

CHAPTER III

Forrest entered a section of the Big House by way of a massive, hewn-timber, iron-studded door that let in at the foot of what seemed a donjon keep. The floor was cement, and doors let off in various directions. One, opening to a Chinese in the white apron and starched cap of a chef, emitted at the same time the low hum of a dynamo. It was this that deflected Forrest from his straight path. He paused, holding the door ajar, and peered into a cool, electric-lighted cement room where stood a long, glass-fronted, glass-shelved refrigerator flanked by an ice-machine and a dynamo. On the floor, in greasy overalls, squatted a greasy little man to whom his employer nodded.

"Anything wrong, Thompson?" he asked.

"There was," was the answer, positive and complete.

Forrest closed the door and went on along a passage that was like a tunnel. Narrow, iron-barred openings, like the slits for archers in medieval castles, dimly lighted the way. Another door gave access to a long, low room, beam-ceilinged, with a fireplace in which an ox could have been roasted. A huge stump, resting on a bed of coals, blazed brightly. Two billiard tables, several card tables, lounging corners, and a miniature bar constituted the major furnishing. Two young men

chalked their cues and returned Forrest's greeting.

"Good morning, Mr. Naismith," he bantered. "--More material for the Breeders' Gazette?"

Naismith, a youngish man of thirty, with glasses, smiled sheepishly and cocked his head at his companion.

"Wainwright challenged me," he explained.

"Which means that Lute and Ernestine must still be beauty-sleeping," Forrest laughed.

Young Wainwright bristled to acceptance of the challenge, but before he could utter the retort on his lips his host was moving on and addressing Naismith over his shoulder.

"Do you want to come along at eleven:thirty? Thayer and I are running out in the machine to look over the Shropshires. He wants about ten carloads of rams. You ought to find good stuff in this matter of Idaho shipments. Bring your camera along.--Seen Thayer this morning?"

"Just came in to breakfast as we were leaving," Bert Wainwright volunteered.

"Tell him to be ready at eleven-thirty if you see him. You're not

invited, Bert... out of kindness. The girls are sure to be up then."

"Take Rita along with you anyway," Bert pleaded.

"No fear," was Forrest's reply from the door. "We're on business. Besides, you can't pry Rita from Ernestine with block-and-tackle."

"That's why I wanted to see if you could," Bert grinned.

"Funny how fellows never appreciate their own sisters." Forrest paused for a perceptible moment. "I always thought Rita was a real nice sister. What's the matter with her?"

Before a reply could reach him, he had closed the door and was jingling his spurs along the passage to a spiral stairway of broad concrete steps. As he left the head of the stairway, a dance-time piano measure and burst of laughter made him peep into a white morning room, flooded with sunshine. A young girl, in rose-colored kimono and boudoir cap, was at the instrument, while two others, similarly accoutered, in each other's arms, were parodying a dance never learned at dancing school nor intended by the participants for male eyes to see.

The girl at the piano discovered him, winked, and played on. Not for another minute did the dancers spy him. They gave startled cries, collapsed, laughing, in each other's arms, and the music stopped. They

were gorgeous, healthy young creatures, the three of them, and Forrest's eye kindled as he looked at them in quite the same way that it had kindled when he regarded the Fotherington Princess.

Persiflage, of the sort that obtains among young things of the human kind, flew back and forth.

"I've been here five minutes," Dick Forrest asserted.

The two dancers, to cover their confusion, doubted his veracity and instanced his many well-known and notorious guilts of mendacity. The girl at the piano, Ernestine, his sister-in-law, insisted that pearls of truth fell from his lips, that she had seen him from the moment he began to look, and that as she estimated the passage of time he had been looking much longer than five minutes.

"Well, anyway," Forrest broke in on their babel, "Bert, the sweet innocent, doesn't think you are up yet."

"We're not... to him," one of the dancers, a vivacious young Venus, retorted. "Nor are we to you either. So run along, little boy. Run along."

"Look here, Lute," Forrest began sternly. "Just because I am a decrepit old man, and just because you are eighteen, just eighteen, and happen to be my wife's sister, you needn't presume to put the high

and mighty over on me. Don't forget--and I state the fact, disagreeable as it may be, for Rita's sake--don't forget that in the past ten years I've paddled you more disgraceful times than you care to dare me to enumerate.

"It is true, I am not so young as I used to was, but--" He felt the biceps of his right arm and made as if to roll up the sleeve. "--But, I'm not all in yet, and for two cents..."

"What?" the young woman challenged belligerently.

"For two cents," he muttered darkly. "For two cents... Besides, and it grieves me to inform you, your cap is not on straight. Also, it is not a very tasteful creation at best. I could make a far more becoming cap with my toes, asleep, and... yes, seasick as well."

Lute tossed her blond head defiantly, glanced at her comrades in solicitation of support, and said:

"Oh, I don't know. It seems humanly reasonable that the three of us can woman-handle a mere man of your elderly and insulting avoirdupois. What do you say, girls? Let's rush him. He's not a minute under forty, and he has an aneurism. Yes, and though loath to divulge family secrets, he's got Meniere's Disease."

Ernestine, a small but robust blonde of eighteen, sprang from the

piano and joined her two comrades in a raid on the cushions of the deep window seats. Side by side, a cushion in each hand, and with proper distance between them cannily established for the swinging of the cushions, they advanced upon the foe.

Forrest prepared for battle, then held up his hand for parley.

"Fraid cat!" they taunted, in several at first, and then in chorus.

He shook his head emphatically.

"Just for that, and for all the rest of your insolences, the three of you are going to get yours. All the wrongs of a lifetime are rising now in my brain in a dazzling brightness. I shall go Berserk in a moment. But first, and I speak as an agriculturist, and I address myself to you, Lute, in all humility, in heaven's name what is Meniere's Disease? Do sheep catch it?"

"Meniere's Disease is," Lute began,... "is what you've got. Sheep are the only known living creatures that get it."

Ensued red war and chaos. Forrest made a football rush of the sort that obtained in California before the adoption of Rugby; and the girls broke the line to let him through, turned upon him, flanked him on either side, and pounded him with cushions.

He turned, with widespread arms, extended fingers, each finger a hook, and grappled the three. The battle became a whirlwind, a be-spurred man the center, from which radiated flying draperies of flimsy silk, disconnected slippers, boudoir caps, and hairpins. There were thuds from the cushions, grunts from the man, squeals, yelps and giggles from the girls, and from the totality of the combat inextinguishable laughter and a ripping and tearing of fragile textures.

Dick Forrest found himself sprawled on the floor, the wind half knocked out of him by shrewdly delivered cushions, his head buzzing from the buffeting, and, in one hand, a trailing, torn, and generally disrupted girdle of pale blue silk and pink roses.

In one doorway, cheeks flaming from the struggle, stood Rita, alert as a fawn and ready to flee. In the other doorway, likewise flame-checked, stood Ernestine in the commanding attitude of the Mother of the Gracchi, the wreckage of her kimono wrapped severely about her and held severely about her by her own waist-pressing arm. Lute, cornered behind the piano, attempted to run but was driven back by the menace of Forrest, who, on hands and knees, stamped loudly with the palms of his hands on the hardwood floor, rolled his head savagely, and emitted bull-like roars.

"And they still believe that old prehistoric myth," Ernestine proclaimed from safety, "that once he, that wretched semblance of a man-thing prone in the dirt, captained Berkeley to victory over

Stanford."

Her breasts heaved from the exertion, and he marked the pulsating of the shimmering cherry-colored silk with delight as he flung his glance around to the other two girls similarly breathing.

The piano was a miniature grand--a dainty thing of rich white and gold to match the morning room. It stood out from the wall, so that there was possibility for Lute to escape around either way of it. Forrest gained his feet and faced her across the broad, flat top of the instrument. As he threatened to vault it, Lute cried out in horror:

"But your spurs, Dick! Your spurs!"

"Give me time to take them off," he offered.

As he stooped to unbuckle them, Lute darted to escape, but was herded back to the shelter of the piano.

"All right," he growled. "On your head be it. If the piano's scratched I'll tell Paula."

"I've got witnesses," she panted, indicating with her blue joyous eyes the young things in the doorways.

"Very well, my dear." Forrest drew back his body and spread his

resting palms. "I'm coming over to you."

Action and speech were simultaneous. His body, posited sidewise from his hands, was vaulted across, the perilous spurs a full foot above the glossy white surface. And simultaneously Lute ducked and went under the piano on hands and knees. Her mischance lay in that she bumped her head, and, before she could recover way, Forrest had circled the piano and cornered her under it.

"Come out!" he commanded. "Come out and take your medicine!"

"A truce," she pleaded. "A truce, Sir Knight, for dear love's sake and all damsels in distress."

"I ain't no knight," Forrest announced in his deepest bass. "I'm an ogre, a filthy, debased and altogether unregenerate ogre. I was born in the tule-swamps. My father was an ogre and my mother was more so. I was lulled to slumber on the squalls of infants dead, foreordained, and predamned. I was nourished solely on the blood of maidens educated in Mills Seminary. My favorite chophouse has ever been a hardwood floor, a loaf of Mills Seminary maiden, and a roof of flat piano. My father, as well as an ogre, was a California horse-thief. I am more reprehensible than my father. I have more teeth. My mother, as well as an ogress, was a Nevada book-canvasser. Let all her shame be told. She even solicited subscriptions for ladies' magazines. I am more terrible than my mother. I have peddled safety razors."

"Can naught soothe and charm your savage breast?" Lute pleaded in soulful tones while she studied her chances for escape.

"One thing only, miserable female. One thing only, on the earth, over the earth, and under its ruining waters--"

A squawk of recognized plagiarism interrupted him from Ernestine.

"See Ernest Dowson, page seventy-nine, a thin book of thin verse ladled out with porridge to young women detentioned at Mills Seminary," Forrest went on. "As I had already enunciated before I was so rudely interrupted, the one thing only that can balm and embalm this savage breast is the 'Maiden's Prayer.' Listen, with all your ears ere I chew them off in multitude and gross! Listen, silly, unbeautiful, squat, short-legged and ugly female under the piano! Can you recite the 'Maiden's Prayer'?"

Screams of delight from the young things in the doorways prevented the proper answer and Lute, from under the piano, cried out to young Wainwright, who had appeared:

"A rescue, Sir Knight! A rescue!"

"Unhand the maiden!" was Bert's challenge.

"Who art thou?" Forrest demanded.

"King George, sirrah!--I mean, er, Saint George."

"Then am I thy dragon," Forrest announced with due humility. "Spare this ancient, honorable, and only neck I have."

"Off with his head!" the young things encouraged.

"Stay thee, maidens, I pray thee," Bert begged. "I am only a Small Potato. Yet am I unafraid. I shall beard the dragon. I shall beard him in his gullet, and, while he lingeringly chokes to death over my unpalatableness and general spinefulness, do you, fair damsels, flee to the mountains lest the valleys fall upon you. Yolo, Petaluma, and West Sacramento are about to be overwhelmed by a tidal wave and many big fishes."

"Off with his head!" the young things chanted. "Slay him in his blood and barbecue him!"

"Thumbs down," Forrest groaned. "I am undone. Trust to the unstrained quality of mercy possessed by Christian young women in the year 1914 who will vote some day if ever they grow up and do not marry foreigners. Consider my head off, Saint George. I am expired. Further deponent sayeth not."

And Forrest, with sobs and slubberings, with realistic shudders and kicks and a great jingling of spurs, lay down on the floor and expired.

Lute crawled out from under the piano, and was joined by Rita and Ernestine in an extemporized dance of the harpies about the slain.

In the midst of it, Forrest sat up, protesting. Also, he was guilty of a significant and privy wink to Lute.

"The hero!" he cried. "Forget him not. Crown him with flowers."

And Bert was crowned with flowers from the vases, unchanged from the day before. When a bunch of water-logged stems of early tulips, propelled by Lute's vigorous arm, impacted soggily on his neck under the ear, he fled. The riot of pursuit echoed along the hall and died out down the stairway toward the stag room. Forrest gathered himself together, and, grinning, went jingling on through the Big House.

He crossed two patios on brick walks roofed with Spanish tile and swamped with early foliage and blooms, and gained his wing of the house, still breathing from the fun, to find, in the office, his secretary awaiting him.

"Good morning, Mr. Blake," he greeted. "Sorry I was delayed." He glanced at his wrist-watch. "Only four minutes, however. I just

couldn't get away sooner."