

## CHAPTER XV

It was long after ten in the morning, when Graham, straying about restlessly and wondering if Paula Forrest ever appeared before the middle of the day, wandered into the music room. Despite the fact that he was a several days' guest in the Big House, so big was it that the music room was new territory. It was an exquisite room, possibly thirty-five by sixty and rising to a lofty trussed ceiling where a warm golden light was diffused from a skylight of yellow glass. Red tones entered largely into the walls and furnishing, and the place, to him, seemed to hold the hush of music.

Graham was lazily contemplating a Keith with its inevitable triumph of sun-gloried atmosphere and twilight-shadowed sheep, when, from the tail of his eye, he saw his hostess come in from the far entrance. Again, the sight of her, that was a picture, gave him the little catch-breath of gasp. She was clad entirely in white, and looked very young and quite tall in the sweeping folds of a holoku of elaborate simplicity and apparent shapelessness. He knew the holoku in the home of its origin, where, on the lanais of Hawaii, it gave charm to a plain woman and double-folded the charm of a charming woman.

While they smiled greeting across the room, he was noting the set of

her body, the poise of head and frankness of eyes--all of which seemed articulate with a friendly, comradely, "Hello, friends." At least such was the form Graham's fancy took as she came toward him.

"You made a mistake with this room," he said gravely.

"No, don't say that! But how?"

"It should have been longer, much longer, twice as long at least."

"Why?" she demanded, with a disapproving shake of head, while he delighted in the girlish color in her cheeks that gave the lie to her thirty-eight years.

"Because, then," he answered, "you should have had to walk twice as far this morning and my pleasure of watching you would have been correspondingly increased. I've always insisted that the holoku is the most charming garment ever invented for women."

"Then it was my holoku and not I," she retorted. "I see you are like Dick--always with a string on your compliments, and lo, when we poor sillies start to nibble, back goes the compliment dragging at the end of the string."

"Now I want to show you the room," she hurried on, closing his disclaimer. "Dick gave me a free hand with it. It's all mine, you see,

even to its proportions."

"And the pictures?"

"I selected them," she nodded, "every one of them, and loved them onto the walls myself. Although Dick did quarrel with me over that Vereschagin. He agreed on the two Millets and the Corot over there, and on that Isabey; and even conceded that some Vereschagins might do in a music room, but not that particular Vereschagin. He's jealous for our local artists, you see. He wanted more of them, wanted to show his appreciation of home talent."

"I don't know your Pacific Coast men's work very well," Graham said. "Tell me about them. Show me that--Of course, that's a Keith, there; but whose is that next one? It's beautiful."

"A McComas--" she was answering; and Graham, with a pleasant satisfaction, was settling himself to a half-hour's talk on pictures, when Donald Ware entered with questing eyes that lighted up at sight of the Little Lady.

His violin was under his arm, and he crossed to the piano in a brisk, business-like way and proceeded to lay out music.

"We're going to work till lunch," Paula explained to Graham. "He swears I'm getting abominably rusty, and I think he's half right."

We'll see you at lunch. You can stay if you care, of course; but I warn you it's really going to be work. And we're going swimming this afternoon. Four o'clock at the tank, Dick says. Also, he says he's got a new song he's going to sing then.--What time is it, Mr. Ware?"

"Ten minutes to eleven," the musician answered briefly, with a touch of sharpness.

"You're ahead of time--the engagement was for eleven. And till eleven you'll have to wait, sir. I must run and see Dick, first. I haven't said good morning to him yet."

Well Paula knew her husband's hours. Scribbled secretly in the back of the note-book that lay always on the reading stand by her couch were hieroglyphic notes that reminded her that he had coffee at six-thirty; might possibly be caught in bed with proof-sheets or books till eight-forty-five, if not out riding; was inaccessible between nine and ten, dictating correspondence to Blake; was inaccessible between ten and eleven, conferring with managers and foremen, while Bonbright, the assistant secretary, took down, like any court reporter, every word uttered by all parties in the rapid-fire interviews.

At eleven, unless there were unexpected telegrams or business, she could usually count on finding Dick alone for a space, although invariably busy. Passing the secretaries' room, the click of a typewriter informed her that one obstacle was removed. In the library,

the sight of Mr. Bonbright hunting a book for Mr. Manson, the Shorthorn manager, told her that Dick's hour with his head men was over.

She pressed the button that swung aside a section of filled bookshelves and revealed the tiny spiral of steel steps that led up to Dick's work room. At the top, a similar pivoting section of shelves swung obediently to her press of button and let her noiselessly into his room. A shade of vexation passed across her face as she recognized Jeremy Braxton's voice. She paused in indecision, neither seeing nor being seen.

"If we flood we flood," the mine superintendent was saying. "It will cost a mint--yes, half a dozen mints--to pump out again. And it's a damned shame to drown the old Harvest that way."

"But for this last year the books show that we've worked at a positive loss," Paula heard Dick take up. "Every petty bandit from Huerta down to the last peon who's stolen a horse has gouged us. It's getting too stiff--taxes extraordinary--bandits, revolutionists, and federals. We could survive it, if only the end were in sight; but we have no guarantee that this disorder may not last a dozen or twenty years."

"Just the same, the old Harvest--think of flooding her!" the superintendent protested.

"And think of Villa," Dick replied, with a sharp laugh the bitterness of which did not escape Paula. "If he wins he says he's going to divide all the land among the peons. The next logical step will be the mines. How much do you think we've coughed up to the constitutionalists in the past twelvemonth?"

"Over a hundred and twenty thousand," Braxton answered promptly. "Not counting that fifty thousand cold bullion to Torenas before he retreated. He jumped his army at Guaymas and headed for Europe with it--I wrote you all that."

"If we keep the workings afloat, Jeremy, they'll go on gouging, gouge without end, Amen. I think we'd better flood. If we can make wealth more efficiently than those rascalions, let us show them that we can destroy wealth with the same facility."

"That's what I tell them. And they smile and repeat that such and such a free will offering, under exigent circumstances, would be very acceptable to the revolutionary chiefs--meaning themselves. The big chiefs never finger one peso in ten of it. Good Lord! I show them what we've done. Steady work for five thousand peons. Wages raised from ten centavos a day to a hundred and ten. I show them peons--ten-centavo men when we took them, and five-peso men when I showed them. And the same old smile and the same old itching palm, and the same old acceptability of a free will offering from us to the sacred cause of the revolution. By God! Old Diaz was a robber, but he was a decent

robber. I said to Arranzo: 'If we shut down, here's five thousand Mexicans out of a job--what'll you do with them?' And Arranzo smiled and answered me pat. 'Do with them?' he said. 'Why, put guns in their hands and march 'em down to take Mexico City.'"

In imagination Paula could see Dick's disgusted shrug of shoulders as she heard him say:

"The curse of it is--that the stuff is there, and that we're the only fellows that can get it out. The Mexicans can't do it. They haven't the brains. All they've got is the guns, and they're making us shell out more than we make. There's only one thing for us, Jeremy. We'll forget profits for a year or so, lay off the men, and just keep the engineer force on and the pumping going."

"I threw that into Arranzo," Jeremy Braxton's voice boomed. "And what was his comeback? That if we laid off the peons, he'd see to it that the engineers laid off, too, and the mine could flood and be damned to us.--No, he didn't say that last. He just smiled, but the smile meant the same thing. For two cents I'd a-wrung his yellow neck, except that there'd have been another patriot in his boots and in my office next day proposing a stiffer gouge.

"So Arranzo got his 'bit,' and, on top of it, before he went across to join the main bunch around Juarez, he let his men run off three hundred of our mules--thirty thousand dollars' worth of mule-flesh

right there, after I'd sweetened him, too. The yellow skunk!"

"Who is revolutionary chief in our diggings right now?" Paula heard her husband ask with one of his abrupt shifts that she knew of old time tokened his drawing together the many threads of a situation and proceeding to action.

"Raoul Bena."

"What's his rank?"

"Colonel--he's got about seventy ragamuffins."

"What did he do before he quit work?"

"Sheep-herder."

"Very well." Dick's utterance was quick and sharp. "You've got to play-act. Become a patriot. Hike back as fast as God will let you. Sweeten this Raoul Bena. He'll see through your play, or he's no Mexican. Sweeten him and tell him you'll make him a general---a second Villa."

"Lord, Lord, yes, but how?" Jeremy Braxton demanded.

"By putting him at the head of an army of five thousand. Lay off the



men. Make him make them volunteer. We're safe, because Huerta is doomed. Tell him you're a real patriot. Give each man a rifle. We'll stand that for a last gouge, and it will prove you a patriot. Promise every man his job back when the war is over. Let them and Raoul Bena depart with your blessing. Keep on the pumping force only. And if we cut out profits for a year or so, at the same time we are cutting down losses. And perhaps we won't have to flood old Harvest after all."

Paula smiled to herself at Dick's solution as she stole back down the spiral on her way to the music room. She was depressed, but not by the Harvest Group situation. Ever since her marriage there had always been trouble in the working of the Mexican mines Dick had inherited. Her depression was due to her having missed her morning greeting to him. But this depression vanished at meeting Graham, who had lingered with Ware at the piano and who, at her coming, was evidencing signs of departure.

"Don't run away," she urged. "Stay and witness a spectacle of industry that should nerve you up to starting on that book Dick has been telling me about."