

CHAPTER XXXI

A ring of his bed 'phone made Dick sit on the bed to take up the receiver. As he listened, he looked out across the patio to Paula's porches. Bonbright was explaining that it was a call from Chauncey Bishop who was at Eldorado in a machine. Chauncey Bishop, editor and owner of the San Francisco Dispatch, was sufficiently important a person, in Bonbright's mind, as well as old friend of Dick's, to be connected directly to him.

"You can get here for lunch," Dick told the newspaper owner. "And, say, suppose you put up for the night.... Never mind your special writers. We're going hunting mountain lions this afternoon, and there's sure to be a kill. Got them located.... Who? What's she write?... What of it? She can stick around the ranch and get half a dozen columns out of any of half a dozen subjects, while the writer chap can get the dope on lion-hunting.... Sure, sure. I'll put him on a horse a child can ride."

The more the merrier, especially newspaper chaps, Dick grinned to himself--and grandfather Jonathan Forrest would have nothing on him when it came to pulling off a successful finish.

But how could Paula have been so wantonly cruel as to sing the "Gypsy

Trail" so immediately afterward? Dick asked himself, as, receiver near to ear, he could distantly hear Chauncey Bishop persuading his writer man to the hunting.

"All right then, come a running," Dick told Bishop in conclusion. "I'm giving orders now for the horses, and you can have that bay you rode last time."

Scarcely had he hung up, when the bell rang again. This time it was Paula.

"Red Cloud, dear Red Cloud," she said, "your reasoning is all wrong. I think I love you best. I am just about making up my mind, and it's for you. And now, just to help me to be sure, tell me what you told me a little while ago--you know--' I love the woman, the one woman. After a dozen years of possession I love her quite madly, oh, so sweetly madly.' Say it to me, Red Cloud."

"I do truly love the woman, the one woman," Dick repeated. "After a dozen years of possession I do love her quite madly, oh, so sweetly madly."

There was a pause when he had finished, which, waiting, he did not dare to break.

"There is one little thing I almost forgot to tell you," she said,

very softly, very slowly, very clearly. "I do love you. I have never loved you so much as right now. After our dozen years you've bowled me over at last. And I was bowled over from the beginning, although I did not know it. I have made up my mind now, once and for all."

She hung up abruptly.

With the thought that he knew how a man felt receiving a reprieve at the eleventh hour, Dick sat on, thinking, forgetful that he had not hooked the receiver, until Bonbright came in from the secretaries' room to remind him.

"It was from Mr. Bishop," Bonbright explained. "Sprung an axle. I took the liberty of sending one of our machines to bring them in."

"And see what our men can do with repairing theirs," Dick nodded.

Alone again, he got up and stretched, walked absently the length of the room and back.

"Well, Martinez, old man," he addressed the empty air, "this afternoon you'll be defrauded out of as fine a histrionic stunt as you will never know you've missed."

He pressed the switch for Paula's telephone and rang her up.

Oh Dear answered, and quickly brought her mistress.

"I've a little song I want to sing to you, Paul," he said, then chanted the old negro 'spiritual':

"Fer itself, fer itself,
Fer itself, fer itself,
Every soul got ter confess
Fer itself.'

"And I want you to tell me again, fer yourself, fer yourself, what you just told me."

Her laughter came in a merry gurgle that delighted him.

"Red Cloud, I do love you," she said. "My mind is made up. I shall never have any man but you in all this world. Now be good, and let me dress. I'll have to rush for lunch as it is."

"May I come over?--for a moment?" he begged.

"Not yet, eager one. In ten minutes. Let me finish with Oh Dear first. Then I'll be all ready for the hunt. I'm putting on my Robin Hood outfit--you know, the greens and russets and the long feather. And I'm taking my 30-30. It's heavy enough for mountain lions."

"You've made me very happy," Dick continued.

"And you're making me late. Ring off.--Red Cloud, I love you more this minute--"

He heard her hang up, and was surprised, the next moment, that somehow he was reluctant to yield to the happiness that he had claimed was his. Rather, did it seem that he could still hear her voice and Graham's recklessly singing the "Gypsy Trail."

Had she been playing with Graham? Or had she been playing with him? Such conduct, for her, was unprecedented and incomprehensible. As he groped for a solution, he saw her again in the moonlight, clinging to Graham with upturned lips, drawing Graham's lips down to hers.

Dick shook his head in bafflement, and glanced at his watch. At any rate, in ten minutes, in less than ten minutes, he would hold her in his arms and know.

So tedious was the brief space of time that he strolled slowly on the way, pausing to light a cigarette, throwing it away with the first inhalation, pausing again to listen to the busy click of typewriters from the secretaries' room. With still two minutes to spare, and knowing that one minute would take him to the door without a knob, he stopped in the patio and gazed at the wild canaries bathing in the fountain.

When they startled into the air, a cloud of fluttering gold and crystal droppings in the sunshine, Dick startled. The report of the rifle had come from Paula's wing above, and he identified it as her 30-30 as he dashed across the patio. She beat me to it, was his next thought, and what had been incomprehensible the moment before was as sharply definite as the roar of her rifle.

And across the patio, up the stairs, through the door left wide-flung behind him, continued to pulse in his brain: She beat me to it. She beat me to it.

She lay, crumpled and quivering, in hunting costume complete, save for the pair of tiny bronze spurs held over her in anguished impotence by the frightened maid.

His examination was quick. Paula breathed, although she was unconscious. From front to back, on the left side, the bullet had torn through. His next spring was to the telephone, and as he waited the delay of connecting through the house central he prayed that Hennessy would be at the stallion barn. A stable boy answered, and, while he ran to fetch the veterinary, Dick ordered Oh Joy to stay by the switches, and to send Oh My to him at once.

From the tail of his eye he saw Graham rush into the room and on to Paula.

"Hennessy," Dick commanded. "Come on the jump. Bring the needful for first aid. It's a rifle shot through the lungs or heart or both. Come right to Mrs. Forrest's rooms. Now jump."

"Don't touch her," he said sharply to Graham. "It might make it worse, start a worse hemorrhage."

Next he was back at Oh Joy.

"Start Callahan with the racing car for Eldorado. Tell him he'll meet Doctor Robinson on the way, and that he is to bring Doctor Robinson back with him on the jump. Tell him to jump like the devil was after him. Tell him Mrs. Forrest is hurt and that if he makes time he'll save her life."

Receiver to ear, he turned to look at Paula. Graham, bending over her but not touching her, met his eyes.

"Forrest," he began, "if you have done--"

But Dick hushed him with a warning glance directed toward Oh Dear who still held the bronze spurs in speechless helplessness.

"It can be discussed later," Dick said shortly, as he turned his mouth to the transmitter.

"Doctor Robinson?... Good. Mrs. Forrest has a rifle-shot through lungs or heart or maybe both. Callahan is on his way to meet you in the racing car. Keep coming as fast as God'll let you till you meet Callahan. Good-by."

Back to Paula, Graham stepped aside as Dick, on his knees, bent over her. His examination was brief. He looked up at Graham with a shake of the head and said:

"It's too ticklish to fool with."

He turned to Oh Dear.

"Put down those spurs and bring pillows.--Evan, lend a hand on the other side, and lift gently and steadily.--Oh Dear, shove that pillow under--easy, easy."

He looked up and saw Oh My standing silently, awaiting orders.

"Get Mr. Bonbright to relieve Oh Joy at the switches," Dick commanded.

"Tell Oh Joy to stand near to Mr. Bonbright to rush orders. Tell Oh Joy to have all the house boys around him to rush the orders. As soon as Saunders comes back with Mr. Bishop's crowd, tell Oh Joy to start him out on the jump to Eldorado to look for Callahan in case Callahan has a smash up. Tell Oh Joy to get hold of Mr. Manson, and Mr. Pitts

or any two of the managers who have machines and have them, with their machines, waiting here at the house. Tell Oh Joy to take care of Mr. Bishop's crowd as usual. And you come back here where I can call you."

Dick turned to Oh Dear.

"Now tell me how it happened."

Oh Dear shook her head and wrung her hands.

"Where were you when the rifle went off?"

The Chinese girl swallowed and pointed toward the wardrobe room.

"Go on, talk," Dick commanded harshly.

"Mrs. Forrest tell me to get spurs. I forget before. I go quick. I hear gun. I come back quick. I run."

She pointed to Paula to show what she had found.

"But the gun?" Dick asked.

"Some trouble. Maybe gun no work. Maybe four minutes, maybe five minutes, Mrs. Forrest try make gun work."

"Was she trying to make the gun work when you went for the spurs?"

Oh Dear nodded.

"Before that I say maybe Oh Joy can fix gun. Mrs. Forrest say never mind. She say you can fix. She put gun down. Then she try once more fix gun. Then she tell me get spurs. Then... gun go off."

Hennessy's arrival shut off further interrogation. His examination was scarcely less brief than Dick's. He looked up with a shake of the head.

"Nothing I can dare tackle, Mr. Forrest. The hemorrhage has eased of itself, though it must be gathering inside. You've sent for a doctor?"

"Robinson. I caught him in his office.--He's young, a good surgeon," Dick explained to Graham. "He's nervy and daring, and I'd trust him in this farther than some of the old ones with reputations.--What do you think, Mr. Hennessy? What chance has she?"

"Looks pretty bad, though I'm no judge, being only a horse doctor. Robinson'll know. Nothing to do but wait."

Dick nodded and walked out on Paula's sleeping porch to listen for the exhaust of the racing machine Callahan drove. He heard the ranch limousine arrive leisurely and swiftly depart. Graham came out on the

porch to him.

"I want to apologize, Forrest," he said. "I was rather off for the moment. I found you here, and I thought you were here when it happened. It must have been an accident."

"Poor little kid," Dick agreed. "And she so prided herself on never being careless with guns."

"I've looked at the rifle," Graham said, "but I couldn't find anything wrong with it."

"And that's how it happened. Whatever was wrong got right. That's how it went off."

And while Dick talked, building the fabric of the lie so that even Graham should be fooled, to himself he was understanding how well Paula had played the trick. That last singing of the "Gypsy Trail" had been her farewell to Graham and at the same time had provided against any suspicion on his part of what she had intended directly to do. It had been the same with him. She had had her farewell with him, and, the last thing, over the telephone, had assured him that she would never have any man but him in all the world.

He walked away from Graham to the far end of the porch.

"She had the grit, she had the grit," he muttered to himself with quivering lips. "Poor kid. She couldn't decide between the two, and so she solved it this way."

The noise of the racing machine drew him and Graham together, and together they entered the room to wait for the doctor. Graham betrayed unrest, reluctant to go, yet feeling that he must.

"Please stay on, Evan," Dick told him. "She liked you much, and if she does open her eyes she'll be glad to see you."

Dick and Graham stood apart from Paula while Doctor Robinson made his examination. When he arose with an air of finality, Dick looked his question. Robinson shook his head.

"Nothing to be done," he said. "It is a matter of hours, maybe of minutes." He hesitated, studying Dick's face for a moment. "I can ease her off if you say the word. She might possibly recover consciousness and suffer for a space."

Dick took a turn down the room and back, and when he spoke it was to Graham.

"Why not let her live again, brief as the time may be? The pain is immaterial. It will have its inevitable quick anodyne. It is what I would wish, what you would wish. She loved life, every moment of it.

Why should we deny her any of the little left her?"

Graham bent his head in agreement, and Dick turned to the doctor.

"Perhaps you can stir her, stimulate her, to a return of consciousness. If you can, do so. And if the pain proves too severe, then you can ease her."

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When her eyes fluttered open, Dick nodded Graham up beside him. At first bewilderment was all she betrayed, then her eyes focused first on Dick's face, then on Graham's, and, with recognition, her lips parted in a pitiful smile.

"I... I thought at first that I was dead," she said.

But quickly another thought was in her mind, and Dick divined it in her eyes as they searched him. The question was if he knew it was no accident. He gave no sign. She had planned it so, and she must pass believing it so.

"I... was... wrong," she said. She spoke slowly, faintly, in evident pain, with a pause for strength of utterance between each word. "I was always so cocksure I'd never have an accident, and look what I've gone and done."

"It's a darn shame," Dick said, sympathetically. "What was it? A jam?"

She nodded, and again her lips parted in the pitiful brave smile as she said whimsically: "Oh, Dick, go call the neighbors in and show them what little Paula's din.

"How serious is it?" she asked. "Be honest, Red Cloud, you know me," she added, after the briefest of pauses in which Dick had not replied.

He shook his head.

"How long?" she queried.

"Not long," came his answer. "You can ease off any time."

"You mean...?" She glanced aside curiously at the doctor and back to Dick, who nodded.

"It's only what I should have expected from you, Red Cloud," she murmured gratefully. "But is Doctor Robinson game for it?"

The doctor stepped around so that she could see him, and nodded.

"Thank you, doctor. And remember, I am to say when."

"Is there much pain?" Dick queried.

Her eyes were wide and brave and dreadful, and her lips quivered for the moment ere she replied, "Not much, but dreadful, quite dreadful. I won't care to stand it very long. I'll say when."

Once more the smile on her lips announced a whimsey.

"Life is queer, most queer, isn't it? And do you know, I want to go out with love-songs in my ears. You first, Evan, sing the 'Gypsy Trail.'--Why, I was singing it with you less than an hour ago. Think of it! Do, Evan, please."

Graham looked to Dick for permission, and Dick gave it with his eyes.

"Oh, and sing it robustly, gladly, madly, just as a womaning Gypsy man should sing it," she urged. "And stand back there, so, where I can see you."

And while Graham sang the whole song through to its:

"The heart of a man to the heart of a maid, light of my
tents be fleet,
Morning waits at the end of the world and the world is
all at our feet,"

Oh My, immobile-faced, a statue, stood in the far doorway awaiting commands. Oh Dear, grief-stricken, stood at her mistress's head, no longer wringing her hands, but holding them so tightly clasped that the finger-tips and nails showed white. To the rear, at Paula's dressing table, Doctor Robinson noiselessly dissolved in a glass the anodyne pellets and filled his hypodermic.

When Graham had finished, Paula thanked him with her eyes, closed them, and lay still for a space.

"And now, Red Cloud," she said when next she opened them, "the song of Ai-kut, and of the Dew-Woman, the Lush-Woman. Stand where Evan did, so that I can see you well."

And Dick chanted:

"I am Ai-kut, the first man of the Nishinam. Ai-kut is the short for Adam, and my father and my mother were the coyote and the moon. And this is Yo-to-to-wi, my wife. Yo-to-to-wi is the short for Eve. She is the first woman of the Nishinam.

"Me, I am Ai-kut. This is my dew of women. This is my honey-dew of women. Her father and her mother were the Sierra dawn and the summer east wind of the mountains. Together they conspired, and from the air and earth they sweated all sweetness till in a mist of their own love

the leaves of the chaparral and the manzanita were dewed with the honey dew.

"Yo-to-to-wi is my honey-dew woman. Hear me! I am Ai-kut! Yo-to-to-wi is my quail-woman, my deer-woman, my lush-woman of all soft rain and fat soil. She was born of the thin starlight and the brittle dawn-light, in the morning of the world, and she is the one woman of all women to me."

Again, with closed eyes, she lay silent for a while. Once she attempted to draw a deeper breath, which caused her to cough slightly several times.

"Try not to cough," Dick said.

They could see her brows contract with the effort of will to control the irritating tickle that might precipitate a paroxysm.

"Oh Dear, come around where I can see you," she said, when she opened her eyes.

The Chinese girl obeyed, moving blindly, so that Robinson, with a hand on her arm, was compelled to guide her.

"Good-by, Oh Dear. You've been very good to me always. And sometimes, maybe, I have not been good to you. I am sorry. Remember, Mr. Forrest

will always be your father and your mother.... And all my jade is yours."

She closed her eyes in token that the brief audience was over.

Again she was vexed by the tickling cough that threatened to grow more pronounced.

"I am ready, Dick," she said faintly, still with closed eyes. "I want to make my sleepy, sleepy noise. Is the doctor ready? Come closer. Hold my hand like you did before in the little death."

She turned her eyes to Graham, and Dick did not look, for he knew love was in that last look of hers, as he knew it would be when she looked into his eyes at the last.

"Once," she explained to Graham, "I had to go on the table, and I made Dick go with me into the anaesthetic chamber and hold my hand until I went under. You remember, Henley called it the drunken dark, the little death in life. It was very easy."

In the silence she continued her look, then turned her face and eyes back to Dick, who knelt close to her, holding her hand.

With a pressure of her fingers on his and a beckoning of her eyes, she drew his ear down to her lips.

"Red Cloud," she whispered, "I love you best. And I am proud I belonged to you for such a long, long time." Still closer she drew him with the pressure of her fingers. "I'm sorry there were no babies, Red Cloud."

With the relaxing of her fingers she eased him from her so that she could look from one to the other.

"Two bonnie, bonnie men. Good-by, bonnie men. Good-by, Red Cloud."

In the pause, they waited, while the doctor bared her arm for the needle.

"Sleepy, sleepy," she twittered in mimicry of drowsy birds. "I am ready, doctor. Stretch the skin tight, first. You know I don't like to be hurt.--Hold me tight, Dick."

Robinson, receiving the eye permission from Dick, easily and quickly thrust the needle through the stretched skin, with steady hand sank the piston home, and with the ball of the finger soothingly rubbed the morphine into circulation.

"Sleepy, sleepy, boo'ful sleepy," she murmured drowsily, after a time.

Semi-consciously she half-turned on her side, curved her free arm on

the pillow and nestled her head on it, and drew her body up in nestling curves in the way Dick knew she loved to sleep.

After a long time, she sighed faintly, and began so easily to go that she was gone before they guessed. From without, the twittering of the canaries bathing in the fountain penetrated the silence of the room, and from afar came the trumpeting of Mountain Lad and the silver whinny of the Fotherington Princess.

THE END