

CHAPTER LIII

BY MIC-CO'S POOL

TO THE dark, old-fashioned house in St. Augustine in which Baron Tregar was a "paying guest" came one twilight, a man for whom compassionately he had waited. His visitor was sadly white and tired, with heavy lines about his sullen mouth and the dust of the highway upon his motoring rig. There was no fire in his eyes; rather a stupid apathy which in a man with less strength about the mouth and chin might easily have become commonness.

"Tregar," he said with an effort, "you told me to come when I needed you. I am here. I can not see my way —"

Tregar held out his hand in silence. Only he knew the sacrifice of insolent pride that had brought his guest so low.

Ronador took his hand and reddened.

"My father rightly counts upon your loyalty," he choked and walked away to the window.

Suddenly he wheeled with blazing eyes of agony.

"Why must that old horrible remorse grind and tear!" he cried, "now when I can not bear it! It is keener and crueller now than it was that

day when you found me in the forest. Every new twist of this damnable mess has been a barb tearing the old wound open afresh. And now—I—I can not even find Miss Westfall. I have motored over the roads in vain. The van is gone from the lake shore. It seemed that I must make one final desperate effort to make her understand—”

With the memory of the eyes of Diane and Philip flashing messages of utter trust that day beneath the trees, the Baron sighed.

“Ronador,” he said kindly, “it would have been in vain.”

“And now,” Ronador moistened his pallid lips, “there is a rumble of war from Galituria.”

“Yes,” said Tregar sadly, “Themar was a traitor.”

“I told him much,” said Ronador, great drops of moisture standing forth upon his forehead. “It seemed that I must, to make him understand the urgent need of silencing Granberry forever. He cabled the news to Galituria and sold it. I am ill and discouraged. There is fever in my blood, Tregar, from this climate of eternal summer—a fever in my head—”

Tregar stroked his beard.

“There is a doctor,” he said quietly, “of whom Poynter has told me much—a doctor who healed Granberry’s mind as well as his body. I had

thought to go to him myself — to rest. I, too, am tired, Ronador. One goes to a little hamlet and an old man guides by a road to the south into the Everglades. Let us go there together.”

“No!” said Ronador sullenly. “Let us rather go home. I am sick of this land of insolent men like Granberry and Poynter, who bend the knee to no man.”

“You would go back then, ill, sullen, resentful, with the news that we must lay before your father? By Heaven, no!” thundered the Baron with one of his infrequent outbursts. “Let us go back smiling, for all we have lost, and seek to tell of this child of Theodomir with what grace we can muster. Poynter is at the bedside of his father. Granberry has gone to learn the tale of the other candlestick. These men, Ronador, we must see again before we sail. In the meantime, there is Poynter’s physician.”

“Very well,” said Ronador, goaded to a sudden consent by a fevered wave of nausea and shaking, “let us go to him.”

So came Prince Ronador and the Baron to the island lodge of Mic-co.

Though Ronador in the first disorder of rebellious mind and body, had fancied himself sicker than he really was, he was suffering more now than even Tregar guessed. The last stage of the journey to a man of less indomitable grit and

courage would have been impossible. It was no sickness of the mind alone. His body was wildly ravaged by a fever.

Through a dizzy blur which distorted every object and which frowningly he sought to drive away with clenched hands, he stared at the lodge, stared at Keela, stared at the grave and quiet face of Mic-co. He was still staring vaguely about him when night curtained the liliated pool and the stars flashed brightly overhead.

"I am not ill, Tregar!" he insisted curtly. "Let me rest by the pool. There is peace here and I am tired. We traveled rapidly—"

Nevertheless, for all his feverish denial, his desperate attempts to keep to the thread of desultory talk were pitiful. He frowned heavily, began his sentences slowly and trailed off incoherently to a halt and silence.

The Baron turned compassionately away from him to Mic-co with a question.

"Names," said Mic-co, "are nothing to me, Baron Tregar. They are merely a part of that great world from which I live apart. I am a Heidelberg man, since you feel sufficiently interested to inquire. Though my choice of a profession was merely a careless desire to know some one thing well, I have never regretted it."

"I—I beg your pardon," stammered the Baron and glanced keenly at Mic-co.

“It is a habit of mine,” hinted Mic-co, “to take what confidence a man may offer and let him withhold what he will.”

“There is nothing to withhold!” flashed Ronador with sudden fierceness. “Why do you speak of it?”

Mic-co thought of a white-faced young fellow who had stubbornly refused to accept his hospitality, one morning beneath the live oaks, until he might name aloud his offenses in the sight of God and Man. This man before him, sweeping rapidly into the black gulf of delirium, was of a different caliber.

By the pool Ronador leaped suddenly, his face quite colorless save where the flame of fever burned in his cheeks.

“That Voice!” he said, standing in curious attitude of listening. “You hear it, Tregar? Always—always it comes so in the quietest hours. Tell him! Tell him! Why should I tell him? What is he to me? I may not purchase relief at the price of any man’s respect. Only Tregar knows. Hush!—In God’s name, hush! Thou shalt not kill! Thou shalt not kill!” He seemed, without conscious effort, to be repeating the words of this Voice with which he held this terrible communion, and waved Tregar back with an imperious gesture of defiance. Facing Mic-co he flung out his arm.

"I am a murderer in the sight of God and Man!" he choked. "I murdered my cousin Theodomir for a dream of empire. I can not forget—Oh, God! I can not forget. The Voice bids me tell!"

He dropped wildly to his knees, his eyes imploring.

"Oh, God!" he prayed with pallid lips, "hear this, my prayer. I have paid in black hours of bitter suffering. I have played and lost and the fire of life is but ashes in my hand. Give me peace—peace!"

He stayed so long upon his knees that Tregar touched him gently on the shoulder.

"Ronador," he said gently. "Come. You are very ill and know not what you say."

Ronador staggered blindly to his feet. Once more he waved the Baron aside and took up his terrible dialogue with the inner Voice.

"The Voice! The Voice!" he whispered. "Thou shalt not kill! Thou shalt not kill! You lie!" he cried in a sudden outburst of terrible fierceness. "He was not a fool. He loved men more than the mockery and cant of courts. He loved—he trusted me—and I betrayed him. Who knew when he fled wildly away from the pomp and inequalities he hated? I! Who watched for his secret letters? I! Who came to America when his letter of homesick pleading

came? I! I! I! Who killed him when conscience and duty would have sent him back to the court of his father? I, his cousin whom he loved above all men. You lie. I did love him. I was drunk with the royal glitter ahead. I craved it even as he hated it. Thou shalt not kill! Thou shalt not kill! Mercy! Mercy! I can not bear it."

He fell groveling upon the floor and crawled to Mic-co's feet.

"The Voice bids me tell!" he whispered, clutching fearfully at Mic-co's hand. "Twice, since, I would have killed to keep this thing of the candlestick from creeping back and back until that thing of long ago lay uncovered and I disgraced! . . . Theodomir hid in the Seminole village. No—no, you must listen—the Voice bids me tell or lose my reason. I came there at his bidding—his marriage to the Indian girl had been unhappy. He was homesick and this fair land of liberty had a rotten core. I struck him down and fled. You will heal and fight the Voice—"

Mic-co bent and raised the groveling figure.

"Peace!" he said, his face very white. "We will heal and quiet the Voice forever. Come!" Gently he led the sick man away.

"He will sleep now, I think," he said a little later. "A drug is best when a Voice is mocking—"

The Baron leaned forward and caught Mic-co's arm in a grasp of iron.

"Who are you," he whispered, "that you suffer with him now? You are white and shaking. Who are you that you know the tongue of my country?"

Mic-co sighed.

"I," said he sadly, "am that man he thought to kill!"

White-faced, the Baron stared at the snowy beard and hair and the fine, dark eyes.

"Theodomir!" he whispered brokenly. "Theodomir! It—it can not be."

He fell to pacing the floor in violent agitation.

"The eyes are quieter," he said at length with an effort, "but the hair and beard so white! I would not have guessed—I would not have guessed!" Again he stared.

"Are you man or saint," he cried at last, "that you can forgive as I have seen your eyes forgive to-night?"

"May a man look upon such remorse as that," asked Mic-co, "and not forgive? I loved him greatly. Had I loved him less—had I loved her less—that Indian wife who had no love in her heart for me, this hair of mine would not have turned snow-white when the Indians were fanning the flickering spark of life into a blaze again."

"There is peace in your face," said Tregar a little bitterly, "and none of the old fretful discontent. Have you no single thought of regret for that fair land of ours you left?"

"For that fatherland of rugged mountain and silver waterfall—yes!" cried Theodomir with sudden fire. "For the festering core of imperialism that darkens its beauty with sable wing—no! No single thought of regret. How pitiful and absurd our Lilliputian game of empire! What man is better than another? Tolstoi and Buddha, they are the men who knew. Was not my wildest error," he demanded reverting afresh to the other's reproach, "that homesick letter that brought him to my side? Peace came to me, Tregar, in building this lodge, in working in the field and hunting, in doctoring these primitive people who saved my life, in teaching the child of my Indian wife—"

"The child of your wife! You mean your daughter?"

"I have no child," said Theodomir. "The girl you saw to-night is my foster daughter, the child of my wife and the man for whose whim she begged me to divorce her."

"No child!" exclaimed the Baron with a sickening flash of realization. "My poor Ronador!"

"My kindness to her," said Mic-co, "was at first a discipline. Her mother deserted her and

the old chief granted me half her life. I could not bear the touch of her hands or the look in her eyes for many months, but through her, Tregar, at last I learned peace and forgiveness and forbearance, as men should. I built the lodge for her and me. I taught her the ways of her white father. I made myself proficient in the English tongue that those traders and hunters and naturalists who stray here might guess nothing of my origin. I shall never again leave the peace and quiet of this island home. And you and I, Tregar, must quiet that Voice forever!"

"Is that possible?" choked Tregar.

"I think so," said Mic-co. "I think we may some day send him home with the Voice quieted forever and the remorse and suffering healed. Had I thought he was strong enough to bear it, I would have told him to-night."

"Let me tell you," said Tregar with strong emotion, "how I found him in the forest, when years back I came to know this secret I have tried so hard to keep for him. I had been hunting with the King and lost my way in the forests of Grünwald. I found him there in the thickest part—naked, slashing his body wildly with a knife in an agony of remorse and penance and the most terrible grief I have ever witnessed. Before he well knew what he was about he had blurted forth the whole pitiful story—that he had killed his cousin

in a moment of passion—that he must scourge and torture his body to discipline his soul. I—I shall not forget his face.”

“Poor fellow!” said Mic-co. “My poor cousin!”

They wheeled suddenly at a choking sound in the doorway. Some wild memory of the Grünwald had surged through the fevered brain of the sick man. His clothes were gone, his body slashed cruelly in a dozen places. He had torn down the buckskin curtain at his window and bound it about his body in the fashion of earlier ages. How long he had stood there in the doorway they did not know. Now as they turned, he rushed forward and flung himself with a great heart-broken sob at the feet of his cousin.

“Theodomir! Theodomir!” he cried.

Tregar turned away from the sound of his terrible sobbing.