

CHAPTER XXV

Paula on the Fawn, and Dick on the Outlaw, rode out from the Big House as nearly side by side as the Outlaw's wicked perversity permitted.

The conversation she permitted was fragmentary. With tiny ears laid back and teeth exposed, she would attempt to evade Dick's restraint of rein and spur and win to a bite of Paula's leg or the Fawn's sleek flank, and with every defeat the pink flushed and faded in the whites of her eyes. Her restless head-tossing and pitching attempts to rear (thwarted by the martingale) never ceased, save when she pranced and sidled and tried to whirl.

"This is the last year of her," Dick announced. "She's indomitable. I've worked two years on her without the slightest improvement. She knows me, knows my ways, knows I am her master, knows when she has to give in, but is never satisfied. She nourishes the perennial hope that some time she'll catch me napping, and for fear she'll miss that time she never lets any time go by."

"And some time she may catch you," Paula said.

"That's why I'm giving her up. It isn't exactly a strain on me, but soon or late she's bound to get me if there's anything in the law of probability. It may be a million-to-one shot, but heaven alone knows

where in the series of the million that fatal one is going to pop up."

"You're a wonder, Red Cloud," Paula smiled.

"Why?"

"You think in statistics and percentages, averages and exceptions. I wonder, when we first met, what particular formula you measured me up by."

"I'll be darned if I did," he laughed back. "There was where all signs failed. I didn't have a statistic that applied to you. I merely acknowledged to myself that here was the most wonderful female woman ever born with two good legs, and I knew that I wanted her more than I had ever wanted anything. I just had to have her--"

"And got her," Paula completed for him. "But since, Red Cloud, since. Surely you've accumulated enough statistics on me."

"A few, quite a few," he admitted. "But I hope never to get the last one--"

He broke off at sound of the unmistakable nicker of Mountain Lad. The stallion appeared, the cowboy on his back, and Dick gazed for a moment at the perfect action of the beast's great swinging trot.

"We've got to get out of this," he warned, as Mountain Lad, at sight of them, broke into a gallop.

Together they pricked their mares, whirled them about, and fled, while from behind they heard the soothing "Whoas" of the rider, the thuds of the heavy hoofs on the roadway, and a wild imperative neigh. The Outlaw answered, and the Fawn was but a moment behind her. From the commotion they knew Mountain Lad was getting tempestuous.

Leaning to the curve, they swept into a cross-road and in fifty paces pulled up, where they waited till the danger was past.

"He's never really injured anybody yet," Paula said, as they started back.

"Except when he casually stepped on Cowley's toes. You remember he was laid up in bed for a month," Dick reminded her, straightening out the Outlaw from a sidle and with a flicker of glance catching the strange look with which Paula was regarding him.

There was question in it, he could see, and love in it, and fear--yes, almost fear, or at least apprehension that bordered on dismay; but, most of all, a seeking, a searching, a questioning. Not entirely ungermane to her mood, was his thought, had been that remark of his thinking in statistics.

But he made that he had not seen, whipping out his pad, and, with an interested glance at a culvert they were passing, making a note.

"They missed it," he said. "It should have been repaired a month ago."

"What has become of all those Nevada mustangs?" Paula inquired.

This was a flyer Dick had taken, when a bad season for Nevada pasture had caused mustangs to sell for a song with the alternative of starving to death. He had shipped a trainload down and ranged them in his wilder mountain pastures to the west.

"It's time to break them," he answered. "And I'm thinking of a real old-fashioned rodeo next week. What do you say? Have a barbecue and all the rest, and invite the country side?"

"And then you won't be there," Paula objected.

"I'll take a day off. Is it a go?"

They reined to one side of the road, as she agreed, to pass three farm tractors, all with their trailage of ganged discs and harrows.

"Moving them across to the Rolling Meadows," he explained. "They pay over horses on the right ground."

Rising from the home valley, passing through cultivated fields and wooded knolls, they took a road busy with many wagons hauling road-dressing from the rock-crusher they could hear growling and crunching higher up.

"Needs more exercise than I've been giving her," Dick remarked, jerking the Outlaw's bared teeth away from dangerous proximity to the Fawn's flank.

"And it's disgraceful the way I've neglected Duddy and Fuddy," Paula said. "I've kept their feed down like a miser, but they're a lively handful just the same."

Dick heard her idly, but within forty-eight hours he was to remember with hurt what she had said.

They continued on till the crunch of the rock-crusher died away, penetrated a belt of woodland, crossed a tiny divide where the afternoon sunshine was wine-colored by the manzanita and rose-colored by madronos, and dipped down through a young planting of eucalyptus to the Little Meadow. But before they reached it, they dismounted and tied their horses. Dick took the .22 automatic rifle from his saddle-holster, and with Paula advanced softly to a clump of redwoods on the edge of the meadow. They disposed themselves in the shade and gazed out across the meadow to the steep slope of hill that came down to it a hundred and fifty yards away.

"There they are--three--four of them," Paula whispered, as her keen eyes picked the squirrels out amongst the young grain.

These were the wary ones, the sports in the direction of infinite caution who had shunned the poisoned grain and steel traps of Dick's vermin catchers. They were the survivors, each of a score of their fellows not so cautious, themselves fit to repopulate the hillside.

Dick filled the chamber and magazine with tiny cartridges, examined the silencer, and, lying at full length, leaning on his elbow, sighted across the meadow. There was no sound of explosion when he fired, only the click of the mechanism as the bullet was sped, the empty cartridge ejected, a fresh cartridge flipped into the chamber, and the trigger re-cocked. A big, dun-colored squirrel leaped in the air, fell over, and disappeared in the grain. Dick waited, his eye along the rifle and directed toward several holes around which the dry earth showed widely as evidence of the grain which had been destroyed. When the wounded squirrel appeared, scrambling across the exposed ground to safety, the rifle clicked again and he rolled over on his side and lay still.

At the first click, every squirrel but the stricken one, had made into its burrow. Remained nothing to do but wait for their curiosity to master caution. This was the interval Dick had looked forward to. As he lay and scanned the hillside for curious heads to appear, he wondered if Paula would have something to say to him. In trouble she

was, but would she keep this trouble to herself? It had never been her way. Always, soon or late, she brought her troubles to him. But, then, he reflected, she had never had a trouble of this nature before. It was just the one thing that she would be least prone to discuss with him. On the other hand, he reasoned, there was her everlasting frankness. He had marveled at it, and joyed in it, all their years together. Was it to fail her now?

So he lay and pondered. She did not speak. She was not restless. He could hear no movement. When he glanced to the side at her he saw her lying on her back, eyes closed, arms outstretched, as if tired.

A small head, the color of the dry soil of its home, peeped from a hole. Dick waited long minutes, until, assured that no danger lurked, the owner of the head stood full up on its hind legs to seek the cause of the previous click that had startled it. Again the rifle clicked.

"Did you get him?" Paula queried, without opening her eyes.

"Yea, and a fat one," Dick answered. "I stopped a line of generations right there."

An hour passed. The afternoon sun beat down but was not uncomfortable in the shade. A gentle breeze fanned the young grain into lazy wavelets at times, and stirred the redwood boughs above them. Dick added a third squirrel to the score. Paula's book lay beside her, but

she had not offered to read.

"Anything the matter?" he finally nerved himself to ask.

"No; headache--a beastly little neuralgic hurt across the eyes, that's all."

"Too much embroidery," he teased.

"Not guilty," was her reply.

All was natural enough in all seeming; but Dick, as he permitted an unusually big squirrel to leave its burrow and crawl a score of feet across the bare earth toward the grain, thought to himself: No, there will be no talk between us this day. Nor will we nestle and kiss lying here in the grass.

His victim was now at the edge of the grain. He pulled trigger. The creature fell over, lay still a moment, then ran in quick awkward fashion toward its hole. Click, click, click, went the mechanism. Puffs of dust leaped from the earth close about the fleeing squirrel, showing the closeness of the misses. Dick fired as rapidly as he could twitch his forefinger on the trigger, so that it was as if he played a stream of lead from a hose.

He had nearly finished refilling the magazine when Paula spoke.

"My! What a fusillade.--Get him?"

"Yea, grandfather of all squirrels, a mighty graineater and destroyer of sustenance for young calves. But nine long smokeless cartridges on one squirrel doesn't pay. I'll have to do better."

The sun dropped lower. The breeze died out. Dick managed another squirrel and sadly watched the hillside for more. He had arranged the time and made his bid for confidence. The situation was as grave as he had feared. Graver it might be, for all he knew, for his world was crumbling about him. Old landmarks were shifting their places. He was bewildered, shaken. Had it been any other woman than Paula! He had been so sure. There had been their dozen years to vindicate his surety....

"Five o'clock, sun he get low," he announced, rising to his feet and preparing to help her up.

"It did me so much good--just resting," she said, as they started for the horses. "My eyes feel much better. It's just as well I didn't try to read to you."

"And don't be piggy," Dick warned, as lightly as if nothing were amiss with him. "Don't dare steal the tiniest peek into Le Gallienne. You've got to share him with me later on. Hold up your hand.--Now, honest to

God, Paul."

"Honest to God," she obeyed.

"And may jackasses dance on your grandmother's grave--"

"And may jackasses dance on my grandmother's grave," she solemnly repeated.

The third morning of Graham's absence, Dick saw to it that he was occupied with his dairy manager when Paula made her eleven o'clock pilgrimage, peeped in upon him, and called her "Good morning, merry gentleman," from the door. The Masons, arriving in several machines with their boisterous crowd of young people, saved Paula for lunch and the afternoon; and, on her urging, Dick noted, she made the evening safe by holding them over for bridge and dancing.

But the fourth morning, the day of Graham's expected return, Dick was alone in his workroom at eleven. Bending over his desk, signing letters, he heard Paula tiptoe into the room. He did not look up, but while he continued writing his signature he listened with all his soul to the faint, silken swish of her kimono. He knew when she was bending over him, and all but held his breath. But when she had softly kissed his hair and called her "Good morning, merry gentleman," she evaded the hungry sweep of his arm and laughed her way out. What affected him as strongly as the disappointment was the happiness he had seen in her

face. She, who so poorly masked her moods, was bright-eyed and eager as a child. And it was on this afternoon that Graham was expected, Dick could not escape making the connection.

He did not care to ascertain if she had replenished the lilacs in the tower room, and, at lunch, which was shared with three farm college students from Davis, he found himself forced to extemporize a busy afternoon for himself when Paula tentatively suggested that she would drive Graham up from Eldorado.

"Drive?" Dick asked.

"Duddy and Fuddy," she explained. "They're all on edge, and I just feel like exercising them and myself. Of course, if you'll share the exercise, we'll drive anywhere you say, and let him come up in the machine."

Dick strove not to think there was anxiety in her manner while she waited for him to accept or decline her invitation.

"Poor Duddy and Fuddy would be in the happy hunting grounds if they had to cover my ground this afternoon," he laughed, at the same time mapping his program. "Between now and dinner I've got to do a hundred and twenty miles. I'm taking the racer, and it's going to be some dust and bump and only an occasional low place. I haven't the heart to ask you along. You go on and take it out of Duddy and Fuddy."

Paula sighed, but so poor an actress was she that in the sigh, intended for him as a customary reluctant yielding of his company, he could not fail to detect the relief at his decision.

"Whither away?" she asked brightly, and again he noticed the color in her face, the happiness, and the brilliance of her eyes.

"Oh, I'm shooting away down the river to the dredging work--Carlson insists I must advise him--and then up in to Sacramento, running over the Teal Slough land on the way, to see Wing Fo Wong."

"And in heaven's name who is this Wing Fo Wong?" she laughingly queried, "that you must trot and see him?"

"A very important personage, my dear. Worth all of two millions--made in potatoes and asparagus down in the Delta country. I'm leasing three hundred acres of the Teal Slough land to him." Dick addressed himself to the farm students. "That land lies just out of Sacramento on the west side of the river. It's a good example of the land famine that is surely coming. It was tule swamp when I bought it, and I was well laughed at by the old-timers. I even had to buy out a dozen hunting preserves. It averaged me eighteen dollars an acre, and not so many years ago either.

"You know the tule swamps. Worthless, save for ducks and low-water

pasturage. It cost over three hundred an acre to dredge and drain and to pay my quota of the river reclamation work. And on what basis of value do you think I am making a ten years' lease to old Wing Fo Wong? TWO thousand an acre. I couldn't net more than that if I truck-farmed it myself. Those Chinese are wizards with vegetables, and gluttons for work. No eight hours for them. It's eighteen hours. The last coolie is a partner with a microscopic share. That's the way Wing Fo Wong gets around the eight hour law."

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Twice warned and once arrested, was Dick through the long afternoon. He drove alone, and though he drove with speed he drove with safety. Accidents, for which he personally might be responsible, were things he did not tolerate. And they never occurred. That same sureness and definiteness of adjustment with which, without fumbling or approximating, he picked up a pencil or reached for a door-knob, was his in the more complicated adjustments, with which, as instance, he drove a high-powered machine at high speed over busy country roads.

But drive as he would, transact business as he would, at high pressure with Carlson and Wing Fo Wong, continually, in the middle ground of his consciousness, persisted the thought that Paula had gone out of her way and done the most unusual in driving Graham the long eight miles from Eldorado to the ranch.

"Phew!" he started to mutter a thought aloud, then suspended utterance and thought as he jumped the racer from forty-five to seventy miles an hour, swept past to the left of a horse and buggy going in the same direction, and slanted back to the right side of the road with margin to spare but seemingly under the nose of a run-about coming from the opposite direction. He reduced his speed to fifty and took up his thought:

"Phew! Imagine little Paul's thoughts if I dared that drive with some charming girl!"

He laughed at the fancy as he pictured it, for, most early in their marriage, he had gauged Paula's capacity for quiet jealousy. Never had she made a scene, or dropped a direct remark, or raised a question; but from the first, quietly but unmistakably, she had conveyed the impression of hurt that was hers if he at all unduly attended upon any woman.

He grinned with remembrance of Mrs. Dehameny, the pretty little brunette widow--Paula's friend, not his--who had visited in the long ago in the Big House. Paula had announced that she was not riding that afternoon and, at lunch, had heard him and Mrs. Dehameny arrange to ride into the redwood canyons beyond the grove of the philosophers. And who but Paula, not long after their start, should overtake them and make the party three! He had smiled to himself at the time, and felt immensely tickled with Paula, for neither Mrs. Dehameny nor the

ride with her had meant anything to him.

So it was, from the beginning, that he had restricted his attentions to other women. Ever since he had been far more circumspect than Paula. He had even encouraged her, given her a free hand always, had been proud that his wife did attract fine fellows, had been glad that she was glad to be amused or entertained by them. And with reason, he mused. He had been so safe, so sure of her--more so, he acknowledged, than had she any right to be of him. And the dozen years had vindicated his attitude, so that he was as sure of her as he was of the diurnal rotation of the earth. And now, was the form his fancy took, the rotation of the earth was a shaky proposition and old Oom Paul's flat world might be worth considering.

He lifted the gauntlet from his left wrist to snatch a glimpse at his watch, In five minutes Graham would be getting off the train at Eldorado. Dick, himself homeward bound west from Sacramento, was eating up the miles. In a quarter of an hour the train that he identified as having brought Graham, went by. Not until he was well past Eldorado did he overtake Duddy and Fuddy and the trap. Graham sat beside Paula, who was driving. Dick slowed down as he passed, waved a hello to Graham, and, as he jumped into speed again, called cheerily:

"Sorry I've got to give you my dust. I'll beat you a game of billiards before dinner, Evan, if you ever get in."