

CHAPTER X

ON THE RIDGE ROAD

AT THE Westfall farm as the electric vanguard of the storm flashed brightly over the valley, the telephone had tinkled. In considerable distress of mind Aunt Agatha answered it.

"I—I'm sure I don't know when he will be home," she said helplessly after a while. . . . "He went barely a minute ago and very foolish too, I said, with the storm coming. . . . At dinner he spoke some of going to the camp—Miss Westfall's camp. . . . I—I really don't know. . . . I wish I did but I don't."

The lightning blazed at the window and left it black. Beyond in the lane, a car with glaring headlights was rolling rapidly toward the gateway. Aunt Agatha hung up with an aggrieved sniff.

Catching the reflection of the headlights she hurried to the window.

"Carl! Carl!" she called through the noise of wind and thunder.

The car came to a halt with a grinding shudder of brakes.

"Yes?" said Carl patiently. "What is it, Aunt Agatha?"

"Dick Sherrill phoned," said his aunt plaintively. "I thought you'd gone. He wanted you to come up and play bridge. Oh, Carl, I—I do wish you wouldn't motor about in a thunder shower. I once knew a man—such a nice, quiet fellow too—and very domestic in his habits—but he would ramble about and the lightning tore his collar off and printed a picture of a tree on his spine. Think of that!"

Carl laughed. He was raincoated and hatless.

"An arboreal spine!" said he, rolling on. "Lord, Aunt Agatha, that was tough! Moral—don't be domestic!"

"Carl!" quavered his aunt tearfully.

Again, throbbing like a giant heart in the darkness, the car halted. Carl tossed his hair back from his forehead with a smothered groan, but said nothing. He was always kinder and less impatient to Aunt Agatha in a careless way than Diane.

"Will you take Diane an extra raincoat and rubbers?" appealed Aunt Agatha pathetically. "Like as not the pockets of the other are full of bugs and things."

"Aunt Agatha," grumbled Carl kindly, "why fuss so? Diane's equipped with nerve and grit and independence enough to look out for herself."

Aunt Agatha sniffed and closed the window.

"I shan't worry!" she said flatly. "I shan't do it. If Carl comes home with a tree on his spine, it's his own concern. Why *I* should have to endure all this, however, I can't for the life of me see. I've one consolation anyway. A good part of my life's over. Death will be a welcome relief after what *I've* gone through!"

Shrugging as the window closed Carl drove on rapidly down the driveway.

It pleased him to ride madly with the wind and storm. The gale, laden with dust and grit, bit and stung and tore rudely at his coat and hair. The great lamps of the car flashed brilliantly ahead, revealing the wind-beaten grasses by the wayside. Somewhere back in his mind there was a troublesome stir of conscience. It had bothered him for days. It had driven him irresistibly to-night at dinner to speak of visiting his cousin's camp, though he bit his lip immediately afterward in a flash of indecision. The turbulent night had seemed of a sort to think things over. Moonlit fields and roads were enervating. Storm whipping a man's blood into fire and energy—biting his brain into relentless activity!—there was a thing for you.

Whiskey did not help. Last night it had treacherously magnified the voice of conscience into a gibing roar.

Money! Money! The ray of the lamps ahead, the fork of the lightning, the flickering gaslight there at the crossroads, they were all the color of gold and like gold—of a flame that burned. Yes, he must have money. No matter what the voice, he must have money.

At the crossroads he halted suddenly. To the south now lay his cousin's camp, to the north the storm.

Perversely Carl wheeled about and drove to the north. A conscience was a luxury for a rich man. Let the thing he had done, sired by the demon of the bottle and mothered by the hell-pit of his flaming passions, breed its own results.

It was a fitful nerve-straining task, waiting, and he had waited now for weeks. Waiting had bred the Voice in his conscience, waiting had bored insidious holes in his armor of flippant philosophy through which had crept remorse and bitter self-contempt; once it had brought a flaming resolve brutally to lay it all before his cousin and taunt her with a crouching ghost buried for years in a candlestick.

Then there were nights like to-night when the ghastly hell-pit was covered, and when to tell her squarely what the future held, without taunt or apology, stirred him on to ardent resolution.

But alas! the last was but an intermittent witch-fire leading him through the marsh after

the elusive ghosts of finer things, to flicker forlornly out at the end and abandon him in a pit of blackness and mockery.

Very well, then; he would tell Diane of the yellowed paper; he would tell her to-night. However he played the game there was gold at the end.

He laughed suddenly and shrugged and swept erratically into a lighter mood of impudence and daring. There was rain beating furiously in his face and his hair was wet. Well, the car pounding along beneath him had known many such nights of storm and wild adventure. It had pleased him frequently to mock and gibe at death, with the wheel in his hand and a song on his lips, and now wind and storm were tempting him to ride with the devil.

So, dashing wildly through the whirl of dirt and wind, heavy with the odor of burnt oil, he bent to the wheel, every nerve alert and leaping. As the great car jumped to its limit of speed, he fell to singing an elaborate sketch of opera in an insolent, dare-devil voice of splendid timbre, the exhaust, unmuffled, pounding forth an obligato.

The lightning flared. It glittered wickedly upon the unlighted lamps of a car rolling rapidly toward him. With a squirt of mud and a scatter of flying pebbles, Carl swung far to the side of

the road and slammed on his brakes, skidding dangerously. The other car, heading wildly to the left, went crashing headlong into a ditch from which a man crawled, cursing viciously in a foreign tongue.

"You damned fool!" thundered Carl in a flash of temper. "Where are your lights?"

The man did not reply.

Carl, whose normal instincts were friendly, sprang solicitously from the car.

"I beg your pardon," said he carelessly. "Are you hurt?"

"No," said the other curtly.

"French," decided Carl, marking the European intonation. "Badly shaken up, poor devil!—and not sure of his English. That accounts for his peculiar silence. Monsieur," said he civilly in French. "I am not prepared to deliver a homily upon wild driving, but it's well to drive with lights when roads are dark and storm abroad."

"I have driven so few times," said the other coldly in excellent English, "and the storm and erratic manner of your approach were disquieting."

"*Touché!*" admitted Carl indifferently. "You have me there. Your choice of a practice night, however," he added dryly, "was unique, to say the least."

He crossed the road, frowned curiously down at the wrecked machine and struck a match.

"*Voilà!*" he exclaimed, staring aghast at the bent and splintered mass, "*c'est magnifique, Monsieur!*"

A sheet of flame shot suddenly from the match downward and wrapped the wreck in fire. Conscientious now of the fumes of leaking gasoline, Carl leaped back.

"Monsieur," said he ruefully, and turned.

The reflection of the burning oil revealed Monsieur some feet away, running rapidly. Angered by the man's unaccountable indifference, Carl leaped after him. He was much the better runner of the two and presently swung his prisoner about in a brutal grip and marched him savagely back to the blazing car. Again there was an indefinable peculiarity about the manner of the man's surrender.

"It is conventional, Monsieur," said Carl evenly, "to betray interest and concern in the wreck of one's property. *Voilà!* I have effectively completed what you had begun. If I am not indifferent, surely one may with reason look for a glimmer of concern from you."

Shrugging, the man stared sullenly at the car, a hopeless torch now suffusing the lonely road with light. There was a certain suggestion of racial subtlety in the careful immobility of his

face, but his dark, inscrutable eyes were blazing dangerously.

Carl's careless air of interest altered indefinitely. Inspecting his chafing prisoner now with narrowed, speculative eyes which glinted keenly, he fell presently to whistling softly, laughed and with tantalizing abruptness fell silent again. Immobile and subtle now as his silent companion, he stared curiously at the other's fastidiously pointed beard, at the dark eyes and tightly compressed lips, and impudently proffered his cigarettes. They were impatiently declined.

"Monsieur is pleased," said Carl easily, "to reveal many marked peculiarities of manner, owing to the unbalancing fact, I take it, that his mind is relentlessly pursuing one channel. Monsieur," went on Carl, lazily lighting his own cigarette and staring into his companion's face with a look of level-eyed interest, "Monsieur has been praying ardently for—opportunities, is it not so? 'I will humor this mad fool who motors about in the rain like an operatic comet!' says Monsieur inwardly, 'for I am, of course, a stranger to him. Then, without arousing undue interest, I may presently escape into the storm whence I came—er—driving atrociously.'"

The man stared.

"Monsieur," purred Carl audaciously, "is doubtless more interested in—let us say—camp

fires for instance, than such a vulgar blaze as yonder car."

"One is powerless," returned the other haughtily, "to answer riddles."

Carl bowed with curiously graceful insolence.

"As if one could even hope to break such splendid nerve as that!" he murmured appreciatively. "It is an impassiveness that comes only with training. Monsieur," he added imperturbably, "I have had the pleasure—of seeing you before."

"It is possible!" shrugged the other politely.

"Under strikingly different conditions!" pursued Carl reminiscently. There was a disappointing lack of interest in the other's face.

"Even that is possible," assented the foreigner stiffly. "Environment is a shifting circumstance of many colors. The honor of your acquaintance, however, I fear is not mine."

Carl's eyes, dark and cold as agate, compelled attention.

"My name," said he deliberately, "is Granberry, Carl Westfall Granberry."

The brief interval of silence was electric.

"It is a pity," said the other formally, "that the name is unfamiliar. Monsieur Granberi, the storm increases. My ill-fated car, I take it, requires no further attention." He stopped short, staring with peculiar intentness at the road be-

yond. In the faint sputtering glow of the embers by the wayside his face looked white and strained.

A slight smile dangerously edged the American's lips. With a careless feint of glancing over his shoulder, he tightened every muscle and leaped ahead. The violent impact of his body bore his victim, cursing, to the ground.

"Ah!" said Carl wresting a revolver from the other's hand, "I thought so! My friend, when you try a trick like that again, guard your hands before you fall to staring. A fool might have turned—and been shot in the back for his pains, eh? Monsieur," he murmured softly, pinioning the other with his weight and smiling insolently, "we've a long ride ahead of us. Privacy, I think, is essential to the perfect adjustment of our future relations. There are one or two inexplicable features—"

The eyes of the other met his with a level glance of desperate hostility.

With an undisciplined flash of temper, Carl brutally clubbed his assailant into insensibility with the revolver butt and dragged him heavily to the tonneau of his car, throbbing unheeded in the darkness. Having assured himself of his guest's continued docility by the sinister adjustment of a handkerchief, an indifferent rag or so from the repair kit and a dirty rope, he covered the motionless figure carelessly with a robe

and sprang to the wheel, whistling softly. With a throb, the great car leaped, humming, to the road.

At midnight the lights of Harlem lay ahead. The ride from the hills, three hours of storm and squirting gravel, had been made with the persistent whir and drone of a speeding engine. But once had it rested black and silent in a lonely road of dripping trees, while the driver hurried into a roadside tavern and telephoned.

Now, with a purring sigh as a bridge loomed ahead, the car slackened and stopped. Carl slowly lighted a cigarette. At the end of the bridge a straggler struck a match and flung it lightly in the river, the disc of his cigar a fire-point in the shadows.

The car rolled on again and halted.

A stocky young man behind the fire-point emerged from the darkness and climbed briskly into the tonneau.

"Hello, Hunch," said Carl.

"'Lo!" said Hunch and stared intently at the robe.

"Take a look at him," invited Carl carelessly. "It's not often you have an opportunity of riding with one of his brand. He's in the *Almanach de Gotha*."

"T'ell yuh say!" said Hunch largely, though

the term had conveyed no impression whatever to his democratic mind.

Cautiously raising the robe Hunch Dorrigan stared with interest at the prisoner he was inconspicuously to assist into the empty town house of the Westfalls.