

## CHAPTER X

It was a stag lunch. As Forrest explained, the girls were "hen-partying."

"I doubt you'll see a soul of them till four o'clock, when Ernestine, that's one of Paula's sisters, is going to wallop me at tennis--at least so she's threatened and pledged."

And Graham sat through the lunch, where only men sat, took his part in the conversation on breeds and breeding, learned much, contributed a mite from his own world-experiences, and was unable to shake from his eyes the persistent image of his hostess, the vision of the rounded and delicate white of her against the dark wet background of the swimming stallion. And all the afternoon, looking over prize Merinos and Berkshire gilts, continually that vision burned up under his eyelids. Even at four, in the tennis court, himself playing against Ernestine, he missed more than one stroke because the image of the flying ball would suddenly be eclipsed by the image of a white marble figure of a woman that strove and clung on the back of a great horse.

Graham, although an outlander, knew his California, and, while every girl of the swimming suits was gowned for dinner, was not surprised to find no man similarly accoutered. Nor had he made the mistake of so

being himself, despite the Big House and the magnificent scale on which it operated.

Between the first and second gongs, all the guests drifted into the long dining room. Sharp after the second gong, Dick Forrest arrived and precipitated cocktails. And Graham impatiently waited the appearance of the woman who had worried his eyes since noon. He was prepared for all manner of disappointment. Too many gorgeous stripped athletes had he seen slouched into conventional garmenting, to expect too much of the marvelous creature in the white silken swimming suit when it should appear garbed as civilized women garb.

He caught his breath with an imperceptible gasp when she entered. She paused, naturally, for just the right flash of an instant in the arched doorway, limned against the darkness behind her, the soft glow of the indirect lighting full upon her. Graham's lips gasped apart, and remained apart, his eyes ravished with the beauty and surprise of her he had deemed so small, so fairy-like. Here was no delicate midget of a child-woman or boy-girl on a stallion, but a grand lady, as only a small woman can be grand on occasion.

Taller in truth was she, as well as in seeming, than he had judged her, and as finely proportioned in her gown as in her swimming suit. He noted her shining gold-brown hair piled high; the healthy tinge of her skin that was clean and clear and white; the singing throat, full and round, incomparably set on a healthy chest; and the gown, dull

blue, a sort of medieval thing with half-fitting, half-clinging body, with flowing sleeves and trimmings of gold-jeweled bands.

She smiled an embracing salutation and greeting. Graham recognized it as kin to the one he had seen when she smiled from the back of the stallion. When she started forward, he could not fail to see the inimitable way she carried the cling and weight of her draperies with her knees--round knees, he knew, that he had seen press desperately into the round muscle-pads of Mountain Lad. Graham observed, also, that she neither wore nor needed corseting. Nor could he fail, as she crossed the floor, to see two women: one, the grand lady, the mistress of the Big House; one, the lovely equestrienne statue beneath the dull-blue, golden-trimmed gown, that no gowning could ever make his memory forget.

She was upon them, among them, and Graham's hand held hers in the formal introduction as he was made welcome to the Big House and all the hacienda in a voice that he knew was a singing voice and that could proceed only from a throat that pillared, such as hers, from a chest deep as hers despite her smallness.

At table, across the corner from her, he could not help a surreptitious studying of her. While he held his own in the general fun and foolishness, it was his hostess that mostly filled the circle of his eye and the content of his mind.

It was as bizarre a company as Graham had ever sat down to dinner with. The sheep-buyer and the correspondent for the Breeders' Gazette were still guests. Three machine-loads of men, women, and girls, totaling fourteen, had arrived shortly before the first gong and had remained to ride home in the moonlight. Graham could not remember their names; but he made out that they came from some valley town thirty miles away called Wickenberg, and that they were of the small-town banking, professional, and wealthy-farmer class. They were full of spirits, laughter, and the latest jokes and catches sprung in the latest slang.

"I see right now," Graham told Paula, "if your place continues to be the caravanserai which it has been since my arrival, that I might as well give up trying to remember names and people."

"I don't blame you," she laughed concurrence. "But these are neighbors. They drop in any time. Mrs. Watson, there, next to Dick, is of the old land-aristocracy. Her grandfather, Wicken, came across the Sierras in 1846. Wickenberg is named after him. And that pretty dark-eyed girl is her daughter...."

And while Paula gave him a running sketch of the chance guests, Graham heard scarce half she said, so occupied was he in trying to sense his way to an understanding of her. Naturalness was her keynote, was his first judgment. In not many moments he had decided that her key-note was joy. But he was dissatisfied with both conclusions, and knew he

had not put his finger on her. And then it came to him--pride. That was it! It was in her eye, in the poise of her head, in the curling tendrils of her hair, in her sensitive nostrils, in the mobile lips, in the very pitch and angle of the rounded chin, in her hands, small, muscular and veined, that he knew at sight to be the hard-worked hands of one who had spent long hours at the piano. Pride it was, in every muscle, nerve, and quiver of her--conscious, sentient, stinging pride.

She might be joyous and natural, boy and woman, fun and frolic; but always the pride was there, vibrant, tense, intrinsic, the basic stuff of which she was builded. She was a woman, frank, outspoken, straight-looking, plastic, democratic; but toy she was not. At times, to him, she seemed to glint an impression of steel--thin, jewel-like steel. She seemed strength in its most delicate terms and fabrics. He fondled the impression of her as of silverspun wire, of fine leather, of twisted hair-sennit from the heads of maidens such as the Marquesans make, of carven pearl-shell for the lure of the bonita, and of barbed ivory at the heads of sea-spears such as the Eskimos throw.

"All right, Aaron," they heard Dick Forrest's voice rising, in a lull, from the other end of the table. "Here's something from Phillips Brooks for you to chew on. Brooks said that no man 'has come to true greatness who has not felt in some degree that his life belongs to his race, and that what God gives him, he gives him for mankind.'"

"So at last you believe in God?" the man, addressed Aaron, genially

sneered back. He was a slender, long-faced olive-brunette, with brilliant black eyes and the blackest of long black beards.

"I'm hanged if I know," Dick answered. "Anyway, I quoted only figuratively. Call it morality, call it good, call it evolution."

"A man doesn't have to be intellectually correct in order to be great," intruded a quiet, long-faced Irishman, whose sleeves were threadbare and frayed. "And by the same token many men who are most correct in sizing up the universe have been least great."

"True for you, Terrence," Dick applauded.

"It's a matter of definition," languidly spoke up an unmistakable Hindoo, crumbling his bread with exquisitely slender and small-boned fingers. "What shall we mean as great?"

"Shall we say beauty?" softly queried a tragic-faced youth, sensitive and shrinking, crowned with an abominably trimmed head of long hair.

Ernestine rose suddenly at her place, hands on table, leaning forward with a fine simulation of intensity.

"They're off!" she cried. "They're off! Now we'll have the universe settled all over again for the thousandth time. Theodore"--to the

youthful poet--"it's a poor start. Get into the running. Ride your father ion and your mother ion, and you'll finish three lengths ahead."

A roar of laughter was her reward, and the poet blushed and receded into his sensitive shell.

Ernestine turned on the black-bearded one:

"Now, Aaron. He's not in form. You start it. You know how. Begin: 'As Bergson so well has said, with the utmost refinement of philosophic speech allied with the most comprehensive intellectual outlook that...'"

More laughter roared down the table, drowning Ernestine's conclusion as well as the laughing retort of the black-bearded one.

"Our philosophers won't have a chance to-night," Paula stole in an aside to Graham.

"Philosophers?" he questioned back. "They didn't come with the Wickenberg crowd. Who and what are they? I'm all at sea."

"They--" Paula hesitated. "They live here. They call themselves the jungle-birds. They have a camp in the woods a couple of miles away, where they never do anything except read and talk. I'll wager, right

now, you'll find fifty of Dick's latest, uncatalogued books in their cabins. They have the run of the library, as well, and you'll see them drifting in and out, any time of the day or night, with their arms full of books--also, the latest magazines. Dick says they are responsible for his possessing the most exhaustive and up-to-date library on philosophy on the Pacific Coast. In a way, they sort of digest such things for him. It's great fun for Dick, and, besides, it saves him time. He's a dreadfully hard worker, you know."

"I understand that they... that Dick takes care of them?" Graham asked, the while he pleased in looking straight into the blue eyes that looked so straight into his.

As she answered, he was occupied with noting the faintest hint of bronze--perhaps a trick of the light--in her long, brown lashes. Perforce, he lifted his gaze to her eyebrows, brown, delicately stenciled, and made sure that the hint of bronze was there. Still lifting his gaze to her high-piled hair, he again saw, but more pronounced, the bronze note glinting from the brown-golden hair. Nor did he fail to startle and thrill to a dazzlement of smile and teeth and eye that frequently lived its life in her face. Hers was no thin smile of restraint, he judged. When she smiled she smiled all of herself, generously, joyously, throwing the largess of all her being into the natural expression of what was herself and which domiciled somewhere within that pretty head of hers.



"Yes," she was saying. "They have never to worry, as long as they live, over mere bread and butter. Dick is most generous, and, rather immoral, in his encouragement of idleness on the part of men like them. It's a funny place, as you'll find out until you come to understand us. They... they are appurtenances, and--and hereditaments, and such things. They will be with us always until we bury them or they bury us. Once in a while one or another of them drifts away--for a time. Like the cat, you know. Then it costs Dick real money to get them back. Terrence, there--Terrence McFane--he's an epicurean anarchist, if you know what that means. He wouldn't kill a flea. He has a pet cat I gave him, a Persian of the bluest blue, and he carefully picks her fleas, not injuring them, stores them in a vial, and turns them loose in the forest on his long walks when he tires of human companionship and communes with nature.

"Well, only last year, he got a bee in his bonnet--the alphabet. He started for Egypt--without a cent, of course--to run the alphabet down in the home of its origin and thereby to win the formula that would explain the cosmos. He got as far as Denver, traveling as tramps travel, when he mixed up in some I. W. W. riot for free speech or something. Dick had to hire lawyers, pay fines, and do just about everything to get him safe home again.

"And the one with a beard--Aaron Hancock. Like Terrence, he won't work. Aaron's a Southerner. Says none of his people ever did work, and that there have always been peasants and fools who just couldn't be

restrained from working. That's why he wears a beard. To shave, he holds, is unnecessary work, and, therefore, immoral. I remember, at Melbourne, when he broke in upon Dick and me, a sunburnt wild man from out the Australian bush. It seems he'd been making original researches in anthropology, or folk-lore-ology, or something like that. Dick had known him years before in Paris, and Dick assured him, if he ever drifted back to America, of food and shelter. So here he is."

"And the poet?" Graham asked, glad that she must still talk for a while, enabling him to study the quick dazzlement of smile that played upon her face.

"Oh, Theo--Theodore Malken, though we call him Leo. He won't work, either. His people are old Californian stock and dreadfully wealthy; but they disowned him and he disowned them when he was fifteen. They say he is lunatic, and he says they are merely maddening. He really writes some remarkable verse... when he does write; but he prefers to dream and live in the jungle with Terrence and Aaron. He was tutoring immigrant Jews in San Francisco, when Terrence and Aaron rescued him, or captured him, I don't know which. He's been with us two years now, and he's actually filling out, despite the facts that Dick is absurdly generous in furnishing supplies and that they'd rather talk and read and dream than cook. The only good meals they get is when they descend upon us, like to-night."

"And the Hindoo, there--who's he?"

"That's Dar Hyal. He's their guest. The three of them invited him up, just as Aaron first invited Terrence, and as Aaron and Terrence invited Leo. Dick says, in time, three more are bound to appear, and then he'll have his Seven Sages of the Madroño Grove. Their jungle camp is in a madroño grove, you know. It's a most beautiful spot, with living springs, a canyon--but I was telling you about Dar Hyal.

"He's a revolutionist, of sorts. He's dabbled in our universities, studied in France, Italy, Switzerland, is a political refugee from India, and he's hitched his wagon to two stars: one, a new synthetic system of philosophy; the other, rebellion against the tyranny of British rule in India. He advocates individual terrorism and direct mass action. That's why his paper, Kadar, or Badar, or something like that, was suppressed here in California, and why he narrowly escaped being deported; and that's why he's up here just now, devoting himself to formulating his philosophy.

"He and Aaron quarrel tremendously--that is, on philosophical matters. And now--" Paula sighed and erased the sigh with her smile--"and now, I'm done. Consider yourself acquainted. And, oh, if you encounter our sages more intimately, a word of warning, especially if the encounter be in the stag room: Dar Hyal is a total abstainer; Theodore Malken can get poetically drunk, and usually does, on one cocktail; Aaron Hancock is an expert wine-bibber; and Terrence McFane, knowing little of one drink from another, and caring less, can put ninety-nine men

out of a hundred under the table and go right on lucidly expounding epicurean anarchy."

One thing Graham noted as the dinner proceeded. The sages called Dick Forrest by his first name; but they always addressed Paula as "Mrs. Forrest," although she called them by their first names. There was nothing affected about it. Quite unconsciously did they, who respected few things under the sun, and among such few things not even work--quite unconsciously, and invariably, did they recognize the certain definite aloofness in Dick Forrest's wife so that her given name was alien to their lips. By such tokens Evan Graham was not slow in learning that Dick Forrest's wife had a way with her, compounded of sheerest democracy and equally sheer royalty.

It was the same thing, after dinner, in the big living room. She dared as she pleased, but nobody assumed. Before the company settled down, Paula seemed everywhere, bubbling over with more outrageous spirits than any of them. From this group or that, from one corner or another, her laugh rang out. And her laugh fascinated Graham. There was a fibrous thrill in it, most sweet to the ear, that differentiated it from any laugh he had ever heard. It caused Graham to lose the thread of young Mr. Wombold's contention that what California needed was not a Japanese exclusion law but at least two hundred thousand Japanese coolies to do the farm labor of California and knock in the head the threatened eight-hour day for agricultural laborers. Young Mr. Wombold, Graham gleaned, was an hereditary large land-owner in the

vicinity of Wickenberg who prided himself on not yielding to the trend of the times by becoming an absentee landlord.

From the piano, where Eddie Mason was the center of a group of girls, came much noise of ragtime music and slangtime song. Terrence McFane and Aaron Hancock fell into a heated argument over the music of futurism. And Graham was saved from the Japanese situation with Mr. Wombold by Dar Hyal, who proceeded to proclaim Asia for the Asiatics and California for the Californians.

Paula, catching up her skirts for speed, fled down the room in some romp, pursued by Dick, who captured her as she strove to dodge around the Wombold group.

"Wicked woman," Dick reproved her in mock wrath; and, the next moment, joined her in persuading Dar Hyal to dance.

And Dar Hyal succumbed, flinging Asia and the Asiatics to the winds, along with his arms and legs, as he weirdly parodied the tango in what he declared to be the "blastic" culmination of modern dancing.

"And now, Red Cloud, sing Mr. Graham your Acorn Song," Paula commanded Dick.

Forrest, his arm still about her, detaining her for the threatened punishment not yet inflicted, shook his head somberly.

"The Acorn Song!" Ernestine called from the piano; and the cry was taken up by Eddie Mason and the girls.

"Oh, do, Dick," Paula pleaded. "Mr. Graham is the only one who hasn't heard it."

Dick shook his head.

"Then sing him your Goldfish Song."

"I'll sing him Mountain Lad's song," Dick bullied, a whimsical sparkle in his eyes. He stamped his feet, pranced, nickered a not bad imitation of Mountain Lad, tossed an imaginary mane, and cried:

"Hear me! I am Eros! I stamp upon the hills!"

"The Acorn Song," Paula interrupted quickly and quietly, with just the hint of steel in her voice.

Dick obediently ceased his chant of Mountain Lad, but shook his head like a stubborn colt.

"I have a new song," he said solemnly. "It is about you and me, Paula. I got it from the Nishinam."

"The Nishinam are the extinct aborigines of this part of California," Paula shot in a swift aside of explanation to Graham.

Dick danced half a dozen steps, stiff-legged, as Indians dance, slapped his thighs with his palms, and began a new chant, still retaining his hold on his wife.

"Me, I am Ai-kut, the first man of the Nishinam. Ai-kut is the short for Adam, and my father and my mother were the coyote and the moon. And this is Yo-to-to-wi, my wife. She is the first woman of the Nishinam. Her father and her mother were the grasshopper and the ring-tailed cat. They were the best father and mother left after my father and mother. The coyote is very wise, the moon is very old; but who ever heard much of anything of credit to the grasshopper and the ring-tailed cat? The Nishinam are always right. The mother of all women had to be a cat, a little, wizened, sad-faced, shrewd ring-tailed cat."

Whereupon the song of the first man and woman was interrupted by protests from the women and acclamations from the men.

"This is Yo-to-to-wi, which is the short for Eve," Dick chanted on, drawing Paula brusely closer to his side with a semblance of savage roughness. "Yo-to-to-wi is not much to look at. But be not hard upon her. The fault is with the grasshopper and the ring-tailed cat. Me, I am Ai-kut, the first man; but question not my taste. I was the first man, and this, I saw, was the first woman. Where there is but one

choice, there is not much to choose. Adam was so circumstanced. He chose Eve. Yo-to-to-wi was the one woman in all the world for me, so I chose Yo-to-to-wi."

And Evan Graham, listening, his eyes on that possessive, encircling arm of all his hostess's fairness, felt an awareness of hurt, and arose unsummoned the thought, to be dismissed angrily, "Dick Forrest is lucky--too lucky."

"Me, I am Ai-kut," Dick chanted on. "This is my dew of woman. She is my honey-dew of woman. I have lied to you. Her father and her mother were neither hopper nor cat. They were the Sierra dawn and the summer east wind of the mountains. Together they conspired, and from the air and earth they sweated all sweetness till in a mist of their own love the leaves of the chaparral and the manzanita were dewed with the honey-dew.

"Yo-to-to-wi is my honey-dew woman. Hear me! I am Ai-kut. Yo-to-to-wi is my quail woman, my deer-woman, my lush-woman of all soft rain and fat soil. She was born of the thin starlight and the brittle dawn-light before the sun . . .

"And," Forrest concluded, relapsing into his natural voice and enunciation, having reached the limit of extemporization,--"and if you think old, sweet, blue-eyed Solomon has anything on me in singing the Song of Songs, just put your names down for the subscription edition



of my Song of Songs."