

CHAPTER VII

That Vance Corliss wanted to see more of the girl he had divided blankets with, goes with the saying. He had not been wise enough to lug a camera into the country, but none the less, by a yet subtler process, a sun-picture had been recorded somewhere on his cerebral tissues. In the flash of an instant it had been done. A wave message of light and color, a molecular agitation and integration, a certain minute though definite corrugation in a brain recess,--and there it was, a picture complete! The blazing sunlight on the beetling black; a slender gray form, radiant, starting forward to the vision from the marge where light and darkness met; a fresh young morning smile wreathed in a flame of burning gold.

It was a picture he looked at often, and the more he looked the greater was his desire, to see Frona Welse again. This event he anticipated with a thrill, with the exultancy over change which is common of all life. She was something new, a fresh type, a woman unrelated to all women he had met. Out of the fascinating unknown a pair of hazel eyes smiled into his, and a hand, soft of touch and strong of grip, beckoned him. And there was an allurement about it which was as the allurement of sin.

Not that Vance Corliss was anybody's fool, nor that his had been an anchorite's existence; but that his upbringing, rather, had given his life a certain puritanical bent. Awakening intelligence and broader

knowledge had weakened the early influence of an austere mother, but had not wholly eradicated it. It was there, deep down, very shadowy, but still a part of him. He could not get away from it. It distorted, ever so slightly, his concepts of things. It gave a squint to his perceptions, and very often, when the sex feminine was concerned, determined his classifications. He prided himself on his largeness when he granted that there were three kinds of women. His mother had only admitted two. But he had outgrown her. It was incontestable that there were three kinds,--the good, the bad, and the partly good and partly bad. That the last usually went bad, he believed firmly. In its very nature such a condition could not be permanent. It was the intermediary stage, marking the passage from high to low, from best to worst.

All of which might have been true, even as he saw it; but with definitions for premises, conclusions cannot fail to be dogmatic. What was good and bad? There it was. That was where his mother whispered with dead lips to him. Nor alone his mother, but divers conventional generations, even back to the sturdy ancestor who first uplifted from the soil and looked down. For Vance Corliss was many times removed from the red earth, and, though he did not know it, there was a clamor within him for a return lest he perish.

Not that he pigeon-holed Frona according to his inherited definitions. He refused to classify her at all. He did not dare. He preferred to pass judgment later, when he had gathered more data. And there was the

allurement, the gathering of the data; the great critical point where purity reaches dreamy hands towards pitch and refuses to call it pitch--till defiled. No; Vance Corliss was not a cad. And since purity is merely a relative term, he was not pure. That there was no pitch under his nails was not because he had manicured diligently, but because it had not been his luck to run across any pitch. He was not good because he chose to be, because evil was repellant; but because he had not had opportunity to become evil. But from this, on the other hand, it is not to be argued that he would have gone bad had he had a chance.

He was a product of the sheltered life. All his days had been lived in a sanitary dwelling; the plumbing was excellent. The air he had breathed had been mostly ozone artificially manufactured. He had been sun-bathed in balmy weather, and brought in out of the wet when it rained. And when he reached the age of choice he had been too fully occupied to deviate from the straight path, along which his mother had taught him to creep and toddle, and along which he now proceeded to walk upright, without thought of what lay on either side.

Vitality cannot be used over again. If it be expended on one thing, there is none left for the other thing. And so with Vance Corliss. Scholarly lucubrations and healthy exercises during his college days had consumed all the energy his normal digestion extracted from a wholesome omnivorous diet. When he did discover a bit of surplus energy, he worked it off in the society of his mother and of the

conventional minds and prim teas she surrounded herself with. Result: A very nice young man, of whom no maid's mother need ever be in trepidation; a very strong young man, whose substance had not been wasted in riotous living; a very learned young man, with a Freiberg mining engineer's diploma and a B.A. sheepskin from Yale; and, lastly, a very self-centred, self-possessed young man.

Now his greatest virtue lay in this: he had not become hardened in the mould baked by his several forbears and into which he had been pressed by his mother's hands. Some atavism had been at work in the making of him, and he had reverted to that ancestor who sturdily uplifted. But so far this portion of his heritage had lain dormant. He had simply remained adjusted to a stable environment. There had been no call upon the adaptability which was his. But whensoever the call came, being so constituted, it was manifest that he should adapt, should adjust himself to the unwonted pressure of new conditions. The maxim of the rolling stone may be all true; but notwithstanding, in the scheme of life, the inability to become fixed is an excellence par excellence. Though he did not know it, this inability was Vance Corliss's most splendid possession.

But to return. He looked forward with great sober glee to meeting Frona Welse, and in the meanwhile consulted often the sun-picture he carried of her. Though he went over the Pass and down the lakes and river with a push of money behind him (London syndicates are never niggardly in such matters). Frona beat him into Dawson by a fortnight.

While on his part money in the end overcame obstacles, on hers the name of Welse was a talisman greater than treasure. After his arrival, a couple of weeks were consumed in buying a cabin, presenting his letters of introduction, and settling down. But all things come in the fulness of time, and so, one night after the river closed, he pointed his moccasins in the direction of Jacob Welse's house. Mrs. Schoville, the Gold Commissioner's wife, gave him the honor of her company.

Corliss wanted to rub his eyes. Steam-heating apparatus in the Klondike! But the next instant he had passed out of the hall through the heavy portieres and stood inside the drawing-room. And it was a drawing-room. His moose-hide moccasins sank luxuriantly into the deep carpet, and his eyes were caught by a Turner sunrise on the opposite wall. And there were other paintings and things in bronze. Two Dutch fireplaces were roaring full with huge back-logs of spruce. There was a piano; and somebody was singing. Frona sprang from the stool and came forward, greeting him with both hands. He had thought his sun-picture perfect, but this fire-picture, this young creature with the flush and warmth of ringing life, quite eclipsed it. It was a whirling moment, as he held her two hands in his, one of those moments when an incomprehensible orgasm quickens the blood and dizzies the brain. Though the first syllables came to him faintly, Mrs. Schoville's voice brought him back to himself.

"Oh!" she cried. "You know him!"

And Frona answered, "Yes, we met on the Dyea Trail; and those who meet on the Dyea Trail can never forget."

"How romantic!"

The Gold Commissioner's wife clapped her hands. Though fat and forty, and phlegmatic of temperament, between exclamations and hand-clappings her waking existence was mostly explosive. Her husband secretly averred that did God Himself deign to meet her face to face, she would smite together her chubby hands and cry out, "How romantic!"

"How did it happen?" she continued. "He didn't rescue you over a cliff, or that sort of thing, did he? Do say that he did! And you never said a word about it, Mr. Corliss. Do tell me. I'm just dying to know!"

"Oh, nothing like that," he hastened to answer. "Nothing much. I, that is we--"

He felt a sinking as Frona interrupted. There was no telling what this remarkable girl might say.

"He gave me of his hospitality, that was all," she said. "And I can vouch for his fried potatoes; while for his coffee, it is excellent--when one is very hungry."

"Ingrate!" he managed to articulate, and thereby to gain a smile, ere he was introduced to a cleanly built lieutenant of the Mounted Police, who stood by the fireplace discussing the grub proposition with a dapper little man very much out of place in a white shirt and stiff collar.

Thanks to the particular niche in society into which he happened to be born, Corliss drifted about easily from group to group, and was much envied therefore by Del Bishop, who sat stiffly in the first chair he had dropped into, and who was waiting patiently for the first person to take leave that he might know how to compass the manoeuvre. In his mind's eye he had figured most of it out, knew just how many steps required to carry him to the door, was certain he would have to say good-bye to Frona, but did not know whether or not he was supposed to shake hands all around. He had just dropped in to see Frona and say "Howdee," as he expressed it, and had unwittingly found himself in company.

Corliss, having terminated a buzz with a Miss Mortimer on the decadence of the French symbolists, encountered Del Bishop. But the pocket-miner remembered him at once from the one glimpse he had caught of Corliss standing by his tent-door in Happy Camp. Was almighty obliged to him for his night's hospitality to Miss Frona, seein' as he'd ben side-tracked down the line; that any kindness to her was a kindness to him; and that he'd remember it, by God, as long as he had a corner of a

blanket to pull over him. Hoped it hadn't put him out. Miss Frona'd said that bedding was scarce, but it wasn't a cold night (more blowy than crisp), so he reckoned there couldn't 'a' ben much shiverin'. All of which struck Corliss as perilous, and he broke away at the first opportunity, leaving the pocket-miner yearning for the door.

But Dave Harney, who had not come by mistake, avoided gluing himself to the first chair. Being an Eldorado king, he had felt it incumbent to assume the position in society to which his numerous millions entitled him; and though unused all his days to social amenities other than the out-hanging latch-string and the general pot, he had succeeded to his own satisfaction as a knight of the carpet. Quick to take a cue, he circulated with an aplomb which his striking garments and long shambling gait only heightened, and talked choppy and disconnected fragments with whomsoever he ran up against. The Miss Mortimer, who spoke Parisian French, took him aback with her symbolists; but he evened matters up with a goodly measure of the bastard lingo of the Canadian voyageurs, and left her gasping and meditating over a proposition to sell him twenty-five pounds of sugar, white or brown. But she was not unduly favored, for with everybody he adroitly turned the conversation to grub, and then led up to the eternal proposition. "Sugar or bust," he would conclude gayly each time and wander on to the next.

But he put the capstone on his social success by asking Frona to sing the touching ditty, "I Left My Happy Home for You." This was something

beyond her, though she had him hum over the opening bars so that she could furnish the accompaniment. His voice was more strenuous than sweet, and Del Bishop, discovering himself at last, joined in raucously on the choruses. This made him feel so much better that he disconnected himself from the chair, and when he finally got home he kicked up his sleepy tent-mate to tell him about the high time he'd had over at the Welse's. Mrs. Schoville tittered and thought it all so unique, and she thought it so unique several times more when the lieutenant of Mounted Police and a couple of compatriots roared "Rule Britannia" and "God Save the Queen," and the Americans responded with "My Country, 'Tis of Thee" and "John Brown." Then big Alec Beaubien, the Circle City king, demanded the "Marseillaise," and the company broke up chanting "Die Wacht am Rhein" to the frosty night.

"Don't come on these nights," Frona whispered to Corliss at parting. "We haven't spoken three words, and I know we shall be good friends. Did Dave Harney succeed in getting any sugar out of you?"

They mingled their laughter, and Corliss went home under the aurora borealis, striving to reduce his impressions to some kind of order.