

CHAPTER XVI

On Dick's face, at lunch, there was no sign of trouble over the Harvest Group; nor could anybody have guessed that Jeremy Braxton's visit had boded anything less gratifying than a report of unfailing earnings. Although Adolph Weil had gone on the early morning train, which advertised that the business which had brought him had been transacted with Dick at some unheard of hour, Graham discovered a greater company than ever at the table. Besides a Mrs. Tully, who seemed a stout and elderly society matron, and whom Graham could not make out, there were three new men, of whose identity he gleaned a little: a Mr. Gulhuss, State Veterinary; a Mr. Deacon, a portrait painter of evident note on the Coast; and a Captain Lester, then captain of a Pacific Mail liner, who had sailed skipper for Dick nearly twenty years before and who had helped Dick to his navigation.

The meal was at its close, and the superintendent was glancing at his watch, when Dick said:

"Jeremy, I want to show you what I've been up to. We'll go right now. You'll have time on your way to the train."

"Let us all go," Paula suggested, "and make a party of it. I'm dying to see it myself, Dick's been so obscure about it."

Sanctioned by Dick's nod, she was ordering machines and saddle horses the next moment.

"What is it?" Graham queried, when she had finished.

"Oh, one of Dick's stunts. He's always after something new. This is an invention. He swears it will revolutionize farming--that is, small farming. I have the general idea of it, but I haven't seen it set up yet. It was ready a week ago, but there was some delay about a cable or something concerning an adjustment."

"There's billions in it... if it works," Dick smiled over the table.

"Billions for the farmers of the world, and perhaps a trifle of royalty for me... if it works."

"But what is it?" O'Hay asked. "Music in the dairy barns to make the cows give down their milk more placidly?"

"Every farmer his own plowman while sitting on his front porch," Dick baffled back. "In fact, the labor-eliminating intermediate stage between soil production and sheer laboratory production of food. But wait till you see it. Gulhuss, this is where I kill my own business, if it works, for it will do away with the one horse of every ten-acre farmer between here and Jericho."

In ranch machines and on saddle animals, the company was taken a mile beyond the dairy center, where a level field was fenced squarely off and contained, as Dick announced, just precisely ten acres.

"Behold," he said, "the one-man and no-horse farm where the farmer sits on the porch. Please imagine the porch."

In the center of the field was a stout steel pole, at least twenty feet in height and guyed very low.

From a drum on top of the pole a thin wire cable ran to the extreme edge of the field and was attached to the steering lever of a small gasoline tractor. About the tractor two mechanics fluttered. At command from Dick they cranked the motor and started it on its way.

"This is the porch," Dick said. "Just imagine we're all that future farmer sitting in the shade and reading the morning paper while the manless, horseless plowing goes on."

Alone, unguided, the drum on the head of the pole in the center winding up the cable, the tractor, at the circumference permitted by the cable, turned a single furrow as it described a circle, or, rather, an inward trending spiral about the field.

"No horse, no driver, no plowman, nothing but the farmer to crank the tractor and start it on its way," Dick exulted, as the uncanny

mechanism turned up the brown soil and continued unguided, ever spiraling toward the field's center. "Plow, harrow, roll, seed, fertilize, cultivate, harvest--all from the front porch. And where the farmer can buy juice from a power company, all he, or his wife, will have to do is press the button, and he to his newspaper, and she to her pie-crust."

"All you need, now, to make it absolutely perfect," Graham praised, "is to square the circle."

"Yes," Mr. Gulhuss agreed. "As it is, a circle in a square field loses some acreage."

Graham's face advertised a mental arithmetic trance for a minute, when he announced: "Loses, roughly, three acres out of every ten."

"Sure," Dick concurred. "But the farmer has to have his front porch somewhere on his ten acres. And the front porch represents the house, the barn, the chicken yard and the various outbuildings. Very well. Let him get tradition out of his mind, and, instead of building these things in the center of his ten acres, let him build them on the three acres of fringe. And let him plant his fruit and shade trees and berry bushes on the fringe. When you come to consider it, the traditionary method of erecting the buildings in the center of a rectangular ten acres compels him to plow around the center in broken rectangles."

Gulhuss nodded enthusiastically. "Sure. And there's always the roadway from the center out to the county road or right of way. That breaks the efficiency of his plowing. Break ten acres into the consequent smaller rectangles, and it's expensive cultivation."

"Wish navigation was as automatic," was Captain Lester's contribution.

"Or portrait painting," laughed Rita Wainwright with a significant glance at Mr. Deacon.

"Or musical criticism," Lute remarked, with no glance at all, but with a pointedness of present company that brought from O'Hay:

"Or just being a charming young woman."

"What price for the outfit?" Jeremy Braxton asked.

"Right now, we could manufacture and lay down, at a proper profit, for five hundred. If the thing came into general use, with up to date, large-scale factory methods, three hundred. But say five hundred. And write off fifteen per cent, for interest and constant, it would cost the farmer seventy dollars a year. What ten-acre farmer, on two-hundred-dollar land, who keeps books, can keep a horse for seventy dollars a year? And on top of that, it would save him, in labor, personal or hired, at the abjectest minimum, two hundred dollars a year."

"But what guides it?" Rita asked.

"The drum on the post. The drum is graduated for the complete radius-- which took some tall figuring, I assure you--and the cable, winding around the drum and shortening, draws the tractor in toward the center."

"There are lots of objections to its general introduction, even among small farmers," Gulhuss said.

Dick nodded affirmation.

"Sure," he replied. "I have over forty noted down and classified. And I've as many more for the machine itself. If the thing is a success, it will take a long time to perfect it and introduce it."

Graham found himself divided between watching the circling tractor and casting glances at the picture Paula Forrest was on her mount. It was her first day on The Fawn, which was the Palomina mare Hennessy had trained for her. Graham smiled with secret approval of her femininity; for Paula, whether she had designed her habit for the mare, or had selected one most peculiarly appropriate, had achieved a triumph.

In place of a riding coat, for the afternoon was warm, she wore a tan linen blouse with white turnback collar. A short skirt, made like the

lower part of a riding coat, reached the knees, and from knees to entrancing little bespurred champagne boots tight riding trousers showed. Skirt and trousers were of fawn-colored silk corduroy. Soft white gauntlets on her hands matched with the collar in the one emphasis of color. Her head was bare, the hair done tight and low around her ears and nape of neck.

"I don't see how you can keep such a skin and expose yourself to the sun this way," Graham ventured, in mild criticism.

"I don't," she smiled with a dazzle of white teeth. "That is, I don't expose my face this way more than a few times a year. I'd like to, because I love the sun-gold burn in my hair; but I don't dare a thorough tanning."

The mare frisked, and a breeze of air blew back a flap of skirt, showing an articulate knee where the trouser leg narrowed tightly over it. Again Graham visioned the white round of knee pressed into the round muscles of the swimming Mountain Lad, as he noted the firm knee-grip on her pigskin English saddle, quite new and fawn-colored to match costume and horse.

When the magneto on the tractor went wrong, and the mechanics busied themselves with it in the midst of the partly plowed field, the company, under Paula's guidance, leaving Dick behind with his invention, resolved itself into a pilgrimage among the brood-centers

on the way to the swimming tank. Mr. Crellin, the hog-manager, showed them Lady Isleton, who, with her prodigious, fat, recent progeny of eleven, won various naïve encomiums, while Mr. Crellin warmly proclaimed at least four times, "And not a runt, not a runt, in the bunch."

Other glorious brood-sows, of Berkshire, Duroc-Jersey, and O. I. C. blood, they saw till they were wearied, and new-born kids and lambs, and rotund does and ewes. From center to center, Paula kept the telephones warning ahead of the party's coming, so that Mr. Manson waited to exhibit the great King Polo, and his broad-backed Shorthorn harem, and the Shorthorn harems of bulls that were only little less than King Polo in magnificence and record; and Parkman, the Jersey manager, was on hand, with staffed assistants, to parade Sensational Drake, Golden Jolly, Fontaine Royal, Oxford Master, and Karnak's Fairy Boy--blue ribbon bulls, all, and founders and scions of noble houses of butter-fat renown, and Rosaire Queen, Standby's Dam, Golden Jolly's Lass, Olga's Pride, and Gertie of Maitlands--equally blue-ribboned and blue-blooded Jersey matrons in the royal realm of butter-fat; and Mr. Mendenhall, who had charge of the Shires, proudly exhibited a string of mighty stallions, led by the mighty Mountain Lad, and a longer string of matrons, headed by the Fotherington Princess of the silver whinny. Even old Alden Bessie, the Princess's dam, retired to but part-day's work, he sent for that they might render due honor to so notable a dam.

As four o'clock approached, Donald Ware, not keen on swimming, returned in one of the machines to the Big House, and Mr. Gulhuss remained to discuss Shires with Mr. Mendenhall. Dick was at the tank when the party arrived, and the girls were immediately insistent for the new song.

"It isn't exactly a new song," Dick explained, his gray eyes twinkling roguery, "and it's not my song. It was sung in Japan before I was born, and, I doubt not, before Columbus discovered America. Also, it is a duet--a competitive duet with forfeit penalties attached. Paula will have to sing it with me.--I'll teach you. Sit down there, that's right.--Now all the rest of you gather around and sit down."

Still in her riding habit, Paula sat down on the concrete, facing her husband, in the center of the sitting audience. Under his direction, timing her movements to his, she slapped her hands on her knees, slapped her palms together, and slapped her palms against his palms much in the fashion of the nursery game of "Bean Porridge Hot." Then he sang the song, which was short and which she quickly picked up, singing it with him and clapping the accent. While the air of it was orientally catchy, it was chanted slowly, almost monotonously, but it was quickly provocative of excitement to the spectators:

Jong-Keena, Jong-Keena,
Jong-Jong, Keena-Keena,
Yo-ko-ham-a, Nag-a-sak-i,

Kobe-mar-o--hoy!!!"

The last syllable, hoy, was uttered suddenly, explosively, and an octave and more higher than the pitch of the melody. At the same moment that it was uttered, Paula's and Dick's hands were abruptly shot toward each other's, either clenched or open. The point of the game was that Paula's hands, open or closed, at the instant of uttering hoy, should match Dick's. Thus, the first time, she did match him, both his and her hands being closed, whereupon he took off his hat and tossed it into Lute's lap.

"My forfeit," he explained. "Come on, Paul, again." And again they sang and clapped:

"Jong-Keena, Jong-Keena,
Jong-Jong, Keena-Keena,
Yo-ko-ham-a, Nag-a-sak-i,
Kobe-mar-o--hoy!!!"

This time, with the hoy, her hands were closed and his were open.

"Forfeit!--forfeit!" the girls cried.

She looked her costume over with alarm, asking, "What can I give?"

"A hair pin," Dick advised; and one of her turtleshell hair pins joined his hat in Lute's lap.

"Bother it!" she exclaimed, when the last of her hair pins had gone the same way, she having failed seven times to Dick's once. "I can't see why I should be so slow and stupid. Besides, Dick, you're too clever. I never could out-guess you or out-anticipate you."

Again they sang the song. She lost, and, to Mrs. Tully's shocked "Paula!" she forfeited a spur and threatened a boot when the remaining spur should be gone. A winning streak of three compelled Dick to give up his wrist watch and both spurs. Then she lost her wrist watch and the remaining spur.

"Jong-Keena, Jong-Keena," they began again, while Mrs. Tully remonstrated, "Now, Paula, you simply must stop this.--Dick, you ought to be ashamed of yourself."

But Dick, emitting a triumphant "Hoy!" won, and joined in the laughter as Paula took off one of her little champagne boots and added it to the heap in Lute's lap.

"It's all right, Aunt Martha," Paula assured Mrs. Tully. "Mr. Ware's not here, and he's the only one who would be shocked.--Come on, Dick. You can't win every time."

"Jong-Keena, Jong-Keena," she chanted on with her husband. The repetition, at first slow, had accelerated steadily, so that now they fairly rippled through with it, while their slapping, striking palms made a continuous patter. The exercise and excitement had added to the sun's action on her skin, so that her laughing face was all a rosy glow.

Evan Graham, a silent spectator, was aware of hurt and indignity. He knew the "Jong-Keena" of old time from the geishas of the tea houses of Nippon, and, despite the unconventionality that ruled the Forrests and the Big House, he experienced shock in that Paula should take part in such a game. It did not enter his head at the moment that he would have been merely curious to see how far the madness would go had the player been Lute, or Ernestine, or Rita. Not till afterward did he realize that his concern and sense of outrage were due to the fact that the player was Paula, and that, therefore, she was bulking bigger in his imagination than he was conscious of. What he was conscious of at the moment was that he was growing angry and that he had deliberately to check himself from protesting.

By this time Dick's cigarette case and matches and Paula's second boot, belt, skirt-pin, and wedding ring had joined the mound of forfeits. Mrs. Tully, her face set in stoic resignation, was silent.

"Jong-Keena, Jong-Keena," Paula laughed and sang on, and Graham heard Ernestine laugh to Bert, "I don't see what she can spare next."

"Well, you know her," he heard Bert answer. "She's game once she gets started, and it certainly looks like she's started."

"Hoy!" Paula and Dick cried simultaneously, as they thrust out their hands.

But Dick's were closed, and hers were open. Graham watched her vainly quest her person for the consequent forfeit.

"Come on, Lady Godiva," Dick commanded. "You hae sung, you hae danced; now pay the piper."

"Was the man a fool?" was Graham's thought. "And a man with a wife like that."

"Well," Paula sighed, her fingers playing with the fastenings of her blouse, "if I must, I must."

Raging inwardly, Graham averted his gaze, and kept it averted. There was a pause, in which he knew everybody must be hanging on what she would do next. Then came a giggle from Ernestine, a burst of laughter from all, and, "A frame-up!" from Bert, that overcame Graham's resoluteness. He looked quickly. The Little Lady's blouse was off, and, from the waist up, she appeared in her swimming suit. It was evident that she had dressed over it for the ride.

"Come on, Lute--you next," Dick was challenging.

But Lute, not similarly prepared for Jong-Keena, blushingly led the retreat of the girls to the dressing rooms.

Graham watched Paula poise at the forty-foot top of the diving scaffold and swan-dive beautifully into the tank; heard Bert's admiring "Oh, you Annette Kellerman!" and, still chagrined by the trick that had threatened to outrage him, fell to wondering about the wonder woman, the Little Lady of the Big House, and how she had happened so wonderfully to be. As he fetched down the length of tank, under water, moving with leisurely strokes and with open eyes watching the shoaling bottom, it came to him that he did not know anything about her. She was Dick Forrest's wife. That was all he knew. How she had been born, how she had lived, how and where her past had been--of all this he knew nothing.

Ernestine had told him that Lute and she were half sisters of Paula. That was one bit of data, at any rate. (Warned by the increasing brightness of the bottom that he had nearly reached the end of the tank, and recognizing Dick's and Bert's legs intertwined in what must be a wrestling bout, Graham turned about, still under water, and swam back a score or so of feet.) There was that Mrs. Tully whom Paula had addressed as Aunt Martha. Was she truly an aunt? Or was she a courtesy Aunt through sisterhood with the mother of Lute and Ernestine?

He broke surface, was hailed by the others to join in bull-in-the-ring; in which strenuous sport, for the next half hour, he was compelled more than once to marvel at the liveness and agility, as well as strategy, of Paula in her successful efforts at escaping through the ring. Concluding the game through weariness, breathing hard, the entire party raced the length of the tank and crawled out to rest in the sunshine in a circle about Mrs. Tully.

Soon there was more fun afoot, and Paula was contending impossible things with Mrs. Tully.

"Now, Aunt Martha, just because you never learned to swim is no reason for you to take such a position. I am a real swimmer, and I tell you I can dive right into the tank here, and stay under for ten minutes."

"Nonsense, child," Mrs. Tully beamed. "Your father, when he was young, a great deal younger than you, my dear, could stay under water longer than any other man; and his record, as I know, was three minutes and forty seconds, as I very well know, for I held the watch myself and kept the time when he won against Harry Selby on a wager."

"Oh, I know my father was some man in his time," Paula swaggered; "but times have changed. If I had the old dear here right now, in all his youthful excellence, I'd drown him if he tried to stay under water with me. Ten minutes? Of course I can do ten minutes. And I will. You

hold the watch, Aunt Martha, and time me. Why, it's as easy as--"

"Shooting fish in a bucket," Dick completed for her.

Paula climbed to the platform above the springboard.

"Time me when I'm in the air," she said.

"Make your turn and a half," Dick called.

She nodded, smiled, and simulated a prodigious effort at filling her lungs to their utmost capacity. Graham watched enchanted. A diver himself, he had rarely seen the turn and a half attempted by women other than professionals. Her wet suit of light blue and green silk clung closely to her, showing the lines of her justly proportioned body. With what appeared to be an agonized gulp for the last cubic inch of air her lungs could contain, she sprang up, out, and down, her body vertical and stiff, her legs straight, her feet close together as they impacted on the springboard end. Flung into the air by the board, she doubled her body into a ball, made a complete revolution, then straightened out in perfect diver's form, and in a perfect dive, with scarcely a ripple, entered the water.

"A Toledo blade would have made more splash," was Graham's verdict.

"If only I could dive like that," Ernestine breathed her admiration.

"But I never shall. Dick says diving is a matter of timing, and that's why Paula does it so terribly well. She's got the sense of time--"

"And of abandon," Graham added.

"Of willed abandon," Dick qualified.

"Of relaxation by effort," Graham agreed. "I've never seen a professional do so perfect a turn and a half."

"And I'm prouder of it than she is," Dick proclaimed. "You see, I taught her, though I confess it was an easy task. She coordinates almost effortlessly. And that, along with her will and sense of time-- why her first attempt was better than fair."

"Paula is a remarkable woman," Mrs. Tully said proudly, her eyes fluttering between the second hand of the watch and the unbroken surface of the pool. "Women never swim so well as men. But she does.-- Three minutes and forty seconds! She's beaten her father!"

"But she won't stay under any five minutes, much less ten," Dick solemnly stated. "She'll burst her lungs first."

At four minutes, Mrs. Tully began to show excitement and to look anxiously from face to face. Captain Lester, not in the secret, scrambled to his feet with an oath and dived into the tank.

"Something has happened," Mrs. Tully said with controlled quietness.

"She hurt herself on that dive. Go in after her, you men."

But Graham and Bert and Dick, meeting under water, gleefully grinned and squeezed hands. Dick made signs for them to follow, and led the way through the dark-shadowed water into the crypt, where, treading water, they joined Paula in subdued whisperings and gigglings.

"Just came to make sure you were all right," Dick explained. "And now we've got to beat it.--You first, Bert. I'll follow Evan."

And, one by one, they went down through the dark water and came up on the surface of the pool. By this time Mrs. Tully was on her feet and standing by the edge of the tank.

"If I thought this was one of your tricks, Dick Forrest," she began.

But Dick, paying no attention, acting preternaturally calmly, was directing the men loudly enough for her to hear.

"We've got to make this systematic, fellows. You, Bert, and you, Evan, join with me. We start at this end, five feet apart, and search the bottom across. Then move along and repeat it back."

"Don't exert yourselves, gentlemen," Mrs. Tully called, beginning to

laugh. "As for you, Dick, you come right out. I want to box your ears."

"Take care of her, you girls," Dick shouted. "She's got hysterics."

"I haven't, but I will have," she laughed.

"But damn it all, madam, this is no laughing matter!" Captain Lester spluttered breathlessly, as he prepared for another trip to explore the bottom.

"Are you on, Aunt Martha, really and truly on?" Dick asked, after the valiant mariner had gone down.

Mrs. Tully nodded. "But keep it up, Dick, you've got one dupe. Elsie Coghlan's mother told me about it in Honolulu last year."

Not until eleven minutes had elapsed did the smiling face of Paula break the surface. Simulating exhaustion, she slowly crawled out and sank down panting near her aunt. Captain Lester, really exhausted by his strenuous exertions at rescue, studied Paula keenly, then marched to the nearest pillar and meekly bumped his head three times against the concrete.

"I'm afraid I didn't stay down ten minutes," Paula said. "But I wasn't much under that, was I, Aunt Martha?"

"You weren't much under at all," Mrs. Tully replied, "if it's my opinion you were asking. I'm surprised that you are even wet.--There, there, breathe naturally, child. The play-acting is unnecessary. I remember, when I was a young girl, traveling in India, there was a school of fakirs who leaped into deep wells and stayed down much longer than you, child, much longer indeed."

"You knew!" Paula charged.

"But you didn't know I did," her Aunt retorted. "And therefore your conduct was criminal. When you consider a woman of my age, with my heart--"

"And with your blessed, brass-tack head," Paula cried.

"For two apples I'd box your ears."

"And for one apple I'd hug you, wet as I am," Paula laughed back.

"Anyway, we did fool Captain Lester.--Didn't we, Captain?"

"Don't speak to me," that doughty mariner muttered darkly. "I'm busy with myself, meditating what form my vengeance shall take.--As for you, Mr. Dick Forrest, I'm divided between blowing up your dairy, or hamstringing Mountain Lad. Maybe I'll do both. In the meantime I am going out to kick that mare you ride."

Dick on The Outlaw, and Paula on The Fawn, rode back side by side to the Big House.

"How do you like Graham?" he asked.

"Splendid," was her reply. "He's your type, Dick. He's universal, like you, and he's got the same world-marks branded on him--the Seven Seas, the books, and all the rest. He's an artist, too, and pretty well all-around. And he's good fun. Have you noticed his smile? It's irresistible. It makes one want to smile with him."

"And he's got his serious scars, as well," Dick nodded concurrence.

"Yes--right in the corners of the eyes, just after he has smiled, you'll see them come. They're not tired marks exactly, but rather the old eternal questions: Why? What for? What's it worth? What's it all about?"

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And bringing up the rear of the cavalcade, Ernestine and Graham talked.

"Dick's deep," she was saying. "You don't know him any too well. He's dreadfully deep. I know him a little. Paula knows him a lot. But very

few others ever get under the surface of him. He's a real philosopher, and he has the control of a stoic or an Englishman, and he can play-act to fool the world."

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At the long hitching rails under the oaks, where the dismounting party gathered, Paula was in gales of laughter.

"Go on, go on," she urged Dick, "more, more."

"She's been accusing me of exhausting my vocabulary in naming the house-boys by my system," he explained.

"And he's given me at least forty more names in a minute and a half.--
Go on, Dick, more."

"Then," he said, striking a chant, "we can have Oh Sin and Oh Pshaw, Oh Sing and Oh Song, Oh Sung and Oh Sang, Oh Last and Oh Least, Oh Ping and Oh Pong, Oh Some, Oh More, and Oh Most, Oh Naught and Oh Nit..."

And Dick jingled away into the house still chanting his extemporized directory.