queens wiser than Catherine of Russia. A hidden paper purporting to be a deathbed statement of Prince Theodimir’s — this little daughter of Nanca and the artist — and, Lord! what complications we could have immediately. How easily she might have been the child of Theodimir and a princess!”

And sitting there by the table, Ann, he drew up an ingenious document couched in the stilted English of a foreigner. Like most of Grant’s notions, it was infernally clever. It suggested that my marriage to Nanca had been childless and that we had brought a child — the daughter of Theodimir and Nanca — away from the Indian village and had reared her with my name. Then he showed me with a laugh where three conflicting meanings might be read from the stilted phrasing and eccentric punctuation.

“Drop that, old man,” said he, “into your chauvinis-

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tic little Punch and Judy court along with the name of the missing Theodomir and watch the blaze!"

After all, I do not think we will stay here in New York. Nanca is not at all well. She longs for trees and the open country. We are coming up to the lodge.

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I'm glad Dad sent for you. I think he is growing fonder of Carl, though of course his prejudices will probably always flash out now and then. . . . He's fond of us both, Ann, for all he raves so. No word of Grant since that night of which you told me. . . . I am sorry.

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You tell me Grant has written to you. Tell him when you write — to write to me. I miss him.

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Grant has sent me a giant pair of candlesticks from Spain. They are six feet tall, of age-old wood and Spanish carving. He begs that they may stand in the Spanish room and makes some incoherent reference to you in connection with them, out of which I can't for the life of me extract a grain of sense. If you could have cared for him a little, Ann!

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I will not take this thing that Fate has whipped into my face with a scornful jeer. Nanca is dead! Her life went out with the life she gave my daughter. Oh, Ann, Ann, why are you not with me now when I need you

most. After all what is this mortal tegument but a shell which a man sloughs off in eternal evolution. Outside, the moon is very bright upon the lake. The "Mulberry Moon," Nanca called it, and loved its light. It shines in at her window now, but she can not see it. Ann, because the moon is so bright to-night — because the name of the moon goddess bears within it your name — let the name of my poor, motherless little girl be Diane. Nanca called her "Little Red-winged Blackbird!" I believe at the end she was thinking of the little girl we left in the Indian village. They are very much alike. Poor Nanca!

The writing broke off with a wild scrawl. With agonized eyes Diane pushed the letters away and stared at the quiet firelit room, building again within its log walls the tragedy of her father's death. He had lain there by the fire, his life snuffed out like a candle by his own hand. The broken-hearted old man down South had carried the child of his son away, fiercely denied the Indian blood, and pledged Aunt Agatha to the keeping of the secret. And this was the net that had driven Carl to the verge of insanity and sent Themar to his death in a Florida swamp!

There was no princess — no child of the exiled Theodomir. The paper stuffed in the candlestick in a reckless moment had been but the ingenious figment of a man's brain for the enter-

tainment of an hour. The old chief and Shocaw with their broken tale to Philip had but tangled the net the more. As the blood of the Indian mother had driven Diane forth to the forest, so had the blood of the artist father driven Keela forth from the Indian village, a wanderer apart from her people, and Fate had relentlessly knotted the threads of their lives in a Southern pine wood.