

## CHAPTER XXVI

"This can't go on. We must do something--at once."

They were in the music room, Paula at the piano, her face turned up to Graham who stood close to her, almost over her.

"You must decide," Graham continued.

Neither face showed happiness in the great thing that had come upon them, now that they considered what they must do.

"But I don't want you to go," Paula urged. "I don't know what I want. You must bear with me. I am not considering myself. I am past considering myself. But I must consider Dick. I must consider you. I... I am so unused to such a situation," she concluded with a wan smile.

"But it must be settled, dear love. Dick is not blind."

"What has there been for him to see?" she demanded. "Nothing, except that one kiss in the canyon, and he couldn't have seen that. Do you think of anything else--I challenge you, sir."

"Would that there were," he met the lighter touch in her mood, then immediately relapsed. "I am mad over you, mad for you. And there I stop. I do not know if you are equally mad. I do not know if you are mad at all."

As he spoke, he dropped his hand to hers on the keys, and she gently withdrew it.

"Don't you see?" he complained. "Yet you wanted me to come back?"

"I wanted you to come back," she acknowledged, with her straight look into his eyes. "I wanted you to come back," she repeated, more softly, as if musing.

"And I'm all at sea," he exclaimed impatiently. "You do love me?"

"I do love you, Evan--you know that. But..." She paused and seemed to be weighing the matter judicially.

"But what?" he commanded. "Go on."

"But I love Dick, too. Isn't it ridiculous?"

He did not respond to her smile, and her eyes delightedly warmed to the boyish sullenness that vexed his own eyes. A thought was hot on his tongue, but he restrained the utterance of it while she wondered

what it was, disappointed not to have had it.

"It will work out," she assured him gravely. "It will have to work out somehow. Dick says all things work out. All is change. What is static is dead, and we're not dead, any of us... are we?"

"I don't blame you for loving Dick, for... for continuing to love Dick," he answered impatiently. "And for that matter, I don't see what you find in me compared with him. This is honest. He is a great man to me, and Great Heart is his name--" she rewarded him with a smile and nod of approval. "But if you continue to love Dick, how about me?"

"But I love you, too."

"It can't be," he cried, tearing himself from the piano to make a hasty march across the room and stand contemplating the Keith on the opposite wall as if he had never seen it before.

She waited with a quiet smile, pleasuring in his unruly impetuosity.

"You can't love two men at once," he flung at her.

"Oh, but I do, Evan. That's what I am trying to work out. Only I don't know which I love more. Dick I have known a long time. You... you are a--"

"Recent acquaintance," he broke in, returning to her with the same angry stride.

"Not that, no, not that, Evan. You have made a revelation to me of myself. I love you as much as Dick. I love you more. I--I don't know."

She broke down and buried her face in her hands, permitting his hand to rest tenderly on her shoulder.

"You see it is not easy for me," she went on. "There is so much involved, so much that I cannot understand. You say you are all at sea. Then think of me all at sea and worse confounded. You--oh, why talk about it--you are a man with a man's experiences, with a man's nature. It is all very simple to you. 'She loves me, she loves me not.' But I am tangled, confused. I--and I wasn't born yesterday--have had no experience in loving variously. I have never had affairs. I loved only one man... and now you. You, and this love for you, have broken into a perfect marriage, Evan--"

"I know--" he said.

"--I don't know," she went on. "I must have time, either to work it out myself or to let it work itself out. If it only weren't for Dick..." her voice trailed off pathetically.

Unconsciously, Graham's hand went farther about her shoulder.

"No, no--not yet," she said softly, as softly she removed it, her own lingering caressingly on his a moment ere she released it. "When you touch me, I can't think," she begged. "I--I can't think."

"Then I must go," he threatened, without any sense of threatening. She made a gesture of protest. "The present situation is impossible, unbearable. I feel like a cur, and all the time I know I am not a cur. I hate deception--oh, I can lie with the Pathan, to the Pathan--but I can't deceive a man like Great Heart. I'd prefer going right up to him and saying: 'Dick, I love your wife. She loves me. What are you going to do about it?'"

"Do so," Paula said, fired for the moment.

Graham straightened up with resolution.

"I will. And now."

"No, no," she cried in sudden panic. "You must go away." Again her voice trailed off, as she said, "But I can't let you go."

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If Dick had had any reason to doubt his suspicion of the state of Paula's heart, that reason vanished with the return of Graham. He need

look nowhere for confirmation save to Paula. She was in a flushed awakening, burgeoning like the full spring all about them, a happier tone in her happy laugh, a richer song in her throat, a warmness of excitement and a continuous energy of action animating her. She was up early and to bed late. She did not conserve herself, but seemed to live on the champagne of her spirits, until Dick wondered if it was because she did not dare allow herself time to think.

He watched her lose flesh, and acknowledged to himself that the one result was to make her look lovelier than ever, to take on an almost spiritual delicacy under her natural vividness of color and charm.

And the Big House ran on in its frictionless, happy, and remorseless way. Dick sometimes speculated how long it would continue so to run on, and recoiled from contemplation of a future in which it might not so run on. As yet, he was confident, no one knew, no one guessed, but himself. But how long could that continue? Not long, he was certain. Paula was not sufficiently the actress. And were she a master at concealment of trivial, sordid detail, yet the new note and flush of her would be beyond the power of any woman to hide.

He knew his Asiatic servants were marvels of discernment--and discretion, he had to add. But there were the women. Women were cats. To the best of them it would be great joy to catch the radiant, unimpeachable Paula as clay as any daughter of Eve. And any chance woman in the house, for a day, or an evening, might glimpse the

situation--Paula's situation, at least, for he could not make out Graham's attitude yet. Trust a woman to catch a woman.

But Paula, different in other ways, was different in this. He had never seen her display cattishness, never known her to be on the lookout for other women on the chance of catching them tripping--except in relation to him. And he grinned again at the deliciousness of the affair with Mrs. Dehameney which had been an affair only in Paula's apprehension.

Among other things of wonderment, Dick speculated if Paula wondered if he knew.

And Paula did wonder, and for a time without avail. She could detect no change in his customary ways and moods or treatment of her. He turned off his prodigious amount of work as usual, played as usual, chanted his songs, and was the happy good fellow. She tried to imagine an added sweetness toward her, but vexed herself with the fear that it was imagined.

But it was not for long that she was in doubt. Sometimes in a crowd, at table, in the living room in the evening, or at cards, she would gaze at him through half-veiled lashes when he was unaware, until she was certain she saw the knowledge in his eyes and face. But no hint of this did she give to Graham. His knowing would not help matters. It might even send him away, which she frankly admitted to herself was

the last thing she should want to happen.

But when she came to a realization that she was almost certain Dick knew or guessed, she hardened, deliberately dared to play with the fire. If Dick knew--since he knew, she framed it to herself--why did he not speak? He was ever a straight talker. She both desired and feared that he might, until the fear faded and her earnest hope was that he would. He was the one who acted, did things, no matter what they were. She had always depended upon him as the doer. Graham had called the situation a triangle. Well, Dick could solve it. He could solve anything. Then why didn't he?

In the meantime, she persisted in her ardent recklessness, trying not to feel the conscience-pricks of her divided allegiance, refusing to think too deeply, riding the top of the wave of her life--as she assured herself, living, living, living. At times she scarcely knew what she thought, save that she was very proud in having two such men at heel. Pride had always been one of her dominant key-notes--pride of accomplishment, achievement, mastery, as with her music, her appearance, her swimming. It was all one--to dance, as she well knew, beautifully; to dress with distinction and beauty; to swan-dive, all grace and courage, as few women dared; or, all fragility, to avalanche down the spill-way on the back of Mountain Lad and by the will and steel of her swim the huge beast across the tank.

She was proud, a woman of their own race and type, to watch these two



gray-eyed blond men together. She was excited, feverish, but not nervous. Quite coldly, sometimes, she compared the two when they were together, and puzzled to know for which of them she made herself more beautiful, more enticing. Graham she held, and she had held Dick and strove still to hold him.

There was almost a touch of cruelty in the tingles of pride that were hers at thought of these two royal men suffering for her and because of her; for she did not hide from herself the conviction that if Dick knew, or, rather, since he did know, he, too, must be suffering. She assured herself that she was a woman of imagination and purpose in sex matters, and that no part of her attraction toward Graham lay merely in his freshness, newness, difference. And she denied to herself that passion played more than the most minor part. Deep down she was conscious of her own recklessness and madness, and of an end to it all that could not but be dreadful to some one of them or all of them. But she was content willfully to flutter far above such deeps and to refuse to consider their existence. Alone, looking at herself in her mirror, she would shake her head in mock reproof and cry out, "Oh, you huntress! You huntress!" And when she did permit herself to think a little gravely, it was to admit that Shaw and the sages of the madrono grove might be right in their diatribes on the hunting proclivities of women.

She denied Dar Hyal's statement that woman was nature's failure to make a man; but again and again came to her Wilde's, "Woman attacks by

sudden and strange surrenders." Had she so attacked Graham? she asked herself. Sudden and strange, to her, were the surrenders she had already made. Were there to be more? He wanted to go. With her, or without her, he wanted to go. But she held him--how? Was there a tacit promise of surrenders to come? And she would laugh away further consideration, confine herself to the fleeting present, and make her body more beautiful, and mood herself to be more fascinating, and glow with happiness in that she was living, thrilling, as she had never dreamed to live and thrill.