

CHAPTER XIX

After Mrs. Tully's departure, Paula, true to her threat, filled the house with guests. She seemed to have remembered all who had been waiting an invitation, and the limousine that met the trains eight miles away was rarely empty coming or going. There were more singers and musicians and artist folk, and beves of young girls with their inevitable followings of young men, while mammas and aunts and chaperons seemed to clutter all the ways of the Big House and to fill a couple of motor cars when picnics took place.

And Graham wondered if this surrounding of herself by many people was not deliberate on Paula's part. As for himself, he definitely abandoned work on his book, and joined in the before-breakfast swims of the hardier younger folk, in the morning rides over the ranch, and in whatever fun was afoot indoors and out.

Late hours and early were kept; and one night, Dick, who adhered to his routine and never appeared to his guests before midday, made a night of it at poker in the stag-room. Graham had sat in, and felt well repaid when, at dawn, the players received an unexpected visit from Paula--herself past one of her white nights, she said, although no sign of it showed on her fresh skin and color. Graham had to struggle to keep his eyes from straying too frequently to her as she

mixed golden fizzes to rejuvenate the wan-eyed, jaded players. Then she made them start the round of "jacks" that closed the game, and sent them off for a cold swim before breakfast and the day's work or frolic.

Never was Paula alone. Graham could only join in the groups that were always about her. Although the young people ragged and tangoed incessantly, she rarely danced, and then it was with the young men. Once, however, she favored him with an old-fashioned waltz. "Your ancestors in an antediluvian dance," she mocked the young people, as she stepped out; for she and Graham had the floor to themselves.

Once down the length of the room, the two were in full accord. Paula, with the sympathy Graham recognized that made her the exceptional accompanist or rider, subdued herself to the masterful art of the man, until the two were as parts of a sentient machine that operated without jar or friction. After several minutes, finding their perfect mutual step and pace, and Graham feeling the absolute giving of Paula to the dance, they essayed rhythmical pauses and dips, their feet never leaving the floor, yet affecting the onlookers in the way Dick voiced it when he cried out: "They float! They float!" The music was the "Waltz of Salomé," and with its slow-fading end they postured slower and slower to a perfect close.

There was no need to speak. In silence, without a glance at each other, they returned to the company where Dick was proclaiming:

"Well, younglings, codlings, and other fry, that's the way we old folks used to dance. I'm not saying anything against the new dances, mind you. They're all right and dandy fine. But just the same it wouldn't injure you much to learn to waltz properly. The way you waltz, when you do attempt it, is a scream. We old folks do know a thing or two that is worth while."

"For instance?" queried one of the girls.

"I'll tell you. I don't mind the young generation smelling of gasoline the way it does--"

Cries and protests drowned Dick out for a moment.

"I know I smell of it myself," he went on. "But you've all failed to learn the good old modes of locomotion. There isn't a girl of you that Paula can't walk into the ground. There isn't a fellow of you that Graham and I can't walk into a receiving hospital.--Oh, I know you can all crank engines and shift gears to the queen's taste. But there isn't one of you that can properly ride a horse--a real horse, in the only way, I mean. As for driving a smart pair of roadsters, it's a screech. And how many of you husky lads, hell-scooting on the bay in your speed-boats, can take the wheel of an old-time sloop or schooner, without an auxiliary, and get out of your own way in her?"

"But we get there just the same," the same girl retorted.

"And I don't deny it," Dick answered. "But you are not always pretty. I'll tell you a pretty sight that no one of you can ever present-- Paula, there, with the reins of four slashing horses in her hands, her foot on the brake, swinging tally-ho along a mountain road."

On a warm morning, in the cool arcade of the great patio, a chance group of four or five, among whom was Paula, formed about Graham, who had been reading alone. After a time he returned to his magazine with such absorption that he forgot those about him until an awareness of silence penetrated to his consciousness. He looked up. All the others save Paula had strayed off. He could hear their distant laughter from across the patio. But Paula! He surprised the look on her face, in her eyes. It was a look bent on him, concerning him. Doubt, speculation, almost fear, were in her eyes; and yet, in that swift instant, he had time to note that it was a look deep and searching--almost, his quick fancy prompted, the look of one peering into the just-opened book of fate. Her eyes fluttered and fell, and the color increased in her cheeks in an unmistakable blush. Twice her lips moved to the verge of speech; yet, caught so arrantly in the act, she was unable to phrase any passing thought. Graham saved the painful situation by saying casually:

"Do you know, I've just been reading De Vries' eulogy of Luther Burbank's work, and it seems to me that Dick is to the domestic animal

world what Burbank is to the domestic vegetable world. You are life-makers here--thumbing the stuff into new forms of utility and beauty."

Paula, by this time herself again, laughed and accepted the compliment.

"I fear me," Graham continued with easy seriousness, "as I watch your achievements, that I can only look back on a misspent life. Why didn't I get in and make things? I'm horribly envious of both of you."

"We are responsible for a dreadful lot of creatures being born," she said. "It makes one breathless to think of the responsibility."

"The ranch certainly spells fecundity," Graham smiled. "I never before was so impressed with the flowering and fruiting of life. Everything here prospers and multiplies--"

"Oh!" Paula cried, breaking in with a sudden thought. "Some day I'll show you my goldfish. I breed them, too--yea, and commercially. I supply the San Francisco dealers with their rarest strains, and I even ship to New York. And, best of all, I actually make money--profits, I mean. Dick's books show it, and he is the most rigid of bookkeepers. There isn't a tack-hammer on the place that isn't inventoried; nor a horse-shoe nail unaccounted for. That's why he has such a staff of bookkeepers. Why, do you know, calculating every last least item of

expense, including average loss of time for colic and lameness, out of fearfully endless columns of figures he has worked the cost of an hour's labor for a draught horse to the third decimal place."

"But your goldfish," Graham suggested, irritated by her constant dwelling on her husband.

"Well, Dick makes his bookkeepers keep track of my goldfish in the same way. I'm charged every hour of any of the ranch or house labor I use on the fish--postage stamps and stationery, too, if you please. I have to pay interest on the plant. He even charges me for the water, just as if he were a city water company and I a householder. And still I net ten per cent., and have netted as high as thirty. But Dick laughs and says when I've deducted the wages of superintendence--my superintendence, he means--that I'll find I am poorly paid or else am operating at a loss; that with my net I couldn't hire so capable a superintendent.

"Just the same, that's why Dick succeeds in his undertakings. Unless it's sheer experiment, he never does anything without knowing precisely, to the last microscopic detail, what it is he is doing."

"He is very sure," Graham observed.

"I never knew a man to be so sure of himself," Paula replied warmly; "and I never knew a man with half the warrant. I know him. He is a

genius--but only in the most paradoxical sense. He is a genius because he is so balanced and normal that he hasn't the slightest particle of genius in him. Such men are rarer and greater than geniuses. I like to think of Abraham Lincoln as such a type."

"I must admit I don't quite get you," Graham said.

"Oh, I don't dare to say that Dick is as good, as cosmically good, as Lincoln," she hurried on. "Dick is good, but it is not that. It is in their excessive balance, normality, lack of flare, that they are of the same type. Now I am a genius. For, see, I do things without knowing how I do them. I just do them. I get effects in my music that way. Take my diving. To save my life I couldn't tell how I swan-dive, or jump, or do the turn and a half.

"Dick, on the other hand, can't do anything unless he clearly knows in advance how he is going to do it. He does everything with balance and foresight. He's a general, all-around wonder, without ever having been a particular wonder at any one thing.--Oh, I know him. He's never been a champion or a record-breaker in any line of athletics. Nor has he been mediocre in any line. And so with everything else, mentally, intellectually. He is an evenly forged chain. He has no massive links, no weak links."

"I'm afraid I'm like you," Graham said, "that commoner and lesser creature, a genius. For I, too, on occasion, flare and do the most

unintentional things. And I am not above falling on my knees before mystery."

"And Dick hates mystery--or it would seem he does. Not content with knowing how--he is eternally seeking the why of the how. Mystery is a challenge to him. It excites him like a red rag does a bull. At once he is for ripping the husks and the heart from mystery, so that he will know the how and the why, when it will be no longer mystery but a generalization and a scientifically demonstrable fact."

Much of the growing situation was veiled to the three figures of it. Graham did not know of Paula's desperate efforts to cling close to her husband, who, himself desperately busy with his thousand plans and projects, was seeing less and less of his company. He always appeared at lunch, but it was a rare afternoon when he could go out with his guests. Paula did know, from the multiplicity of long, code telegrams from Mexico, that things were in a parlous state with the Harvest Group. Also, she saw the agents and emissaries of foreign investors in Mexico, always in haste and often inopportune, arriving at the ranch to confer with Dick. Beyond his complaint that they ate the heart out of his time, he gave her no clew to the matters discussed.

"My! I wish you weren't so busy," she sighed in his arms, on his knees, one fortunate morning, when, at eleven o'clock, she had caught him alone.

It was true, she had interrupted the dictation of a letter into the phonograph; and the sigh had been evoked by the warning cough of Bonbright, whom she saw entering with more telegrams in his hand.

"Won't you let me drive you this afternoon, behind Duddy and Fuddy, just you and me, and cut the crowd?" she begged.

He shook his head and smiled.

"You'll meet at lunch a weird combination," he explained. "Nobody else needs to know, but I'll tell you." He lowered his voice, while Bonbright discreetly occupied himself at the filing cabinets. "They're Tampico oil folk. Samuels himself, President of the Nacisco; and Wishaar, the big inside man of the Pearson-Brooks crowd--the chap that engineered the purchase of the East Coast railroad and the Tiwana Central when they tried to put the Nacisco out of business; and Matthewson--he's the hi-yu-skookum big chief this side the Atlantic of the Palmerston interests--you know, the English crowd that fought the Nacisco and the Pearson-Brooks bunch so hard; and, oh, there'll be several others. It shows you that things are rickety down Mexico way when such a bunch stops scrapping and gets together.

"You see, they are oil, and I'm important in my way down there, and they want me to swing the mining interests in with the oil. Truly, big things are in the air, and we've got to hang together and do something

or get out of Mexico. And I'll admit, after they gave me the turn-down in the trouble three years ago, that I've sulked in my tent and made them come to see me."

He caressed her and called her his armful of dearest woman, although she detected his eye roving impatiently to the phonograph with its unfinished letter.

"And so," he concluded, with a pressure of his arms about her that seemed to hint that her moment with him was over and she must go, "that means the afternoon. None will stop over. And they'll be off and away before dinner."

She slipped off his knees and out of his arms with unusual abruptness, and stood straight up before him, her eyes flashing, her cheeks white, her face set with determination, as if about to say something of grave importance. But a bell tinkled softly, and he reached for the desk telephone.

Paula drooped, and sighed inaudibly, and, as she went down the room and out the door, and as Bonbright stepped eagerly forward with the telegrams, she could hear the beginning of her husband's conversation:

"No. It is impossible. He's got to come through, or I'll put him out of business. That gentleman's agreement is all poppycock. If it were only that, of course he could break it. But I've got some mighty

interesting correspondence that he's forgotten about.... Yes, yes; it will clinch it in any court of law. I'll have the file in your office by five this afternoon. And tell him, for me, that if he tries to put through this trick, I'll break him. I'll put a competing line on, and his steamboats will be in the receiver's hands inside a year.... And... hello, are you there?... And just look up that point I suggested. I am rather convinced you'll find the Interstate Commerce has got him on two counts...."

Nor did Graham, nor even Paula, imagine that Dick--the keen one, the deep one, who could see and sense things yet to occur and out of intangible nuances and glimmerings build shrewd speculations and hypotheses that subsequent events often proved correct--was already sensing what had not happened but what might happen. He had not heard Paula's brief significant words at the hitching post; nor had he seen Graham catch her in that deep scrutiny of him under the arcade. Dick had heard nothing, seen little, but sensed much; and, even in advance of Paula, had he apprehended in vague ways what she afterward had come to apprehend.

The most tangible thing he had to build on was the night, immersed in bridge, when he had not been unaware of the abrupt leaving of the piano after the singing of the "Gypsy Trail"; nor when, in careless smiling greeting of them when they came down the room to devil him over his losing, had he failed to receive a hint or feeling of something unusual in Paula's roguish teasing face. On the moment,

laughing retorts, giving as good as she sent, Dick's own laughing eyes had swept over Graham beside her and likewise detected the unusual. The man was overstrung, had been Dick's mental note at the time. But why should he be overstrung? Was there any connection between his overstrungness and the sudden desertion by Paula of the piano? And all the while these questions were slipping through his thoughts, he had laughed at their sallies, dealt, sorted his hand, and won the bid on no trumps.

Yet to himself he had continued to discount as absurd and preposterous the possibility of his vague apprehension ever being realized. It was a chance guess, a silly speculation, based upon the most trivial data, he sagely concluded. It merely connoted the attractiveness of his wife and of his friend. But--and on occasional moments he could not will the thought from coming uppermost in his mind--why had they broken off from singing that evening? Why had he received the feeling that there was something unusual about it? Why had Graham been overstrung?

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Nor did Bonbright, one morning, taking dictation of a telegram in the last hour before noon, know that Dick's casual sauntering to the window, still dictating, had been caused by the faint sound of hoofs on the driveway. It was not the first of recent mornings that Dick had so sauntered to the window, to glance out with apparent absentness at the rush of the morning riding party in the last dash home to the

hitching rails. But he knew, on this morning, before the first figures came in sight whose those figures would be.

"Braxton is safe," he went on with the dictation without change of tone, his eyes on the road where the riders must first come into view. "If things break he can get out across the mountains into Arizona. See Connors immediately. Braxton left Connors complete instructions. Connors to-morrow in Washington. Give me fullest details any move--signed."

Up the driveway the Fawn and Altadena clattered neck and neck. Dick had not been disappointed in the figures he expected to see. From the rear, cries and laughter and the sound of many hoofs tokened that the rest of the party was close behind.

"And the next one, Mr. Bonbright, please put in the Harvest code," Dick went on steadily, while to himself he was commenting that Graham was a passable rider but not an excellent one, and that it would have to be seen to that he was given a heavier horse than Altadena. "It is to Jeremy Braxton. Send it both ways. There is a chance one or the other may get through..."