

## CHAPTER VIII

Five minutes after Paula had left him, punctual to the second, the four telegrams disposed of, Dick was getting into a ranch motor car, along with Thayer, the Idaho buyer, and Naismith, the special correspondent for the Breeders' Gazette. Wardman, the sheep manager, joined them at the corrals where several thousand young Shropshire rams had been assembled for inspection.

There was little need for conversation. Thayer was distinctly disappointed in this, for he felt that the purchase of ten carloads of such expensive creatures was momentous enough to merit much conversation.

"They speak for themselves," Dick had assured him, and turned aside to give data to Naismith for his impending article on Shropshires in California and the Northwest.

"I wouldn't advise you to bother to select them," Dick told Thayer ten minutes later. "The average is all top. You could spend a week picking your ten carloads and have no higher grade than if you had taken the first to hand."

This cool assumption that the sale was already consummated so

perturbed Thayer, that, along with the sure knowledge that he had never seen so high a quality of rams, he was nettled into changing his order to twenty carloads.

As he told Naismith, after they had regained the Big House and as they chalked their cues to finish the interrupted game:

"It's my first visit to Forrest's. He's a wizard. I've been buying in the East and importing. But those Shropshires won my judgment. You noticed I doubled my order. Those Idaho buyers will be wild for them. I only had buying orders straight for six carloads, and contingent on my judgment for two carloads more; but if every buyer doesn't double his order, straight and contingent, when he sees them rams, and if there isn't a stampede for what's left, I don't know sheep. They're the goods. If they don't jump up the sheep game of Idaho ... well, then Forrest's no breeder and I'm no buyer, that's all."

As the warning gong for lunch rang out--a huge bronze gong from Korea that was never struck until it was first indubitably ascertained that Paula was awake--Dick joined the young people at the goldfish fountain in the big patio. Bert Wainwright, variously advised and commanded by his sister, Rita, and by Paula and her sisters, Lute and Ernestine, was striving with a dip-net to catch a particularly gorgeous flower of a fish whose size and color and multiplicity of fins and tails had led Paula to decide to segregate him for the special breeding tank in the fountain of her own secret patio. Amid high excitement, and much

squealing and laughter, the deed was accomplished, the big fish deposited in a can and carried away by the waiting Italian gardener.

"And what have you to say for yourself?" Ernestine challenged, as Dick joined them.

"Nothing," he answered sadly. "The ranch is depleted. Three hundred beautiful young bulls depart to-morrow for South America, and Thayer--you met him last night--is taking twenty carloads of rams. All I can say is that my congratulations are extended to Idaho and Chile."

"Plant more acorns," Paula laughed, her arms about her sisters, the three of them smilingly expectant of an inevitable antic.

"Oh, Dick, sing your acorn song," Lute begged.

He shook his head solemnly.

"I've got a better one. It's purest orthodoxy. It's got Red Cloud and his acorn song skinned to death. Listen! This is the song of the little East-sider, on her first trip to the country under the auspices of her Sunday School. She's quite young. Pay particular attention to her lisp."

And then Dick chanted, lisping:

"The goldfish thwimmeth in the bowl,  
The robin thiths upon the tree;  
What maketh them thit so eathily?  
Who stuckth the fur upon their breasths?  
God! God! He done it!"

"Cribbed," was Ernestine's judgment, as the laughter died away.

"Sure," Dick agreed. "I got it from the Rancher and Stockman, that got it from the Swine Breeders' Journal, that got it from the Western Advocate, that got it from Public Opinion, that got it, undoubtedly, from the little girl herself, or, rather from her Sunday School teacher. For that matter I am convinced it was first printed in Our Dumb Animals."

The bronze gong rang out its second call, and Paula, one arm around Dick, the other around Rita, led the way into the house, while, bringing up the rear, Bert Wainwright showed Lute Ernestine a new tango step.

"One thing, Thayer," Dick said in an aside, after releasing himself from the girls, as they jostled in confusion where they met Thayer and Naismith at the head of the stairway leading down to the dining room. "Before you leave us, cast your eyes over those Merinos. I really have to brag about them, and American sheepmen will have to come to them. Of course, started with imported stock, but I've made a California

strain that will make the French breeders sit up. See Wardman and take your pick. Get Naismith to look them over with you. Stick half a dozen of them in your train-load, with my compliments, and let your Idaho sheepmen get a line on them."

They seated at a table, capable of indefinite extension, in a long, low dining room that was a replica of the hacienda dining rooms of the Mexican land-kings of old California. The floor was of large brown tiles, the beamed ceiling and the walls were whitewashed, and the huge, undecorated, cement fireplace was an achievement in massiveness and simplicity. Greenery and blooms nodded from without the deep-embrasured windows, and the room expressed the sense of cleanness, chastity, and coolness.

On the walls, but not crowded, were a number of canvases--most ambitious of all, in the setting of honor, all in sad grays, a twilight Mexican scene by Xavier Martinez, of a peon, with a crooked-stick plow and two bullocks, turning a melancholy furrow across the foreground of a sad, illimitable, Mexican plain. There were brighter pictures, of early Mexican-Californian life, a pastel of twilight eucalyptus with a sunset-tipped mountain beyond, by Reimers, a moonlight by Peters, and a Griffin stubble-field across which gleamed and smoldered California summer hills of tawny brown and purple-misted, wooded canyons.

"Say," Thayer muttered in an undertone across to Naismith, while Dick

and the girls were in the thick of exclamatory and giggling banter, "here's some stuff for that article of yours, if you touch upon the Big House. I've seen the servants' dining room. Forty head sit down to it every meal, including gardeners, chauffeurs, and outside help. It's a boarding house in itself. Some head, some system, take it from me. That Chiney boy, Oh Joy, is a wooz. He's housekeeper, or manager, of the whole shebang, or whatever you want to call his job--and, say, it runs that smooth you can't hear it."

"Forrest's the real wooz," Naismith nodded. "He's the brains that picks brains. He could run an army, a campaign, a government, or even a three-ring circus."

"Which last is some compliment," Thayer concurred heartily.

"Oh, Paula," Dick said across to his wife. "I just got word that Graham arrives to-morrow morning. Better tell Oh Joy to put him in the watch-tower. It's man-size quarters, and it's possible he may carry out his threat and work on his book."

"Graham?--Graham?" Paula queried aloud of her memory. "Do I know him?"

"You met him once two years ago, in Santiago, at the Café Venus. He had dinner with us."

"Oh, one of those naval officers?"

Dick shook his head.

"The civilian. Don't you remember that big blond fellow--you talked music with him for half an hour while Captain Joyce talked our heads off to prove that the United States should clean Mexico up and out with the mailed fist."

"Oh, to be sure," Paula vaguely recollected. "He'd met you somewhere before... South Africa, wasn't it? Or the Philippines?"

"That's the chap. South Africa, it was. Evan Graham. Next time we met was on the Times dispatch boat on the Yellow Sea. And we crossed trails a dozen times after that, without meeting, until that night in the Café Venus.

"Heavens--he left Bora-Bora, going east, two days before I dropped anchor bound west on my way to Samoa. I came out of Apia, with letters for him from the American consul, the day before he came in. We missed each other by three days at Levuka--I was sailing the Wild Duck then. He pulled out of Suva as guest on a British cruiser. Sir Everard Im Thurm, British High Commissioner of the South Seas, gave me more letters for Graham. I missed him at Port Resolution and at Vila in the New Hebrides. The cruiser was junketing, you see. I beat her in and out of the Santa Cruz Group. It was the same thing in the Solomons. The cruiser, after shelling the cannibal villages at Langa-Langa,

steamed out in the morning. I sailed in that afternoon. I never did deliver those letters in person, and the next time I laid eyes on him was at the Café Venus two years ago."

"But who about him, and what about him?" Paula queried. "And what's the book?"

"Well, first of all, beginning at the end, he's broke--that is, for him, he's broke. He's got an income of several thousand a year left, but all that his father left him is gone. No; he didn't blow it. He got in deep, and the 'silent panic' several years ago just about cleaned him. But he doesn't whimper.

"He's good stuff, old American stock, a Yale man. The book--he expects to make a bit on it--covers last year's trip across South America, west coast to east coast. It was largely new ground. The Brazilian government voluntarily voted him a honorarium of ten thousand dollars for the information he brought out concerning unexplored portions of Brazil. Oh, he's a man, all man. He delivers the goods. You know the type--clean, big, strong, simple; been everywhere, seen everything, knows most of a lot of things, straight, square, looks you in the eyes--well, in short, a man's man."

Ernestine clapped her hands, flung a tantalizing, man-challenging, man-conquering glance at Bert Wainwright, and exclaimed: "And he comes tomorrow!"



Dick shook his head reprovably.

"Oh, nothing in that direction, Ernestine. Just as nice girls as you have tried to hook Evan Graham before now. And, between ourselves, I couldn't blame them. But he's had good wind and fast legs, and they've always failed to run him down or get him into a corner, where, dazed and breathless, he's mechanically muttered 'Yes' to certain interrogatories and come out of the trance to find himself, roped, thrown, branded, and married. Forget him, Ernestine. Stick by golden youth and let it drop its golden apples. Pick them up, and golden youth with them, making a noise like stupid failure all the time you are snaring swift-legged youth. But Graham's out of the running. He's old like me--just about the same age--and, like me, he's run a lot of those queer races. He knows how to make a get-away. He's been cut by barbed wire, nose-twitched, neck-burnt, cinched to a fare-you-well, and he remains subdued but uncatchable. He doesn't care for young things. In fact, you may charge him with being wobbly, but I plead guilty, by proxy, that he is merely old, hard bitten, and very wise."