

CHAPTER II

She came out of the wood of glistening birch, and with the first fires of the sun blazing her unbound hair raced lightly across the dew-dripping meadow. The earth was fat with excessive moisture and soft to her feet, while the dank vegetation slapped against her knees and cast off flashing sprays of liquid diamonds. The flush of the morning was in her cheek, and its fire in her eyes, and she was aglow with youth and love. For she had nursed at the breast of nature,--in forfeit of a mother,--and she loved the old trees and the creeping green things with a passionate love; and the dim murmur of growing life was a gladness to her ears, and the damp earth-smells were sweet to her nostrils.

Where the upper-reach of the meadow vanished in a dark and narrow forest aisle, amid clean-stemmed dandelions and color-bursting buttercups, she came upon a bunch of great Alaskan violets. Throwing herself at full length, she buried her face in the fragrant coolness, and with her hands drew the purple heads in circling splendor about her own. And she was not ashamed. She had wandered away amid the complexities and smirch and withering heats of the great world, and she had returned, simple, and clean, and wholesome. And she was glad of it, as she lay there, slipping back to the old days, when the universe began and ended at the sky-line, and when she journeyed over the Pass to behold the Abyss.

It was a primitive life, that of her childhood, with few conventions, but such as there were, stern ones. And they might be epitomized, as she had read somewhere in her later years, as "the faith of food and blanket." This faith had her father kept, she thought, remembering that his name sounded well on the lips of men. And this was the faith she had learned,--the faith she had carried with her across the Abyss and into the world, where men had wandered away from the old truths and made themselves selfish dogmas and casuistries of the subtlest kinds; the faith she had brought back with her, still fresh, and young, and joyous. And it was all so simple, she had contended; why should not their faith be as her faith--the faith of food and blanket? The faith of trail and hunting camp? The faith with which strong clean men faced the quick danger and sudden death by field and flood? Why not? The faith of Jacob Welse? Of Matt McCarthy? Of the Indian boys she had played with? Of the Indian girls she had led to Amazonian war? Of the very wolf-dogs straining in the harnesses and running with her across the snow? It was healthy, it was real, it was good, she thought, and she was glad.

The rich notes of a robin saluted her from the birch wood, and opened her ears to the day. A partridge boomed afar in the forest, and a tree-squirrel launched unerringly into space above her head, and went on, from limb to limb and tree to tree, scolding graciously the while. From the hidden river rose the shouts of the toiling adventurers, already parted from sleep and fighting their way towards the Pole.

Frona arose, shook back her hair, and took instinctively the old path between the trees to the camp of Chief George and the Dyea tribesmen. She came upon a boy, breech-clouted and bare, like a copper god. He was gathering wood, and looked at her keenly over his bronze shoulder. She bade him good-morning, blithely, in the Dyea tongue; but he shook his head, and laughed insultingly, and paused in his work to hurl shameful words after her. She did not understand, for this was not the old way, and when she passed a great and glowering Sitkan buck she kept her tongue between her teeth. At the fringe of the forest, the camp confronted her. And she was startled. It was not the old camp of a score or more of lodges clustering and huddling together in the open as though for company, but a mighty camp. It began at the very forest, and flowed in and out among the scattered tree-clumps on the flat, and spilled over and down to the river bank where the long canoes were lined up ten and twelve deep. It was a gathering of the tribes, like unto none in all the past, and a thousand miles of coast made up the tally. They were all strange Indians, with wives and chattels and dogs. She rubbed shoulders with Juneau and Wrangel men, and was jostled by wild-eyed Sticks from over the Passes, fierce Chilcats, and Queen Charlotte Islanders. And the looks they cast upon her were black and frowning, save--and far worse--where the merrier souls leered patronizingly into her face and chuckled unmentionable things.

She was not frightened by this insolence, but angered; for it hurt her, and embittered the pleasurable home-coming. Yet she quickly grasped the significance of it: the old patriarchal status of her father's time

had passed away, and civilization, in a scorching blast, had swept down upon this people in a day. Glancing under the raised flaps of a tent, she saw haggard-faced bucks squatting in a circle on the floor. By the door a heap of broken bottles advertised the vigils of the night. A white man, low of visage and shrewd, was dealing cards about, and gold and silver coins leaped into heaping bets upon the blanket board. A few steps farther on she heard the clattering whirl of a wheel of fortune, and saw the Indians, men and women, chancing eagerly their sweat-earned wages for the gaudy prizes of the game. And from tepee and lodge rose the cracked and crazy strains of cheap music-boxes.

An old squaw, peeling a willow pole in the sunshine of an open doorway, raised her head and uttered a shrill cry.

"Hee-Hee! Tenas Hee-Hee!" she muttered as well and as excitedly as her toothless gums would permit.

Frona thrilled at the cry. Tenas Hee-Hee! Little Laughter! Her name of the long gone Indian past! She turned and went over to the old woman.

"And hast thou so soon forgotten, Tenas Hee-Hee?" she mumbled. "And thine eyes so young and sharp! Not so soon does Neepoosa forget."

"It is thou, Neepoosa?" Frona cried, her tongue halting from the disuse of years.

"Ay, it is Neepoosa," the old woman replied, drawing her inside the tent, and despatching a boy, hot-footed, on some errand. They sat down together on the floor, and she patted Frona's hand lovingly, peering, meanwhile, bleary-eyed and misty, into her face. "Ay, it is Neepoosa, grown old quickly after the manner of our women. Neepoosa, who dandled thee in her arms when thou wast a child. Neepoosa, who gave thee thy name, Tenas Hee-Hee. Who fought for thee with Death when thou wast ailing; and gathered growing things from the woods and grasses of the earth and made of them tea, and gave thee to drink. But I mark little change, for I knew thee at once. It was thy very shadow on the ground that made me lift my head. A little change, mayhap. Tall thou art, and like a slender willow in thy grace, and the sun has kissed thy cheeks more lightly of the years; but there is the old hair, flying wild and of the color of the brown seaweed floating on the tide, and the mouth, quick to laugh and loth to cry. And the eyes are as clear and true as in the days when Neepoosa chid thee for wrong-doing, and thou wouldst not put false words upon thy tongue. Ai! Ai! Not as thou art the other women who come now into the land!"

"And why is a white woman without honor among you?" Frona demanded. "Your men say evil things to me in the camp, and as I came through the woods, even the boys. Not in the old days, when I played with them, was this shame so."

"Ai! Ai!" Neepoosa made answer. "It is so. But do not blame them."

Pour not thine anger upon their heads. For it is true it is the fault of thy women who come into the land these days. They can point to no man and say, 'That is my man.' And it is not good that women should be thus. And they look upon all men, bold-eyed and shameless, and their tongues are unclean, and their hearts bad. Wherefore are thy women without honor among us. As for the boys, they are but boys. And the men; how should they know?"

The tent-flaps were poked aside and an old man came in. He grunted to Frona and sat down. Only a certain eager alertness showed the delight he took in her presence.

"So Tenas Hee-Hee has come back in these bad days," he vouchsafed in a shrill, quavering voice.

"And why bad days, Muskim?" Frona asked. "Do not the women wear brighter colors? Are not the bellies fuller with flour and bacon and white man's grub? Do not the young men contrive great wealth what of their pack-straps and paddles? And art thou not remembered with the ancient offerings of meat and fish and blanket? Why bad days, Muskim?"

"True," he replied in his fine, priestly way, a reminiscent flash of the old fire lighting his eyes. "It is very true. The women wear brighter colors. But they have found favor, in the eyes of thy white men, and they look no more upon the young men of their own blood. Wherefore the tribe does not increase, nor do the little children

longer clutter the way of our feet. It is so. The bellies are fuller with the white man's grub; but also are they fuller with the white man's bad whiskey. Nor could it be otherwise that the young men contrive great wealth; but they sit by night over the cards, and it passes from them, and they speak harsh words one to another, and in anger blows are struck, and there is bad blood between them. As for old Muskim, there are few offerings of meat and fish and blanket. For the young women have turned aside from the old paths, nor do the young men longer honor the old totems and the old gods. So these are bad days, Tenas Hee-Hee, and they behold old Muskim go down in sorrow to the grave."

"Ai! Ai! It is so!" wailed Neepoosa.

"Because of the madness of thy people have my people become mad," Muskim continued. "They come over the salt sea like the waves of the sea, thy people, and they go--ah! who knoweth where?"

"Ai! Who knoweth where?" Neepoosa lamented, rocking slowly back and forth.

"Ever they go towards the frost and cold; and ever do they come, more people, wave upon wave!"

"Ai! Ai! Into the frost and cold! It is a long way, and dark and cold!" She shivered, then laid a sudden hand on Frona's arm. "And

thou goest?"

Frona nodded.

"And Tenas Hee-Hee goest! Ai! Ai! Ai!"

The tent-flap lifted, and Matt McCarthy peered in. "It's yerself, Frona, is it? With breakfast waitin' this half-hour on ye, an' old Andy fumin' an' frettin' like the old woman he is. Good-mornin' to ye, Neepoosa," he addressed Frona's companions, "an' to ye, Muskim, though, belike ye've little mimory iv me face."

The old couple grunted salutation and remained stolidly silent.

"But hurry with ye, girl," turning back to Frona. "Me steamer starts by mid-day, an' it's little I'll see iv ye at the best. An' likewise there's Andy an' the breakfast pipin' hot, both iv them."