CHAPTER XI

It was Mrs. Mason who first asked that Paula play; but it was Terrence McFane and Aaron Hancock who evicted the rag-time group from the piano and sent Theodore Malken, a blushing ambassador, to escort Paula.

"'Tis for the confounding of this pagan that I'm askin' you to play 'Reflections on the Water,'" Graham heard Terrence say to her.

"And 'The Girl with Flaxen Hair,' after, please," begged Hancock, the indicted pagan. "It will aptly prove my disputation. This wild Celt has a bog-theory of music that predates the cave-man--and he has the unadulterated stupidity to call himself ultra-modern."

"Oh, Debussy!" Paula laughed. "Still wrangling over him, eh? I'll try and get around to him. But I don't know with what I'll begin."

Dar Hyal joined the three sages in seating Paula at the concert grand which, Graham decided, was none too great for the great room. But no sooner was she seated than the three sages slipped away to what were evidently their chosen listening places. The young poet stretched himself prone on a deep bearskin forty feet from the piano, his hands buried in his hair. Terrence and Aaron lolled into a cushioned embrasure of a window seat, sufficiently near to each other to nudge

the points of their respective contentions as Paula might expound them. The girls were huddled in colored groups on wide couches or garlanded in twos and threes on and in the big koa-wood chairs.

Evan Graham half-started forward to take the honor of turning Paula's music, but saw in time that Dar Hyal had already elected to himself that office. Graham glimpsed the scene with quiet curious glances. The grand piano, under a low arch at the far-end of the room, was cunningly raised and placed as on and in a sounding board. All jollity and banter had ceased. Evidently, he thought, the Little Lady had a way with her and was accepted as a player of parts. And from this he was perversely prepared for disappointment.

Ernestine leaned across from a chair to whisper to him:

"She can do anything she wants to do. And she doesn't work . . . much. She studied under Leschetizky and Madame Carreno, you know, and she abides by their methods. She doesn't play like a woman, either. Listen to that!"

Graham knew that he expected disappointment from her confident hands, even as she rippled them over the keys in little chords and runs with which he could not quarrel but which he had heard too often before from technically brilliant but musically mediocre performers. But whatever he might have fancied she would play, he was all unprepared for Rachmaninoff's sheerly masculine Prelude, which he had heard only

men play when decently played.

She took hold of the piano, with the first two ringing bars, masterfully, like a man; she seemed to lift it, and its sounding wires, with her two hands, with the strength and certitude of maleness. And then, as only he had heard men do it, she sank, or leaped--he could scarcely say which--to the sureness and pureness and ineffable softness of the Andante following.

She played on, with the calm and power of anything but the little, almost girlish woman he glimpsed through half-closed lids across the ebony board of the enormous piano, which she commanded, as she commanded herself, as she commanded the composer. Her touch was definite, authoritative, was his judgment, as the Prelude faded away in dying chords hauntingly reminiscent of its full vigor that seemed still to linger in the air.

While Aaron and Terrence debated in excited whispers in the window seat, and while Dar Hyal sought other music at Paula's direction, she glanced at Dick, who turned off bowl after bowl of mellow light till Paula sat in an oasis of soft glow that brought out the dull gold lights in her dress and hair.

Graham watched the lofty room grow loftier in the increasing shadows. Eighty feet in length, rising two stories and a half from masonry walls to tree-trunked roof, flung across with a flying gallery from

the rail of which hung skins of wild animals, hand-woven blankets of Oaxaca and Ecuador, and tapas, woman-pounded and vegetable-dyed, from the islands of the South Pacific, Graham knew it for what it was--a feast-hall of some medieval castle; and almost he felt a poignant sense of lack of the long spread table, with pewter below the salt and silver above the salt, and with huge hound-dogs scuffling beneath for bones.

Later, when Paula had played sufficient Debussy to equip Terrence and Aaron for fresh war, Graham talked with her about music for a few vivid moments. So well did she prove herself aware of the philosophy of music, that, ere he knew it, he was seduced into voicing his own pet theory.

"And so," he concluded, "the true psychic factor of music took nearly three thousand years to impress itself on the Western mind. Debussy more nearly attains the idea-engendering and suggestive serenity--say of the time of Pythagoras--than any of his fore-runners--"

Here, Paula put a pause in his summary by beckoning over Terrence and Aaron from their battlefield in the windowseat.

"Yes, and what of it?" Terrence was demanding, as they came up side by side. "I defy you, Aaron, I defy you, to get one thought out of Bergson on music that is more lucid than any thought he ever uttered in his 'Philosophy of Laughter,' which is not lucid at all."

"Oh!--listen!" Paula cried, with sparkling eyes. "We have a new prophet. Hear Mr. Graham. He's worthy of your steel, of both your steel. He agrees with you that music is the refuge from blood and iron and the pounding of the table. That weak souls, and sensitive souls, and high-pitched souls flee from the crassness and the rawness of the world to the drug-dreams of the over-world of rhythm and vibration--"

"Atavistic!" Aaron Hancock snorted. "The cave-men, the monkey-folk, and the ancestral bog-men of Terrence did that sort of thing--"

"But wait," Paula urged. "It's his conclusions and methods and processes. Also, there he disagrees with you, Aaron, fundamentally. He quoted Pater's 'that all art aspires toward music'--"

"Pure prehuman and micro-organic chemistry," Aaron broke in. "The reactions of cell-elements to the doggerel punch of the wave-lengths of sunlight, the foundation of all folk-songs and rag-times. Terrence completes his circle right there and stultifies all his windiness. Now listen to me, and I will present--"

"But wait," Paula pleaded. "Mr. Graham argues that English puritanism barred music, real music, for centuries...."

"True," said Terrence.

"And that England had to win to its sensuous delight in rhythm through Milton and Shelley--"

"Who was a metaphysician." Aaron broke in.

"A lyrical metaphysician," Terrence defined instantly. "That you must acknowledge, Aaron."

"And Swinburne?" Aaron demanded, with a significance that tokened former arguments.

"He says Offenbach was the fore-runner of Arthur Sullivan," Paula cried challengingly. "And that Auber was before Offenbach. And as for Wagner, ask him, just ask him--"

And she slipped away, leaving Graham to his fate. He watched her, watched the perfect knee-lift of her draperies as she crossed to Mrs. Mason and set about arranging bridge quartets, while dimly he could hear Terrence beginning:

"It is agreed that music was the basis of inspiration of all the arts of the Greeks...."

Later, when the two sages were obliviously engrossed in a heated battle as to whether Berlioz or Beethoven had exposited in their compositions the deeper intellect, Graham managed his escape. Clearly,

his goal was to find his hostess again. But she had joined two of the girls in the whispering, giggling seclusiveness of one of the big chairs, and, most of the company being deep in bridge, Graham found himself drifted into a group composed of Dick Forrest, Mr. Wombold, Dar Hyal, and the correspondent of the Breeders' Gazette.

"I'm sorry you won't be able to run over with me," Dick was saying to the correspondent. "It would mean only one more day. I'll take you tomorrow."

"Sorry," was the reply. "But I must make Santa Rosa. Burbank has promised me practically a whole morning, and you know what that means. Yet I know the Gazette would be glad for an account of the experiment. Can't you outline it?--briefly, just briefly? Here's Mr. Graham. It will interest him, I am sure."

"More water-works?" Graham queried.

"No; an asinine attempt to make good farmers out of hopelessly poor ones," Mr. Wombold answered. "I contend that any farmer to-day who has no land of his own, proves by his lack of it that he is an inefficient farmer."

"On the contrary," spoke up Dar Hyal, weaving his slender Asiatic fingers in the air to emphasize his remarks. "Quite on the contrary. Times have changed. Efficiency no longer implies the possession of

capital. It is a splendid experiment, an heroic experiment. And it will succeed."

"What is it, Dick?" Graham urged. "Tell us."

"Oh, nothing, just a white chip on the table," Forrest answered lightly. "Most likely it will never come to anything, although just the same I have my hopes--"

"A white chip!" Wombold broke in. "Five thousand acres of prime valley land, all for a lot of failures to batten on, to farm, if you please, on salary, with food thrown in!"

"The food that is grown on the land only," Dick corrected. "Now I will have to put it straight. I've set aside five thousand acres midway between here and the Sacramento River."

"Think of the alfalfa it grew, and that you need," Wombold again interrupted.

"My dredgers redeemed twice that acreage from the marshes in the past year," Dick replied. "The thing is, I believe the West and the world must come to intensive farming. I want to do my share toward blazing the way. I've divided the five thousand acres into twenty-acre holdings. I believe each twenty acres should support, comfortably, not only a family, but pay at least six per cent."

"When it is all allotted it will mean two hundred and fifty families," the Gazette man calculated; "and, say five to the family, it will mean twelve hundred and fifty souls."

"Not quite," Dick corrected. "The last holding is occupied, and we have only a little over eleven hundred on the land." He smiled whimsically. "But they promise, they promise. Several fat years and they'll average six to the family."

"Who is we?" Graham inquired.

"Oh, I have a committee of farm experts on it--my own men, with the exception of Professor Lieb, whom the Federal Government has loaned me. The thing is: they must farm, with individual responsibility, according to the scientific methods embodied in our instructions. The land is uniform. Every holding is like a pea in the pod to every other holding. The results of each holding will speak in no uncertain terms. The failure of any farmer, through laziness or stupidity, measured by the average result of the entire two hundred and fifty farmers, will not be tolerated. Out the failures must go, convicted by the average of their fellows.

"It's a fair deal. No farmer risks anything. With the food he may grow and he and his family may consume, plus a cash salary of a thousand a year, he is certain, good seasons and bad, stupid or intelligent, of

at least a hundred dollars a month. The stupid and the inefficient will be bound to be eliminated by the intelligent and the efficient. That's all. It will demonstrate intensive farming with a vengeance. And there is more than the certain salary guaranty. After the salary is paid, the adventure must yield six per cent, to me. If more than this is achieved, then the entire hundred per cent, of the additional achievement goes to the farmer."

"Which means that each farmer with go in him will work nights to make good--I see," said the Gazette man. "And why not? Hundred-dollar jobs aren't picked up for the asking. The average farmer in the United States doesn't net fifty a month on his own land, especially when his wages of superintendence and of direct personal labor are subtracted. Of course able men will work their heads off to hold to such a proposition, and they'll see to it that every member of the family does the same."

"'Tis the one objection I have to this place," Terrence McFane, who had just joined the group, announced. "Ever one hears but the one thing--work. 'Tis repulsive, the thought of the work, each on his twenty acres, toilin' and moilin', daylight till dark, and after dark--an' for what? A bit of meat, a bit of bread, and, maybe, a bit of jam on the bread. An' to what end? Is meat an' bread an' jam the end of it all, the meaning of life, the goal of existence? Surely the man will die, like a work horse dies, after a life of toil. And what end has been accomplished? Bread an' meat an' jam? Is that it? A full belly

and shelter from the cold till one's body drops apart in the dark moldiness of the grave?"

"But, Terrence, you, too, will die," Dick Forrest retorted.

"But, oh, my glorious life of loafing," came the instant answer. "The hours with the stars and the flowers, under the green trees with the whisperings of breezes in the grass. My books, my thinkers and their thoughts. Beauty, music, all the solaces of all the arts. What? When I fade into the dark I shall have well lived and received my wage for living. But these twenty-acre work-animals of two-legged men of yours! Daylight till dark, toil and moil, sweat on the shirts on the backs of them that dries only to crust, meat and bread in their bellies, roofs that don't leak, a brood of youngsters to live after them, to live the same beast-lives of toil, to fill their bellies with the same meat and bread, to scratch their backs with the same sweaty shirts, and to go into the dark knowing only meat and bread, and, mayhap, a bit of jam."

"But somebody must do the work that enables you to loaf," Mr. Wombold spoke up indignantly.

"'Tis true, 'tis sad 'tis true," Terrence replied lugubriously. Then his face beamed. "And I thank the good Lord for it, for the work-beasties that drag and drive the plows up and down the fields, for the bat-eyed miner-beasties that dig the coal and gold, for all the stupid peasant-beasties that keep my hands soft, and give power to fine

fellows like Dick there, who smiles on me and shares the loot with me, and buys the latest books for me, and gives me a place at his board that is plenished by the two-legged work-beasties, and a place at his fire that is builded by the same beasties, and a shack and a bed in the jungle under the madroño trees where never work intrudes its monstrous head."

Evan Graham was slow in getting ready for bed that night. He was unwontedly stirred both by the Big House and by the Little Lady who was its mistress. As he sat on the edge of the bed, half-undressed, and smoked out a pipe, he kept seeing her in memory, as he had seen her in the flesh the past twelve hours, in her varied moods and guises--the woman who had talked music with him, and who had expounded music to him to his delight; who had enticed the sages into the discussion and abandoned him to arrange the bridge tables for her guests; who had nestled in the big chair as girlish as the two girls with her; who had, with a hint of steel, quelled her husband's obstreperousness when he had threatened to sing Mountain Lad's song; who, unafraid, had bestridden the half-drowning stallion in the swimming tank; and who, a few hours later, had dreamed into the dining room, distinctive in dress and person, to meet her many guests.

The Big House, with all its worthy marvels and bizarre novelties, competed with the figure of Paula Forrest in filling the content of his imagination. Once again, and yet again, many times, he saw the slender fingers of Dar Hyal weaving argument in the air, the black

whiskers of Aaron Hancock enunciating Bergsonian dogmas, the frayed coat-cuffs of Terrence McFane articulating thanks to God for the two-legged work-beasties that enabled him to loaf at Dick Forrest's board and under Dick Forrest's madroño trees.

Graham knocked out his pipe, took a final sweeping survey of the strange room which was the last word in comfort, pressed off the lights, and found himself between cool sheets in the wakeful dark. Again he heard Paula Forrest laugh; again he sensed her in terms of silver and steel and strength; again, against the dark, he saw that inimitable knee-lift of her gown. The bright vision of it was almost an irk to him, so impossible was it for him to shake it from his eyes. Ever it returned and burned before him, a moving image of light and color that he knew to be subjective but that continually asserted the illusion of reality.

He saw stallion and rider sink beneath the water, and rise again, a flurry of foam and floundering of hoofs, and a woman's face that laughed while she drowned her hair in the drowning mane of the beast. And the first ringing bars of the Prelude sounded in his ears as again he saw the same hands that had guided the stallion lift the piano to all Rachmaninoff's pure splendor of sound.

And when Graham finally fell asleep, it was in the thick of marveling over the processes of evolution that could produce from primeval mire and dust the glowing, glorious flesh and spirit of woman.