CHAPTER XIV.

An indifferent swimmer, Donald Ware had avoided the afternoon sport in the tank; but after dinner, somewhat to the irritation of Graham, the violinist monopolized Paula at the piano. New guests, with the casual expectedness of the Big House, had drifted in--a lawyer, by name Adolph Well, who had come to confer with Dick over some big water-right suit; Jeremy Braxton, straight from Mexico, Dick's general superintendent of the Harvest Group, which bonanza, according to Jeremy Braxton, was as "unpetering" as ever; Edwin O'Hay, a red-headed Irish musical and dramatic critic; and Chauncey Bishop, editor and owner of the San Francisco Dispatch, and a member of Dick's class and frat, as Graham gleaned.

Dick had started a boisterous gambling game which he called "Horrible Fives," wherein, although excitement ran high and players plunged, the limit was ten cents, and, on a lucky coup, the transient banker might win or lose as high as ninety cents, such coup requiring at least ten minutes to play out. This game went on at a big table at the far end of the room, accompanied by much owing and borrowing of small sums and an incessant clamor for change.

With nine players, the game was crowded, and Graham, rather than draw cards, casually and occasionally backed Ernestine's cards, the while

he glanced down the long room at the violinist and Paula Forrest absorbed in Beethoven Symphonies and Delibes' Ballets. Jeremy Braxton was demanding raising the limit to twenty cents, and Dick, the heaviest loser, as he averred, to the tune of four dollars and sixty cents, was plaintively suggesting the starting of a "kitty" in order that some one should pay for the lights and the sweeping out of the place in the morning, when Graham, with a profound sigh at the loss of his last bet--a nickel which he had had to pay double--announced to Ernestine that he was going to take a turn around the room to change his luck.

"I prophesied you would," she told him under her breath.

"What?" he asked.

She glanced significantly in Paula's direction.

"Just for that I simply must go down there now," he retorted.

"Can't dast decline a dare," she taunted.

"If it were a dare I wouldn't dare do it."

"In which case I dare you," she took up.

He shook his head: "I had already made up my mind to go right down

there to that one spot and cut that fiddler out of the running. You can't dare me out of it at this late stage. Besides, there's Mr. O'Hay waiting for you to make your bet."

Ernestine rashly laid ten cents, and scarcely knew whether she won or lost, so intent was she on watching Graham go down the room, although she did know that Bert Wainwright had not been unobservant of her gaze and its direction. On the other hand, neither she nor Bert, nor any other at the table, knew that Dick's quick-glancing eyes, sparkling with merriment while his lips chaffed absurdities that made them all laugh, had missed no portion of the side play.

Ernestine, but little taller than Paula, although hinting of a plus roundness to come, was a sun-healthy, clear blonde, her skin sprayed with the almost transparent flush of maidenhood at eighteen. To the eye, it seemed almost that one could see through the pink daintiness of fingers, hand, wrist, and forearm, neck and cheek. And to this delicious transparency of rose and pink, was added a warmth of tone that did not escape Dick's eyes as he glimpsed her watch Evan Graham move down the length of room. Dick knew and classified her wild imagined dream or guess, though the terms of it were beyond his divination.

What she saw was what she imagined was the princely walk of Graham, the high, light, blooded carriage of his head, the delightful carelessness of the gold-burnt, sun-sanded hair that made her fingers

ache to be into with caresses she for the first time knew were possible of her fingers.

Nor did Paula, during an interval of discussion with the violinist in which she did not desist from stating her criticism of O'Hay's latest criticism of Harold Bauer, fail to see and keep her eyes on Graham's progress. She, too, noted with pleasure his grace of movement, the high, light poise of head, the careless hair, the clear bronze of the smooth cheeks, the splendid forehead, the long gray eyes with the hint of drooping lids and boyish sullenness that fled before the smile with which he greeted her.

She had observed that smile often since her first meeting with him. It was an irresistible smile, a smile that lighted the eyes with the radiance of good fellowship and that crinkled the corners into tiny, genial lines. It was provocative of smiles, for she found herself smiling a silent greeting in return as she continued stating to Ware her grievance against O'Hay's too-complacent praise of Bauer.

But her engagement was tacitly with Donald Ware at the piano, and with no more than passing speech, she was off and away in a series of Hungarian dances that made Graham marvel anew as he loafed and smoked in a window-seat.

He marveled at the proteanness of her, at visions of those nimble fingers guiding and checking The Fop, swimming and paddling in

submarine crypts, and, falling in swan-like flight through forty feet of air, locking just above the water to make the diver's head-protecting arch of arm.

In decency, he lingered but few minutes, returned to the gamblers, and put the entire table in a roar with a well-acted Yiddisher's chagrin and passion at losing entire nickels every few minutes to the fortunate and chesty mine superintendent from Mexico.

Later, when the game of Horrible Fives broke up, Bert and Lute Desten spoiled the Adagio from Beethoven's Sonata Pathetique by exaggeratedly ragging to it in what Dick immediately named "The Loving Slow-Drag," till Paula broke down in a gale of laughter and ceased from playing.

New groupings occurred. A bridge table formed with Weil, Rita, Bishop, and Dick. Donald Ware was driven from his monopoly of Paula by the young people under the leadership of Jeremy Braxton; while Graham and O'Hay paired off in a window-seat and O'Hay talked shop.

After a time, in which all at the piano had sung Hawaiian hulas, Paula sang alone to her own accompaniment. She sang several German love-songs in succession, although it was merely for the group about her and not for the room; and Evan Graham, almost to his delight, decided that at last he had found a weakness in her. She might be a magnificent pianist, horsewoman, diver, and swimmer, but it

was patent, despite her singing throat, that she was not a magnificent singer. This conclusion he was quickly compelled to modify. A singer she was, a consummate singer. Weakness was only comparative after all. She lacked the magnificent voice. It was a sweet voice, a rich voice, with the same warm-fibered thrill of her laugh; but the volume so essential to the great voice was not there. Ear and voice seemed effortlessly true, and in her singing were feeling, artistry, training, intelligence. But volume--it was scarcely a fair average, was his judgment.

But quality--there he halted. It was a woman's voice. It was haunted with richness of sex. In it resided all the temperament in the world--with all the restraint of discipline, was the next step of his analysis. He had to admire the way she refused to exceed the limitations of her voice. In this she achieved triumphs.

And, while he nodded absently to O'Hay's lecturette on the state of the--opera, Graham fell to wondering if Paula Forrest, thus so completely the mistress of her temperament, might not be equally mistress of her temperament in the deeper, passional ways. There was a challenge there--based on curiosity, he conceded, but only partly so based; and, over and beyond, and, deeper and far beneath, a challenge to a man made in the immemorial image of man.

It was a challenge that bade him pause, and even look up and down the great room and to the tree-trunked roof far above, and to the flying

gallery hung with the spoils of the world, and to Dick Forrest, master of all this material achievement and husband of the woman, playing bridge, just as he worked, with all his heart, his laughter ringing loud as he caught Rita in renig. For Graham had the courage not to shun the ultimate connotations. Behind the challenge in his speculations lurked the woman. Paula Forrest was splendidly, deliciously woman, all woman, unusually woman. From the blow between the eyes of his first striking sight of her, swimming the great stallion in the pool, she had continued to witch-ride his man's imagination. He was anything but unused to women; and his general attitude was that of being tired of the mediocre sameness of them. To chance upon the unusual woman was like finding the great pearl in a lagoon fished out by a generation of divers.

"Glad to see you're still alive," Paula laughed to him, a little later.

She was prepared to depart with Lute for bed. A second bridge quartet had been arranged--Ernestine, Bert, Jeremy Braxton, and Graham; while O'Hay and Bishop were already deep in a bout of two-handed pinochle.

"He's really a charming Irishman when he keeps off his one string," Paula went on.

"Which, I think I am fair, is music," Graham said.

"And on music he is insufferable," Lute observed. "It's the only thing he doesn't know the least thing about. He drives one frantic."

"Never mind," Paula soothed, in gurgling tones. "You will all be avenged. Dick just whispered to me to get the philosophers up to-morrow night. You know how they talk music. A musical critic is their awful prey."

"Terrence said the other night that there was no closed season on musical critics," Lute contributed.

"Terrence and Aaron will drive him to drink," Paula laughed her joy of anticipation. "And Dar Hyal, alone, with his blastic theory of art, can specially apply it to music to the confutation of all the first words and the last. He doesn't believe a thing he says about blastism, any more than was he serious when he danced the other evening. It's his bit of fun. He's such a deep philosopher that he has to get his fun somehow."

"And if O'Hay ever locks horns with Terrence," Lute prophesied, "I can see Terrence tucking arm in arm with him, leading him down to the stag room, and heating the argument with the absentest-minded variety of drinks that ever O'Hay accomplished."

"Which means a very sick O'Hay next day," Paula continued her gurgles of anticipation.

"I'll tell him to do it!" exclaimed Lute.

"You mustn't think we're all bad," Paula protested to Graham. "It's just the spirit of the house. Dick likes it. He's always playing jokes himself. He relaxes that way. I'll wager, right now, it was Dick's suggestion, to Lute, and for Lute to carry out, for Terrence to get O'Hay into the stag room. Now, 'fess up, Lute."

"Well, I will say," Lute answered with meticulous circumspection, "that the idea was not entirely original with me."

At this point, Ernestine joined them and appropriated Graham with:

"We're all waiting for you. We've cut, and you and I are partners. Besides, Paula's making her sleep noise. So say good night, and let her go."

Paula had left for bed at ten o'clock. Not till one did the bridge break up. Dick, his arm about Ernestine in brotherly fashion, said good night to Graham where one of the divided ways led to the watch tower, and continued on with his pretty sister-in-law toward her quarters.

"Just a tip, Ernestine," he said at parting, his gray eyes frankly and genially on hers, but his voice sufficiently serious to warn her.

"What have I been doing now?" she pouted laughingly.

"Nothing... as yet. But don't get started, or you'll be laying up a sore heart for yourself. You're only a kid yet--eighteen; and a darned nice, likable kid at that. Enough to make 'most any man sit up and take notice. But Evan Graham is not 'most any man--"

"Oh, I can take care of myself," she blurted out in a fling of quick resentment.

"But listen to me just the same. There comes a time in the affairs of a girl when the love-bee gets a buzzing with a very loud hum in her pretty noddle. Then is the time she mustn't make a mistake and start in loving the wrong man. You haven't fallen in love with Evan Graham yet, and all you have to do is just not to fall in love with him. He's not for you, nor for any young thing. He's an oldster, an ancient, and possibly has forgotten more about love, romantic love, and young things, than you'll ever learn in a dozen lives. If he ever marries again--"

"Again!" Ernestine broke in.

"Why, he's been a widower, my dear, for over fifteen years."

"Then what of it?" she demanded defiantly.

"Just this," Dick continued quietly. "He's lived the young-thing romance, and lived it wonderfully; and, from the fact that in fifteen years he has not married again, means--"

"That he's never recovered from his loss?" Ernestine interpolated. "But that's no proof--"

"--Means that he's got over his apprenticeship to wild young romance," Dick held on steadily. "All you have to do is look at him and realize that he has not lacked opportunities, and that, on occasion, some very fine women, real wise women, mature women, have given him foot-races that tested his wind and endurance. But so far they've not succeeded in catching him. And as for young things, you know how filled the world is with them for a man like him. Think it over, and just keep your heart-thoughts away from him. If you don't let your heart start to warm toward him, it will save your heart from a grievous chill later on."

He took one of her hands in his, and drew her against him, an arm soothingly about her shoulder. For several minutes of silence Dick idly speculated on what her thoughts might be.

"You know, we hard-bitten old fellows--" he began half-apologetically, half-humorously.

But she made a restless movement of distaste, and cried out:

"Are the only ones worth while! The young men are all youngsters, and that's what's the matter with them. They're full of life, and coltish spirits, and dance, and song. But they're not serious. They're not big. They're not--oh, they don't give a girl that sense of all-wiseness, of proven strength, of, of... well, of manhood."

"I understand," Dick murmured. "But please do not forget to glance at the other side of the shield. You glowing young creatures of women must affect the old fellows in precisely similar ways. They may look on you as toys, playthings, delightful things to whom to teach a few fine foolishnesses, but not as comrades, not as equals, not as sharers--full sharers. Life is something to be learned. They have learned it... some of it. But young things like you, Ernestine, have you learned any of it yet?"

"Tell me," she asked abruptly, almost tragically, "about this wild young romance, about this young thing when he was young, fifteen years ago."

"Fifteen?" Dick replied promptly. "Eighteen. They were married three years before she died. In fact--figure it out for yourself--they were actually married, by a Church of England dominie, and living in wedlock, about the same moment that you were squalling your first post-birth squalls in this world."

"Yes, yes--go on," she urged nervously. "What was she like?"

"She was a resplendent, golden-brown, or tan-golden half-caste, a Polynesian queen whose mother had been a queen before her, whose father was an Oxford man, an English gentleman, and a real scholar. Her name was Nomare. She was Queen of Huahoa. She was barbaric. He was young enough to out-barbaric her. There was nothing sordid in their marriage. He was no penniless adventurer. She brought him her island kingdom and forty thousand subjects. He brought to that island his fortune--and it was no inconsiderable fortune. He built a palace that no South Sea island ever possessed before or will ever possess again. It was the real thing, grass-thatched, hand-hewn beams that were lashed with cocoanut sennit, and all the rest. It was rooted in the island; it sprouted out of the island; it belonged, although he fetched Hopkins out from New York to plan it.

"Heavens! they had their own royal yacht, their mountain house, their canoe house--the last a veritable palace in itself. I know. I have been at great feasts in it--though it was after their time. Nomare was dead, and no one knew where Graham was, and a king of collateral line was the ruler.

"I told you he out-barbaricked her. Their dinner service was gold.-- Oh, what's the use in telling any more. He was only a boy. She was half-English, half-Polynesian, and a really and truly queen. They were

flowers of their races. They were a pair of wonderful children. They lived a fairy tale. And... well, Ernestine, the years have passed, and Evan Graham has passed from the realm of the young thing. It will be a remarkable woman that will ever infatuate him now. Besides, he's practically broke. Though he didn't wastrel his money. As much misfortune, and more, than anything else."

"Paula would be more his kind," Ernestine said meditatively.

"Yes, indeed," Dick agreed. "Paula, or any woman as remarkable as Paula, would attract him a thousand times more than all the sweet, young, lovely things like you in the world. We oldsters have our standards, you know."

"And I'll have to put up with the youngsters," Ernestine sighed.

"In the meantime, yes," he chuckled. "Remembering, always, that you, too, in time, may grow into the remarkable, mature woman, who can outfoot a man like Evan in a foot-race of love for possession."

"But I shall be married long before that," she pouted.

"Which will be your good fortune, my dear. And, now, good night. And you are not angry with me?"

She smiled pathetically and shook her head, put up her lips to be

kissed, then said as they parted:

"I promise not to be angry if you will only show me the way that in the end will lead me to ancient graybeards like you and Graham."

Dick Forrest, turning off lights as he went, penetrated the library, and, while selecting half a dozen reference volumes on mechanics and physics, smiled as if pleased with himself at recollection of the interview with his sister-in-law. He was confident that he had spoken in time and not a moment too soon. But, half way up the book-concealed spiral staircase that led to his work room, a remark of Ernestine, echoing in his consciousness, made him stop from very suddenness to lean his shoulder against the wall.--"Paula would be more his kind."

"Silly ass!" he laughed aloud, continuing on his way. "And married a dozen years!"

Nor did he think again about it, until, in bed, on his sleeping porch, he took a glance at his barometers and thermometers, and prepared to settle down to the solution of the electrical speculation that had been puzzling him. Then it was, as he peered across the great court to his wife's dark wing and dark sleeping porch to see if she were still waking, that Ernestine's remark again echoed. He dismissed it with a "Silly ass!" of scorn, lighted a cigarette, and began running, with trained eye, the indexes of the books and marking the pages sought

with matches.