

## CHAPTER XXX

On the way back from the sick mare, Dick paused once to listen to the restless stamp of Mountain Lad and his fellows in the stallion barn. In the quiet air, from somewhere up the hills, came the ringing of a single bell from some grazing animal. A cat's-paw of breeze fanned him with sudden balmy warmth. All the night was balmy with the faint and almost aromatic scent of ripening grain and drying grass. The stallion stamped again, and Dick, with a deep breath and realization that never had he more loved it all, looked up and circled the sky-line where the crests of the mountains blotted the field of stars.

"No, Cato," he mused aloud. "One cannot agree with you. Man does not depart from life as from an inn. He departs as from a dwelling, the one dwelling he will ever know. He departs ... nowhere. It is good night. For him the Noiseless One ... and the dark."

He made as if to start, but once again the stamp of the stallions held him, and the hillside bell rang out. He drew a deep inhalation through his nostrils of the air of balm, and loved it, and loved the fair land of his devising.

"I looked into time and saw none of me there," he quoted, then capped it, smiling, with a second quotation: "She gat me nine great

sons.... The other nine were daughters."

Back at the house, he did not immediately go in, but stood a space gazing at the far flung lines of it. Nor, inside, did he immediately go to his own quarters. Instead, he wandered through the silent rooms, across the patios, and along the dim-lit halls. His frame of mind was as of one about to depart on a journey. He pressed on the lights in Paula's fairy patio, and, sitting in an austere Roman seat of marble, smoked a cigarette quite through while he made his plans.

Oh, he would do it nicely enough. He could pull off a hunting accident that would fool the world. Trust him not to bungle it. Next day would be the day, in the woods above Sycamore Creek. Grandfather Jonathan Forrest, the straight-laced Puritan, had died of a hunting accident. For the first time Dick doubted that accident. Well, if it hadn't been an accident, the old fellow had done it well. It had never been hinted in the family that it was aught but an accident.

His hand on the button to turn off the lights, Dick delayed a moment for a last look at the marble babies that played in the fountain and among the roses.

"So long, younglings," he called softly to them. "You're the nearest I ever came to it."

From his sleeping porch he looked across the big patio to Paula's

porch. There was no light. The chance was she slept.

On the edge of the bed, he found himself with one shoe unlaced, and, smiling at his absentness, relaced it. What need was there for him to sleep? It was already four in the morning. He would at least watch his last sunrise. Last things were coming fast. Already had he not dressed for the last time? And the bath of the previous morning would be his last. Mere water could not stay the corruption of death. He would have to shave, however--a last vanity, for the hair did continue to grow for a time on dead men's faces.

He brought a copy of his will from the wall-safe to his desk and read it carefully. Several minor codicils suggested themselves, and he wrote them out in long-hand, pre-dating them six months as a precaution. The last was the endowment of the sages of the madroño grove with a fellowship of seven.

He ran through his life insurance policies, verifying the permitted suicide clause in each one; signed the tray of letters that had waited his signature since the previous morning; and dictated a letter into the phonograph to the publisher of his books. His desk cleaned, he scrawled a quick summary of income and expense, with all earnings from the Harvest mines deducted. He transposed the summary into a second summary, increasing the expense margins, and cutting down the income items to an absurdest least possible. Still the result was satisfactory.

He tore up the sheets of figures and wrote out a program for the future handling of the Harvest situation. He did it sketchily, with casual tentativeness, so that when it was found among the papers there would be no suspicions. In the same fashion he worked out a line-breeding program for the Shires, and an in-breeding table, up and down, for Mountain Lad and the Fotherington Princess and certain selected individuals of their progeny.

When Oh My came in with coffee at six, Dick was on his last paragraph of his scheme for rice-growing.

"Although the Italian rice may be worth experimenting with for quick maturity," he wrote, "I shall for a time confine the main plantings in equal proportions to Moti, Ioko, and the Wateribune. Thus, with different times of maturing, the same crews and the same machinery, with the same overhead, can work a larger acreage than if only one variety is planted."

Oh My served the coffee at his desk, and made no sign even after a glance to the porch at the bed which had not been slept in--all of which control Dick permitted himself privily to admire.

At six-thirty the telephone rang and he heard Hennessy's tired voice: "I knew you'd be up and glad to know Alden Bessie's pulled through. It was a squeak, though. And now it's me for the hay."

When Dick had shaved, he looked at the shower, hesitated a moment, then his face set stubbornly. I'm darned if I will, was his thought; a sheer waste of time. He did, however, change his shoes to a pair of heavy, high-laced ones fit for the roughness of hunting. He was at his desk again, looking over the notes in his scribble pads for the morning's work, when Paula entered. She did not call her "Good morning, merry gentleman"; but came quite close to him before she greeted him softly with:

"The Acorn-planter. Ever tireless, never weary Red Cloud."

He noted the violet-blue shadows under her eyes, as he arose, without offering to touch her. Nor did she offer invitation.

"A white night?" he asked, as he placed a chair.

"A white night," she answered wearily. "Not a second's sleep, though I tried so hard."

Both were reluctant of speech, and they labored under a mutual inability to draw their eyes away from each other.

"You ... you don't look any too fit yourself," she said.

"Yes, my face," he nodded. "I was looking at it while I shaved. The

expression won't come off."

"Something happened to you last night," she probed, and he could not fail to see the same compassion in her eyes that he had seen in Oh Dear's. "Everybody remarked your expression. What was it?"

He shrugged his shoulders. "It has been coming on for some time," he evaded, remembering that the first hint of it had been given him by Paula's portrait of him. "You've noticed it?" he inquired casually.

She nodded, then was struck by a sudden thought. He saw the idea leap to life ere her words uttered it.

"Dick, you haven't an affair?"

It was a way out. It would straighten all the tangle. And hope was in her voice and in her face.

He smiled, shook his head slowly, and watched her disappointment.

"I take it back," he said. "I have an affair."

"Of the heart?"

She was eager, as he answered, "Of the heart."

But she was not prepared for what came next. He abruptly drew his chair close, till his knees touched hers, and, leaning forward, quickly but gently prisoned her hands in his resting on her knees.

"Don't be alarmed, little bird-woman," he quieted her. "I shall not kiss you. It is a long time since I have. I want to tell you about that affair. But first I want to tell you how proud I am--proud of myself. I am proud that I am a lover. At my age, a lover! It is unbelievable, and it is wonderful. And such a lover! Such a curious, unusual, and quite altogether remarkable lover. In fact, I have laughed all the books and all biology in the face. I am a monogamist. I love the woman, the one woman. After a dozen years of possession I love her quite madly, oh, so sweetly madly."

Her hands communicated her disappointment to him, making a slight, impulsive flutter to escape; but he held them more firmly.

"I know her every weakness, and, weakness and strength and all, I love her as madly as I loved her at the first, in those mad moments when I first held her in my arms."

Her hands were mutinous of the restraint he put upon them, and unconsciously she was beginning to pull and tug to be away from him. Also, there was fear in her eyes. He knew her fastidiousness, and he guessed, with the other man's lips recent on hers, that she feared a more ardent expression on his part.

"And please, please be not frightened, timid, sweet, beautiful, proud, little bird-woman. See. I release you. Know that I love you most dearly, and that I am considering you as well as myself, and before myself, all the while."

He drew his chair away from her, leaned back, and saw confidence grow in her eyes.

"I shall tell you all my heart," he continued, "and I shall want you to tell me all your heart."

"This love for me is something new?" she asked. "A recrudescence?"

"Yes, a recrudescence, and no."

"I thought that for a long time I had been a habit to you," she said.

"But I was loving you all the time."

"Not madly."

"No," he acknowledged. "But with certainty. I was so sure of you, of myself. It was, to me, all a permanent and forever established thing. I plead guilty. But when that permanency was shaken, all my love for you fired up. It was there all the time, a steady, long-married



flame."

"But about me?" she demanded.

"That is what we are coming to. I know your worry right now, and of a minute ago. You are so intrinsically honest, so intrinsically true, that the thought of sharing two men is abhorrent to you. I have not misread you. It is a long time since you have permitted me any love-touch." He shrugged his shoulders "And an equally long time since I offered you a love-touch."

"Then you have known from the first?" she asked quickly.

He nodded.

"Possibly," he added, with an air of judicious weighing, "I sensed it coming before even you knew it. But we will not go into that or other things."

"You have seen..." she attempted to ask, stung almost to shame at thought of her husband having witnessed any caress of hers and Graham's.

"We will not demean ourselves with details, Paula. Besides, there was and is nothing wrong about any of it. Also, it was not necessary for me to see anything. I have my memories of when I, too, kissed stolen

kisses in the pause of the seconds between the frank, outspoken 'Good nights.' When all the signs of ripeness are visible--the love-shades and love-notes that cannot be hidden, the unconscious caress of the eyes in a fleeting glance, the involuntary softening of voices, the cuckoo-sob in the throat--why, the night-parting kiss does not need to be seen. It has to be. Still further, oh my woman, know that I justify you in everything."

"It... it was not ever... much," she faltered.

"I should have been surprised if it had been. It couldn't have been you. As it is, I have been surprised. After our dozen years it was unexpected--"

"Dick," she interrupted him, leaning toward him and searching him. She paused to frame her thought, and then went on with directness. "In our dozen years, will you say it has never been any more with you?"

"I have told you that I justify you in everything," he softened his reply.

"But you have not answered my question," she insisted. "Oh, I do not mean mere flirtatious passages, bits of primrose philandering. I mean unfaithfulness and I mean it technically. In the past you have?"

"In the past," he answered, "not much, and not for a long, long time."

"I often wondered," she mused.

"And I have told you I justify you in everything," he reiterated. "And now you know where lies the justification."

"Then by the same token I had a similar right," she said. "Though I haven't, Dick, I haven't," she hastened to add. "Well, anyway, you always did preach the single standard."

"Alas, not any longer," he smiled. "One's imagination will conjure, and in the past few weeks I've been forced to change my mind."

"You mean that you demand I must be faithful?"

He nodded and said, "So long as you live with me."

"But where's the equity?"

"There isn't any equity," he shook his head. "Oh, I know it seems a preposterous change of view. But at this late day I have made the discovery of the ancient truth that women are different from men. All I have learned of book and theory goes glimmering before the everlasting fact that the women are the mothers of our children. I... I still had my hopes of children with you, you see. But that's all over and done with. The question now is, what's in your heart? I have

told you mine. And afterward we can determine what is to be done."

"Oh, Dick," she breathed, after silence had grown painful, "I do love you, I shall always love you. You are my Red Cloud. Why, do you know, only yesterday, out on your sleeping porch, I turned my face to the wall. It was terrible. It didn't seem right. I turned it out again, oh so quickly."

He lighted a cigarette and waited.

"But you have not told me what is in your heart, all of it," he chided finally.

"I do love you," she repeated.

"And Evan?"

"That is different. It is horrible to have to talk this way to you. Besides, I don't know. I can't make up my mind what is in my heart."

"Love? Or amorous adventure? It must be one or the other."

She shook her head.

"Can't you understand?" she asked. "That I don't understand? You see, I am a woman. I have never sown any wild oats. And now that all this

has happened, I don't know what to make of it. Shaw and the rest must be right. Women are hunting animals. You are both big game. I can't help it. It is a challenge to me. And I find I am a puzzle to myself. All my concepts have been toppled over by my conduct. I want you. I want Evan. I want both of you. It is not amorous adventure, oh believe me. And if by any chance it is, and I do not know it--no, it isn't, I know it isn't."

"Then it is love."

"But I do love you, Red Cloud."

"And you say you love him. You can't love both of us."

"But I can. I do. I do love both of you.--Oh, I am straight. I shall be straight. I must work this out. I thought you might help me. That is why I came to you this morning. There must be some solution."

She looked at him appealingly as he answered, "It is one or the other, Evan or me. I cannot imagine any other solution."

"That's what he says. But I can't bring myself to it. He was for coming straight to you. I would not permit him. He has wanted to go, but I held him here, hard as it was on both of you, in order to have you together, to compare you two, to weigh you in my heart. And I get nowhere. I want you both. I can't give either of you up."

"Unfortunately, as you see," Dick began, a slight twinkle in his eyes, "while you may be polyandrously inclined, we stupid male men cannot reconcile ourselves to such a situation."

"Don't be cruel, Dick," she protested.

"Forgive me. It was not so meant. It was out of my own hurt--an effort to bear it with philosophical complacency."

"I have told him that he was the only man I had ever met who is as great as my husband, and that my husband is greater."

"That was loyalty to me, yes, and loyalty to yourself," Dick explained. "You were mine until I ceased being the greatest man in the world. He then became the greatest man in the world."

She shook her head.

"Let me try to solve it for you," he continued. "You don't know your mind, your desire. You can't decide between us because you equally want us both?"

"Yes," she whispered. "Only, rather, differently want you both."

"Then the thing is settled," he concluded shortly.

"What do you mean?"

"This, Paula. I lose. Graham is the winner. Don't you see. Here am I, even with him, even and no more, while my advantage over him is our dozen years together--the dozen years of past love, the ties and bonds of heart and memory. Heavens! If all this weight were thrown in the balance on Evan's side, you wouldn't hesitate an instant in your decision. It is the first time you have ever been bowled over in your life, and the experience, coming so late, makes it hard for you to realize."

"But, Dick, you bowled me over."

He shook his head.

"I have always liked to think so, and sometimes I have believed--but never really. I never took you off your feet, not even in the very beginning, whirlwind as the affair was. You may have been glamoured. You were never mad as I was mad, never swept as I was swept. I loved you first--"

"And you were a royal lover."

"I loved you first, Paula, and, though you did respond, it was not in the same way. I never took you off your feet. It seems pretty clear

that Evan has."

"I wish I could be sure," she mused. "I have a feeling of being bowled over, and yet I hesitate. The two are not compatible. Perhaps I never shall be bowled over by any man. And you don't seem to help me in the least."

"You, and you alone, can solve it, Paula," he said gravely.

"But if you would help, if you would try--oh, such a little, to hold me," she persisted.

"But I am helpless. My hands are tied. I can't put an arm to hold you. You can't share two. You have been in his arms--" He put up his hand to hush her protest. "Please, please, dear, don't. You have been in his arms. You flutter like a frightened bird at thought of my caressing you. Don't you see? Your actions decide against me. You have decided, though you may not know it. Your very flesh has decided. You can bear his arms. The thought of mine you cannot bear."

She shook her head with slow resoluteness.

"And still I do not, cannot, make up my mind," she persisted.

"But you must. The present situation is intolerable. You must decide quickly, for Evan must go. You realize that. Or you must go. You both



cannot continue on here. Take all the time in the world. Send Evan away. Or, suppose you go and visit Aunt Martha for a while. Being away from both of us might aid you to get somewhere. Perhaps it will be better to call off the hunting. I'll go alone, and you stay and talk it over with Evan. Or come on along and talk it over with him as you ride. Whichever way, I won't be in till late. I may sleep out all night in one of the herder's cabins. When I come back, Evan must be gone. Whether or not you are gone with him will also have been decided."

"And if I should go?" she queried.

Dick shrugged his shoulders, and stood up, glancing at his wrist-watch.

"I have sent word to Blake to come earlier this morning," he explained, taking a step toward the door in invitation for her to go.

At the door she paused and leaned toward him.

"Kiss me, Dick," she said, and, afterward: "This is not a... love-touch." Her voice had become suddenly husky. "It's just in case I do decide to... to go."

The secretary approached along the hall, but Paula lingered.

"Good morning, Mr. Blake," Dick greeted him. "Sorry to rout you out so early. First of all, will you please telephone Mr. Agar and Mr. Pitts. I won't be able to see them this morning. Oh, and put the rest off till to-morrow, too. Make a point of getting Mr. Hanley. Tell him I approve of his plan for the Buckeye spillway, and to go right ahead. I will see Mr. Mendenhall, though, and Mr. Manson. Tell them nine-thirty."

"One thing, Dick," Paula said. "Remember, I made him stay. It was not his fault or wish. I wouldn't let him go."

"You've bowled him over right enough," Dick smiled. "I could not reconcile his staying on, under the circumstances, with what I knew of him. But with you not permitting him to go, and he as mad as a man has a right to be where you are concerned, I can understand. He's a whole lot better than a good sort. They don't make many like him. He will make you happy--"

She held up her hand.

"I don't know that I shall ever be happy again, Red Cloud. When I see what I have brought into your face.... And I was so happy and contented all our dozen years. I can't forget it. That is why I have been unable to decide. But you are right. The time has come for me to solve the ..." She hesitated and could not utter the word "triangle" which he saw forming on her lips. "The situation," her voice trailed

away. "We'll all go hunting. I'll talk with him as we ride, and I'll send him away, no matter what I do."

"I shouldn't be precipitate, Paul," Dick advised. "You know I don't care a hang for morality except when it is useful. And in this case it is exceedingly useful. There may be children.--Please, please," he hushed her. "And in such case even old scandal is not exactly good for them. Desertion takes too long. I'll arrange to give you the real statutory grounds, which will save a year in the divorce."

"If I so make up my mind," she smiled wanly.

He nodded.

"But I may not make up my mind that way. I don't know it myself. Perhaps it's all a dream, and soon I shall wake up, and Oh Dear will come in and tell me how soundly and long I have slept."

She turned away reluctantly, and paused suddenly when she had made half a dozen steps.

"Dick," she called. "You have told me your heart, but not what's in your mind. Don't do anything foolish. Remember Denny Holbrook--no hunting accident, mind."

He shook his head, and twinkled his eyes in feigned amusement, and

marveled to himself that her intuition should have so squarely hit the mark.

"And leave all this?" he lied, with a gesture that embraced the ranch and all its projects. "And that book on in-and-in-breeding? And my first annual home sale of stock just ripe to come off?"

"It would be preposterous," she agreed with brightening face. "But, Dick, in this difficulty of making up my mind, please, please know that--" She paused for the phrase, then made a gesture in mimicry of his, that included the Big House and its treasures, and said, "All this does not influence me a particle. Truly not."

"As if I did not know it," he assured her. "Of all unmercenary women--"

"Why, Dick," she interrupted him, fired by a new thought, "if I loved Evan as madly as you think, you would mean so little that I'd be content, if it were the only way out, for you to have a hunting accident. But you see, I don't. Anyway, there's a brass tack for you to ponder."

She made another reluctant step away, then called back in a whisper, her face over her shoulder:

"Red Cloud, I'm dreadfully sorry.... And through it all I'm so glad

that you do still love me."

Before Blake returned, Dick found time to study his face in the glass. Printed there was the expression that had startled his company the preceding evening. It had come to stay. Oh, well, was his thought, one cannot chew his heart between his teeth without leaving some sign of it.

He strolled out on the sleeping porch and looked at Paula's picture under the barometers. He turned it to the wall, and sat on the bed and regarded the blankness for a space. Then he turned it back again.

"Poor little kid," he murmured, "having a hard time of it just waking up at this late day."

But as he continued to gaze, abruptly there leaped before his eyes the vision of her in the moonlight, clinging to Graham and drawing his lips down to hers.

Dick got up quickly, with a shake of head to shake the vision from his eyes.

By half past nine his correspondence was finished and his desk cleaned save for certain data to be used in his talks with his Shorthorn and Shire managers. He was over at the window and waving a smiling farewell to Lute and Ernestine in the limousine, as Mendenhall

entered. And to him, and to Manson next, Dick managed, in casual talk, to impress much of his bigger breeding plans.

"We've got to keep an eagle eye on the bull-get of King Polo," he told Manson. "There's all the promise in the world for a greater than he from Bleakhouse Fawn, or Alberta Maid, or Moravia's Nellie Signal. We missed it this year so far, but next year, or the year after, soon or late, King Polo is going to be responsible for a real humdinger of winner."

And as with Manson, with much more talk, so with Mendenhall, Dick succeeded in emphasizing the far application of his breeding theories.

With their departure, he got Oh Joy on the house 'phone and told him to take Graham to the gun room to choose a rifle and any needed gear.

At eleven he did not know that Paula had come up the secret stairway from the library and was standing behind the shelves of books listening. She had intended coming in but had been deterred by the sound of his voice. She could hear him talking over the telephone to Hanley about the spillway of the Buckeye dam.

"And by the way," Dick's voice went on, "you've been over the reports on the Big Miramar?... Very good. Discount them. I disagree with them flatly. The water is there. I haven't a doubt we'll find a fairly shallow artesian supply. Send up the boring outfit at once and start

prospecting. The soil's ungodly rich, and if we don't make that dry hole ten times as valuable in the next five years ..."

Paula sighed, and turned back down the spiral to the library.

Red Cloud the incorrigible, always planting his acorns--was her thought. There he was, with his love-world crashing around him, calmly considering dams and well-borings so that he might, in the years to come, plant more acorns.

Nor was Dick ever to know that Paula had come so near to him with her need and gone away. Again, not aimlessly, but to run through for the last time the notes of the scribble pad by his bed, he was out on his sleeping porch. His house was in order. There was nothing left but to sign up the morning's dictation, answer several telegrams, then would come lunch and the hunting in the Sycamore hills. Oh, he would do it well. The Outlaw would bear the blame. And he would have an eye-witness, either Froelig or Martinez. But not both of them. One pair of eyes would be enough to satisfy when the martingale parted and the mare reared and toppled backward upon him into the brush. And from that screen of brush, swiftly linking accident to catastrophe, the witness would hear the rifle go off.

Martinez was more emotional than the sculptor and would therefore make a more satisfactory witness, Dick decided. Him would he maneuver to have with him in the narrow trail when the Outlaw should be made the

scapegoat. Martinez was no horseman. All the better. It would be well, Dick judged, to make the Outlaw act up in real devilishness for a minute or two before the culmination. It would give verisimilitude. Also, it would excite Martinez's horse, and, therefore, excite Martinez so that he would not see occurrences too clearly.

He clenched his hands with sudden hurt. The Little Lady was mad, she must be mad; on no other ground could he understand such arrant cruelty, listening to her voice and Graham's from the open windows of the music room as they sang together the "Gypsy Trail."

Nor did he unclench his hands during all the time they sang. And they sang the mad, reckless song clear through to its mad reckless end. And he continued to stand, listening to her laugh herself merrily away from Graham and on across the house to her wing, from the porches of which she continued to laugh as she teased and chided Oh Dear for fancied derelictions.

From far off came the dim but unmistakable trumpeting of Mountain Lad. King Polo asserted his lordly self, and the harems of mares and heifers sent back their answering calls. Dick listened to all the whinnying and nickering and bawling of sex, and sighed aloud: "Well, the land is better for my having been. It is a good thought to take to bed."