

CHAPTER XXIII

There was little talk that same evening after dinner. Paula, singing at the piano, disconcerted Terrence in the midst of an apostrophe on love. He quit a phrase midmost to listen to the something new he heard in her voice, then slid noiselessly across the room to join Leo at full length on the bearskin. Dar Hyal and Hancock likewise abandoned the discussion, each isolating himself in a capacious chair. Graham, seeming least attracted, browsed in a current magazine, but Dick observed that he quickly ceased turning the pages. Nor did Dick fail to catch the new note in Paula's voice and to endeavor to sense its meaning.

When she finished the song the three sages strove to tell her all at the same time that for once she had forgotten herself and sung out as they had always claimed she could. Leo lay without movement or speech, his chin on his two hands, his face transfigured.

"It's all this talk on love," Paula laughed, "and all the lovely thoughts Leo and Terrence ... and Dick have put into my head."

Terrence shook his long mop of iron-gray hair.

"Into your heart you'd be meaning," he corrected. "'Tis the very heart

and throat of love that are yours this night. And for the first time, dear lady, have I heard the full fair volume that is yours. Never again plaint that your voice is thin. Thick it is, and round it is, as a great rope, a great golden rope for the mooring of argosies in the harbors of the Happy Isles."

"And for that I shall sing you the Gloria," she answered, "to celebrate the slaying of the dragons by Saint Leo, by Saint Terrence ... and, of course, by Saint Richard."

Dick, missing nothing of the talk, saved himself from speech by crossing to the concealed sideboard and mixing for himself a Scotch and soda.

While Paula sang the Gloria, he sat on one of the couches, sipping his drink and remembering keenly. Once before he had heard her sing like that--in Paris, during their swift courtship, and directly afterward, during their honeymoon on the All Away.

A little later, using his empty glass in silent invitation to Graham, he mixed highballs for both of them, and, when Graham had finished his, suggested to Paula that she and Graham sing the "Gypsy Trail."

She shook her head and began *Das Kraut Ver-gessenheit*.

"She was not a true woman, she was a terrible woman," the song's close

wrung from Leo. "And he was a true lover. She broke his heart, but still he loved her. He cannot love again because he cannot forget his love for her."

"And now, Red Cloud, the Song of the Acorn," Paula said, smiling over to her husband. "Put down your glass, and be good, and plant the acorns."

Dick lazily hauled himself off the couch and stood up, shaking his head mutinously, as if tossing a mane, and stamping ponderously with his feet in simulation of Mountain Lad.

"I'll have Leo know that he is not the only poet and love-knight on the ranch. Listen to Mountain Lad's song, all wonder and wild delight, Terrence, and more. Mountain Lad doesn't moon about the loved one. He doesn't moon at all. He incarnates love, and rears right up in meeting and tells them so. Listen to him!"

Dick filled the room and shook the air with wild, glad, stallion nickering; and then, with mane-tossing and foot-pawing, chanted:

"Hear me! I am Eros! I stamp upon the hills. I fill the wide valleys. The mares hear me, and startle, in quiet pastures; for they know me. The land is filled with fatness, and the sap is in the trees. It is the spring. The spring is mine. I am monarch of my kingdom of the spring. The mares remember my voice. They knew me aforesometimes through

their mothers before them. Hear me! I am Eros. I stamp upon the hills, and the wide valleys are my heralds, echoing the sound of my approach."

It was the first time the sages of the madrono grove had heard Dick's song, and they were loud in applause. Hancock took it for a fresh start in the discussion, and was beginning to elaborate a biologic Bergsonian definition of love, when he was stopped by Terrence, who had noticed the pain that swept across Leo's face.

"Go on, please, dear lady," Terrence begged. "And sing of love, only of love; for it is my experience that I meditate best upon the stars to the accompaniment of a woman's voice."

A little later, Oh Joy, entering the room, waited till Paula finished a song, then moved noiselessly to Graham and handed him a telegram. Dick scowled at the interruption.

"Very important--I think," the Chinese explained to him.

"Who took it?" Dick demanded.

"Me--I took it," was the answer. "Night clerk at Eldorado call on telephone. He say important. I take it."

"It is, fairly so," Graham spoke up, having finished reading the

message. "Can I get a train out to-night for San Francisco, Dick?"

"Oh Joy, come back a moment," Dick called, looking at his watch. "What train for San Francisco stops at Eldorado?"

"Eleven-ten," came the instant information. "Plenty time. Not too much. I call chauffeur?"

Dick nodded.

"You really must jump out to-night?" he asked Graham.

"Really. It is quite important. Will I have time to pack?"

Dick gave a confirmatory nod to Oh Joy, and said to Graham:

"Just time to throw the needful into a grip." He turned to Oh Joy. "Is Oh My up yet?"

"Yessr."

"Send him to Mr. Graham's room to help, and let me know as soon as the machine is ready. No limousine. Tell Saunders to take the racer."

"One fine big strapping man, that," Terrence commented, after Graham had left the room.

They had gathered about Dick, with the exception of Paula, who remained at the piano, listening.

"One of the few men I'd care to go along with, hell for leather, on a forlorn hope or anything of that sort," Dick said. "He was on the Nethermere when she went ashore at Pango in the '97 hurricane. Pango is just a strip of sand, twelve feet above high water mark, a lot of cocoanuts, and uninhabited. Forty women among the passengers, English officers' wives and such. Graham had a bad arm, big as a leg--snake bite.

"It was a thundering sea. Boats couldn't live. They smashed two and lost both crews. Four sailors volunteered in succession to carry a light line ashore. And each man, in turn, dead at the end of it, was hauled back on board. While they were untying the last one, Graham, with an arm like a leg, stripped for it and went to it. And he did it, although the pounding he got on the sand broke his bad arm and staved in three ribs. But he made the line fast before he quit. In order to haul the hawser ashore, six more volunteered to go in on Evan's line to the beach. Four of them arrived. And only one woman of the forty was lost--she died of heart disease and fright.

"I asked him about it once. He was as bad as an Englishman. All I could get out of the beggar was that the recovery was uneventful. Thought that the salt water, the exercise, and the breaking of the

bone had served as counter-irritants and done the arm good."

Oh Joy and Graham entered the room from opposite ends. Dick saw that Graham's first questing glance was for Paula.

"All ready, sir," Oh Joy announced.

Dick prepared to accompany his guest outside to the car; but Paula evidenced her intention of remaining in the house. Graham started over to her to murmur perfunctory regrets and good-by.

And she, warm with what Dick had just told of him, pleased at the goodly sight of him, dwelling with her eyes on the light, high poise of head, the careless, sun-sanded hair, and the lightness, almost debonaireness, of his carriage despite his weight of body and breadth of shoulders. As he drew near to her, she centered her gaze on the long gray eyes whose hint of drooping lids hinted of boyish sullenness. She waited for the expression of sullenness to vanish as the eyes lighted with the smile she had come to know so well.

What he said was ordinary enough, as were her regrets; but in his eyes, as he held her hand a moment, was the significance which she had unconsciously expected and to which she replied with her own eyes. The same significance was in the pressure of the momentary handclasp. All unpremeditated, she responded to that quick pressure. As he had said, there was little need for speech between them.

As their hands fell apart, she glanced swiftly at Dick; for she had learned much, in their dozen years together, of his flashes of observance, and had come to stand in awe of his almost uncanny powers of guessing facts from nuances, and of linking nuances into conclusions often startling in their thoroughness and correctness. But Dick, his shoulder toward her, laughing over some quip of Hancock, was just turning his laughter-crinkled eyes toward her as he started to accompany Graham.

No, was her thought; surely Dick had seen nothing of the secret little that had been exchanged between them. It had been very little, very quick--a light in the eyes, a muscular quiver of the fingers, and no lingering. How could Dick have seen or sensed? Their eyes had certainly been hidden from Dick, likewise their clasped hands, for Graham's back had been toward him.

Just the same, she wished she had not made that swift glance at Dick. She was conscious of a feeling of guilt, and the thought of it hurt her as she watched the two big men, of a size and blondness, go down the room side by side. Of what had she been guilty? she asked herself. Why should she have anything to hide? Yet she was honest enough to face the fact and accept, without quibble, that she had something to hide. And her cheeks burned at the thought that she was being drifted into deception.

"I won't be but a couple of days," Graham was saying as he shook hands with Dick at the car.

Dick saw the square, straight look of his eyes, and recognized the firmness and heartiness of his gripping hand. Graham half began to say something, then did not; and Dick knew he had changed his mind when he said:

"I think, when I get back, that I'll have to pack."

"But the book," Dick protested, inwardly cursing himself for the leap of joy which had been his at the other's words.

"That's just why," Graham answered. "I've got to get it finished. It doesn't seem I can work like you do. The ranch is too alluring. I can't get down to the book. I sit over it, and sit over it, but the confounded meadowlarks keep echoing in my ears, and I begin to see the fields, and the redwood canyons, and Selim. And after I waste an hour, I give up and ring for Selim. And if it isn't that, it's any one of a thousand other enchantments."

He put his foot on the running-board of the pulsing car and said, "Well, so long, old man."

"Come back and make a stab at it," urged Dick. "If necessary, we'll frame up a respectable daily grind, and I'll lock you in every morning

until you've done it. And if you don't do your work all day, all day you'll stay locked in. I'll make you work.--Got cigarettes?--matches?"

"Right O."

"Let her go, Saunders," Dick ordered the chauffeur; and the car seemed to leap out into the darkness from the brilliantly lighted porte cochère.

Back in the house, Dick found Paula playing to the madrono sages, and ensconced himself on the couch to wait and wonder if she would kiss him good night when bedtime came. It was not, he recognized, as if they made a regular schedule of kissing. It had never been like that. Often and often he did not see her until midday, and then in the presence of guests. And often and often, she slipped away to bed early, disturbing no one with a good night kiss to her husband which might well hint to them that their bedtime had come.

No, Dick concluded, whether or not she kissed him on this particular night it would be equally without significance. But still he wondered.

She played on and sang on interminably, until at last he fell asleep. When he awoke he was alone in the room. Paula and the sages had gone out quietly. He looked at his watch. It marked one o'clock. She had played unusually late, he knew; for he knew she had just gone. It was the cessation of music and movement that had awakened him.

And still he wondered. Often he napped there to her playing, and always, when she had finished, she kissed him awake and sent him to bed. But this night she had not. Perhaps, after all, she was coming back. He lay and drowsed and waited. The next time he looked at his watch, it was two o'clock. She had not come back.

He turned off the lights, and as he crossed the house, pressed off the hall lights as he went, while the many unimportant little nothings, almost of themselves, ranged themselves into an ordered text of doubt and conjecture that he could not refrain from reading.

On his sleeping porch, glancing at his barometers and thermometers, her laughing face in the round frame caught his eyes, and, standing before it, even bending closer to it, he studied her long.

"Oh, well," he muttered, as he drew up the bedcovers, propped the pillows behind him and reached for a stack of proofsheets, "whatever it is I'll have to play it."

He looked sidewise at her picture.

"But, oh, Little Woman, I wish you wouldn't," was the sighed good night.