

CHAPTER XXI

Graham, riding solitary through the redwood canyons among the hills that overlooked the ranch center, was getting acquainted with Selim, the eleven-hundred-pound, coal-black gelding which Dick had furnished him in place of the lighter Altadena. As he rode along, learning the good nature, the roguishness and the dependableness of the animal, Graham hummed the words of the "Gypsy Trail" and allowed them to lead his thoughts. Quite carelessly, foolishly, thinking of bucolic lovers carving their initials on forest trees, he broke a spray of laurel and another of redwood. He had to stand in the stirrups to pluck a long-stemmed, five-fingered fern with which to bind the sprays into a cross. When the patteran was fashioned, he tossed it on the trail before him and noted that Selim passed over without treading upon it. Glancing back, Graham watched it to the next turn of the trail. A good omen, was his thought, that it had not been trampled.

More five-fingered ferns to be had for the reaching, more branches of redwood and laurel brushing his face as he rode, invited him to continue the manufacture of patterans, which he dropped as he fashioned them. An hour later, at the head of the canyon, where he knew the trail over the divide was difficult and stiff, he debated his course and turned back.

Selim warned him by nickering. Came an answering nicker from close at hand. The trail was wide and easy, and Graham put his mount into a fox trot, swung a wide bend, and overtook Paula on the Fawn.

"Hello!" he called. "Hello! Hello!"

She reined in till he was alongside.

"I was just turning back," she said. "Why did you turn back? I thought you were going over the divide to Little Grizzly."

"You knew I was ahead of you?" he asked, admiring the frank, boyish way of her eyes straight-gazing into his.

"Why shouldn't I? I had no doubt at the second patteran."

"Oh, I'd forgotten about them," he laughed guiltily. "Why did you turn back?"

She waited until the Fawn and Selim had stepped over a fallen alder across the trail, so that she could look into Graham's eyes when she answered:

"Because I did not care to follow your trail.--To follow anybody's trail," she quickly amended. "I turned back at the second one."

He failed of a ready answer, and an awkward silence was between them. Both were aware of this awkwardness, due to the known but unspoken things.

"Do you make a practice of dropping patteredans?" Paula asked.

"The first I ever left," he replied, with a shake of the head. "But there was such a generous supply of materials it seemed a pity, and, besides, the song was haunting me."

"It was haunting me this morning when I woke up," she said, this time her face straight ahead so that she might avoid a rope of wild grapevine that hung close to her side of the trail.

And Graham, gazing at her face in profile, at her crown of gold-brown hair, at her singing throat, felt the old ache at the heart, the hunger and the yearning. The nearness of her was a provocation. The sight of her, in her fawn-colored silk corduroy, tormented him with a rush of visions of that form of hers--swimming Mountain Lad, swan-diving through forty feet of air, moving down the long room in the dull-blue dress of medieval fashion with the maddening knee-lift of the clinging draperies.

"A penny for them," she interrupted his visioning. His answer was prompt.

"Praise to the Lord for one thing: you haven't once mentioned Dick."

"Do you so dislike him?"

"Be fair," he commanded, almost sternly. "It is because I like him. Otherwise..."

"What?" she queried.

Her voice was brave, although she looked straight before her at the Fawn's pricking ears.

"I can't understand why I remain. I should have been gone long ago."

"Why?" she asked, her gaze still on the pricking ears.

"Be fair, be fair," he warned. "You and I scarcely need speech for understanding."

She turned full upon him, her cheeks warming with color, and, without speech, looked at him. Her whip-hand rose quickly, half way, as if to press her breast, and half way paused irresolutely, then dropped down to her side. But her eyes, he saw, were glad and startled. There was no mistake. The startle lay in them, and also the gladness. And he, knowing as it is given some men to know, changed the bridle rein to his other hand, reined close to her, put his arm around her, drew her

till the horses rocked, and, knee to knee and lips on lips, kissed his desire to hers. There was no mistake--pressure to pressure, warmth to warmth, and with an elate thrill he felt her breathe against him.

The next moment she had torn herself loose. The blood had left her face. Her eyes were blazing. Her riding-whip rose as if to strike him, then fell on the startled Fawn. Simultaneously she drove in both spurs with such suddenness and force as to fetch a groan and a leap from the mare.

He listened to the soft thuds of hoofs die away along the forest path, himself dizzy in the saddle from the pounding of his blood. When the last hoof-beat had ceased, he half-slipped, half-sank from his saddle to the ground, and sat on a mossy boulder. He was hard hit--harder than he had deemed possible until that one great moment when he had held her in his arms. Well, the die was cast.

He straightened up so abruptly as to alarm Selim, who sprang back the length of his bridle rein and snorted.

What had just occurred had been unpremeditated. It was one of those inevitable things. It had to happen. He had not planned it, although he knew, now, that had he not procrastinated his going, had he not drifted, he could have foreseen it. And now, going could not mend matters. The madness of it, the hell of it and the joy of it, was that no longer was there any doubt. Speech beyond speech, his lips still

tingling with the memory of hers, she had told him. He dwelt over that kiss returned, his senses swimming deliciously in the sea of remembrance.

He laid his hand caressingly on the knee that had touched hers, and was grateful with the humility of the true lover. Wonderful it was that so wonderful a woman should love him. This was no girl. This was a woman, knowing her own will and wisdom. And she had breathed quickly in his arms, and her lips had been live to his. He had evoked what he had given, and he had not dreamed, after the years, that he had had so much to give.

He stood up, made as if to mount Selim, who nozzled his shoulder, then paused to debate.

It was no longer a question of going. That was definitely settled. Dick had certain rights, true. But Paula had her rights, and did he have the right to go, after what had happened, unless ... unless she went with him? To go now was to kiss and ride away. Surely, since the world of sex decreed that often the same men should love the one woman, and therefore that perfidy should immediately enter into such a triangle--surely, it was the lesser evil to be perfidious to the man than to the woman.

It was a real world, he pondered as he rode slowly along; and Paula, and Dick, and he were real persons in it, were themselves conscious

realists who looked the facts of life squarely in the face. This was no affair of priest and code, of other wisdoms and decisions. Of themselves must it be settled. Some one would be hurt. But life was hurt. Success in living was the minimizing of pain. Dick believed that himself, thanks be. The three of them believed it. And it was nothing new under the sun. The countless triangles of the countless generations had all been somehow solved. This, then, would be solved. All human affairs reached some solution.

He shook sober thought from his brain and returned to the bliss of memory, reaching his hand to another caress of his knee, his lips breathing again to the breathing of hers against them. He even reined Selim to a halt in order to gaze at the hollow resting place of his bent arm which she had filled.

Not until dinner did Graham see Paula again, and he found her the very usual Paula. Not even his eye, keen with knowledge, could detect any sign of the day's great happening, nor of the anger that had whitened her face and blazed in her eyes when she half-lifted her whip to strike him. In everything she was the same Little Lady of the Big House. Even when it chanced that her eyes met his, they were serene, untroubled, with no hint of any secret in them. What made the situation easier was the presence of several new guests, women, friends of Dick and her, come for a couple of days.

Next morning, in the music room, he encountered them and Paula at the

piano.

"Don't you sing, Mr. Graham?" a Miss Hoffman asked.

She was the editor of a woman's magazine published in San Francisco, Graham had learned.

"Oh, adorably," he assured her. "Don't I, Mrs. Forrest?" he appealed.

"It is quite true," Paula smiled, "if for no other reason that he is kind enough not to drown me quite."

"And nothing remains but to prove our words," he volunteered. "There's a duet we sang the other evening--" He glanced at Paula for a sign.

"--Which is particularly good for my kind of singing." Again he gave her a passing glance and received no cue to her will or wish. "The music is in the living room. I'll go and get it."

"It's the 'Gypsy Trail,' a bright, catchy thing," he heard her saying to the others as he passed out.

They did not sing it so recklessly as on that first occasion, and much of the thrill and some of the fire they kept out of their voices; but they sang it more richly, more as the composer had intended it and with less of their own particular interpretation. But Graham was thinking as he sang, and he knew, too, that Paula was thinking, that

in their hearts another duet was pulsing all unguessed by the several women who applauded the song's close.

"You never sang it better, I'll wager," he told Paula.

For he had heard a new note in her voice. It had been fuller, rounder, with a generousness of volume that had vindicated that singing throat.

"And now, because I know you don't know, I'll tell you what a patteran is," she was saying....