

CHAPTER XII

The next morning Graham learned further the ways of the Big House. Oh My had partly initiated him in particular things the preceding day and had learned that, after the waking cup of coffee, he preferred to breakfast at table, rather than in bed. Also, Oh My had warned him that breakfast at table was an irregular affair, anywhere between seven and nine, and that the breakfasters merely drifted in at their convenience. If he wanted a horse, or if he wanted a swim or a motor car, or any ranch medium or utility he desired, Oh My informed him, all he had to do was to call for it.

Arriving in the breakfast room at half past seven, Graham found himself just in time to say good-by to the Gazette man and the Idaho buyer, who, finishing, were just ready to catch the ranch machine that connected at Eldorado with the morning train for San Francisco. He sat alone, being perfectly invited by a perfect Chinese servant to order as he pleased, and found himself served with his first desire--an ice-cold, sherried grapefruit, which, the table-boy proudly informed him, was "grown on the ranch." Declining variously suggested breakfast foods, mushes, and porridges, Graham had just ordered his soft-boiled eggs and bacon, when Bert Wainwright drifted in with a casualness that Graham recognized as histrionic, when, five minutes later, in boudoir cap and delectable negligee, Ernestine

Desten drifted in and expressed surprise at finding such a multitude of early risers.

Later, as the three of them were rising from table, they greeted Lute Desten and Rita Wainwright arriving. Over the billiard table with Bert, Graham learned that Dick Forrest never appeared for breakfast, that he worked in bed from terribly wee small hours, had coffee at six, and only on unusual occasions appeared to his guests before the twelve-thirty lunch. As for Paula Forrest, Bert explained, she was a poor sleeper, a late riser, lived behind a door without a knob in a spacious wing with a rare and secret patio that even he had seen but once, and only on infrequent occasion was she known to appear before twelve-thirty, and often not then.

"You see, she's healthy and strong and all that," he explained, "but she was born with insomnia. She never could sleep. She couldn't sleep as a little baby even. But it's never hurt her any, because she's got a will, and won't let it get on her nerves. She's just about as tense as they make them, yet, instead of going wild when she can't sleep, she just wills to relax, and she does relax. She calls them her `white nights,' when she gets them. Maybe she'll fall asleep at daybreak, or at nine or ten in the morning; and then she'll sleep the rest of the clock around and get down to dinner as chipper as you please."

"It's constitutional, I fancy," Graham suggested.

Bert nodded.

"It would be a handicap to nine hundred and ninety-nine women out of a thousand. But not to her. She puts up with it, and if she can't sleep one time--she should worry--she just sleeps some other time and makes it up."

More and other things Bert Wainwright told of his hostess, and Graham was not slow in gathering that the young man, despite the privileges of long acquaintance, stood a good deal in awe of her.

"I never saw anybody whose goat she couldn't get if she went after it," he confided. "Man or woman or servant, age, sex, and previous condition of servitude--it's all one when she gets on the high and mighty. And I don't see how she does it. Maybe it's just a kind of light that comes into her eyes, or some kind of an expression on her lips, or, I don't know what--anyway, she puts it across and nobody makes any mistake about it."

"She has a ... a way with her," Graham volunteered.

"That's it!" Bert's face beamed. "It's a way she has. She just puts it over. Kind of gives you a chilly feeling, you don't know why. Maybe she's learned to be so quiet about it because of the control she's learned by passing sleepless nights without squealing out or getting sour. The chances are she didn't bat an eye all last night--"

excitement, you know, the crowd, swimming Mountain Lad and such things. Now ordinary things that'd keep most women awake, like danger, or storm at sea, and such things, Dick says don't faze her. She can sleep like a baby, he says, when the town she's in is being bombarded or when the ship she's in is trying to claw off a lee shore. She's a wonder, and no mistake. You ought to play billiards with her--the English game. She'll go some."

A little later, Graham, along with Bert, encountered the girls in the morning room, where, despite an hour of rag-time song and dancing and chatter, he was scarcely for a moment unaware of a loneliness, a lack, and a desire to see his hostess, in some fresh and unguessed mood and way, come in upon them through the open door.

Still later, mounted on Altadena and accompanied by Bert on a thoroughbred mare called Mollie, Graham made a two hours' exploration of the dairy center of the ranch, and arrived back barely in time to keep an engagement with Ernestine in the tennis court.

He came to lunch with an eagerness for which his keen appetite could not entirely account; and he knew definite disappointment when his hostess did not appear.

"A white night," Dick Forrest surmised for his guest's benefit, and went into details additional to Bert's of her constitutional inaptitude for normal sleep. "Do you know, we were married years

before I ever saw her sleep. I knew she did sleep, but I never saw her. I've seen her go three days and nights without closing an eye and keep sweet and cheerful all the time, and when she did sleep, it was out of exhaustion. That was when the All Away went ashore in the Carolines and the whole population worked to get us off. It wasn't the danger, for there wasn't any. It was the noise. Also, it was the excitement. She was too busy living. And when it was almost all over, I actually saw her asleep for the first time in my life."

A new guest had arrived that morning, a Donald Ware, whom Graham met at lunch. He seemed well acquainted with all, as if he had visited much in the Big House; and Graham gathered that, despite his youth, he was a violinist of note on the Pacific Coast.

"He has conceived a grand passion for Paula," Ernestine told Graham as they passed out from the dining room.

Graham raised his eyebrows.

"Oh, but she doesn't mind," Ernestine laughed. "Every man that comes along does the same thing. She's used to it. She has just a charming way of disregarding all their symptoms, and enjoys them, and gets the best out of them in consequence. It's lots of fun to Dick. You'll be doing the same before you're here a week. If you don't, we'll all be surprised mightily. And if you don't, most likely you'll hurt Dick's feelings. He's come to expect it as a matter of course. And when a

fond, proud husband gets a habit like that, it must hurt terribly to see his wife not appreciated."

"Oh, well, if I am expected to, I suppose I must," Graham sighed. "But just the same I hate to do whatever everybody does just because everybody does it. But if it's the custom--well, it's the custom, that's all. But it's mighty hard on one with so many other nice girls around."

There was a quizzical light in his long gray eyes that affected Ernestine so profoundly that she gazed into his eyes over long, became conscious of what she was doing, dropped her own eyes away, and flushed.

"Little Leo--the boy poet you remember last night," she rattled on in a patent attempt to escape from her confusion. "He's madly in love with Paula, too. I've heard Aaron Hancock chaffing him about some sonnet cycle, and it isn't difficult to guess the inspiration. And Terrence--the Irishman, you know--he's mildly in love with her. They can't help it, you see; and can you blame them?"

"She surely deserves it all," Graham murmured, although vaguely hurt in that the addle-pated, alphabet-obsessed, epicurean anarchist of an Irishman who gloried in being a loafer and a pensioner should even mildly be in love with the Little Lady. "She is most deserving of all men's admiration," he continued smoothly. "From the little I've seen

of her she's quite remarkable and most charming."

"She's my half-sister," Ernestine vouchsafed, "although you wouldn't dream a drop of the same blood ran in our veins. She's so different. She's different from all the Destens, from any girl I ever knew-- though she isn't exactly a girl. She's thirty-eight, you know--"

"Pussy, pussy," Graham whispered.

The pretty young blonde looked at him in surprise and bewilderment, taken aback by the apparent irrelevance of his interruption.

"Cat," he censured in mock reproof.

"Oh!" she cried. "I never meant it that way. You will find we are very frank here. Everybody knows Paula's age. She tells it herself. I'm eighteen--so, there. And now, just for your meanness, how old are you?"

"As old as Dick," he replied promptly.

"And he's forty," she laughed triumphantly. "Are you coming swimming? --the water will be dreadfully cold."

Graham shook his head. "I'm going riding with Dick."

Her face fell with all the ingenuousness of eighteen.

"Oh," she protested, "some of his eternal green manures, or hillside terracing, or water-pocketing."

"But he said something about swimming at five."

Her face brightened joyously.

"Then we'll meet at the tank. It must be the same party. Paula said swimming at five."

As they parted under a long arcade, where his way led to the tower room for a change into riding clothes, she stopped suddenly and called:

"Oh, Mr. Graham."

He turned obediently.

"You really are not compelled to fall in love with Paula, you know. It was just my way of putting it."

"I shall be very, very careful," he said solemnly, although there was a twinkle in his eye as he concluded.

Nevertheless, as he went on to his room, he could not but admit to himself that the Paula Forrest charm, or the far fairy tentacles of it, had already reached him and were wrapping around him. He knew, right there, that he would prefer the engagement to ride to have been with her than with his old-time friend, Dick.

As he emerged from the house to the long hitching-rails under the ancient oaks, he looked eagerly for his hostess. Only Dick was there, and the stable-man, although the many saddled horses that stamped in the shade promised possibilities. But Dick and he rode away alone. Dick pointed out her horse, an alert bay thoroughbred, stallion at that, under a small Australian saddle with steel stirrups, and double-reined and single-bitted.

"I don't know her plans," he said. "She hasn't shown up yet, but at any rate she'll be swimming later. We'll meet her then."

Graham appreciated and enjoyed the ride, although more than once he found himself glancing at his wrist-watch to ascertain how far away five o'clock might yet be. Lambing time was at hand, and through home field after home field he rode with his host, now one and now the other dismounting to turn over onto its feet rotund and glorious Shropshire and Rambouillet-Merino ewes so hopelessly the product of man's selection as to be unable to get off, of themselves, from their own broad backs, once they were down with their four legs helplessly sky-aspiring.

"I've really worked to make the American Merino," Dick was saying; "to give it the developed leg, the strong back, the well-sprung rib, and the stamina. The old-country breed lacked the stamina. It was too much hand-reared and manicured."

"You're doing things, big things," Graham assured him. "Think of shipping rams to Idaho! That speaks for itself."

Dick Forrest's eyes were sparkling, as he replied:

"Better than Idaho. Incredible as it may sound, and asking forgiveness for bragging, the great flocks to-day of Michigan and Ohio can trace back to my California-bred Ramboulet rams. Take Australia. Twelve years ago I sold three rams for three hundred each to a visiting squatter. After he took them back and demonstrated them he sold them for as many thousand each and ordered a shipload more from me. Australia will never be the worse for my having been. Down there they say that lucerne, artesian wells, refrigerator ships, and Forrest's rams have tripled the wool and mutton production."

Quite by chance, on the way back, meeting Mendenhall, the horse manager, they were deflected by him to a wide pasture, broken by wooded canyons and studded with oaks, to look over a herd of yearling Shires that was to be dispatched next morning to the upland pastures and feeding sheds of the Miramar Hills. There were nearly two hundred

of them, rough-coated, beginning to shed, large-boned and large for their age.

"We don't exactly crowd them," Dick Forrest explained, "but Mr. Mendenhall sees to it that they never lack full nutrition from the time they are foaled. Up there in the hills, where they are going, they'll balance their grass with grain. This makes them assemble every night at the feeding places and enables the feeders to keep track of them with a minimum of effort. I've shipped fifty stallions, two-year-olds, every year for the past five years, to Oregon alone. They're sort of standardized, you know. The people up there know what they're getting. They know my standard so well that they'll buy unsight and unseen."

"You must cull a lot, then," Graham ventured.

"And you'll see the culls draying on the streets of San Francisco," Dick answered.

"Yes, and on the streets of Denver," Mr. Mendenhall amplified, "and of Los Angeles, and--why, two years ago, in the horse-famine, we shipped twenty carloads of four-year geldings to Chicago, that averaged seventeen hundred each. The lightest were sixteen, and there were matched pairs up to nineteen hundred. Lord, Lord, that was a year for horse-prices--blue sky, and then some."

As Mr. Mendenhall rode away, a man, on a slender-legged, head-tossing Palomina, rode up to them and was introduced to Graham as Mr. Hennessy, the ranch veterinary.

"I heard Mrs. Forrest was looking over the colts," he explained to his employer, "and I rode across to give her a glance at The Fawn here. She'll be riding her in less than a week. What horse is she on to-day?"

"The Fop," Dick replied, as if expecting the comment that was prompt as the disapproving shake of Mr. Hennessy's head.

"I can never become converted to women riding stallions," muttered the veterinary. "The Fop is dangerous. Worse--though I take my hat off to his record--he's malicious and vicious. She--Mrs. Forrest ought to ride him with a muzzle--but he's a striker as well, and I don't see how she can put cushions on his hoofs."

"Oh, well," Dick placated, "she has a bit that is a bit in his mouth, and she's not afraid to use it--"

"If he doesn't fall over on her some day," Mr. Hennessy grumbled.

"Anyway, I'll breathe easier when she takes to The Fawn here. Now she's a lady's mount--all the spirit in the world, but nothing vicious. She's a sweet mare, a sweet mare, and she'll steady down from her friskiness. But she'll always be a gay handful--no riding academy proposition."

"Let's ride over," Dick suggested. "Mrs. Forrest'll have a gay handful in The Fop if she's ridden him into that bunch of younglings.--It's her territory, you know," he elucidated to Graham. "All the house horses and lighter stock is her affair. And she gets grand results. I can't understand it, myself. It's like a little girl straying into an experimental laboratory of high explosives and mixing the stuff around any old way and getting more powerful combinations than the graybeard chemists."

The three men took a cross-ranch road for half a mile, turned up a wooded canyon where ran a spring-trickle of stream, and emerged on a wide rolling terrace rich in pasture. Graham's first glimpse was of a background of many curious yearling and two-year-old colts, against which, in the middleground, he saw his hostess, on the back of the bright bay thoroughbred, The Fop, who, on hind legs, was striking his forefeet in the air and squealing shrilly. They reined in their mounts and watched.

"He'll get her yet," the veterinary muttered morosely. "That Fop isn't safe."

But at that moment Paula Forrest, unaware of her audience, with a sharp cry of command and a cavalier thrust of sharp spurs into The Fop's silken sides, checked him down to four-footedness on the ground and a restless, champing quietness.

"Taking chances?" Dick mildly reproached her, as the three rode up.

"Oh, I can manage him," she breathed between tight teeth, as, with ears back and vicious-gleaming eyes, The Fop bared his teeth in a bite that would have been perilously near to Graham's leg had she not reined the brute abruptly away across the neck and driven both spurs solidly into his sides.

The Fop quivered, squealed, and for the moment stood still.

"It's the old game, the white man's game," Dick laughed. "She's not afraid of him, and he knows it. She outgames him, out-savages him, teaches him what savagery is in its intimate mood and tense."

Three times, while they looked on, ready to whirl their own steeds away if he got out of hand, The Fop attempted to burst into rampage, and three times, solidly, with careful, delicate hand on the bitter bit, Paula Forrest dealt him double spurs in the ribs, till he stood, sweating, frothing, fretting, beaten, and in hand.

"It's the way the white man has always done," Dick moralized, while Graham suffered a fluttery, shivery sensation of admiration of the beast-conquering Little Lady. "He's out-savaged the savage the world around," Dick went on. "He's out-endured him, out-filthed him, out-scalped him, out-tortured him, out-eaten him--yes, out-eaten him. It's

a fair wager that the white man, in extremis, has eaten more of the genus homo, than the savage, in extremis, has eaten."

"Good afternoon," Paula greeted her guest, the ranch veterinary, and her husband. "I think I've got him now. Let's look over the colts. Just keep an eye, Mr. Graham, on his mouth. He's a dreadful snapper. Ride free from him, and you'll save your leg for old age."

Now that The Fop's demonstration was over, the colts, startled into flight by some impish spirit amongst them, galloped and frisked away over the green turf, until, curious again, they circled back, halted at gaze, and then, led by one particularly saucy chestnut filly, drew up in half a circle before the riders, with alert pricking ears.

Graham scarcely saw the colts at first. He was seeing his protean hostess in a new role. Would her proteanness never end? he wondered, as he glanced over the magnificent, sweating, mastered creature she bestrode. Mountain Lad, despite his hugeness, was a mild-mannered pet beside this squealing, biting, striking Fop who advertised all the spirited viciousness of the most spirited vicious thoroughbred.

"Look at her," Paula whispered to Dick, in order not to alarm the saucy chestnut filly. "Isn't she wonderful! That's what I've been working for." Paula turned to Evan. "Always they have some fault, some miss, at the best an approximation rather than an achievement. But she's an achievement. Look at her. She's as near right as I shall

probably ever get. Her sire is Big Chief, if you know our racing register. He sold for sixty thousand when he was a cripple. We borrowed the use of him. She was his only get of the season. But look at her! She's got his chest and lungs. I had my choices--mares eligible for the register. Her dam wasn't eligible, but I chose her. She was an obstinate old maid, but she was the one mare for Big Chief. This is her first foal and she was eighteen years old when she bred. But I knew it was there. All I had to do was to look at Big Chief and her, and it just had to be there."

"The dam was only half thoroughbred," Dick explained.

"But with a lot of Morgan on the other side," Paula added instantly, "and a streak along the back of mustang. This shall be called Nymph, even if she has no place in the books. She'll be my first unimpeachable perfect saddle horse--I know it--the kind I like--my dream come true at last."

"A hoss has four legs, one on each corner," Mr. Hennessy uttered profoundly.

"And from five to seven gaits," Graham took up lightly,

"And yet I don't care for those many-gaited Kentuckians," Paula said quickly, "--except for park work. But for California, rough roads, mountain trails, and all the rest, give me the fast walk, the fox

trot, the long trot that covers the ground, and the not too-long, ground-covering gallop. Of course, the close-coupled, easy canter; but I scarcely call that a gait--it's no more than the long lope reduced to the adjustment of wind or rough ground."

"She's a beauty," Dick admired, his eyes warm in contemplation of the saucy chestnut filly, who was daringly close and alertly sniffing of the subdued Fop's tremulous and nostril-dilated muzzle.

"I prefer my own horses to be near thoroughbred rather than all thoroughbred," Paula proclaimed. "The running horse has its place on the track, but it's too specialized for mere human use."

"Nicely coupled," Mr. Hennessy said, indicating the Nymph. "Short enough for good running and long enough for the long trot. I'll admit I didn't have any faith in the combination; but you've got a grand animal out of it just the same."

"I didn't have horses when I was a young girl," Paula said to Graham; "and the fact that I can now not only have them but breed them and mold them to my heart's desire is always too good to be true. Sometimes I can't believe it myself, and have to ride out and look them over to make sure."

She turned her head and raised her eyes gratefully to Forrest; and Graham watched them look into each other's eyes for a long half-

minute. Forrest's pleasure in his wife's pleasure, in her young enthusiasm and joy of life, was clear to Graham's observation. "Lucky devil," was Graham's thought, not because of his host's vast ranch and the success and achievement of it, but because of the possession of a wonder-woman who could look unabashed and appreciative into his eyes as the Little Lady had looked.

Graham was meditating, with skepticism, Ernestine's information that Paula Forrest was thirty-eight, when she turned to the colts and pointed her riding whip at a black yearling nibbling at the spring green.

"Look at that level rump, Dick," she said, "and those trotting feet and pasterns." And, to Graham: "Rather different from Nymph's long wrists, aren't they? But they're just what I was after." She laughed a little, with just a shade of annoyance. "The dam was a bright sorrel--almost like a fresh-minted twenty-dollar piece--and I did so want a pair out of her, of the same color, for my own trap. Well, I can't say that I exactly got them, although I bred her to a splendid, sorrel trotting horse. And this is my reward, this black--and, wait till we get to the brood mares and you'll see the other, a full brother and mahogany brown. I'm so disappointed."

She singled out a pair of dark bays, feeding together: "Those are two of Guy Dillon's get--brother, you know, to Lou Dillon. They're out of different mares, not quite the same bay, but aren't they splendidly

matched? And they both have Guy Dillon's coat."

She moved her subdued steed on, skirting the flank of the herd quietly in order not to alarm it; but a number of colts took flight.

"Look at them!" she cried. "Five, there, are hackneys. Look at the lift of their fore-legs as they run."

"I'll be terribly disappointed if you don't get a prize-winning four-in-hand out of them," Dick praised, and brought again the flash of grateful eyes that hurt Graham as he noted it.

"Two are out of heavier mares--see that one in the middle and the one on the far left--and there's the other three to pick from for the leaders. Same sire, five different dams, and a matched and balanced four, out of five choices, all in the same season, is a stroke of luck, isn't it?"

She turned quickly to Mr. Hennessy: "I can begin to see the ones that will have to sell for polo ponies--among the two-year-olds. You can pick them."

"If Mr. Mendenhall doesn't sell that strawberry roan for a clean fifteen hundred, it'll be because polo has gone out of fashion," the veterinary approved, with waxing enthusiasm. "I've had my eye on them. That pale sorrel, there. You remember his set-back. Give him an extra

year and he'll--look at his coupling!--watch him turn!--a cow-skin?--
he'll turn on a silver dollar! Give him a year to make up, and he'll
stand a show for the international. Listen to me. I've had my faith in
him from the beginning. Cut out that Burlingame crowd. When he's ripe,
ship him straight East."

Paula nodded and listened to Mr. Hennessy's judgment, her eyes
kindling with his in the warmth of the sight of the abounding young
life for which she was responsible.

"It always hurts, though," she confessed to Graham, "selling such
beauties to have them knocked out on the field so quickly."

Her sheer absorption in the animals robbed her speech of any hint of
affectation or show--so much so, that Dick was impelled to praise her
judgment to Evan.

"I can dig through a whole library of horse practice, and muddle and
mull over the Mendelian Law until I'm dizzy, like the clod that I am;
but she is the genius. She doesn't have to study law. She just knows
it in some witch-like, intuitional way. All she has to do is size up a
bunch of mares with her eyes, and feel them over a little with her
hands, and hunt around till she finds the right sires, and get pretty
nearly what she wants in the result--except color, eh, Paul?" he
teased.

She showed her laughing teeth in the laugh at her expense, in which Mr. Hennessy joined, and Dick continued: "Look at that filly there. We all knew Paula was wrong. But look at it! She bred a rickety old thoroughbred, that we wanted to put out of her old age, to a standard stallion; got a filly; bred it back with a thoroughbred; bred its filly foal with the same standard again; knocked all our prognostications into a cocked hat, and--well, look at it, a world-beater polo pony. There is one thing we have to take off our hats to her for: she doesn't let any woman sentimentality interfere with her culling. Oh, she's cold-blooded enough. She's as remorseless as any man when it comes to throwing out the undesirables and selecting for what she wants. But she hasn't mastered color yet. There's where her genius falls down, eh, Paul? You'll have to put up with Duddy and Fuddy for a while longer for your trap. By the way, how is Duddy?"

"He's come around," she answered, "thanks to Mr. Hennessy."

"Nothing serious," the veterinarian added. "He was just off his feed a trifle. It was more a scare of the stableman than anything else."