

## CHAPTER XX

Once again the tide of guests ebbed from the Big House, and more than one lunch and dinner found only the two men and Paula at the table. On such evenings, while Graham and Dick yarned for their hour before bed, Paula no longer played soft things to herself at the piano, but sat with them doing fine embroidery and listening to the talk.

Both men had much in common, had lived life in somewhat similar ways, and regarded life from the same angles. Their philosophy was harsh rather than sentimental, and both were realists. Paula made a practice of calling them the pair of "Brass Tacks."

"Oh, yes," she laughed to them, "I understand your attitude. You are successes, the pair of you--physical successes, I mean. You have health. You are resistant. You can stand things. You have survived where men less resistant have gone down. You pull through African fevers and bury the other fellows. This poor chap gets pneumonia in Cripple Creek and cashes in before you can get him to sea level. Now why didn't you get pneumonia? Because you were more deserving? Because you had lived more virtuously? Because you were more careful of risks and took more precautions?"

She shook her head.

"No. Because you were luckier--I mean by birth, by possession of constitution and stamina. Why, Dick buried his three mates and two engineers at Guayaquil. Yellow fever. Why didn't the yellow fever germ, or whatever it is, kill Dick? And the same with you, Mr. Broad-shouldered Deep-chested Graham. In this last trip of yours, why didn't you die in the swamps instead of your photographer? Come. Confess. How heavy was he? How broad were his shoulders? How deep his chest?--wide his nostrils?--tough his resistance?"

"He weighed a hundred and thirty-five," Graham admitted ruefully. "But he looked all right and fit at the start. I think I was more surprised than he when he turned up his toes." Graham shook his head. "It wasn't because he was a light weight and small. The small men are usually the toughest, other things being equal. But you've put your finger on the reason just the same. He didn't have the physical stamina, the resistance,--You know what I mean, Dick?"

"In a way it's like the quality of muscle and heart that enables some prizefighters to go the distance--twenty, thirty, forty rounds, say," Dick concurred. "Right now, in San Francisco, there are several hundred youngsters dreaming of success in the ring. I've watched them trying out. All look good, fine-bodied, healthy, fit as fiddles, and young. And their spirits are most willing. And not one in ten of them can last ten rounds. I don't mean they get knocked out. I mean they blow up. Their muscles and their hearts are not made out of first-

grade fiber. They simply are not made to move at high speed and tension for ten rounds. And some of them blow up in four or five rounds. And not one in forty can go the twenty-round route, give and take, hammer and tongs, one minute of rest to three of fight, for a full hour of fighting. And the lad who can last forty rounds is one in ten thousand--lads like Nelson, Gans, and Wolgast.

"You understand the point I am making," Paula took up. "Here are the pair of you. Neither will see forty again. You're a pair of hard-bitten sinners. You've gone through hardship and exposure that dropped others all along the way. You've had your fun and folly. You've roughed and rowdied over the world--"

"Played the wild ass," Graham laughed in.

"And drunk deep," Paula added. "Why, even alcohol hasn't burned you. You were too tough. You put the other fellows under the table, or into the hospital or the grave, and went your gorgeous way, a song on your lips, with tissues uncorroded, and without even the morning-after headache. And the point is that you are successes. Your muscles are blond-beast muscles, your vital organs are blond-beast organs. And from all this emanates your blond-beast philosophy. That's why you are brass tacks, and preach realism, and practice realism, shouldering and shoving and walking over lesser and unluckier creatures, who don't dare talk back, who, like Dick's prizefighting boys, would blow up in the first round if they resorted to the arbitrament of force."

Dick whistled a long note of mock dismay.

"And that's why you preach the gospel of the strong," Paula went on.

"If you had been weaklings, you'd have preached the gospel of the weak and turned the other cheek. But you--you pair of big-muscled giants--when you are struck, being what you are, you don't turn the other cheek--"

"No," Dick interrupted quietly. "We immediately roar, 'Knock his block off!' and then do it.--She's got us, Evan, hip and thigh. Philosophy, like religion, is what the man is, and is by him made in his own image."

And while the talk led over the world, Paula sewed on, her eyes filled with the picture of the two big men, admiring, wondering, pondering, without the surety of self that was theirs, aware of a slipping and giving of convictions so long accepted that they had seemed part of her.

Later in the evening she gave voice to her trouble.

"The strangest part of it," she said, taking up a remark Dick had just made, "is that too much philosophizing about life gets one worse than nowhere. A philosophic atmosphere is confusing--at least to a woman. One hears so much about everything, and against everything, that

nothing is sure. For instance, Mendenhall's wife is a Lutheran. She hasn't a doubt about anything. All is fixed, ordained, immovable. Star-drifts and ice-ages she knows nothing about, and if she did they would not alter in the least her rules of conduct for men and women in this world and in relation to the next.

"But here, with us, you two pound your brass tacks, Terrence does a Greek dance of epicurean anarchism, Hancock waves the glittering veils of Bergsonian metaphysics, Leo makes solemn obeisance at the altar of Beauty, and Dar Hyal juggles his sophistic blastism to no end save all your applause for his cleverness. Don't you see? The effect is that there is nothing solid in any human judgment. Nothing is right. Nothing is wrong. One is left compassless, rudderless, chartless on a sea of ideas. Shall I do this? Must I refrain from that? Will it be wrong? Is there any virtue in it? Mrs. Mendenhall has her instant answer for every such question. But do the philosophers?"

Paula shook her head.

"No. All they have is ideas. They immediately proceed to talk about it, and talk and talk and talk, and with all their erudition reach no conclusion whatever. And I am just as bad. I listen and listen, and talk and talk, as I am talking now, and remain convictionless. There is no test--"

"But there is," Dick said. "The old, eternal test of truth--Will it

work?"

"Ah, now you are pounding your favorite brass tack," Paula smiled.

"And Dar Hyal, with a few arm-wavings and word-whirrings, will show that all brass tacks are illusions; and Terrence, that brass tacks are sordid, irrelevant and non-essential things at best; and Hancock, that the overhanging heaven of Bergson is paved with brass tacks, only that they are a much superior article to yours; and Leo, that there is only one brass tack in the universe, and that it is Beauty, and that it isn't brass at all but gold."

\* \* \* \* \*

"Come on, Red Cloud, go riding this afternoon," Paula asked her husband. "Get the cobwebs out of your brain, and let lawyers and mines and livestock go hang."

"I'd like to, Paul," he answered. "But I can't. I've got to rush in a machine all the way to the Buckeye. Word came in just before lunch. They're in trouble at the dam. There must have been a fault in the under-strata, and too-heavy dynamiting has opened it. In short, what's the good of a good dam when the bottom of the reservoir won't hold water?"

Three hours later, returning from the Buckeye, Dick noted that for the first time Paula and Graham had gone riding together alone.

\* \* \* \* \*

The Wainwrights and the Coghlanes, in two machines, out for a week's trip to the Russian River, rested over for a day at the Big House, and were the cause of Paula's taking out the tally-ho for a picnic into the Los Baños Hills. Starting in the morning, it was impossible for Dick to accompany them, although he left Blake in the thick of dictation to go out and see them off. He assured himself that no detail was amiss in the harnessing and hitching, and reseated the party, insisting on Graham coming forward into the box-seat beside Paula.

"Just must have a reserve of man's strength alongside of Paula in case of need," Dick explained. "I've known a brake-rod to carry away on a down grade somewhat to the inconvenience of the passengers. Some of them broke their necks. And now, to reassure you, with Paula at the helm, I'll sing you a song:

"What can little Paula do?  
Why, drive a phaeton and two.  
Can little Paula do no more?  
Yes, drive a tally-ho and four."

All were in laughter as Paula nodded to the grooms to release the horses' heads, took the feel of the four mouths on her hands, and

shortened and slipped the reins to adjustment of four horses into the collars and taut on the traces.

In the babel of parting gibes to Dick, none of the guests was aware of aught else than a bright morning, the promise of a happy day, and a genial host bidding them a merry going. But Paula, despite the keen exhilaration that should have arisen with the handling of four such horses, was oppressed by a vague sadness in which, somehow, Dick's being left behind figured. Through Graham's mind Dick's merry face had flashed a regret of conscience that, instead of being seated there beside this one woman, he should be on train and steamer fleeing to the other side of the world.

But the merriness died on Dick's face the moment he turned on his heel to enter the house. It was a few minutes later than ten when he finished his dictation and Mr. Blake rose to go. He hesitated, then said a trifle apologetically:

"You told me, Mr. Forrest, to remind you of the proofs of your Shorthorn book. They wired their second hurry-up yesterday."

"I won't be able to tackle it myself," Dick replied. "Will you please correct the typographical, submit the proofs to Mr. Manson for correction of fact--tell him be sure to verify that pedigree of King of Devon--and ship them off."



Until eleven Dick received his managers and foremen. But not for a quarter of an hour after that did he get rid of his show manager, Mr. Pitts, with the tentative make-up of the catalogue for the first annual stock-sale on the ranch. By that time Mr. Bonbright was on hand with his sheaf of telegrams, and the lunch-hour was at hand ere they were cleaned up.

For the first time alone since he had seen the tally-ho off, Dick stepped out on his sleeping porch to the row of barometers and thermometers on the wall. But he had come to consult, not them, but the girl's face that laughed from the round wooden frame beneath them.

"Paula, Paula," he said aloud, "are you surprising yourself and me after all these years? Are you turning madcap at sober middle age?"

He put on leggings and spurs to be ready for riding after lunch, and what his thoughts had been while buckling on the gear he epitomized to the girl in the frame.

"Play the game," he muttered. And then, after a pause, as he turned to go: "A free field and no favor ... and no favor."

\* \* \* \* \*

"Really, if I don't go soon, I'll have to become a pensioner and join the philosophers of the madroño grove," Graham said laughingly to

Dick.

It was the time of cocktail assembling, and Paula, in addition to Graham, was the only one of the driving party as yet to put in an appearance.

"If all the philosophers together would just make one book!" Dick demurred. "Good Lord, man, you've just got to complete your book here. I got you started and I've got to see you through with it."

Paula's encouragement to Graham to stay on--mere stereotyped, uninterested phrases--was music to Dick. His heart leapt. After all, might he not be entirely mistaken? For two such mature, wise, middle-aged individuals as Paula and Graham any such foolishness was preposterous and unthinkable. They were not young things with their hearts on their sleeves.

"To the book!" he toasted. He turned to Paula. "A good cocktail," he praised. "Paul, you excel yourself, and you fail to teach Oh Joy the art. His never quite touch yours.--Yes, another, please."