

BORROWED FROM THE NIGHT

By Anna C. Minoque

CHAPTER XVII—CONTINUED

"Your proof of this marriage," sneered the father, "is your word. Against it stands my denial. Which will the world accept? Which will stand in any court of justice of civilized nations?"

"Yours," replied the son, without a moment's hesitation. "But in your heart lies the knowledge that when you deny my words, you lie. Your conscience is my proof against yourself."

George Martins laughed. The other looked upon him, his gray head, his life-line face, with an expression half contemptuous, half pitiful. Then he went on:

"I called you a murderer, and you are. When you said to me, a half-wild youth who had gone to you, my lawful father, to claim my sonship, 'Give me wealth and I will give you the recognition you demand' and I asked if I should bring to you my mother's gold bracelets and jewels, you mocked me and demanded of me what were such trinkets beside Gerald Martins' rich tract of land. When I said, 'If Gerald Martins were dead, would this be yours?' You answered, 'That if Gerald Martins' wife and child were dead, it would be yours. I looked into your eyes and you looked into mine. Mine asked, 'If I kill them and give their wealth thus to you, will you recognize me as your son?' and your eyes said, 'I will. But child of the barbarian as you thought me, your white blood or my natural instinct for my work. I asked if I should remove these obstacles to your desire, and you bade me to do so, and gave me the pearl ornamented purse, made for you by my mother, as a token of our compact. Afterwards, moved by what motive I know not, you told me not to kill them, but to carry them off to my people, and commanded me to do this while you were absent from Lexington. I hung around the cabin for those six weeks, waiting my opportunity to capture the woman and child, and when the time of your home-coming drew near, I began to grow desperate. That evening chance favored me when Gerald Martins quit his work to look for flowers for his wife. I saw her standing at the door and told her that her husband had been killed by a falling tree. She started to get the baby to take it with her into the wood, and I laughed for joy. But something must have warned her of her danger, for she fastened the door on the child. Then she came to me and we went together to the forest. As I was hurrying her away we heard the husband singing. She began to scream, and in her terror pulled the gold ring out of my nose. Fear and pain, and above all the knowledge that I could not expect you to redeem your promise, maddened me and I thrust my knife into her heart. I was not a savage when she was dead. I was a white man, and I hated you as one of your Christian souls must hate the devil that tempted it to its damnation, so when I hid her in her dress, hoping that it might be found, and recognized as yours, would be evidence against you as the author of the crime. I fled. I would not return to my mother's people, so I went to the fierce Indians of the north, and from them learned to become the blood-thirsty foe of the pale-face. When the war between the English and the Americans broke out, I joined with the Indians and British in our common cause of hatred—I have called you a murderer," he continued, turning from his subject, "and I here repeat that you are as guilty of the death of Gerald Martins' wife as I."

"Where is your proof?" demanded George Martins, but the sneer was gone from his voice, and the tones seemed to shiver into each other.

"My words," he returned.

"What are your words against mine?"

"And your purse, which must have been found in the folds of her dress," added the Indian, not noting the interruption.

"Who could state that that purse was mine?"

"The wife of Hulpin, the tavern-keeper. As I waited for you at the door of his hostelry one evening I heard her remark on its beauty and value, as you drew it out to pay her for a supper for yourself and a friend. You told her that you had bought it from an Indian woman."

A paleness crept over the face of the listener, but he instantly said, with his old effrontery.

"Where is that purse now? Who found it?"

"The finder will appear when he is called for," returned the other coolly, and as George Martins remembered who that finder was, he shook his head.

"I have called you a thief," went on the young man, "and you are. Because you could not find the hiding-place of Gerald Martins' daughter you overruled by your gold the scruples of a poor mother, and bought her dead child's body to fill a grave for Amy Martins. Then you came into the full enjoyment of Gerald Martins' property, while his daughter was living upon the charity of strangers."

George Martins broke into a laugh, a harsh, brutal laugh.

"I amuse you?" said the other calmly.

"You do. Your inventive genius would do credit to a fictionist, my

dear sir. But, as I asked about your other charges, where is your proof?"

"Here," replied the other, and he took a leathern case from his pocket and opening it, unfolded a sheet of paper, which he spread on the table.

"Advance, and see my proof—Gerald Martins' will and testament! No, sir, I do not let it go out of my hands! It has never left my person since I took it from your dead cousin's breast the night of the Raisin Massacre."

Trembling, his face ghastly, George Martins leaned over the table, but as his eyes fell on the opening address, "To St. John Worthington, loyal gentleman and noble friend," he drew himself up and cried out,

"'Tis a forgery! St. John Worthington, was Gerald Martins' rival and foe."

"Read on," commanded the son. "If it is a forgery, St. John Worthington will decide, not you." George Martins' eyes fell again on the paper, and what he read made the ashen hue of fear whiten his face, the film of despair darkened his eyes. The son watched him with the clear, penetrating gaze and the immovable calm of his mother's race. He had as much to gain as the other had to lose, but he betrayed none of the white man's emotion. When the reader's eyes reached Gerald Martins' signature, the son's hands turned the long paper, and the blood-scurrowed letters blazed up from the creased surface, he said:

"Do you recognize here the handwriting of your young pupil? Not very creditable to my teacher, very unlike his delicate, fashionable penmanship which was my boyish delight and envy as I pored over it at the low tent door; still there are circumstances which excuse its badness. The ink was not good, the pen blunt, and death was staring me in the face; and as he folded up the paper and returned it to its leathern case he related the instant which had given the will into his hands."

"When I read the paper," he continued, "I realized that I had a game on hand which was well worth the playing, but I likewise knew that I was not the equal of my white opponent, in shrewdness. I saw that Gerald Martins' secret was safe. I inferred the same of his daughter. There was no need for bringing the game to an issue. Time strengthens what it does not destroy. I knew that it was necessary to be your intellectual equal and I set about to be so. She is the supreme deity to me. While I never returned to Kentucky I kept myself informed about you. I knew that you were rich, honored and happy, and I said it is well. Every day added to my power, and I waited until your son and heir had grown to madness, to include him in your downfall. At the time appointed by myself I have become and I find you are entered upon the supreme effort of your life, and against you is the man whom your cousin's will appoints your successor and prosecutor. False! False! He is broke out."

"She is the supreme deity to me now as she has done from the beginning. Strive as we may, there is no escaping her hour. George Martins, her hour for you has dawned!"

He paused at the words, and lifting his hands, one of which was holding the leathern case, folded them on his breast. Standing thus, he gazed steadily at the man on the other side of the table, and for a moment that man quailed before the speaker's attitude and words. He appeared like the incarnation of the Fate both believed in and turn in which direction he might, George Martins saw no escape from her decree. In that moment he realized that as men so shall they reap. It seemed a trifling thing to win the love of an Indian woman, marry her according to a ceremonial whose sacredness and right he neither admitted nor respected, and by her bring a man child into the world. When he had grown weary of life among the gentle Natchez, without a pang of regret he had forsaken the mother and son, leaving her to soothe her sorrow in a second affection; him, to grow up in the ignorance and paganism of his people. But there was no second love nor longer life for the too faithful Indian woman, and when she was no more, her son had come up to the Dark and Bloody Ground to find his white father. He found him—the husband of another wife, the parent of another son; and his love had changed to savage hate. In memory of his wronged mother, for the reputation of his shame, he had sworn revenge. The hour of its fulfillment had arrived and there was that in the son's face and manner which made the father realize that as he had shown no mercy, he need expect to receive none.

In the pause that followed the concluding words, the voices of Mrs. Martins and Preston came to the two men, in a soft murmurous flow; and as they listened to it, the last gleam of light died in the eyes of George Martins, while a smile of exultation illumined the dark face of his companion.

"Well!" Unable longer to endure the thoughts suggested by the echo of those voices on the piazza, George Martins spoke.

"I asked you to acknowledge me as your son, as a matter of justice. Now," and he held out his right hand, on whose open palm rested the leathern case, "with your knowledge of what this contains, when I ask you a second time to receive me as your son, will you refuse?"

As he ceased, Mrs. Martins' voice, with a happy laugh rippling it, came to them distinctly. It was like a lash to the soul of her husband. Tell

that woman that her place by his side had once been filled by another, and that other a low barbarian! Tell that mother that her son, the son she had given to him, had not the first claim on his fatherhood! Tell her these truths! He would rather face a prison cell or ignominious scaffold, than see the annihilation of his wife's love in the proud, unrelenting abhorrence of her eyes.

"I still refuse!" He lifted his head as he uttered the words, color came back to his face, and the Indian said that his opponent would not yield tamely. He smiled, withdrew his hand, opened his coat and dropped the case into his pocket. Then he refastened the buttons, and taking up his hat, said:

"Very well, sir. My business with you is concluded. I am sorry to have detained you so long and unnecessarily from the society of your family and guests."

But George Martins detained him by a sweeping motion of his hand.

"What are you going to do? At least, I have a right to a knowledge of your intentions."

"Certainly," he responded. "I am going to Lexington, where, in a quiet way, I shall find out all I want to know about the public's reception of the death of Mrs. Martins and her dress. I am sure I left in her dress. If any suspicions were aroused by the circumstances of her death, men will hesitate less to refer to them now than they might have done after the commission of the deed. When I have learned all that is to be learned, I shall go down to this convent of Loretto, and secure information as to the whereabouts of Gerald Martins' daughter. When I meet her, I shall tell her all. She shall go to St. John Worthington with her father's last testament and my confession, and—well, trust a woman and a political foe to make your part a political complete and irrevocable. And I shall so arrange my plans that I may return in safety to my Spanish friends and rich plantations, leaving you to bear my share of the crime with your own."

It was coolly and frankly said, even greater coolness and frankness. It was a desperate game; there was but the shadow of a chance for him to win, yet he grasped at that shadow. This man prided himself on the bravery of his Indian mother, he should see that his father was no coward.

"I can tell you what you want to know. St. John Worthington found the purse. I saw him pick it up. Doubtless it is still in his possession. You may spare yourself the trouble of inquiring about the suspicions of the people. Kentuckians do not admit strangers into that confidence which the betrayal of never uttered suspicious thoughts implies. You must further reflect that there were but two men upon St. John's porch when the woman's discarded locket and myself, heir at law to Gerald Martins, were there. I saw him pick it up. Doubtless it is still in his possession. You may spare yourself the trouble of inquiring about the suspicions of the people. Kentuckians do not admit strangers into that confidence which the betrayal of never uttered suspicious thoughts implies. You must further reflect that there were but two men upon St. John's porch when the woman's discarded locket and myself, heir at law to Gerald Martins, were there. I saw him pick it up. 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