

CHAPTER XXVIII

A dozen times that morning, dictating to Blake or indicating answers, Dick had been on the verge of saying to let the rest of the correspondence go.

"Call up Hennessy and Mendenhall," he told Blake, when, at ten, the latter gathered up his notes and rose to go. "You ought to catch them at the stallion barn. Tell them not to come this morning but to-morrow morning."

Bonbright entered, prepared to shorthand Dick's conversations with his managers for the next hour.

"And--oh, Mr. Blake," Dick called. "Ask Hennessy about Alden Bessie.-- The old mare was pretty bad last night," he explained to Bonbright.

"Mr. Hanley must see you right away, Mr. Forrest," Bonbright said, and added, at sight of the irritated drawing up of his employer's brows, "It's the piping from Buckeye Dam. Something's wrong with the plans--a serious mistake, he says."

Dick surrendered, and for an hour discussed ranch business with his foremen and managers.

Once, in the middle of a hot discussion over sheep-dips with Wardman, he left his desk and paced over to the window. The sound of voices and horses, and of Paula's laugh, had attracted him.

"Take that Montana report--I'll send you a copy to-day," he continued, as he gazed out. "They found the formula didn't get down to it. It was more a sedative than a germicide. There wasn't enough kick in it..."

Four horses, bunched, crossed his field of vision. Paula, teasing the pair of them, was between Martinez and Froelig, old friends of Dick, a painter and sculptor respectively, who had arrived on an early train. Graham, on Selim, made the fourth, and was slightly edged toward the rear. So the party went by, but Dick reflected that quickly enough it would resolve itself into two and two.

Shortly after eleven, restless and moody, he wandered out with a cigarette into the big patio, where he smiled grim amusement at the various tell-tale signs of Paula's neglect of her goldfish. The sight of them suggested her secret patio in whose fountain pools she kept her selected and more gorgeous blooms of fish. Thither he went, through doors without knobs, by ways known only to Paula and the servants.

This had been Dick's one great gift to Paula. It was love-lavish as only a king of fortune could make it. He had given her a free hand

with it, and insisted on her wildest extravagance; and it had been his delight to tease his quondam guardians with the stubs of the checkbook she had used. It bore no relation to the scheme and architecture of the Big House, and, for that matter, so deeply hidden was it that it played no part in jar of line or color. A show-place of show-places, it was not often shown. Outside Paula's sisters and intimates, on rare occasions some artist was permitted to enter and catch his breath. Graham had heard of its existence, but not even him had she invited to see.

It was round, and small enough to escape giving any cold hint of spaciousness. The Big House was of sturdy concrete, but here was marble in exquisite delicacy. The arches of the encircling arcade were of fretted white marble that had taken on just enough tender green to prevent any glare of reflected light. Palest of pink roses bloomed up the pillars and over the low flat roof they upheld, where Puck-like, humorous, and happy faces took the place of grinning gargoyles. Dick strolled the rosy marble pavement of the arcade and let the beauty of the place slowly steal in upon him and gentle his mood.

The heart and key of the fairy patio was the fountain, consisting of three related shallow basins at different levels, of white marble and delicate as shell. Over these basins rollicked and frolicked life-sized babies wrought from pink marble by no mean hand. Some peered over the edges into lower basins, one reached arms covetously toward the goldfish; one, on his back, laughed at the sky, another stood with

dimpled legs apart stretching himself, others waded, others were on the ground amongst the roses white and blush, but all were of the fountain and touched it at some point. So good was the color of the marble, so true had been the sculptor, that the illusion was of life. No cherubs these, but live warm human babies.

Dick regarded the rosy fellowship pleasantly and long, finishing his cigarette and retaining it dead in his hand. That was what she had needed, he mused--babies, children. It had been her passion. Had she realized it... He sighed, and, struck by a fresh thought, looked to her favorite seat with certitude that he would not see the customary sewing lying on it in a pretty heap. She did not sew these days.

He did not enter the tiny gallery behind the arcade, which contained her chosen paintings and etchings, and copies in marble and bronze of her favorites of the European galleries. Instead he went up the stairway, past the glorious Winged Victory on the landing where the staircase divided, and on and up into her quarters that occupied the entire upper wing. But first, pausing by the Victory, he turned and gazed down into the fairy patio. The thing was a cut jewel in its perfectness and color, and he acknowledged, although he had made it possible for her, that it was entirely her own creation--her one masterpiece. It had long been her dream, and he had realized it for her. And yet now, he meditated, it meant nothing to her. She was not mercenary, that he knew; and if he could not hold her, mere baubles such as that would weigh nothing in the balance against her heart.

He wandered idly through her rooms, scarcely noting at what he gazed, but gazing with fondness at it all. Like everything else of hers, it was distinctive, different, eloquent of her. But when he glanced into the bathroom with its sunken Roman bath, for the life of him he was unable to avoid seeing a tiny drip and making a mental note for the ranch plumber.

As a matter of course, he looked to her easel with the expectation of finding no new work, but was disappointed; for a portrait of himself confronted him. He knew her trick of copying the pose and lines from a photograph and filling in from memory. The particular photograph she was using had been a fortunate snapshot of him on horseback. The Outlaw, for once and for a moment, had been at peace, and Dick, hat in hand, hair just nicely ruffled, face in repose, unaware of the impending snap, had at the instant looked squarely into the camera. No portrait photographer could have caught a better likeness. The head and shoulders Paula had had enlarged, and it was from this that she was working. But the portrait had already gone beyond the photograph, for Dick could see her own touches.

With a start he looked more closely. Was that expression of the eyes, of the whole face, his? He glanced at the photograph. It was not there. He walked over to one of the mirrors, relaxed his face, and led his thoughts to Paula and Graham. Slowly the expression came into his eyes and face. Not content, he returned to the easel and verified it.

Paula knew. Paula knew that he knew. She had learned it from him, stolen it from him some time when it was unwittingly on his face, and carried it in her memory to the canvas.

Paula's Chinese maid, Oh Dear, entered from the wardrobe room, and Dick watched her unobserved as she came down the room toward him. Her eyes were down, and she seemed deep in thought. Dick remarked the sadness of her face, and that the little, solicitous contraction of the brows that had led to her naming was gone. She was not solicitous, that was patent. But cast down, she was, in heavy depression.

It would seem that all our faces are beginning to say things, he commented to himself.

"Good morning, Oh Dear," he startled her.

And as she returned the greeting, he saw compassion in her eyes as they dwelt on him. She knew. The first outside themselves. Trust her, a woman, so much in Paula's company when Paula was alone, to divine Paula's secret.

Oh Dear's lips trembled, and she wrung her trembling hands, nerving herself, as he could see, to speech.

"Mister Forrest," she began haltingly, "maybe you think me fool, but I like say something. You very kind man. You very kind my old mother.

You very kind me long long time..."

She hesitated, moistening her frightened lips with her tongue, then braved her eyes to his and proceeded.

"Mrs. Forrest, she, I think..."

But so forbidding did Dick's face become that she broke off in confusion and blushed, as Dick surmised, with shame at the thoughts she had been about to utter.

"Very nice picture Mrs. Forrest make," he put her at her ease.

The Chinese girl sighed, and the same compassion returned into her eyes as she looked long at Dick's portrait.

She sighed again, but the coldness in her voice was not lost on Dick as she answered: "Yes, very nice picture Mrs. Forrest make."

She looked at him with sudden sharp scrutiny, studying his face, then turned to the canvas and pointed at the eyes.

"No good," she condemned.

Her voice was harsh, touched with anger.

"No good," she flung over her shoulder, more loudly, still more harshly, as she continued down the room and out of sight on Paula's sleeping porch.

Dick stiffened his shoulders, unconsciously bracing himself to face what was now soon to happen. Well, it was the beginning of the end. Oh Dear knew. Soon more would know, all would know. And in a way he was glad of it, glad that the torment of suspense would endure but little longer.

But when he started to leave he whistled a merry jingle to advertise to Oh Dear that the world wagged very well with him so far as he knew anything about it.

* * * * *

The same afternoon, while Dick was out and away with Froelig and Martinez and Graham, Paula stole a pilgrimage to Dick's quarters. Out on his sleeping porch she looked over his rows of press buttons, his switchboard that from his bed connected him with every part of the ranch and most of the rest of California, his phonograph on the hinged and swinging bracket, the orderly array of books and magazines and agricultural bulletins waiting to be read, the ash tray, cigarettes, scribble pads, and thermos bottle.

Her photograph, the only picture on the porch, held her attention. It

hung under his barometers and thermometers, which, she knew, was where he looked oftenest. A fancy came to her, and she turned the laughing face to the wall and glanced from the blankness of the back of the frame to the bed and back again. With a quick panic movement, she turned the laughing face out. It belonged, was her thought; it did belong.

The big automatic pistol in the holster on the wall, handy to one's hand from the bed, caught her eye. She reached to it and lifted gently at the butt. It was as she had expected--loose--Dick's way. Trust him, no matter how long unused, never to let a pistol freeze in its holster.

Back in the work room she wandered solemnly about, glancing now at the prodigious filing system, at the chart and blue-print cabinets, at the revolving shelves of reference books, and at the long rows of stoutly bound herd registers. At last she came to his books--a goodly row of pamphlets, bound magazine articles, and an even dozen ambitious tomes. She read the titles painstakingly: "Corn in California," "Silage Practice," "Farm Organization," "Farm Book-keeping," "The Shire in America," "Humus Destruction," "Soilage," "Alfalfa in California," "Cover Crops for California," "The Shorthorn in America"--at this last she smiled affectionately with memory of the great controversy he had waged for the beef cow and the milch cow as against the dual purpose cow.

She caressed, the backs of the books with her palm, pressed her cheek against them and leaned with closed eyes. Oh, Dick, Dick--a thought began that faded to a vagueness of sorrow and died because she did not dare to think it.

The desk was so typically Dick. There was no litter. Clean it was of all work save the wire tray with typed letters waiting his signature and an unusual pile of the flat yellow sheets on which his secretaries typed the telegrams relayed by telephone from Eldorado. Carelessly she ran her eyes over the opening lines of the uppermost sheet and chanced upon a reference that puzzled and interested her. She read closely, with in-drawn brows, then went deeper into the heap till she found confirmation. Jeremy Braxton was dead--big, genial, kindly Jeremy Braxton. A Mexican mob of pulque-crazed peons had killed him in the mountains through which he had been trying to escape from the Harvest into Arizona. The date of the telegram was two days old. Dick had known it for two days and never worried her with it. And it meant more. It meant money. It meant that the affairs of the Harvest Group were going from bad to worse. And it was Dick's way.

And Jeremy was dead. The room seemed suddenly to have grown cold. She shivered. It was the way of life--death always at the end of the road. And her own nameless dread came back upon her. Doom lay ahead. Doom for whom? She did not attempt to guess. Sufficient that it was doom. Her mind was heavy with it, and the quiet room was heavy with it as she passed slowly out.