

CHAPTER XXIX

"'Tis a birdlike sensuousness that is all the Little Lady's own," Terrence was saying, as he helped himself to a cocktail from the tray Ah Ha was passing around.

It was the hour before dinner, and Graham, Leo and Terrence McFane had chanced together in the stag-room.

"No, Leo," the Irishman warned the young poet. "Let the one suffice you. Your cheeks are warm with it. A second one and you'll conflagrate. 'Tis no right you have to be mixing beauty and strong drink in that lad's head of yours. Leave the drink to your elders. There is such a thing as consanguinity for drink. You have it not. As for me--"

He emptied the glass and paused to turn the cocktail reminiscently on his tongue.

"'Tis women's drink," he shook his head in condemnation. "It likes me not. It bites me not. And devil a bit of a taste is there to it.--Ah Ha, my boy," he called to the Chinese, "mix me a highball in a long, long glass--a stiff one."

He held up four fingers horizontally to indicate the measure of liquor he would have in the glass, and, to Ah Ha's query as to what kind of whiskey, answered, "Scotch or Irish, bourbon or rye--whichever comes nearest to hand."

Graham shook his head to the Chinese, and laughed to the Irishman. "You'll never drink me down, Terrence. I've not forgotten what you did to O'Hay."

"'Twas an accident I would have you think," was the reply. "They say when a man's not feeling any too fit a bit of drink will hit him like a club."

"And you?" Graham questioned.

"Have never been hit by a club. I am a man of singularly few experiences."

"But, Terrence, you were saying... about Mrs. Forrest?" Leo begged.

"It sounded as if it were going to be nice."

"As if it could be otherwise," Terrence censured. "But as I was saying, 'tis a bird-like sensuousness--oh, not the little, hoppy, wagtail kind, nor yet the sleek and solemn dove, but a merry sort of bird, like the wild canaries you see bathing in the fountains, always twittering and singing, flinging the water in the sun, and glowing the

golden hearts of them on their happy breasts. 'Tis like that the Little Lady is. I have observed her much.

"Everything on the earth and under the earth and in the sky contributes to the passion of her days--the untoward purple of the ground myrtle when it has no right to aught more than pale lavender, a single red rose tossing in the bathing wind, one perfect Duchesse rose bursting from its bush into the sunshine, as she said to me, 'pink as the dawn, Terrence, and shaped like a kiss.'

"'Tis all one with her--the Princess's silver neigh, the sheep bells of a frosty morn, the pretty Angora goats making silky pictures on the hillside all day long, the drifts of purple lupins along the fences, the long hot grass on slope and roadside, the summer-burnt hills tawny as crouching lions--and even have I seen the sheer sensuous pleasure of the Little Lady with bathing her arms and neck in the blessed sun."

"She is the soul of beauty," Leo murmured. "One understands how men can die for women such as she."

"And how men can live for them, and love them, the lovely things," Terrence added. "Listen, Mr. Graham, and I'll tell you a secret. We philosophers of the madroño grove, we wrecks and wastages of life here in the quiet backwater and easement of Dick's munificence, are a brotherhood of lovers. And the lady of our hearts is all the one--the Little Lady. We, who merely talk and dream our days away, and who

would lift never a hand for God, or country, or the devil, are pledged knights of the Little Lady."

"We would die for her," Leo affirmed, slowly nodding his head.

"Nay, lad, we would live for her and fight for her, dying is that easy."

Graham missed nothing of it. The boy did not understand, but in the blue eyes of the Celt, peering from under the mop of iron-gray hair, there was no mistaking the knowledge of the situation.

Voices of men were heard coming down the stairs, and, as Martinez and Dar Hyal entered, Terrence was saying:

"'Tis fine weather they say they're having down at Catalina now, and I hear the tunny fish are biting splendid."

Ah Ha served cocktails around, and was kept busy, for Hancock and Froelig followed along. Terrence impartially drank stiff highballs of whatever liquor the immobile-faced Chinese elected to serve him, and discoursed fatherly to Leo on the iniquities and abominations of the flowing bowl.

Oh My entered, a folded note in his hand, and looked about in doubt as to whom to give it.

"Hither, wing-heeled Celestial," Terrence waved him up.

"'Tis a petition, couched in very proper terms," Terrence explained, after a glance at its contents. "And Ernestine and Lute have arrived, for 'tis they that petition. Listen." And he read: "'Oh, noble and glorious stags, two poor and lowly meek-eyed does, wandering lonely in the forest, do humbly entreat admission for the brief time before dinner to the stamping ground of the herd.'

"The metaphor is mixed," said Terrence. "Yet have they acted well. 'Tis the rule--Dick's rule--and a good rule it is: no petticoats in the stag-room save by the stags' unanimous consent.--Is the herd ready for the question? All those in favor will say 'Aye.'--Contrary minded?--The ayes have it.

"Oh My, fleet with thy heels and bring in the ladies."

"'With sandals beaten from the crowns of kings,'" Leo added, murmuring the words reverently, loving them with his lips as his lips formed them and uttered them.

"'Shall he tread down the altars of their night,'" Terrence completed the passage. "The man who wrote that is a great man. He is Leo's friend, and Dick's friend, and proud am I that he is my friend."

"And that other line," Leo said. "From the same sonnet," he explained to Graham. "Listen to the sound of it: 'To hear what song the star of morning sings'--oh, listen," the boy went on, his voice hushed low with beauty-love for the words: "'With perished beauty in his hands as clay, Shall he restore futurity its dream--'"

He broke off as Paula's sisters entered, and rose shyly to greet them.

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Dinner that night was as any dinner at which the madroño sages were present. Dick was as robustly controversial as usual, locking horns with Aaron Hancock on Bergson, attacking the latter's metaphysics in sharp realistic fashion.

"Your Bergson is a charlatan philosopher, Aaron," Dick concluded. "He has the same old medicine-man's bag of metaphysical tricks, all decked out and frilled with the latest ascertained facts of science."

"'Tis true," Terrence agreed. "Bergson is a charlatan thinker. 'Tis why he is so popular--"

"I deny--" Hancock broke in.

"Wait a wee, Aaron. 'Tis a thought I have glimmered. Let me catch it before it flutters away into the azure. Dick's caught Bergson with the

goods on him, filched straight from the treasure-house of science. His very cocksureness is filched from Darwin's morality of strength based on the survival of the fittest. And what did Bergson do with it? Touched it up with a bit of James' pragmatism, rosied it over with the eternal hope in man's breast that he will live again, and made it all a-shine with Nietzsche's 'nothing succeeds like excess--'

"Wilde's, you mean," corrected Ernestine.

"Heaven knows I should have filched it for myself had you not been present," Terrence sighed, with a bow to her. "Some day the antiquarians will decide the authorship. Personally I would say it smacked of Methuselah--But as I was saying, before I was delightfully interrupted..."

"Who more cocksure than Dick?" Aaron was challenging a little later; while Paula glanced significantly to Graham.

"I was looking at the herd of yearling stallions but yesterday," Terrence replied, "and with the picture of the splendid beasties still in my eyes I'll ask: And who more delivers the goods?"

"But Hancock's objection is solid," Martinez ventured. "It would be a mean and profitless world without mystery. Dick sees no mystery."

"There you wrong him," Terrence defended. "I know him well. Dick

recognizes mystery, but not of the nursery-child variety. No cock-and-bull stories for him, such as you romanticists luxuriate in."

"Terrence gets me," Dick nodded. "The world will always be mystery. To me man's consciousness is no greater mystery than the reaction of the gases that make a simple drop of water. Grant that mystery, and all the more complicated phenomena cease to be mysteries. That simple chemical reaction is like one of the axioms on which the edifice of geometry is reared. Matter and force are the everlasting mysteries, manifesting themselves in the twin mysteries of space and time. The manifestations are not mysteries--only the stuff of the manifestations, matter and force; and the theater of the manifestations, space and time."

Dick ceased and idly watched the expressionless Ah Ha and Ah Me who chanced at the moment to be serving opposite him. Their faces did not talk, was his thought; although ten to one was a fair bet that they were informed with the same knowledge that had perturbed Oh Dear.

"And there you are," Terrence was triumphing. "'Tis the perfect joy of him--never up in the air with dizzy heels. Flat on the good ground he stands, four square to fact and law, set against all airy fancies and bubbly speculations...."

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And as at table, so afterward that evening no one could have guessed from Dick that all was not well with him. He seemed bent on celebrating Lute's and Ernestine's return, refused to tolerate the heavy talk of the philosophers, and bubbled over with pranks and tricks. Paula yielded to the contagion, and aided and abetted him in his practical jokes which none escaped.

Choicest among these was the kiss of welcome. No man escaped it. To Graham was accorded the honor of receiving it first so that he might witness the discomfiture of the others, who, one by one, were ushered in by Dick from the patio.

Hancock, Dick's arm guiding him, came down the room to confront Paula and her sisters standing in a row on three chairs in the middle of the floor. He scanned them suspiciously, and insisted upon walking around behind them. But there seemed nothing unusual about them save that each wore a man's felt hat.

"Looks good to me," Hancock announced, as he stood on the floor before them and looked up at them.

"And it is good," Dick assured him. "As representing the ranch in its fairest aspects, they are to administer the kiss of welcome. Make your choice, Aaron."

Aaron, with a quick whirl to catch some possible lurking disaster at

his back, demanded, "They are all three to kiss me?"

"No, make your choice which is to give you the kiss."

"The two I do not choose will not feel that I have discriminated against them?" Aaron insisted.

"Whiskers no objection?" was his next query.

"Not in the way at all," Lute told him. "I have always wondered what it would be like to kiss black whiskers."

"Here's where all the philosophers get kissed tonight, so hurry up," Ernestine said. "The others are waiting. I, too, have yet to be kissed by an alfalfa field."

"Whom do you choose?" Dick urged.

"As if, after that, there were any choice about it," Hancock returned jauntily. "I kiss my lady--the Little Lady."

As he put up his lips, Paula bent her head forward, and, nicely directed, from the indented crown of her hat canted a glassful of water into his face.

When Leo's turn came, he bravely made his choice of Paula and nearly

spoiled the show by reverently bending and kissing the hem of her gown.

"It will never do," Ernestine told him. "It must be a real kiss. Put up your lips to be kissed."

"Let the last be first and kiss me, Leo," Lute begged, to save him from his embarrassment.

He looked his gratitude, put up his lips, but without enough tilt of his head, so that he received the water from Lute's hat down the back of his neck.

"All three shall kiss me and thus shall paradise be thrice multiplied," was Terrence's way out of the difficulty; and simultaneously he received three crowns of water for his gallantry.

Dick's boisterousness waxed apace. His was the most care-free seeming in the world as he measured Froelig and Martinez against the door to settle the dispute that had arisen as to whether Froelig or Martinez was the taller.

"Knees straight and together, heads back," Dick commanded.

And as their heads touched the wood, from the other side came a rousing thump that jarred them. The door swung open, revealing

Ernestine with a padded gong-stick in either hand.

Dick, a high-heeled satin slipper in his hand, was under a sheet with Terrence, teaching him "Brother Bob I'm bobbed" to the uproarious joy of the others, when the Masons and Watsons and all their Wickenberg following entered upon the scene.

Whereupon Dick insisted that the young men of their party receive the kiss of welcome. Nor did he miss, in the hubbub of a dozen persons meeting as many more, Lottie Mason's: "Oh, good evening, Mr. Graham. I thought you had gone."

And Dick, in the midst of the confusion of settling such an influx of guests, still maintaining his exuberant jolly pose, waited for that sharp scrutiny that women have only for women. Not many moments later he saw Lottie Mason steal such a look, keen with speculation, at Paula as she chanced face to face with Graham, saying something to him.

Not yet, was Dick's conclusion. Lottie did not know. But suspicion was rife, and nothing, he was certain, under the circumstances, would gladden her woman's heart more than to discover the unimpeachable Paula as womanly weak as herself.

Lottie Mason was a tall, striking brunette of twenty-five, undeniably beautiful, and, as Dick had learned, undeniably daring. In the not remote past, attracted by her, and, it must be submitted, subtly

invited by her, he had been guilty of a philandering that he had not allowed to go as far as her wishes. The thing had not been serious on his part. Nor had he permitted it to become serious on her side. Nevertheless, sufficient flirtatious passages had taken place to impel him this night to look to her, rather than to the other Wickenberg women, for the first signals of suspicion.

"Oh, yes, he's a beautiful dancer," Dick, as he came up to them half an hour later, heard Lottie Mason telling little Miss Maxwell. "Isn't he, Dick?" she appealed to him, with innocent eyes of candor through which disguise he knew she was studying him.

"Who?--Graham, you must mean," he answered with untroubled directness.

"He certainly is. What do you say we start dancing and let Miss Maxwell see? Though there's only one woman here who can give him full swing to show his paces."

"Paula, of course," said Lottie.

"Paula, of course. Why, you young chits don't know how to waltz. You never had a chance to learn."--Lottie tossed her fine head. "Perhaps you learned a little before the new dancing came in," he amended.

"Anyway, I'll get Evan and Paula started, you take me on, and I'll wager we'll be the only couples on the floor."

Half through the waltz, he broke it off with: "Let them have the floor

to themselves. It's worth seeing."

And, glowing with appreciation, he stood and watched his wife and Graham finish the dance, while he knew that Lottie, beside him, stealing side glances at him, was having her suspicions allayed.

The dancing became general, and, the evening being warm, the big doors to the patio were thrown open. Now one couple, and now another, danced out and down the long arcades where the moonlight streamed, until it became the general thing.

"What a boy he is," Paula said to Graham, as they listened to Dick descanting to all and sundry on the virtues of his new night camera. "You heard Aaron complaining at table, and Terrence explaining, his sureness. Nothing terrible has ever happened to him in his life. He has never been overthrown. His sureness has always been vindicated. As Terrence said, it has always delivered the goods. He does know, he does know, and yet he is so sure of himself, so sure of me."

Graham taken away to dance with Miss Maxwell, Paula continued her train of thought to herself. Dick was not suffering so much after all. And she might have expected it. He was the cool-head, the philosopher. He would take her loss with the same equanimity as he would take the loss of Mountain Lad, as he had taken the death of Jeremy Braxton and the flooding of the Harvest mines. It was difficult, she smiled to herself, aflame as she was toward Graham, to be married to a

philosopher who would not lift a hand to hold her. And it came to her afresh that one phase of Graham's charm for her was his humanness, his flamingness. They met on common ground. At any rate, even in the heyday of their coming together in Paris, Dick had not so inflamed her. A wonderful lover he had been, too, with his gift of speech and lover's phrases, with his love-chants that had so delighted her; but somehow it was different from this what she felt for Graham and what Graham must feel for her. Besides, she had been most young in experience of love and lovers in that long ago when Dick had burst so magnificently upon her.

And so thinking, she hardened toward him and recklessly permitted herself to flame toward Graham. The crowd, the gayety, the excitement, the closeness and tenderness of contact in the dancing, the summer-warm of the evening, the streaming moonlight, and the night-scents of flowers--all fanned her ardency, and she looked forward eagerly to the at least one more dance she might dare with Graham.

"No flash light is necessary," Dick was explaining. "It's a German invention. Half a minute exposure under the ordinary lighting is sufficient. And the best of it is that the plate can be immediately developed just like an ordinary blue print. Of course, the drawback is one cannot print from the plate."

"But if it's good, an ordinary plate can be copied from it from which prints can be made," Ernestine amplified.

She knew the huge, twenty-foot, spring snake coiled inside the camera and ready to leap out like a jack-in-the-box when Dick squeezed the bulb. And there were others who knew and who urged Dick to get the camera and make an exposure.

He was gone longer than he expected, for Bonbright had left on his desk several telegrams concerning the Mexican situation that needed immediate replies. Trick camera in hand, Dick returned by a short cut across the house and patio. The dancing couples were ebbing down the arcade and disappearing into the hall, and he leaned against a pillar and watched them go by. Last of all came Paula and Evan, passing so close that he could have reached out and touched them. But, though the moon shone full on him, they did not see him. They saw only each other in the tender sport of gazing.

The last preceding couple was already inside when the music ceased. Graham and Paula paused, and he was for giving her his arm and leading her inside, but she clung to him in sudden impulse. Man-like, cautious, he slightly resisted for a moment, but with one arm around his neck she drew his head willingly down to the kiss. It was a flash of quick passion. The next instant, Paula on his arm, they were passing in and Paula's laugh was ringing merrily and naturally.

Dick clutched at the pillar and eased himself down abruptly until he sat flat on the pavement. Accompanying violent suffocation, or causing

it, his heart seemed rising in his chest. He panted for air. The cursed thing rose and choked and stifled him until, in the grim turn his fancy took, it seemed to him that he chewed it between his teeth and gulped it back and down his throat along with the reviving air. He felt chilled, and was aware that he was wet with sudden sweat.

"And who ever heard of heart disease in the Forrests?" he muttered, as, still sitting, leaning against the pillar for support, he mopped his face dry. His hand was shaking, and he felt a slight nausea from an internal quivering that still persisted.

It was not as if Graham had kissed her, he pondered. It was Paula who had kissed Graham. That was love, and passion. He had seen it, and as it burned again before his eyes, he felt his heart surge, and the premonitory sensation of suffocation seized him. With a sharp effort of will he controlled himself and got to his feet.

"By God, it came up in my mouth and I chewed it," he muttered. "I chewed it."

Returning across the patio by the round-about way, he entered the lighted room jauntily enough, camera in hand, and unprepared for the reception he received.

"Seen a ghost?" Lute greeted.

"Are you sick?"--"What's the matter?" were other questions.

"What is the matter?" he countered.

"Your face--the look of it," Ernestine said. "Something has happened. What is it?"

And while he oriented himself he did not fail to note Lottie Mason's quick glance at the faces of Graham and Paula, nor to note that Ernestine had observed Lottie's glance and followed it up for herself.

"Yes," he lied. "Bad news. Just got the word. Jeremy Braxton is dead. Murdered. The Mexicans got him while he was trying to escape into Arizona."

"Old Jeremy, God love him for the fine man he was," Terrence said, tucking his arm in Dick's. "Come on, old man, 'tis a stiffener you're wanting and I'm the lad to lead you to it."

"Oh, I'm all right," Dick smiled, shaking his shoulders and squaring himself as if gathering himself together. "It did hit me hard for the moment. I hadn't a doubt in the world but Jeremy would make it out all right. But they got him, and two engineers with him. They put up a devil of a fight first. They got under a cliff and stood off a mob of half a thousand for a day and night. And then the Mexicans tossed dynamite down from above. Oh, well, all flesh is grass, and there is

no grass of yesteryear. Terrence, your suggestion is a good one. Lead on."

After a few steps he turned his head over his shoulder and called back: "Now this isn't to stop the fun. I'll be right back to take that photograph. You arrange the group, Ernestine, and be sure to have them under the strongest light."

Terrence pressed open the concealed buffet at the far end of the room and set out the glasses, while Dick turned on a wall light and studied his face in the small mirror inside the buffet door.

"It's all right now, quite natural," he announced.

"'Twas only a passing shade," Terrence agreed, pouring the whiskey.

"And man has well the right to take it hard the going of old friends."

They toasted and drank silently.

"Another one," Dick said, extending his glass.

"Say 'when,'" said the Irishman, and with imperturbable eyes he watched the rising tide of liquor in the glass.

Dick waited till it was half full.

Again they toasted and drank silently, eyes to eyes, and Dick was grateful for the offer of all his heart that he read in Terrence's eyes.

Back in the middle of the hall, Ernestine was gayly grouping the victims, and privily, from the faces of Lottie, Paula, and Graham, trying to learn more of the something untoward that she sensed. Why had Lottie looked so immediately and searchingly at Graham and Paula? --she asked herself. And something was wrong with Paula now. She was worried, disturbed, and not in the way to be expected from the announcement of Jeremy Braxton's death. From Graham, Ernestine could glean nothing. He was quite his ordinary self, his facetiousness the cause of much laughter to Miss Maxwell and Mrs. Watson.

Paula was disturbed. What had happened? Why had Dick lied? He had known of Jeremy's death for two days. And she had never known anybody's death so to affect him. She wondered if he had been drinking unduly. In the course of their married life she had seen him several times in liquor. He carried it well, the only noticeable effects being a flush in his eyes and a loosening of his tongue to whimsical fancies and extemporized chants. Had he, in his trouble, been drinking with the iron-headed Terrence down in the stag room? She had found them all assembled there just before dinner. The real cause for Dick's strangeness never crossed her mind, if, for no other reason, than that he was not given to spying.

He came back, laughing heartily at a joke of Terrence's, and beckoned Graham to join them while Terrence repeated it. And when the three had had their laugh, he prepared to take the picture. The burst of the huge snake from the camera and the genuine screams of the startled women served to dispel the gloom that threatened, and next Dick was arranging a tournament of peanut-carrying.

From chair to chair, placed a dozen yards apart, the feat was with a table knife to carry the most peanuts in five minutes. After the preliminary try-out, Dick chose Paula for his partner, and challenged the world, Wickenberg and the madroño grove included. Many boxes of candy were wagered, and in the end he and Paula won out against Graham and Ernestine, who had proved the next best couple. Demands for a speech changed to clamor for a peanut song. Dick complied, beating the accent, Indian fashion, with stiff-legged hops and hand-slaps on thighs.

"I am Dick Forrest, son of Richard the Lucky, Son of Jonathan the Puritan, son of John who was a sea-rover, as his father Albert before him, who was the son of Mortimer, a pirate who was hanged in chains and died without issue.

"I am the last of the Forrests, but first of the peanut-carriers. Neither Nimrod nor Sandow has anything on me. I carry the peanuts on a knife, a silver knife. The peanuts are animated by the devil. I carry the peanuts with grace and celerity and in quantity. The peanut never

sprouted that can best me.

"The peanuts roll. The peanuts roll. Like Atlas who holds the world, I never let them fall. Not every one can carry peanuts. I am God-gifted. I am master of the art. It is a fine art. The peanuts roll, the peanuts roll, and I carry them on forever.

"Aaron is a philosopher. He cannot carry peanuts. Ernestine is a blonde. She cannot carry peanuts. Evan is a sportsman. He drops peanuts. Paula is my partner. She fumbles peanuts. Only I, I, by the grace of God and my own cleverness, carry peanuts.

"When anybody has had enough of my song, throw something at me. I am proud. I am tireless. I can sing on forever. I shall sing on forever.

"Here beginneth the second canto. When I die, bury me in a peanut patch. While I live--"

The expected avalanche of cushions quenched his song but not his ebullient spirits, for he was soon in a corner with Lottie Mason and Paula concocting a conspiracy against Terrence.

And so the evening continued to be danced and joked and played away. At midnight supper was served, and not till two in the morning were the Wickenbergers ready to depart. While they were getting on their wraps, Paula was proposing for the following afternoon a trip down to

the Sacramento River to look over Dick's experiment in rice-raising.

"I had something else in view," he told her. "You know the mountain pasture above Sycamore Creek. Three yearlings have been killed there in the last ten days."

"Mountain lions!" Paula cried.

"Two at least.--Strayed in from the north," he explained to Graham.

"They sometimes do that. We got three five years ago.--Moss and Hartley will be there with the dogs waiting. They've located two of the beasts. What do you say all of you join me. We can leave right after lunch."

"Let me have Mollie?" Lute asked.

"And you can ride Altadena," Paula told Ernestine.

Quickly the mounts were decided upon, Froelig and Martinez agreeing to go, but promising neither to shoot well nor ride well.

All went out to see the Wickenbergers off, and, after the machines were gone, lingered to make arrangements for the hunting.

"Good night, everybody," Dick said, as they started to move inside.

"I'm going to take a look at Alden Bessie before I turn in. Hennessy

is sitting up with her. Remember, you girls, come to lunch in your riding togs, and curses on the head of whoever's late."

The ancient dam of the Fotherington Princess was in a serious way, but Dick would not have made the visit at such an hour, save that he wanted to be by himself and that he could not nerve himself for a chance moment alone with Paula so soon after what he had overseen in the patio.

Light steps in the gravel made him turn his head. Ernestine caught up with him and took his arm.

"Poor old Alden Bessie," she explained. "I thought I'd go along."

Dick, still acting up to his night's rôle, recalled to her various funny incidents of the evening, and laughed and chuckled with reminiscent glee.

"Dick," she said in the first pause, "you are in trouble." She could feel him stiffen, and hurried on: "What can I do? You know you can depend on me. Tell me."

"Yes, I'll tell you," he answered. "Just one thing." She pressed his arm gratefully. "I'll have a telegram sent you to-morrow. It will be urgent enough, though not too serious. You will just bundle up and depart with Lute."

"Is that all?" she faltered.

"It will be a great favor."

"You won't talk with me?" she protested, quivering under the rebuff.

"I'll have the telegram come so as to rout you out of bed. And now never mind Alden Bessie. You run a long in. Good night."

He kissed her, gently thrust her toward the house, and went on his way.