

CHAPTER XIII

From the colt pasture to the swimming tank Graham talked with his hostess and rode as nearly beside her as The Fop's wickedness permitted, while Dick and Hennessy, on ahead, were deep in ranch business.

"Insomnia has been a handicap all my life," she said, while she tickled The Fop with a spur in order to check a threatened belligerence. "But I early learned to keep the irritation of it off my nerves and the weight of it off my mind. In fact, I early came to make a function of it and actually to derive enjoyment from it. It was the only way to master a thing I knew would persist as long as I persisted. Have you--of course you have--learned to win through an undertow?"

"Yes, by never fighting it," Graham answered, his eyes on the spray of color in her cheeks and the tiny beads of sweat that arose from her continuous struggle with the high-strung creature she rode. Thirty-eight! He wondered if Ernestine had lied. Paula Forrest did not look twenty-eight. Her skin was the skin of a girl, with all the delicate, fine-pored and thin transparency of the skin of a girl.

"Exactly," she went on. "By not fighting the undertow. By yielding to

its down-drag and out-drag, and working with it to reach air again. Dick taught me that trick. So with my insomnia. If it is excitement from immediate events that holds me back from the City of Sleep, I yield to it and come quicker to unconsciousness from out the entangling currents. I invite my soul to live over again, from the same and different angles, the things that keep me from unconsciousness.

"Take the swimming of Mountain Lad yesterday. I lived it over last night as I had lived it in reality. Then I lived it as a spectator--as the girls saw it, as you saw it, as the cowboy saw it, and, most of all, as my husband saw it. Then I made up a picture of it, many pictures of it, from all angles, and painted them, and framed them, and hung them, and then, a spectator, looked at them as if for the first time. And I made myself many kinds of spectators, from crabbed old maids and lean pantaloons to girls in boarding school and Greek boys of thousands of years ago.

"After that I put it to music. I played it on the piano, and guessed the playing of it on full orchestras and blaring bands. I chanted it, I sang it-epic, lyric, comic; and, after a weary long while, of course I slept in the midst of it, and knew not that I slept until I awoke at twelve to-day. The last time I had heard the clock strike was six. Six unbroken hours is a capital prize for me in the sleep lottery."

As she finished, Mr. Hennessy rode away on a cross path, and Dick

Forrest dropped back to squire his wife on the other side.

"Will you sport a bet, Evan?" he queried.

"I'd like to hear the terms of it first," was the answer.

"Cigars against cigars that you can't catch Paula in the tank inside ten minutes--no, inside five, for I remember you're some swimmer."

"Oh, give him a chance, Dick," Paula cried generously. "Ten minutes will worry him."

"But you don't know him," Dicked argued. "And you don't value my cigars. I tell you he is a swimmer. He's drowned kanakas, and you know what that means."

"Perhaps I should reconsider. Maybe he'll slash a killing crawl-stroke at me before I've really started. Tell me his history and prizes."

"I'll just tell you one thing. They still talk of it in the Marquesas. It was the big hurricane of 1892. He did forty miles in forty-five hours, and only he and one other landed on the land. And they were all kanakas. He was the only white man; yet he out-endured and drowned the last kanaka of them--"

"I thought you said there was one other?" Paula interrupted.

"She was a woman," Dick answered. "He drowned the last kanaka."

"And the woman was then a white woman?" Paula insisted.

Graham looked quickly at her, and although she had asked the question of her husband, her head turned to the turn of his head, so that he found her eyes meeting his straightly and squarely in interrogation. Graham held her gaze with equal straightness as he answered: "She was a kanaka."

"A queen, if you please," Dick took up. "A queen out of the ancient chief stock. She was Queen of Huahoa."

"Was it the chief stock that enabled her to out-endure the native men?" Paula asked. "Or did you help her?"

"I rather think we helped each other toward the end," Graham replied.

"We were both out of our heads for short spells and long spells.

Sometimes it was one, sometimes the other, that was all in. We made the land at sunset--that is, a wall of iron coast, with the surf bursting sky-high. She took hold of me and clawed me in the water to get some sense in me. You see, I wanted to go in, which would have meant finish.

"She got me to understand that she knew where she was; that the

current set westerly along shore and in two hours would drift us abreast of a spot where we could land. I swear I either slept or was unconscious most of those two hours; and I swear she was in one state or the other when I chanced to come to and noted the absence of the roar of the surf. Then it was my turn to claw and maul her back to consciousness. It was three hours more before we made the sand. We slept where we crawled out of the water. Next morning's sun burnt us awake, and we crept into the shade of some wild bananas, found fresh water, and went to sleep again. Next I awoke it was night. I took another drink, and slept through till morning. She was still asleep when the bunch of kanakas, hunting wild goats from the next valley, found us."

"I'll wager, for a man who drowned a whole kanaka crew, it was you who did the helping," Dick commented.

"She must have been forever grateful," Paula challenged, her eyes directly on Graham's. "Don't tell me she wasn't young, wasn't beautiful, wasn't a golden brown young goddess."

"Her mother was the Queen of Huahoa," Graham answered. "Her father was a Greek scholar and an English gentleman. They were dead at the time of the swim, and Nomare was queen herself. She was young. She was beautiful as any woman anywhere in the world may be beautiful. Thanks to her father's skin, she as not golden brown. She was tawny golden. But you've heard the story undoubtedly--"

He broke off with a look of question to Dick, who shook his head.

Calls and cries and splashings of water from beyond a screen of trees warned them that they were near the tank.

"You'll have to tell me the rest of the story some time," Paula said.

"Dick knows it. I can't see why he hasn't told you."

She shrugged her shoulders.

"Perhaps because he's never had the time or the provocation."

"God wot, it's had wide circulation," Graham laughed. "For know that I was once morganatic--or whatever you call it--king of the cannibal isles, or of a paradise of a Polynesian isle at any rate.--'By a purple wave on an opal beach in the hush of the Mahim woods,'" he hummed carelessly, in conclusion, and swung off from his horse.

"The white moth to the closing vine, the bee to the opening clover," she hummed another line of the song, while The Fop nearly got his teeth into her leg and she straightened him out with the spur, and waited for Dick to help her off and tie him.

"Cigars!--I'm in on that!--you can't catch her!" Bert Wainwright

called from the top of the high dive forty feet above. "Wait a minute! I'm coming!"

And come he did, in a swan dive that was almost professional and that brought handclapping approval from the girls.

"A sweet dive, balanced beautifully," Graham told him as he emerged from the tank.

Bert tried to appear unconscious of the praise, failed, and, to pass it off, plunged into the water.

"I don't know what kind of a swimmer you are, Graham," he said, "but I just want in with Dick on the cigars."

"Me, too; me, too!" chorused Ernestine, and Lute, and Rita.

"Boxes of candy, gloves, or any truck you care to risk," Ernestine added.

"But I don't know Mrs. Forrest's records, either," Graham protested, after having taken on the bets. "However, if in five minutes--"

"Ten minutes," Paula said, "and to start from opposite ends of the tank. Is that fair? Any touch is a catch." Graham looked his hostess over with secret approval. She was clad, not in the single white silk

slip she evidently wore only for girl parties, but in a coquettish imitation of the prevailing fashion mode, a suit of changeable light blue and green silk--almost the color of the pool; the skirt slightly above the knees whose roundedness he recognized; with long stockings to match, and tiny bathing shoes bound on with crossed ribbons. On her head was a jaunty swimming cap no jauntier than herself when she urged the ten minutes in place of five.

Rita Wainwright held the watch, while Graham walked down to the other end of the hundred-and-fifty-foot tank.

"Paula, you'll be caught if you take any chances," Dick warned. "Evan Graham is a real fish man."

"I guess Paula'll show him a few, even without the pipe," Bert bragged loyally. "And I'll bet she can out-dive him."

"There you lose," Dick answered. "I saw the rock he dived from at Huahoa. That was after his time, and after the death of Queen Nomare. He was only a youngster--twenty-two; he had to be to do it. It was off the peak of the Pau-wi Rock--one hundred and twenty-eight feet by triangulation. And he couldn't do it legitimately or technically with a swan-dive, because he had to clear two lower ledges while he was in the air. The upper ledge of the two, by their own traditions, was the highest the best of the kanakas had ever dared since their traditions began. Well, he did it. He became tradition. As long as the kanakas of

Huahoa survive he will remain tradition--Get ready, Rita. Start on the full minute."

"It's almost a shame to play tricks on so reputable a swimmer," Paula confided to them, as she faced her guest down the length of the tank and while both waited the signal.

"He may get you before you can turn the trick," Dick warned again. And then, to Bert, with just a shade of anxiety: "Is it working all right? Because if it isn't, Paula will have a bad five seconds getting out of it."

"All O.K.," Bert assured. "I went in myself. The pipe is working. There's plenty of air."

"Ready!" Rita called. "Go!"

Graham ran toward their end like a foot-racer, while Paula darted up the high dive. By the time she had gained the top platform, his hands and feet were on the lower rungs. When he was half-way up she threatened a dive, compelling him to cease from climbing and to get out on the twenty-foot platform ready to follow her to the water. Whereupon she laughed down at him and did not dive. "Time is passing--the precious seconds are ticking off," Ernestine chanted.

When he started to climb, Paula again chased him to the half-way

platform with a threat to dive. But not many seconds did Graham waste. His next start was determined, and Paula, poised for her dive, could not send him scuttling back. He raced upward to gain the thirty-foot platform before she should dive, and she was too wise to linger. Out into space she launched, head back, arms bent, hands close to chest, legs straight and close together, her body balanced horizontally on the air as it fell outward and downward.

"Oh you Annette Kellerman!" Bert Wamwright's admiring cry floated up.

Graham ceased pursuit to watch the completion of the dive, and saw his hostess, a few feet above the water, bend her head forward, straighten out her arms and lock the hands to form the arch before her head, and, so shifting the balance of her body, change it from the horizontal to the perfect, water-cleaving angle.

The moment she entered the water, he swung out on the thirty-foot platform and waited. From this height he could make out her body beneath the surface swimming a full stroke straight for the far end of the tank. Not till then did he dive. He was confident that he could outspeed her, and his dive, far and flat, entered him in the water twenty feet beyond her entrance.

But at the instant he was in, Dick dipped two flat rocks into the water and struck them together. This was the signal for Paula to change her course. Graham heard the concussion and wondered. He broke

surface in the full swing of the crawl and went down the tank to the far end at a killing pace. He pulled himself out and watched the surface of the tank. A burst of handclapping from the girls drew his eyes to the Little Lady drawing herself out of the tank at the other end.

Again he ran down the side of the tank, and again she climbed the scaffold. But this time his wind and endurance enabled him to cut down her lead, so that she was driven to the twenty-foot platform. She took no time for posturing or swanning, but tilted immediately off in a stiff dive, angling toward the west side of the tank. Almost they were in the air at the same time. In the water and under it, he could feel against his face and arms the agitation left by her progress; but she led into the deep shadow thrown by the low afternoon sun, where the water was so dark he could see nothing.

When he touched the side of the tank he came up. She was not in sight. He drew himself out, panting, and stood ready to dive in at the first sign of her. But there were no signs.

"Seven minutes!" Rita called. "And a half! ... Eight!... And a half!"

And no Paula Forrest broke surface. Graham refused to be alarmed because he could see no alarm on the faces of the others.

"I lose," he announced at Rita's "Nine minutes!"

"She's been under over two minutes, and you're all too blessed calm about it to get me excited," he said. "I've still a minute--maybe I don't lose," he added quickly, as he stepped off feet first into the tank.

As he went down he turned over and explored the cement wall of tank with his hands. Midway, possibly ten feet under the surface he estimated, his hands encountered an opening in the wall. He felt about, learned it was unscreened, and boldly entered. Almost before he was in, he found he could come up; but he came up slowly, breaking surface in pitchy blackness and feeling about him without splashing.

His fingers touched a cool smooth arm that shrank convulsively at contact while the possessor of it cried sharply with the startle of fright. He held on tightly and began to laugh, and Paula laughed with him. A line from "The First Chanty" flashed into his consciousness--
"Hearing her laugh in the gloom greatly I loved her."

"You did frighten me when you touched me," she said. "You came without a sound, and I was a thousand miles away, dreaming..."

"What?" Graham asked.

"Well, honestly, I had just got an idea for a gown--a dusty, musty, mulberry-wine velvet, with long, close lines, and heavy, tarnished

gold borders and cords and things. And the only jewelery a ring--one enormous pigeon-blood ruby that Dick gave me years ago when we sailed the All Away."

"Is there anything you don't do?" he laughed.

She joined with him, and their mirth sounded strangely hollow in the pent and echoing dark.

"Who told you?" she next asked.

"No one. After you had been under two minutes I knew it had to be something like this, and I came exploring."

"It was Dick's idea. He had it built into the tank afterward. You will find him full of whimsies. He delighted in scaring old ladies into fits by stepping off into the tank with their sons or grandsons and hiding away in here. But after one or two nearly died of shock--old ladies, I mean--he put me up, as to-day, to fooling hardier persons like yourself.--Oh, he had another accident. There was a Miss Coghlan, friend of Ernestine, a little seminary girl. They artfully stood her right beside the pipe that leads out, and Dick went off the high dive and swam in here to the inside end of the pipe. After several minutes, by the time she was in collapse over his drowning, he spoke up the pipe to her in most horrible, sepulchral tones. And right there Miss Coghlan fainted dead away."

"She must have been a weak sister," Graham commented; while he struggled with a wanton desire for a match so that he could strike it and see how Paula Forrest looked paddling there beside him to keep afloat.

"She had a fair measure of excuse," Paula answered. "She was a young thing--eighteen; and she had a sort of school-girl infatuation for Dick. They all get it. You see, he's such a boy when he's playing that they can't realize that he's a hard-bitten, hard-working, deep-thinking, mature, elderly benedict. The embarrassing thing was that the little girl, when she was first revived and before she could gather her wits, exposed all her secret heart. Dick's face was a study while she babbled her--"

"Well?--going to stay there all night?" Bert Wainwright's voice came down the pipe, sounding megaphonically close.

"Heavens!" Graham sighed with relief; for he had startled and clutched Paula's arm. "That's the time I got my fright. The little maiden is avenged. Also, at last, I know what a lead-pipe cinch is."

"And it's time we started for the outer world," she suggested. "It's not the coziest gossiping place in the world. Shall I go first?"

"By all means--and I'll be right behind; although it's a pity the

water isn't phosphorescent. Then I could follow your incandescent heel like that chap Byron wrote about--don't you remember?"

He heard her appreciative gurgle in the dark, and then her: "Well, I'm going now."

Unable to see the slightest glimmer, nevertheless, from the few sounds she made he knew she had turned over and gone down head first, and he was not beyond visioning with inner sight the graceful way in which she had done it--an anything but graceful feat as the average swimming woman accomplishes it.

"Somebody gave it away to you," was Bert's prompt accusation, when Graham rose to the surface of the tank and climbed out.

"And you were the scoundrel who rapped stone under water," Graham challenged. "If I'd lost I'd have protested the bet. It was a crooked game, a conspiracy, and competent counsel, I am confident, would declare it a felony. It's a case for the district attorney."

"But you won," Ernestine cried.

"I certainly did, and, therefore, I shall not prosecute you, nor any one of your crooked gang--if the bets are paid promptly. Let me see--you owe me a box of cigars--"

"One cigar, sir!"

"A box! A box!" "Cross tag!" Paula cried. "Let's play cross-tag!--
You're IT!"

Suiting action to word, she tagged Graham on the shoulder and plunged into the tank. Before he could follow, Bert seized him, whirled him in a circle, was himself tagged, and tagged Dick before he could escape. And while Dick pursued his wife through the tank and Bert and Graham sought a chance to cross, the girls fled up the scaffold and stood in an enticing row on the fifteen-foot diving platform.