CHAPTER XXIV

As luck would have it, beyond chance guests for lunch or dinner, the Big House was empty. In vain, on the first and second days, did Dick lay out his work, or defer it, so as to be ready for any suggestion from Paula to go for an afternoon swim or drive.

He noted that she managed always to avoid the possibility of being kissed. From her sleeping porch she called good night to him across the wide patio. In the morning he prepared himself for her eleven o'clock greeting. Mr. Agar and Mr. Pitts, with important matters concerning the forthcoming ranch sale of stock still unsettled, Dick promptly cleared out at the stroke of eleven. Up she was, he knew, for he had heard her singing. As he waited, seated at his desk, for once he was idle. A tray of letters before him continued to need his signature. He remembered this morning pilgrimage of hers had been originated by her, and by her, somewhat persistently, had been kept up. And an adorable thing it was, he decided--that soft call of "Good morning, merry gentleman," and the folding of her kimono-clad figure in his arms.

He remembered, further, that he had often cut that little visit short, conveying the impression to her, even while he clasped her, of how busy he was. And he remembered, more than once, the certain little

wistful shadow on her face as she slipped away.

Quarter past eleven, and she had not come. He took down the receiver to telephone the dairy, and in the swift rush of women's conversation, ere he hung up, he caught Paula's voice:

"--Bother Mr. Wade. Bring all the little Wades and come, if only for a couple of days--"

Which was very strange of Paula. She had invariably welcomed the intervals of no guests, when she and he were left alone with each other for a day or for several days. And now she was trying to persuade Mrs. Wade to come down from Sacramento. It would seem that Paula did not wish to be alone with him, and was seeking to protect herself with company.

He smiled as he realized that that morning embrace, now that it was not tendered him, had become suddenly desirable. The thought came to him of taking her away with him on one of their travel-jaunts. That would solve the problem, perhaps. And he would hold her very close to him and draw her closer. Why not an Alaskan hunting trip? She had always wanted to go. Or back to their old sailing grounds in the days of the All Away--the South Seas. Steamers ran direct between San Francisco and Tahiti. In twelve days they could be ashore in Papeete. He wondered if Lavaina still ran her boarding house, and his quick vision caught a picture of Paula and himself at breakfast on

Lavaina's porch in the shade of the mango trees.

He brought his fist down on the desk. No, by God, he was no coward to run away with his wife for fear of any man. And would it be fair to her to take her away possibly from where her desire lay? True, he did not know where her desire lay, nor how far it had gone between her and Graham. Might it not be a spring madness with her that would vanish with the spring? Unfortunately, he decided, in the dozen years of their marriage she had never evidenced any predisposition toward spring madness. She had never given his heart a moment's doubt. Herself tremendously attractive to men, seeing much of them, receiving their admiration and even court, she had remained always her equable and serene self, Dick Forrest's wife--

"Good morning, merry gentleman."

She was peeping in on him, quite naturally from the hall, her eyes and lips smiling to him, blowing him a kiss from her finger tips.

"And good morning, my little haughty moon," he called back, himself equally his natural self.

And now she would come in, he thought; and he would fold her in his arms, and put her to the test of the kiss.

He opened his arms in invitation. But she did not enter. Instead, she

startled, with one hand gathered her kimono at her breast, with the other picked up the trailing skirt as if for flight, at the same time looking apprehensively down the hall. Yet his keen ears had caught no sound. She smiled back at him, blew him another kiss, and was gone.

Ten minutes later he had no ears for Bonbright, who, telegrams in hand, startled him as he sat motionless at his desk, as he had sat, without movement, for ten minutes.

And yet she was happy. Dick knew her too long in all the expressions of her moods not to realize the significance of her singing over the house, in the arcades, and out in the patio. He did not leave his workroom till the stroke of lunch; nor did she, as she sometimes did, come to gather him up on the way. At the lunch gong, from across the patio, he heard her trilling die away into the house in the direction of the dining room.

A Colonel Harrison Stoddard--colonel from younger service in the National Guard, himself a retired merchant prince whose hobby was industrial relations and social unrest--held the table most of the meal upon the extension of the Employers' Liability Act so as to include agricultural laborers. But Paula found a space in which casually to give the news to Dick that she was running away for the afternoon on a jaunt up to Wickenberg to the Masons.

"Of course I don't know when I'll be back--you know what the Masons

are. And I don't dare ask you to come, though I'd like you along."

Dick shook his head.

"And so," she continued, "if you're not using Saunders--"

Dick nodded acquiescence.

"I'm using Callahan this afternoon," he explained, on the instant planning his own time now that Paula was out of the question. "I never can make out, Paul, why you prefer Saunders. Callahan is the better driver, and of course the safest."

"Perhaps that's why," she said with a smile. "Safety first means slowest most."

"Just the same I'd back Callahan against Saunders on a speed-track," Dick championed.

"Where are you bound?" she asked.

"Oh, to show Colonel Stoddard my one-man and no-horse farm--you know, the automatically cultivated ten-acre stunt I've been frivoling with. A lot of changes have been made that have been waiting a week for me to see tried out. I've been too busy. And after that, I'm going to take him over the colony--what do you think?--five additions the last

week."

"I thought the membership was full," Paula said.

"It was, and still is," Dick beamed. "But these are babies. And the least hopeful of the families had the rashness to have twins."

"A lot of wiseacres are shaking their heads over that experiment of yours, and I make free to say that I am merely holding my judgment--you've got to show me by bookkeeping," Colonel Stoddard was saying, immensely pleased at the invitation to be shown over in person.

Dick scarcely heard him, such was the rush of other thoughts. Paula had not mentioned whether Mrs. Wade and the little Wades were coming, much less mentioned that she had invited them. Yet this Dick tried to consider no lapse on her part, for often and often, like himself, she had guests whose arrival was the first he knew of their coming.

It was, however, evident that Mrs. Wade was not coming that day, else Paula would not be running away thirty miles up the valley. That was it, and there was no blinking it. She was running away, and from him. She could not face being alone with him with the consequent perils of intimacy--and perilous, in such circumstances, could have but the significance he feared. And further, she was making the evening sure. She would not be back for dinner, or till long after dinner, it was a safe wager, unless she brought the whole Wickenberg crowd with her.

She would be back late enough to expect him to be in bed. Well, he would not disappoint her, he decided grimly, as he replied to Colonel Stoddard:

"The experiment works out splendidly on paper, with decently wide margins for human nature. And there I admit is the doubt and the danger--the human nature. But the only way to test it is to test it, which is what I am doing."

"It won't be the first Dick has charged to profit and loss," Paula said.

"But five thousand acres, all the working capital for two hundred and fifty farmers, and a cash salary of a thousand dollars each a year!" Colonel Stoddard protested. "A few such failures--if it fails--would put a heavy drain on the Harvest."

"That's what the Harvest needs," Dick answered lightly.

Colonel Stoddard looked blank.

"Precisely," Dick confirmed. "Drainage, you know. The mines are flooded--the Mexican situation."

It was during the morning of the second day--the day of Graham's expected return--that Dick, who, by being on horseback at eleven, had

avoided a repetition of the hurt of the previous day's "Good morning, merry gentleman" across the distance of his workroom, encountered Ah Ha in a hall with an armful of fresh-cut lilacs. The house-boy's way led toward the tower room, but Dick made sure.

"Where are you taking them, Ah Ha?" he asked.

"Mr. Graham's room--he come to-day."

Now whose thought was that? Dick pondered. Ah Ha's?--Oh Joy's--or Paula's? He remembered having heard Graham more than once express his fancy for their lilacs.

He deflected his course from the library and strolled out through the flowers near the tower room. Through the open windows of it came Paula's happy humming. Dick pressed his lower lip with tight quickness between his teeth and strolled on.

Some great, as well as many admirable, men and women had occupied that room, and for them Paula had never supervised the flower arrangement, Dick meditated. Oh Joy, himself a master of flowers, usually attended to that, or had his house-staff ably drilled to do it.

Among the telegrams Bonbright handed him, was one from Graham, which Dick read twice, although it was simple and unmomentous, being merely a postponement of his return.

Contrary to custom, Dick did not wait for the second lunch-gong. At the sound of the first he started, for he felt the desire for one of Oh Joy's cocktails--the need of a prod of courage, after the lilacs, to meet Paula. But she was ahead of him. He found her--who rarely drank, and never alone--just placing an empty cocktail glass back on the tray.

So she, too, had needed courage for the meal, was his deduction, as he nodded to Oh Joy and held up one finger.

"Caught you at it!" he reproved gaily. "Secret tippling. The gravest of symptoms. Little I thought, the day I stood up with you, that the wife I was marrying was doomed to fill an alcoholic's grave."

Before she could retort, a young man strolled in whom she and Dick greeted as Mr. Winters, and who also must have a cocktail. Dick tried to believe that it was not relief he sensed in Paula's manner as she greeted the newcomer. He had never seen her quite so cordial to him before, although often enough she had met him. At any rate, there would be three at lunch.

Mr. Winters, an agricultural college graduate and special writer for the Pacific Rural Press, as well as a sort of protégé of Dick, had come for data for an article on California fish-ponds, and Dick mentally arranged his afternoon's program for him.

"Got a telegram from Evan," he told Paula. "Won't be back till the four o'clock day after to-morrow."

"And after all my trouble!" she exclaimed. "Now the lilacs will be wilted and spoiled."

Dick felt a warm glow of pleasure. There spoke his frank, straightforward Paula. No matter what the game was, or its outcome, at least she would play it without the petty deceptions. She had always been that way--too transparent to make a success of deceit.

Nevertheless, he played his own part by a glance of scarcely interested interrogation.

"Why, in Graham's room," she explained. "I had the boys bring a big armful and I arranged them all myself. He's so fond of them, you know."

Up to the end of lunch, she had made no mention of Mrs. Wade's coming, and Dick knew definitely she was not coming when Paula queried casually:

"Expecting anybody?"

He shook his head, and asked, "Are you doing anything this afternoon?"

"Haven't thought about anything," she answered. "And now I suppose I can't plan upon you with Mr. Winters to be told all about fish."

"But you can," Dick assured her. "I'm turning him over to Mr. Hanley, who's got the trout counted down to the last egg hatched and who knows all the grandfather bass by name. I'll tell you what--" He paused and considered. Then his face lighted as with a sudden idea. "It's a loafing afternoon. Let's take the rifles and go potting squirrels. I noticed the other day they've become populous on that hill above the Little Meadow."

But he had not failed to observe the flutter of alarm that shadowed her eyes so swiftly, and that so swiftly was gone as she clapped her hands and was herself.

"But don't take a rifle for me," she said.

"If you'd rather not--" he began gently.

"Oh, I want to go, but I don't feel up to shooting. I'll take Le Gallienne's last book along--it just came in--and read to you in betweenwhiles. Remember, the last time I did that when we went squirreling it was his 'Quest of the Golden Girl' I read to you."