

CHAPTER XVII

A week of dissatisfaction and restlessness ensued for Graham. Tom between belief that his business was to leave the Big House on the first train, and desire to see, and see more of Paula, to be with her, and to be more with her--he succeeded in neither leaving nor in seeing as much of her as during the first days of his visit.

At first, and for the five days that he lingered, the young violinist monopolized nearly her entire time of visibility. Often Graham strayed into the music room, and, quite neglected by the pair, sat for moody half-hours listening to their "work." They were oblivious of his presence, either flushed and absorbed with the passion of their music, or wiping their foreheads and chatting and laughing companionably in pauses to rest. That the young musician loved her with an ardency that was almost painful, was patent to Graham; but what hurt him was the abandon of devotion with which she sometimes looked at Ware after he had done something exceptionally fine. In vain Graham tried to tell himself that all this was mental on her part--purely delighted appreciation of the other's artistry. Nevertheless, being man, it hurt, and continued to hurt, until he could no longer suffer himself to remain.

Once, chancing into the room at the end of a Schumann song and just

after Ware had departed, Graham found Paula still seated at the piano, an expression of rapt dreaming on her face. She regarded him almost unrecognizingly, gathered herself mechanically together, uttered an absent-minded commonplace or so, and left the room. Despite his vexation and hurt, Graham tried to think it mere artist-dreaming on her part, a listening to the echo of the just-played music in her soul. But women were curious creatures, he could not help moralizing, and were prone to lose their hearts most strangely and inconsequentially. Might it not be that by his very music this youngster of a man was charming the woman of her?

With the departure of Ware, Paula Forrest retired almost completely into her private wing behind the door without a knob. Nor did this seem unusual, Graham gleaned from the household.

"Paula is a woman who finds herself very good company," Ernestine explained, "and she often goes in for periods of aloneness, when Dick is the only person who sees her."

"Which is not flattering to the rest of the company," Graham smiled.

"Which makes her such good company whenever she is in company," Ernestine retorted.

The driftage through the Big House was decreasing. A few guests, on business or friendship, continued to come, but more departed. Under Oh

Joy and his Chinese staff the Big House ran so frictionlessly and so perfectly, that entertainment of guests seemed little part of the host's duties. The guests largely entertained themselves and one another.

Dick rarely appeared, even for a moment, until lunch, and Paula, now carrying out her seclusion program, never appeared before dinner.

"Rest cure," Dick laughed one noon, and challenged Graham to a tournament with boxing gloves, single-sticks, and foils.

"And now's the time," he told Graham, as they breathed between bouts, "for you to tackle your book. I'm only one of the many who are looking forward to reading it, and I'm looking forward hard. Got a letter from Havelly yesterday--he mentioned it, and wondered how far along you were."

So Graham, in his tower room, arranged his notes and photographs, schemed out the work, and plunged into the opening chapters. So immersed did he become that his nascent interest in Paula might have languished, had it not been for meeting her each evening at dinner. Then, too, until Ernestine and Lute left for Santa Barbara, there were afternoon swims and rides and motor trips to the pastures of the Miramar Hills and the upland ranges of the Anselmo Mountains. Other trips they made, sometimes accompanied by Dick, to his great dredgers working in the Sacramento basin, or his dam-building on the Little

Coyote and Los Cuatos creeks, or to his five-thousand-acre colony of twenty-acre farmers, where he was trying to enable two hundred and fifty heads of families, along with their families, to make good on the soil.

That Paula sometimes went for long solitary rides, Graham knew, and, once, he caught her dismounting from the Fawn at the hitching rails.

"Don't you think you are spoiling that mare for riding in company?" he twitted.

Paula laughed and shook her head.

"Well, then," he asserted stoutly, "I'm spoiling for a ride with you."

"There's Lute, and Ernestine, and Bert, and all the rest."

"This is new country," he contended. "And one learns country through the people who know it. I've seen it through the eyes of Lute, and Ernestine and all the rest; but there is a lot I haven't seen and which I can see only through your eyes."

"A pleasant theory," she evaded. "A--a sort of landscape vampirism."

"But without the ill effects of vampirism," he urged quickly.

Her answer was slow in coming. Her look into his eyes was frank and straight, and he could guess her words were weighed and gauged.

"I don't know about that," was all she said finally; but his fancy leaped at the several words, ranging and conjecturing their possible connotations.

"But we have so much we might be saying to each other," he tried again. "So much we... ought to be saying to each other."

"So I apprehend," she answered quietly; and again that frank, straight look accompanied her speech.

So she did apprehend--the thought of it was flame to him, but his tongue was not quick enough to serve him to escape the cool, provoking laugh as she turned into the house.

Still the company of the Big House thinned. Paula's aunt, Mrs. Tully, much to Graham's disappointment (for he had expected to learn from her much that he wanted to know of Paula), had gone after only a several days' stay. There was vague talk of her return for a longer stay; but, just back from Europe, she declared herself burdened with a round of duty visits which must be performed before her pleasure visiting began.

O'Hay, the critic, had been compelled to linger several days in order to live down the disastrous culmination of the musical raid made upon him by the philosophers. The idea and the trick had been Dick's. Combat had joined early in the evening, when a seeming chance remark of Ernestine had enabled Aaron Hancock to fling the first bomb into the thick of O'Hay's deepest convictions. Dar Hyal, a willing and eager ally, had charged around the flank with his blastic theory of music and taken O'Hay in reverse. And the battle had raged until the hot-headed Irishman, beside himself with the grueling the pair of skilled logomachists were giving him, accepted with huge relief the kindly invitation of Terrence McFane to retire with him to the tranquillity and repose of the stag room, where, over a soothing highball and far from the barbarians, the two of them could have a heart to heart talk on real music. At two in the morning, wild-eyed and befuddled, O'Hay had been led to bed by the upright-walking and unshakably steady Terrence.

"Never mind," Ernestine had told O'Hay later, with a twinkle in her eye that made him guess the plot. "It was only to be expected. Those rattle-brained philosophers would drive even a saint to drink."

"I thought you were safe in Terrence's hands," had been Dick's mock apology. "A pair of Irishmen, you know. I'd forgot Terrence was case-hardened. Do you know, after he said good night to you, he came up to me for a yarn. And he was steady as a rock. He mentioned casually of having had several sips, so I... I... never dreamed ... er... that he

had indisposed you."

When Lute and Ernestine departed for Santa Barbara, Bert Wainwright and his sister remembered their long-neglected home in Sacramento. A pair of painters, proteges of Paula, arrived the same day. But they were little in evidence, spending long days in the hills with a trap and driver and smoking long pipes in the stag room.

The free and easy life of the Big House went on in its frictionless way. Dick worked. Graham worked. Paula maintained her seclusion. The sages from the madrono grove strayed in for wordy dinners--and wordy evenings, except when Paula played for them. Automobile parties, from Sacramento, Wickenburg, and other valley towns, continued to drop in unexpectedly, but never to the confusion of Oh Joy and the house boys, whom Graham saw, on occasion, with twenty minutes' warning, seat a score of unexpected guests to a perfect dinner. And there were even nights--rare ones--when only Dick and Graham and Paula sat at dinner, and when, afterward, the two men yarned for an hour before an early bed, while she played soft things to herself or disappeared earlier than they.

But one moonlight evening, when the Watsons and Masons and Wombolds arrived in force, Graham found himself out, when every bridge table was made up. Paula was at the piano. As he approached he caught the quick expression of pleasure in her eyes at sight of him, which as quickly vanished. She made a slight movement as if to rise, which did

not escape his notice any more than did her quiet mastery of the impulse that left her seated.

She was immediately herself as he had always seen her--although it was little enough he had seen of her, he thought, as he talked whatever came into his head, and rummaged among her songs with her. Now one and now another song he tried with her, subduing his high baritone to her light soprano with such success as to win cries of more from the bridge players.

"Yes, I am positively aching to be out again over the world with Dick," she told him in a pause. "If we could only start to-morrow! But Dick can't start yet. He's in too deep with too many experiments and adventures on the ranch here. Why, what do you think he's up to now? As if he did not have enough on his hands, he's going to revolutionize the sales end, or, at least, the California and Pacific Coast portion of it, by making the buyers come to the ranch."

"But they do do that," Graham said. "The first man I met here was a buyer from Idaho."

"Oh, but Dick means as an institution, you know--to make them come en masse at a stated time. Not simple auction sales, either, though he says he will bait them with a bit of that to excite interest.

It will be an annual fair, to last three days, in which he will be the only exhibitor. He's spending half his mornings now in conference with

Mr. Agar and Mr. Pitts. Mr. Agar is his sales manager, and Mr. Pitts his showman."

She sighed and rippled her fingers along the keyboard.

"But, oh, if only we could get away--Timbuctoo, Mokpo, or Jericho."

"Don't tell me you've ever been to Mokpo," Graham laughed.

She nodded. "Cross my heart, solemnly, hope to die. It was with Dick in the All Away and in the long ago. It might almost be said we honeymooned in Mokpo."

And while Graham exchanged reminiscences of Mokpo with her, he cudgeled his brain to try and decide whether her continual reference to her husband was deliberate.

"I should imagine you found it such a paradise here," he was saying.

"I do, I do," she assured him with what seemed unnecessary vehemence.

"But I don't know what's come over me lately. I feel it imperative to be up and away. The spring fret, I suppose; the Red Gods and their medicine. And if only Dick didn't insist on working his head off and getting tied down with projects! Do you know, in all the years of our marriage, the only really serious rival I have ever had has been this ranch. He's pretty faithful, and the ranch is his first love.

He had it all planned and started before he ever met me or knew I existed."

"Here, let us try this together," Graham said abruptly, placing the song on the rack before her.

"Oh, but it's the 'Gypsy Trail,'" she protested. "It will only make my mood worse." And she hummed:

"Follow the Romany patteran
West to the sinking sun,
Till the junk sails lift through the homeless drift,
And the East and the West are one.'

"What is the Romany patteran?" she broke off to ask. "I've always thought of it as patter, or patois, the Gypsy patois, and somehow it strikes me as absurd to follow a language over the world--a sort of philological excursion."

"In a way the patteran is speech," he answered. "But it always says one thing: 'This way I have passed.' Two sprigs, crossed in certain ways and left upon the trail, compose the patteran. But they must always be of different trees or shrubs. Thus, on the ranch here, a patteran could be made of manzanita and madrono, of oak and spruce, of buckeye and alder, of redwood and laurel, of huckleberry and lilac. It is a sign of Gypsy comrade to Gypsy comrade, of Gypsy lover to Gypsy

lover." And he hummed:

"Back to the road again, again,
Out of a clear sea track;
Follow the cross of the Gypsy trail,
Over the world and back."

She nodded comprehension, looked for a moment with troubled eyes down the long room to the card-players, caught herself in her momentary absentness, and said quickly:

"Heaven knows there's a lot of Gypsy in some of us. I have more than full share. In spite of his bucolic proclivities, Dick is a born Gypsy. And from what he has told of you, you are hopelessly one."

"After all, the white man is the real Gypsy, the king Gypsy," Graham propounded. "He has wandered wider, wilder, and with less equipment, than any Gypsy. The Gypsy has followed in his trails, but never made trail for him.--Come; let us try it."

And as they sang the reckless words to their merry, careless lilt, he looked down at her and wondered--wondered at her--at himself. This was no place for him by this woman's side, under her husband's roof-tree. Yet here he was, and he should have gone days before. After the years he was just getting acquainted with himself. This was enchantment, madness. He should tear himself away at once. He had

known enchantments and madresses before, and had torn himself away. Had he softened with the years? he questioned himself. Or was this a profounder madness than he had experienced? This meant the violation of dear things--things so dear, so jealously cherished and guarded in his secret life, that never yet had they suffered violation.

And still he did not tear himself away. He stood there beside her, looking down on her brown crown of hair glinting gold and bronze and bewitchingly curling into tendrils above her ears, singing a song that was fire to him--that must be fire to her, she being what she was and feeling what she had already, in flashes, half-unwittingly, hinted to him.

She is a witch, and her voice is not the least of her witchery, he thought, as her voice, so richly a woman's voice, so essentially her voice in contradistinction to all women's voices in the world, sang and throbbed in his ear. And he knew, beyond shade of doubt, that she felt some touch of this madness that afflicted him; that she sensed, as he sensed, that the man and the woman were met.

They thrilled together as they sang, and the thought and the sure knowledge of it added fuel to his own madness till his voice warmed unconsciously to the daring of the last lines, as, voices and thrills blending, they sang:

"The wild hawk to the wind-swept sky,

The deer to the wholesome wold,
And the heart of a man to the heart of a maid
As it was in the days of old--
The heart of a man to the heart of a maid,
Light of my tents be fleet,
Morning waits at the end of the world,
And the world is all at our feet."

He looked for her to look up as the last notes died away, but she remained quiet a moment, her eyes bent on the keys. And then the face that was turned to his was the face of the Little Lady of the Big House, the mouth smiling mischievously, the eyes filled with roguery, as she said:

"Let us go and devil Dick--he's losing. I've never seen him lose his temper at cards, but he gets ridiculously blue after a long siege of losing.

"And he does love gambling," she continued, as she led the way to the tables. "It's one of his modes of relaxing. It does him good. About once or twice a year, if it's a good poker game, he'll sit in all night to it and play to the blue sky if they take off the limit."