CHAPTER XXVII

But it is not the way for a man and a woman, in propinquity, to maintain a definite, unwavering distance asunder. Imperceptibly Paula and Graham drew closer. From lingering eye-gazings and hand-touchings the way led to permitted caresses, until there was a second clasping in the arms and a second kiss long on the lips. Nor this time did Paula flame in anger. Instead, she commanded:

"You must not go."

"I must not stay," Graham reiterated for the thousandth time. "Oh, I have kissed behind doors, and been guilty of all the rest of the silly rubbish," he complained. "But this is you, and this is Dick."

"It will work out, I tell you, Evan."

"Come with me then and of ourselves work it out. Come now."

She recoiled.

"Remember," Graham encouraged, "what Dick said at dinner the night Leo fought the dragons--that if it were you, Paula, his wife, who ran away, he would say 'Bless you, my children.'"

"And that is just why it is so hard, Evan. He is Great Heart.
You named him well. Listen--you watch him now. He is as gentle as he said he would be that night--gentle toward me, I mean. And more. You watch him--"

"He knows?--he has spoken?" Graham broke in.

"He has not spoken, but I am sure he knows, or guesses. You watch him. He won't compete against you--"

"Compete!"

"Just that. He won't compete. Remember at the rodeo yesterday. He was breaking mustangs when our party arrived, but he never mounted again. Now he is a wonderful horse-breaker. You tried your hand. Frankly, while you did fairly well, you couldn't touch him. But he wouldn't show off against you. That alone would make me certain that he guesses.

"Listen. Of late haven't you noticed that he never questions a statement you make, as he used to question, as he questions every one else. He continues to play billiards with you, because there you best him. He fences and singlesticks with you--there you are even. But he won't box or wrestle with you."

"He can out-box and out-wrestle me," Graham muttered ruefully.

"You watch and you will see what I mean by not competing. He is treating me like a spirited colt, giving me my head to make a mess of things if I want to. Not for the world would he interfere. Oh, trust me, I know him. It is his own code that he is living up to. He could teach the philosophers what applied philosophy is.

"No, no; listen," she rushed over Graham's attempt to interrupt. "I want to tell you more. There is a secret staircase that goes up from the library to Dick's work room. Only he and I use it, and his secretaries. When you arrive at the head of it, you are right in his room, surrounded by shelves of books. I have just come from there. I was going in to see him when I heard voices. Of course it was ranch business, I thought, and they would soon be gone. So I waited. It was ranch business, but it was so interesting, so, what Hancock would call, illuminating, that I remained and eavesdropped. It was illuminating of Dick, I mean.

"It was the wife of one of the workmen Dick had on the carpet. Such things do arise on a large place like this. I wouldn't know the woman if I saw her, and I didn't recognize her name. She was whimpering out her trouble when Dick stopped her. 'Never mind all that,' he said. 'What I want to know is, did you give Smith any encouragement?'

"Smith isn't his name, but he is one of our foremen and has worked

eight years for Dick.

"'Oh, no, sir,' I could hear her answer. 'He went out of his way from the first to bother me. I've tried to keep out of his way, always. Besides, my husband's a violent-tempered man, and I did so want him to hold his job here. He's worked nearly a year for you now, and there aren't any complaints, are there? Before that it was irregular work for a long time, and we had real hard times. It wasn't his fault. He ain't a drinking man. He always--'

"'That's all right,' Dick stopped her. 'His work and habits have nothing to do with the matter. Now you are sure you have never encouraged Mr. Smith in any way?' And she was so sure that she talked for ten minutes, detailing the foreman's persedition of her. She had a pleasant voice--one of those sweet, timid, woman's voices, and undoubtedly is quite attractive. It was all I could do to resist peeping. I wanted to see what she looked like.

"'Now this trouble, yesterday morning,' Dick said. 'Was it general? I mean, outside of your husband, and Mr. Smith, was the scene such that those who live around you knew of it?'

"'Yes, sir. You see, he had no right to come into my kitchen. My husband doesn't work under him anyway. And he had his arm around me and was trying to kiss me when my husband came in. My husband has a temper, but he ain't overly strong. Mr. Smith would make two of him.

So he pulled a knife, and Mr. Smith got him by the arms, and they fought all over the kitchen. I knew there was murder going to be done and I run out screaming for help. The folks in the other cottages'd heard the racket already. They'd smashed the window and the cook stove, and the place was filled with smoke and ashes when the neighbors dragged them away from each other. I'd done nothing to deserve all that disgrace. You know, sir, the way the women will talk--'

"And Dick hushed her up there, and took all of five minutes more in getting rid of her. Her great fear was that her husband would lose his place. From what Dick told her, I waited. He had made no decision, and I knew the foreman was next on the carpet. In he came. I'd have given the world to see him. But I could only listen.

"Dick jumped right into the thick of it. He described the scene and uproar, and Smith acknowledged that it had been riotous for a while. 'She says she gave you no encouragement,' Dick said next.

"'Then she lies,' said Smith. 'She has that way of looking with her eyes that's an invitation. She looked at me that way from the first. But it was by word-of-mouth invitation that I was in her kitchen yesterday morning. We didn't expect the husband. But she began to struggle when he hove in sight. When she says she gave me no encouragement--'

"'Never mind all that,' Dick stopped him. 'It's not essential.' 'But it is, Mr. Forrest, if I am to clear myself,' Smith insisted.

"'No; it is not essential to the thing you can't clear yourself of,' Dick answered, and I could hear that cold, hard, judicial note come into his voice. Smith could not understand. Dick told him. 'The thing you have been guilty of, Mr. Smith, is the scene, the disturbance, the scandal, the wagging of the women's tongues now going on forty to the minute, the impairment of the discipline and order of the ranch, all of which is boiled down to the one grave thing, the hurt to the ranch efficiency.'

"And still Smith couldn't see. He thought the charge was of violating social morality by pursuing a married woman, and tried to mitigate the offense by showing the woman encouraged him and by pleading: 'And after all, Mr. Forrest, a man is only a man, and I admit she made a fool of me and I made a fool of myself.' "'Mr. Smith,' Dick said. 'You've worked for me eight years. You've been a foreman six years of that time. I have no complaint against your work. You certainly do know how to handle labor. About your personal morality I don't care a damn. You can be a Mormon or a Turk for all it matters to me. Your private acts are your private acts, and are no concern of mine as long as they do not interfere with your work or my ranch. Any one of my drivers can drink his head off Saturday night, and every Saturday night. That's his business. But the minute he shows a hold-over on Monday morning that is taken out on my horses, that excites them, or

injures them, or threatens to injure them, or that decreases in the slightest the work they should perform on Monday, that moment it is my business and the driver goes down the hill.'

"'You, you mean, Mr. Forrest,' Smith stuttered, 'that, that I'm to go down the hill?' 'That is just what I mean, Mr. Smith. You are to go down the hill, not because you climbed over another man's fence--that's your business and his; but because you were guilty of causing a disturbance that is an impairment of ranch efficiency.'

"Do you know, Evan," Paula broke in on her recital, "Dick can nose more human tragedy out of columns of ranch statistics than can the average fiction writer out of the whirl of a great city. Take the milk reports--the individual reports of the milkers--so many pounds of milk, morning and night, from cow so-and-so, so many pounds from cow so-and-so. He doesn't have to know the man. But there is a decrease in the weight of milk. 'Mr. Parkman,' he'll say to the head dairyman, 'is Barchi Peratta married?' 'Yes, sir.' 'Is he having trouble with his wife?' 'Yes, sir.'

"Or it will be: 'Mr. Parkman, Simpkins has the best long-time record of any of our milkers. Now he's slumped. What's up?' Mr. Parkman doesn't know. 'Investigate,' says Dick. 'There's something on his chest. Talk to him like an uncle and find out. We've got to get it off his chest.' And Mr. Parkman finds out. Simpkins' boy; working his way through Stanford University, has elected the joy-ride path and is in

jail waiting trial for forgery. Dick put his own lawyers on the case, smoothed it over, got the boy out on probation, and Simpkins' milk reports came back to par. And the best of it is, the boy made good, Dick kept an eye on him, saw him through the college of engineering, and he's now working for Dick on the dredging end, earning a hundred and fifty a month, married, with a future before him, and his father still milks."

"You are right," Graham murmured sympathetically. "I well named him when I named him Great Heart."

"I call him my Rock of Ages," Paula said gratefully. "He is so solid. He stands in any storm.--Oh, you don't really know him. He is so sure. He stands right up. He's never taken a cropper in his life. God smiles on him. God has always smiled on him. He's never been beaten down to his knees... yet. I... I should not care to see that sight. It would be heartbreaking. And, Evan--" Her hand went out to his in a pleading gesture that merged into a half-caress. "--I am afraid for him now. That is why I don't know what to do. It is not for myself that I back and fill and hesitate. If he were ignoble, if he were narrow, if he were weak or had one tiniest shred of meanness, if he had ever been beaten to his knees before, why, my dear, my dear, I should have been gone with you long ago."

Her eyes filled with sudden moisture. She stilled him with a pressure of her hand, and, to regain herself, she went back to her recital:

"'Your little finger, Mr. Smith, I consider worth more to me and to the world,' Dick, told him, 'than the whole body of this woman's husband. Here's the report on him: willing, eager to please, not bright, not strong, an indifferent workman at best. Yet you have to go down the hill, and I am very, very sorry.'

"Oh, yes, there was more. But I've given you the main of it. You see Dick's code there. And he lives his code. He accords latitude to the individual. Whatever the individual may do, so long as it does not hurt the group of individuals in which he lives, is his own affair. He believed Smith had a perfect right to love the woman, and to be loved by her if it came to that. I have heard him always say that love could not be held nor enforced. Truly, did I go with you, he would say, 'Bless you, my children.' Though it broke his heart he would say it. Past love, he believes, gives no hold over the present. And every hour of love, I have heard him say, pays for itself, on both sides, quittance in full. He claims there can be no such thing as a love-debt, laughs at the absurdity of love-claims."

"And I agree with him," Graham said. "'You promised to love me always,' says the jilted one, and then strives to collect as if it were a promissory note for so many dollars. Dollars are dollars, but love lives or dies. When it is dead how can it be collected? We are all agreed, and the way is simple. We love. It is enough. Why delay another minute?"

His fingers strayed along her fingers on the keyboard as he bent to her, first kissing her hair, then slowly turning her face up to his and kissing her willing lips.

"Dick does not love me like you," she said; "not madly, I mean. He has had me so long, I think I have become a habit to him. And often and often, before I knew you, I used to puzzle whether he cared more for the ranch or more for me."

"It is so simple," Graham urged. "All we have to do is to be straightforward. Let us go."

He drew her to her feet and made as if to start.

But she drew away from him suddenly, sat down, and buried her flushed face in her hands.

"You do not understand, Evan. I love Dick. I shall always love him."

"And me?" Graham demanded sharply.

"Oh, without saying," she smiled. "You are the only man, besides Dick, that has ever kissed me this... way, and that I have kissed this way. But I can't make up my mind. The triangle, as you call it, must be solved for me. I can't solve it myself. I compare the two of you,

weigh you, measure you. I remember Dick and all our past years. And I consult my heart for you. And I don't know. I don't know. You are a great man, my great lover. But Dick is a greater man than you. You--you are more clay, more--I grope to describe you--more human, I fancy. And that is why I love you more... or at least I think perhaps I do.

"But wait," she resisted him, prisoning his eager hand in hers. "There is more I want to say. I remember Dick and all our past years. But I remember him to-day, as well, and to-morrow. I cannot bear the thought that any man should pity my husband, that you should pity him, and pity him you must when I confess that I love you more. That is why I am not sure. That is why I so quickly take it back and do not know.

"I'd die of shame if through act of mine any man pitied Dick. Truly, I would. Of all things ghastly, I can think of none so ghastly as Dick being pitied. He has never been pitied in his life. He has always been top-dog--bright, light, strong, unassailable. And more, he doesn't deserve pity. And it's my fault... and yours, Evan."

She abruptly thrust Evan's hand away.

"And every act, every permitted touch of you, does make him pitiable. Don't you see how tangled it is for me? And then there is my own pride. That you should see me disloyal to him in little things, such as this--" (she caught his hand again and caressed it with soft finger-tips) "--hurts me in my love for you, diminishes me, must

diminish me in your eyes. I shrink from the thought that my disloyalty to him in this I do--" (she laid his hand against her cheek) "--gives you reason to pity him and censure me."

She soothed the impatience of the hand on her cheek, and, almost absently, musingly scrutinizing it without consciously seeing it, turned it over and slowly kissed the palm. The next moment she was drawn to her feet and into his arms.

"There, you see," was her reproach as she disengaged herself.

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"Why do you tell me all this about Dick?" Graham demanded another time, as they walked their horses side by side. "To keep me away? To protect yourself from me?"

Paula nodded, then quickly added, "No, not quite that. Because you know I don't want to keep you away ... too far. I say it because Dick is so much in my mind. For twelve years, you realize, he filled my mind. I say it because ... because I think it, I suppose. Think! The situation! You are trespassing on a perfect marriage."

"I know it," he answered. "And I do not like the role of trespasser. It is your insistence, instead of going away with me, that I should trespass. And I can't help it. I think away from you, try to force my

thoughts elsewhere. I did half a chapter this morning, and I know it's rotten and will have to be rewritten. For I can't succeed in thinking away from you. What is South America and its ethnology compared to you? And when I come near you my arms go about you before I know what I am doing. And, by God, you want them there, you want them there, you know it."

Paula gathered her reins in signal for a gallop, but first, with a roguish smile, she acknowledged.

"I do want them there, dear trespasser."

Paula yielded and fought at the same time.

"I love my husband--never forget that," she would warn Graham, and within the minute be in his arms.

* * * * *

"There are only the three of us for once, thank goodness," Paula cried, seizing Dick and Graham by the hands and leading them toward Dick's favorite lounging couch in the big room. "Come, let us sit upon the ground and tell sad stories of the deaths of kings. Come, milords, and lordly perishers, and we will talk of Armageddon when the last sun goes down."

She was in a merry mood, and with surprise Dick observed her light a cigarette. He could count on his fingers the cigarettes she had smoked in a dozen years, and then, only under a hostess's provocation to give countenance to some smoking woman guest. Later, when he mixed a highball for himself and Graham, she again surprised him by asking him to mix her a "wee" one.

"This is Scotch," he warned.

"Oh, a very wee one," she insisted, "and then we'll be three good fellows together, winding up the world. And when you've got it all wound up and ready, I'll sing you the song of the Valkyries."

She took more part in the talk than usual, and strove to draw her husband out. Nor was Dick unaware of this, although he yielded and permitted himself to let go full tilt on the theme of the blond sun-perishers.

She is trying to make him compete--was Graham's thought. But Paula scarcely thought of that phase of it, her pleasure consisting in the spectacle of two such splendid men who were hers. They talk of big game hunting, she mused once to herself; but did ever one small woman capture bigger game than this?

She sat cross-legged on the couch, where, by a turn of the head, she could view Graham lounging comfortably in the big chair, or Dick, on

his elbow, sprawled among the cushions. And ever, as they talked, her eyes roved from one to the other; and, as they spoke of struggle and battle, always in the cold iron terms of realists, her own thoughts became so colored, until she could look coolly at Dick with no further urge of the pity that had intermittently ached her heart for days.

She was proud of him--a goodly, eye-filling figure of a man to any woman; but she no longer felt sorry for him. They were right. It was a game. The race was to the swift, the battle to the strong. They had run such races, fought such battles. Then why not she? And as she continued to look, that self-query became reiterant.

They were not anchorites, these two men. Liberal-lived they must have been in that past out of which, like mysteries, they had come to her. They had had the days and nights that women were denied--women such as she. As for Dick, beyond all doubt--even had she heard whispers--there had been other women in that wild career of his over the world. Men were men, and they were two such men. She felt a burn of jealousy against those unknown women who must have been, and her heart hardened. They had taken their fun where they found it--Kipling's line ran through her head.

Pity? Why should she pity, any more than she should be pitied? The whole thing was too big, too natural, for pity. They were taking a hand in a big game, and all could not be winners. Playing with the fancy, she wandered on to a consideration of the outcome. Always she

had avoided such consideration, but the tiny highball had given her daring. It came to her that she saw doom ahead, doom vague and formless but terrible.

She was brought back to herself by Dick's hand before her eyes and apparently plucking from the empty air the something upon which she steadfastly stared.

"Seeing things?" he teased, as her eyes turned to meet his.

His were laughing, but she glimpsed in them what, despite herself, made her veil her own with her long lashes. He knew. Beyond all possibility of error she knew now that he knew. That was what she had seen in his eyes and what had made her veil her own.

"'Cynthia, Cynthia, I've been a-thinking,'" she gayly hummed to him; and, as he resumed his talk, she reached and took a sip from his part-empty glass.

Let come what would, she asserted to herself, she would play it out. It was all a madness, but it was life, it was living. She had never so lived before, and it was worth it, no matter what inevitable payment must be made in the end. Love?--had she ever really loved Dick as she now felt herself capable of loving? Had she mistaken the fondness of affection for love all these years? Her eyes warmed as they rested on Graham, and she admitted that he had swept her as Dick never had.

Unused to alcohol in such strength, her heart was accelerated; and Dick, with casual glances, noted and knew the cause of the added brilliance, the flushed vividness of cheeks and lips.

He talked less and less, and the discussion of the sun-perishers died of mutual agreement as to its facts. Finally, glancing at his watch, he straightened up, yawned, stretched his arms and announced:

"Bed-time he stop. Head belong this fellow white man too much sleepy along him.--Nightcap, Evan?"

Graham nodded, for both felt the need of a stiffener.

"Mrs. Toper--nightcap?" Dick queried of Paula.

But she shook her head and busied herself at the piano putting away the music, while the men had their drink.

Graham closed down the piano for her, while Dick waited in the doorway, so that when they left he led them by a dozen feet. As they came along, Graham, under her instructions, turned off the lights in the halls. Dick waited where the ways diverged and where Graham would have to say good night on his way to the tower room.

The one remaining light was turned off.

"Oh, not that one, silly," Dick heard Paula cry out. "We keep it on all night."

Dick heard nothing, but the dark was fervent to him. He cursed himself for his own past embraces in the dark, for so the wisdom was given him to know the quick embrace that had occurred, ere, the next moment, the light flashed on again.

He found himself lacking the courage to look at their faces as they came toward him. He did not want to see Paula's frank eyes veiled by her lashes, and he fumbled to light a cigarette while he cudgeled his wits for the wording of an ordinary good night.

"How goes the book?--what chapter?" he called after Graham down his hall, as Paula put her hand in his.

Her hand in his, swinging his, hopping and skipping and all a-chatter in simulation of a little girl with a grown-up, Paula went on with Dick; while he sadly pondered what ruse she had in mind by which to avoid the long-avoided, good night kiss.

Evidently she had not found it when they reached the dividing of the ways that led to her quarters and to his. Still swinging his hand, still buoyantly chattering fun, she continued with him into his workroom. Here he surrendered. He had neither heart nor energy to wait

for her to develop whatever she contemplated.

He feigned sudden recollection, deflected her by the hand to his desk, and picked up a letter.

"I'd promised myself to get a reply off on the first machine in the morning," he explained, as he pressed on the phonograph and began dictating.

For a paragraph she still held his hand. Then he felt the parting pressure of her fingers and her whispered good night.

"Good night, little woman," he answered mechanically, and continued dictating as if oblivious to her going.

Nor did he cease until he knew she was well out of hearing.