

CHAPTER XLIX

MR. DORRIGAN

CARL, traveling north after a day of earnest discussion in his cousin's camp, thought much of the second candlestick. Since that night in Philip's wigwam, it had haunted him persistently. Now with Diane's permission to probe its secret—if, indeed, it had one like its charred companion—he was fretting again, as he had intermittently fretted in the lodge of Mic-co, at the train of circumstances that had interposed delay.

Train and taxi were perniciously slow. Carl found his patience taxed to the utmost.

The grandfather's clock was booming eight when at length, after a gauntlet of garrulous servants, he pushed back the great, iron-bound doors of the old Spanish room in his cousin's house and entered. The war-beaten slab of table-wood, the old lanterns, the Spanish grandee above the mantel, the mended candlestick and its unmarred mate, all brought memories of another night when Starrett's glass had struck the marble fireplace. Vividly, too, he recalled how the firelight had stained the square-paneled ceiling of oak overhead, and how Diane had stood

in the doorway. The room was the same. It was a little hard, however, to reconcile the sullen, resentful, impudent young scapegrace of that other night with the man of to-night.

He put out his hand to touch the second candlestick—the telephone bell rang.

Carl frowned impatiently and answered it.

“Hello,” said he. “Yes, this is Carl Granberry speaking . . . Who? . . . Oh! Hello, Hunch, is that you?”

It plainly was. Moreover, Mr. Dorrigan was very nervous and ill at ease. Carl laughed with relish.

“What’s the trouble?” he demanded. “You’re stuttering like a kid . . . Shut up and begin over again. . . . Hello. . . . Yes. . . . Well, I’ve been out of town since January. . . . Hum! . . . Well,” he hinted dryly, “there was sufficient time for an explanation before I went. . . . I guess you’re right. . . . I went up to the farm in October with Wherry.”

Mr. Dorrigan desperately admitted that some of the time between the escape of His Nib’s and Carl’s departure for the farm had been spent in panic-stricken remorse and dread—some in the hospital due to an altercation with Link Murphy, who for reasons not immediately apparent wished jealously to obliterate his other eye. He

begged Carl to give him an immediate opportunity of squaring himself, for he had telephoned the house so frequently of late that the butler had grown insulting. Mr. Dorrigan added that he hoped Mr. Granberry's wholly justified wrath had somewhat abated, but that for purposes of initial communication the telephone had seemed more prudent.

He was plainly relieved at the answer.

Carl glanced at the tormenting candlestick and sighed. Another delay!

"All right," he said finally to Hunch, "come along. I'll give you twenty minutes. If you're not through then, like as not I'll stir up the grudge again—"

The telephone at the other end clicked instantly. Conceivably Hunch was already on his way up town.

Carl impatiently busied himself with some mail upon the table. It had followed him from the farm to Palm Beach and from Palm Beach to New York. There were half a dozen wild letters of gratitude from Wherry and a letter from the old doctor, Wherry's father, that brought a flush of genuine pleasure to Carl's face.

"Wherry, too!" said he softly. "Of course. He stuck that other night. I've been too blind to see." Drawing his flute from his pocket, he glanced with a curious smile and glow at a row

of notches in the wood. The first notch he had cut in the flute after the rainy night in Philip's wigwam, the second by Mic-co's pool, the third was subtly linked with the marshes of Glynn, and a fourth had been furtively added in the camp of his cousin. Now with a glance at Wherry's letters, he was quietly carving a fifth. Who may say what they portended—this record of notches carved upon the one friend who had always understood!

Carl was to carve another, of which he little dreamed, before the summer waned; and the spur to its making was close at hand.

The doorbell rang as he finished, and dropping the flute back into his pocket, he rang for some whiskey and cigars for the entertainment of Mr. Dorrigan, who presently appeared, at the heels of a servant, twirling his hat with a nonchalant ease much too elaborate and at variance with the look in his good eye to be genuine.

"Lo!" said Hunch uncomfortably.

"Hello!" said Carl pleasantly, pushing the decanter across the table.

Hunch stared at his host, fidgeted, poured himself a generous drink and waited suggestively.

Carl merely laughed good-humoredly and lighted a cigar.

"Sorry, Hunch," he regretted, "but I've joined the Lithia League!"

“My Gawd!” burst forth Hunch despairingly, adding in heartfelt memory of his host’s enviable steadiness of head, “My Gawd, Carl, what a waste o’ talents!”

Carl laughed.

“Sit down,” he invited, “and get it off your mind.”

But Hunch’s single eye was wandering in fascinated appraisal over Carl’s dark, pleasant face. Even he, coarse and brutal in perception as he was, was conscious of a difference not wholly attributable to the Lithia League and felt himself impelled to some verbal recognition of his host’s conspicuous well-being.

“Ye’re on the level all right,” he swore obscurely. “Ye’re white! Ye’re lookin’ good, ye’re lookin’ fine— By the Lord Harry, Carl, I don’t know as I blame yuh!”

Unable to fathom the nature of the censure thus withheld, Carl remained silent and Hunch fell again to staring, his immovable eye ridiculously expressive in stony conjunction with the other. Whatever he found in Carl’s face this time plainly afforded him intense relief, for he seated himself with a long breath and drew a yellowish paper from his pocket.

“I says to meself,” he explained, “Hunch, old sport, ye’re in for it. He’ll like as not drop yuh out of the window with an electric wire, feed yuh

to an electric wolf or make yuh play hell-for-a-minute chess or some other o' them woozy stunts 'at pop up in his bean like mushrooms, but yuh gotta square yerself with that paper. Yuh gotta get up yer nerve an' hike up there to the brownstone with it.' I ask yuh," he finished dramatically, and evidently laboring under the momentary conviction that Carl, too, was optically afflicted, "I ask yuh, Carl, to cast yer good lamp over that there paper."

Carl opened the paper and stared.

"Hunch," he exclaimed with an involuntary glance at the mended candlestick, "where in the devil did you get this?"

"I ask yuh to remember," went on Hunch in some excitement, "that I was drunk an' the old she-wol — Gr-r-r-r!" Hunch cleared his heavy throat in a panic, with a rasp like the stripping of gears, and corrected himself. "The Old One," he spoke somewhat as if this singular title was a degree, "the Old One put one over on me."

"My aunt, I imagine," said Carl, "has given me a fairly accurate version of His Nibs' escape. I'll admit a pardonable anxiety to interview you for a while. As a matter of fact there was a night — when I was not in the Lithia League — that I drove down to look you up. Tell me," he added, "where you found this."

"It was not, stric'ly speakin', found," said

Hunch with a modest cough. Once more, overwhelmed afresh by Carl's appearance, he let his good eye go roving.

"Tell it," said Carl with what patience he could muster, "in your own way."

"I ask yuh to remember," urged Hunch with a firm belief in the dignity of this phrase, "that I was still drunk an' batty in me thinker when the old she-wol—Gr-r-r-r-r—the Old One told me to dig out. So I halts on the corner to collect me wits an' by 'm' by I sees a guy wid a darkish face an' lips like Link. He comes along, looks up an' down suspicious, sees the door ain't tight shut an' heel-taps it up the steps. He opens the door an' by 'm' by he helps the Old One to a taxi an' makes out to walk off—see—whiles she's a watchin'. Later, when the taxi turns the corner, back he goes, heel-taps it up the steps ag'in, an' goes in at the door he ain't locked, though he'd made out he had. An' right there," said Hunch impressively, "right there is where yer Uncle Hunch feels a real glimmer in his bean an' goes back. Thin-lips ain't in sight. Yer Uncle Hunch softly heel-taps it upstairs an' finds the darkish guy adoptin' a paper with a fatherly pat, which he slips in his coat pocket. Whereupon—whiles he's lockin' the desk drawer ag'in, aforesaid uncle slips downstairs an' out. By'm'by, Thin-lips trots out with an ugly grin

on his mug—an' Uncle Hunch, gettin' soberer an' soberer by the minute, trots after him with his good lamp workin' overtime."

Carl glanced at the paper.

"Yes?" he encouraged.

"Well," said Hunch with a sheepish grin that was rendered somewhat sinister by the fixed eye, "I jostled him real rude in a crowd an' picked his pocket. An' there yuh are!"

There was some slight rustle of greenish paper in the handshake.

"I'm mighty grateful," said Carl. "That paper cost me a couple of hours of laborious preparation. It's a duplicate, Hunch, for the purpose of decoy. The original's in safe deposit."