

CHAPTER VI

"So I think, captain, you will agree that we must exaggerate the seriousness of the situation." Jacob Welse helped his visitor into his fur great-coat and went on. "Not that it is not serious, but that it may not become more serious. Both you and I have handled famines before. We must frighten them, and frighten them now, before it is too late. Take five thousand men out of Dawson and there will be grub to last. Let those five thousand carry their tale of famine to Dyea and Skaguay, and they will prevent five thousand more coming in over the ice."

"Quite right! And you may count on the hearty co-operation of the police, Mr. Welse." The speaker, a strong-faced, grizzled man, heavy-set and of military bearing, pulled up his collar and rested his hand on the door-knob. "I see already, thanks to you, the newcomers are beginning to sell their outfits and buy dogs. Lord! won't there be a stampede out over the ice as soon as the river closes down! And each that sells a thousand pounds of grub and goes lessens the proposition by one empty stomach and fills another that remains. When does the Laura start?"

"This morning, with three hundred grubless men aboard. Would that they were three thousand!"

Amen to that! And by the way, when does your daughter arrive?"

"Most any day, now." Jacob Welse's eyes warmed. "And I want you to dinner when she does, and bring along a bunch of your young bucks from the Barracks. I don't know all their names, but just the same extend the invitation as though from me personally. I haven't cultivated the social side much,--no time, but see to it that the girl enjoys herself. Fresh from the States and London, and she's liable to feel lonesome. You understand."

Jacob Welse closed the door, tilted his chair back, and cocked his feet on the guard-rail of the stove. For one half-minute a girlish vision wavered in the shimmering air above the stove, then merged into a woman of fair Saxon type.

The door opened. "Mr. Welse, Mr. Foster sent me to find out if he is to go on filling signed warehouse orders?"

"Certainly, Mr. Smith. But tell him to scale them down by half. If a man holds an order for a thousand pounds, give him five hundred."

He lighted a cigar and tilted back again in his chair.

"Captain McGregor wants to see you, sir."

"Send him in."

Captain McGregor strode in and remained standing before his employer. The rough hand of the New World had been laid upon the Scotsman from his boyhood; but sterling honesty was written in every line of his bitter-seamed face, while a prognathous jaw proclaimed to the onlooker that honesty was the best policy,--for the onlooker at any rate, should he wish to do business with the owner of the jaw. This warning was backed up by the nose, side-twisted and broken, and by a long scar which ran up the forehead and disappeared in the gray-grizzled hair.

"We throw off the lines in an hour, sir; so I've come for the last word."

"Good." Jacob Welse whirled his chair about. "Captain McGregor."

"Ay."

"I had other work cut out for you this winter; but I have changed my mind and chosen you to go down with the Laura. Can you guess why?"

Captain McGregor swayed his weight from one leg to the other, and a shrewd chuckle of a smile wrinkled the corners of his eyes. "Going to be trouble," he grunted.

"And I couldn't have picked a better man. Mr. Bally will give you detailed instructions as you go aboard. But let me say this: If we can't scare enough men out of the country, there'll be need for every

pound of grub at Fort Yukon. Understand?"

"Ay."

"So no extravagance. You are taking three hundred men down with you. The chances are that twice as many more will go down as soon as the river freezes. You'll have a thousand to feed through the winter. Put them on rations,--working rations,--and see that they work. Cordwood, six dollars per cord, and piled on the bank where steamers can make a landing. No work, no rations. Understand?"

"Ay."

"A thousand men can get ugly, if they are idle. They can get ugly anyway. Watch out they don't rush the caches. If they do,--do your duty."

The other nodded grimly. His hands gripped unconsciously, while the scar on his forehead took on a livid hue.

"There are five steamers in the ice. Make them safe against the spring break-up. But first transfer all their cargoes to one big cache. You can defend it better, and make the cache impregnable. Send a messenger down to Fort Burr, asking Mr. Carter for three of his men. He doesn't need them. Nothing much is doing at Circle City. Stop in on the way down and take half of Mr. Burdwell's men. You'll need them. There'll

be gun-fighters in plenty to deal with. Be stiff. Keep things in check from the start. Remember, the man who shoots first comes off with the whole hide. And keep a constant eye on the grub."

"And on the forty-five-nineties," Captain McGregor rumbled back as he passed out the door.

"John Melton--Mr. Melton, sir. Can he see you?"

"See here, Welse, what's this mean?" John Melton followed wrathfully on the heels of the clerk, and he almost walked over him as he flourished a paper before the head of the company. "Read that! What's it stand for?"

Jacob Welse glanced over it and looked up coolly. "One thousand pounds of grub."

"That's what I say, but that fellow you've got in the warehouse says no,--five hundred's all it's good for."

"He spoke the truth."

"But--"

"It stands for one thousand pounds, but in the warehouse it is only good for five hundred."

"That your signature?" thrusting the receipt again into the other's line of vision.

"Yes."

"Then what are you going to do about it?"

"Give you five hundred. What are you going to do about it?"

"Refuse to take it."

"Very good. There is no further discussion."

"Yes there is. I propose to have no further dealings with you. I'm rich enough to freight my own stuff in over the Passes, and I will next year. Our business stops right now and for all time."

"I cannot object to that. You have three hundred thousand dollars in dust deposited with me. Go to Mr. Atsheler and draw it at once."

The man fumed impotently up and down. "Can't I get that other five hundred? Great God, man! I've paid for it! You don't intend me to starve?"

"Look here, Melton." Jacob Welse paused to knock the ash from his

cigar. "At this very moment what are you working for? What are you trying to get?"

"A thousand pounds of grub."

"For your own stomach?"

The Bonanzo king nodded his head.

"Just so." The lines showed more sharply on Jacob Welse's forehead.

"You are working for your own stomach. I am working for the stomachs of twenty thousand."

"But you filled Tim McReady's thousand pounds yesterday all right."

"The scale-down did not go into effect until to-day."

"But why am I the one to get it in the neck hard?"

"Why didn't you come yesterday, and Tim McReady to-day?"

Melton's face went blank, and Jacob Welse answered his own question with shrugging shoulders.

"That's the way it stands, Melton. No favoritism. If you hold me responsible for Tim McReady, I shall hold you responsible for not

coming yesterday. Better we both throw it upon Providence. You went through the Forty Mile Famine. You are a white man. A Bonanza property, or a block of Bonanza properties, does not entitle you to a pound more than the oldest penniless 'sour-dough' or the newest baby born. Trust me. As long as I have a pound of grub you shall not starve. Stiffen up. Shake hands. Get a smile on your face and make the best of it."

Still savage of spirit, though rapidly toning down, the king shook hands and flung out of the room. Before the door could close on his heels, a loose-jointed Yankee shambled in, thrust a moccasined foot to the side and hooked a chair under him, and sat down.

"Say," he opened up, confidentially, "people's gittin' scairt over the grub proposition, I guess some."

"Hello, Dave. That you?"

"S'pose so. But ez I was saying there'll be a lively stampede fer the Outside soon as the river freezes."

"Think so?"

"Unh huh."

"Then I'm glad to hear it. It's what the country needs. Going to join

them?"

"Not in a thousand years." Dave Harney threw his head back with smug complacency. "Freighted my truck up to the mine yesterday. Wa'n't a bit too soon about it, either. But say . . . Suthin' happened to the sugar. Had it all on the last sled, an' jest where the trail turns off the Klondike into Bonanzo, what does that sled do but break through the ice! I never seen the beat of it--the last sled of all, an' all the sugar! So I jest thought I'd drop in to-day an' git a hundred pounds or so. White or brown, I ain't pertickler."

Jacob Welse shook his head and smiled, but Harney hitched his chair closer.

"The clerk of yourn said he didn't know, an' ez there wa'n't no call to pester him, I said I'd jest drop round an' see you. I don't care what it's wuth. Make it a hundred even; that'll do me handy.

"Say," he went on easily, noting the decidedly negative poise of the other's head. "I've got a tolerable sweet tooth, I have. Recollect the taffy I made over on Preacher Creek that time? I declare! how time does fly! That was all of six years ago if it's a day. More'n that, surely. Seven, by the Jimcracky! But ez I was sayin', I'd ruther do without my plug of 'Star' than sugar. An' about that sugar? Got my dogs outside. Better go round to the warehouse an' git it, eh? Pretty good idea."

But he saw the "No" shaping on Jacob Welse's lips, and hurried on before it could be uttered.

"Now, I don't want to hog it. Wouldn't do that fer the world. So if yer short, I can put up with seventy-five--" (he studied the other's face), "an' I might do with fifty. I 'preciate your position, an' I ain't low-down critter enough to pester--"

"What's the good of spilling words, Dave? We haven't a pound of sugar to spare--"

"Ez I was sayin', I ain't no hog; an' seein' 's it's you, Welse, I'll make to scrimp along on twenty-five--"

"Not an ounce!"

"Not the least leetle mite? Well, well, don't git het up. We'll jest fergit I ast you fer any, an' I'll drop round some likelier time. So long. Say!" He threw his jaw to one side and seemed to stiffen the muscles of his ear as he listened intently. "That's the Laura's whistle. She's startin' soon. Goin' to see her off? Come along."

Jacob Welse pulled on his bearskin coat and mittens, and they passed through the outer offices into the main store. So large was it, that the tenscore purchasers before the counters made no apparent crowd.

Many were serious-faced, and more than one looked darkly at the head of the company as he passed. The clerks were selling everything except grub, and it was grub that was in demand. "Holding it for a rise. Famine prices," a red-whiskered miner sneered. Jacob Welse heard it, but took no notice. He expected to hear it many times and more unpleasantly ere the scare was over.

On the sidewalk he stopped to glance over the public bulletins posted against the side of the building. Dogs lost, found, and for sale occupied some space, but the rest was devoted to notices of sales of outfits. The timid were already growing frightened. Outfits of five hundred pounds were offering at a dollar a pound, without flour; others, with flour, at a dollar and a half. Jacob Welse saw Melton talking with an anxious-faced newcomer, and the satisfaction displayed by the Bonanzo king told that he had succeeded in filling his winter's cache.

"Why don't you smell out the sugar, Dave?" Jacob Welse asked, pointing to the bulletins.

Dave Harney looked his reproach. "Mebbe you think I ain't ben smellin'. I've clean wore my dogs out chasin' round from Klondike City to the Hospital. Can't git yer fingers on it fer love or money."

They walked down the block-long sidewalk, past the warehouse doors and the long teams of waiting huskies curled up in wolfish comfort in the

snow. It was for this snow, the first permanent one of the fall, that the miners up-creek had waited to begin their freighting.

"Curious, ain't it?" Dave hazarded suggestively, as they crossed the main street to the river bank. "Mighty curious--me ownin' two five-hundred-foot Eldorado claims an' a fraction, wuth five millions if I'm wuth a cent, an' no sweetenin' fer my coffee or mush! Why, gosh-dang-it! this country kin go to blazes! I'll sell out! I'll quit it cold! I'll--I'll--go back to the States!"

"Oh, no, you won't," Jacob Welse answered. "I've heard you talk before. You put in a year up Stuart River on straight meat, if I haven't forgotten. And you ate salmon-belly and dogs up the Tanana, to say nothing of going through two famines; and you haven't turned your back on the country yet. And you never will. And you'll die here as sure as that's the Laura's spring being hauled aboard. And I look forward confidently to the day when I shall ship you out in a lead-lined box and burden the San Francisco end with the trouble of winding up your estate. You are a fixture, and you know it."

As he talked he constantly acknowledged greetings from the passers-by. Those who knew him were mainly old-timers and he knew them all by name, though there was scarcely a newcomer to whom his face was not familiar.

"I'll jest bet I'll be in Paris in 1900," the Eldorado king protested feebly.

But Jacob Welse did not hear. There was a jangling of gongs as McGregor saluted him from the pilot-house and the Laura slipped out from the bank. The men on the shore filled the air with good-luck farewells and last advice, but the three hundred grubless ones, turning their backs on the golden dream, were moody and dispirited, and made small response. The Laura backed out through a channel cut in the shore-ice, swung about in the current, and with a final blast put on full steam ahead.

The crowd thinned away and went about its business, leaving Jacob Welse the centre of a group of a dozen or so. The talk was of the famine, but it was the talk of men. Even Dave Harney forgot to curse the country for its sugar shortage, and waxed facetious over the newcomers,--chechaquos, he called them, having recourse to the Siwash tongue. In the midst of his remarks his quick eye lighted on a black speck floating down with the mush-ice of the river. "Jest look at that!" he cried. "A Peterborough canoe runnin' the ice!"

Twisting and turning, now paddling, now shoving clear of the floating cakes, the two men in the canoe worked in to the rim-ice, along the edge of which they drifted, waiting for an opening. Opposite the channel cut out by the steamer, they drove their paddles deep and darted into the calm dead water. The waiting group received them with open arms, helping them up the bank and carrying their shell after them.

In its bottom were two leather mail-pouches, a couple of blankets, coffee-pot and frying-pan, and a scant grub-sack. As for the men, so frosted were they, and so numb with the cold, that they could hardly stand. Dave Harney proposed whiskey, and was for haling them away at once; but one delayed long enough to shake stiff hands with Jacob Welse.

"She's coming," he announced. "Passed her boat an hour back. It ought to be round the bend any minute. I've got despatches for you, but I'll see you later. Got to get something into me first." Turning to go with Harney, he stopped suddenly and pointed up stream. "There she is now. Just coming out past the bluff."

"Run along, boys, an' git yer whiskey," Harney admonished him and his mate. "Tell 'm it's on me, double dose, an' jest excuse me not drinkin' with you, fer I'm goin' to stay."

The Klondike was throwing a thick flow of ice, partly mush and partly solid, and swept the boat out towards the middle of the Yukon. They could see the struggle plainly from the bank,--four men standing up and poling a way through the jarring cakes. A Yukon stove aboard was sending up a trailing pillar of blue smoke, and, as the boat drew closer, they could see a woman in the stern working the long steering-sweep. At sight of this there was a snap and sparkle in Jacob Welse's eyes. It was the first omen, and it was good, he thought. She was still a Welse; a struggler and a fighter. The years of her culture had not weakened her. Though tasting of the fruits of the first remove

from the soil, she was not afraid of the soil; she could return to it gleefully and naturally.

So he mused till the boat drove in, ice-rimed and battered, against the edge of the rim-ice. The one white man aboard sprang out, painter in hand, to slow it down and work into the channel. But the rim-ice was formed of the night, and the front of it shelved off with him into the current. The nose of the boat sheered out under the pressure of a heavy cake, so that he came up at the stern. The woman's arm flashed over the side to his collar, and at the same instant, sharp and authoritative, her voice rang out to the Indian oarsmen to back water. Still holding the man's head above water, she threw her body against the sweep and guided the boat stern-foremost into the opening. A few more strokes and it grounded at the foot of the bank. She passed the collar of the chattering man to Dave Harney, who dragged him out and started him off on the trail of the mail-carriers.

Frona stood up, her cheeks glowing from the quick work. Jacob Welse hesitated. Though he stood within reach of the gunwale, a gulf of three years was between. The womanhood of twenty, added unto the girl of seventeen, made a sum more prodigious than he had imagined. He did not know whether to bear-hug the radiant young creature or to take her hand and help her ashore. But there was no apparent hitch, for she leaped beside him and was into his arms. Those above looked away to a man till the two came up the bank hand in hand.

"Gentlemen, my daughter." There was a great pride in his face.

Frona embraced them all with a comrade smile, and each man felt that for an instant her eyes had looked straight into his.