

## CHAPTER IX

Vance Corliss proceeded at a fair rate to adapt himself to the Northland life, and he found that many adjustments came easy. While his own tongue was alien to the brimstone of the Lord, he became quite used to strong language on the part of other men, even in the most genial conversation. Carthey, a little Texan who went to work for him for a while, opened or closed every second sentence, on an average, with the mild expletive, "By damn!" It was also his invariable way of expressing surprise, disappointment, consternation, or all the rest of the tribe of sudden emotions. By pitch and stress and intonation, the protean oath was made to perform every function of ordinary speech. At first it was a constant source of irritation and disgust to Corliss, but ere long he grew not only to tolerate it, but to like it, and to wait for it eagerly. Once, Carthey's wheel-dog lost an ear in a hasty contention with a dog of the Hudson Bay, and when the young fellow bent over the animal and discovered the loss, the blended endearment and pathos of the "by damn" which fell from his lips was a relation to Corliss. All was not evil out of Nazareth, he concluded sagely, and, like Jacob Welse of old, revised his philosophy of life accordingly.

Again, there were two sides to the social life of Dawson. Up at the Barracks, at the Welse's, and a few other places, all men of standing were welcomed and made comfortable by the womenkind of like standing. There were teas, and dinners, and dances, and socials for charity, and the usual run of things; all of which, however, failed to wholly

satisfy the men. Down in the town there was a totally different though equally popular other side. As the country was too young for club-life, the masculine portion of the community expressed its masculinity by herding together in the saloons,--the ministers and missionaries being the only exceptions to this mode of expression. Business appointments and deals were made and consummated in the saloons, enterprises projected, shop talked, the latest news discussed, and a general good fellowship maintained. There all life rubbed shoulders, and kings and dog-drivers, old-timers and chechaquos, met on a common level. And it so happened, probably because saw-mills and house-space were scarce, that the saloons accommodated the gambling tables and the polished dance-house floors. And here, because he needs must bend to custom, Corliss's adaptation went on rapidly. And as Carthey, who appreciated him, soliloquized, "The best of it is he likes it damn well, by damn!"

But any adjustment must have its painful periods, and while Corliss's general change went on smoothly, in the particular case of Frona it was different. She had a code of her own, quite unlike that of the community, and perhaps believed woman might do things at which even the saloon-inhabiting males would be shocked. And because of this, she and Corliss had their first disagreeable disagreement.

Frona loved to run with the dogs through the biting frost, cheeks tingling, blood bounding, body thrust forward, and limbs rising and falling ceaselessly to the pace. And one November day, with the first

cold snap on and the spirit thermometer frigidly marking sixty-five below, she got out the sled, harnessed her team of huskies, and flew down the river trail. As soon as she cleared the town she was off and running. And in such manner, running and riding by turns, she swept through the Indian village below the bluff's, made an eight-mile circle up Moosehide Creek and back, crossed the river on the ice, and several hours later came flying up the west bank of the Yukon opposite the town. She was aiming to tap and return by the trail for the wood-sleds which crossed thereabout, but a mile away from it she ran into the soft snow and brought the winded dogs to a walk.

Along the rim of the river and under the frown of the overhanging cliffs, she directed the path she was breaking. Here and there she made detours to avoid the out-jutting talus, and at other times followed the ice in against the precipitous walls and hugged them closely around the abrupt bends. And so, at the head of her huskies, she came suddenly upon a woman sitting in the snow and gazing across the river at smoke-canopied Dawson. She had been crying, and this was sufficient to prevent Frona's scrutiny from wandering farther. A tear, turned to a globule of ice, rested on her cheek, and her eyes were dim and moist; there was an-expression of hopeless, fathomless woe.

"Oh!" Frona cried, stopping the dogs and coming up to her. "You are hurt? Can I help you?" she queried, though the stranger shook her head. "But you mustn't sit there. It is nearly seventy below, and you'll freeze in a few minutes. Your cheeks are bitten already." She

rubbed the afflicted parts vigorously with a mitten of snow, and then looked down on the warm returning glow.

"I beg pardon." The woman rose somewhat stiffly to her feet. "And I thank you, but I am perfectly warm, you see" (settling the fur cape more closely about her with a snuggling movement), "and I had just sat down for the moment."

Frona noted that she was very beautiful, and her woman's eye roved over and took in the splendid furs, the make of the gown, and the bead-work of the moccasins which peeped from beneath. And in view of all this, and of the fact that the face was unfamiliar, she felt an instinctive desire to shrink back.

"And I haven't hurt myself," the woman went on. "Just a mood, that was all, looking out over the dreary endless white."

"Yes," Frona replied, mastering herself; "I can understand. There must be much of sadness in such a landscape, only it never comes that way to me. The sombreness and the sternness of it appeal to me, but not the sadness."

"And that is because the lines of our lives have been laid in different places," the other ventured, reflectively. "It is not what the landscape is, but what we are. If we were not, the landscape would remain, but without human significance. That is what we invest it with."

"Truth is within ourselves; it takes no rise  
From outward things, whate'er you may believe."

Frona's eyes brightened, and she went on to complete the passage:

"There is an inmost centre in us all,  
Where truth abides in fulness; and around.'

"And--and--how does it go? I have forgotten."

"Wall upon wall, the gross flesh hems it in--"

The woman ceased abruptly, her voice trilling off into silvery laughter with a certain bitter reckless ring to it which made Frona inwardly shiver. She moved as though to go back to her dogs, but the woman's hand went out in a familiar gesture,--twin to Frona's own,--which went at once to Frona's heart.

"Stay a moment," she said, with an undertone of pleading in the words, "and talk with me. It is long since I have met a woman"--she paused while her tongue wandered for the word--"who could quote 'Paracelsus.' You are,--I know you, you see,--you are Jacob Welse's daughter, Frona Welse, I believe."

Frona nodded her identity, hesitated, and looked at the woman with

secret intentness. She was conscious of a great and pardonable curiosity, of a frank out-reaching for fuller knowledge. This creature, so like, so different; old as the oldest race, and young as the last rose-tinted babe; flung far as the farthest fires of men, and eternal as humanity itself--where were they unlike, this woman and she? Her five senses told her not; by every law of life they were no; only, only by the fast-drawn lines of social caste and social wisdom were they not the same. So she thought, even as for one searching moment she studied the other's face. And in the situation she found an uplifting awfulness, such as comes when the veil is thrust aside and one gazes on the mysteriousness of Deity. She remembered: "Her feet take hold of hell; her house is the way to the grave, going down to the chamber of death," and in the same instant strong upon her was the vision of the familiar gesture with which the woman's hand had gone out in mute appeal, and she looked aside, out over the dreary endless white, and for her, too, the day became filled with sadness.

She gave an involuntary, half-nervous shiver, though she said, naturally enough, "Come, let us walk on and get the blood moving again. I had no idea it was so cold till I stood still." She turned to the dogs: "Mush-on! King! You Sandy! Mush!" And back again to the woman, "I am quite chilled, and as for you, you must be--"

"Quite warm, of course. You have been running and your clothes are wet against you, while I have kept up the needful circulation and no more. I saw you when you leaped off the sled below the hospital and vanished

down the river like a Diana of the snows. How I envied you! You must enjoy it."

"Oh, I do," Frona answered, simply. "I was raised with the dogs."

"It savors of the Greek."

Frona did not reply, and they walked on in silence. Yet Frona wished, though she dared not dare, that she could give her tongue free rein, and from out of the other's bitter knowledge, for her own soul's sake and sanity, draw the pregnant human generalizations which she must possess. And over her welled a wave of pity and distress; and she felt a discomfort, for she knew not what to say or how to voice her heart. And when the other's speech broke forth, she hailed it with a great relief.

"Tell me," the woman demanded, half-eagerly, half-masterly, "tell me about yourself. You are new to the Inside. Where were you before you came in? Tell me."

So the difficulty was solved, in a way, and Frona talked on about herself, with a successfully feigned girlhood innocence, as though she did not appreciate the other or understand her ill-concealed yearning for that which she might not have, but which was Frona's.

"There is the trail you are trying to connect with." They had rounded

the last of the cliffs, and Frona's companion pointed ahead to where the walls receded and wrinkled to a gorge, out of which the sleds drew the firewood across the river to town. "I shall leave you there," she concluded.

"But are you not going back to Dawson?" Frona queried. "It is growing late, and you had better not linger."

"No . . . I . . ."

Her painful hesitancy brought Frona to a realization of her own thoughtlessness. But she had made the step, and she knew she could not retrace it.

"We will go back together," she said, bravely. And in candid all-knowledge of the other, "I do not mind."

Then it was that the blood surged into the woman's cold face, and her hand went out to the girl in the old, old way.

"No, no, I beg of you," she stammered. "I beg of you . . . I . . . I prefer to continue my walk a little farther. See! Some one is coming now!"

By this time they had reached the wood-trail, and Frona's face was flaming as the other's had flamed. A light sled, dogs a-lope and



swinging down out of the gorge, was just upon them. A man was running with the team, and he waved his hand to the two women.

"Vance!" Frona exclaimed, as he threw his lead-dogs in the snow and brought the sled to a halt. "What are you doing over here? Is the syndicate bent upon cornering the firewood also?"

"No. We're not so bad as that." His face was full of smiling happiness at the meeting as he shook hands with her. "But Carthey is leaving me,--going prospecting somewhere around the North Pole, I believe,--and I came across to look up Del Bishop, if he'll serve."

He turned his head to glance expectantly at her companion, and she saw the smile go out of his face and anger come in. Frona was helplessly aware that she had no grip over the situation, and, though a rebellion at the cruelty and injustice of it was smouldering somewhere deep down, she could only watch the swift culmination of the little tragedy. The woman met his gaze with a half-shrinking, as from an impending blow, and with a softness of expression which entreated pity. But he regarded her long and coldly, then deliberately turned his back. As he did this, Frona noted her face go tired and gray, and the hardness and recklessness of her laughter were there painted in harsh tones, and a bitter devil rose up and lurked in her eyes. It was evident that the same bitter devil rushed hotly to her tongue. But it chanced just then that she glanced at Frona, and all expression was brushed from her face save the infinite tiredness. She smiled wistfully at the girl, and

without a word turned and went down the trail.

And without a word Frona sprang upon her sled and was off. The way was wide, and Corliss swung in his dogs abreast of hers. The smouldering rebellion flared up, and she seemed to gather to herself some of the woman's recklessness.

"You brute!"

The words left her mouth, sharp, clear-cut, breaking the silence like the lash of a whip. The unexpectedness of it, and the savagery, took Corliss aback. He did not know what to do or say.

"Oh, you coward! You coward!"

"Frona! Listen to me--"

But she cut him off. "No. Do not speak. You can have nothing to say. You have behaved abominably. I am disappointed in you. It is horrible! horrible!"

"Yes, it was horrible,--horrible that she should walk with you, have speech with you, be seen with you."

"Not until the sun excludes you, do I exclude you," she flung back at him.

"But there is a fitness of things--"

"Fitness!" She turned upon him and loosed her wrath. "If she is unfit, are you fit? May you cast the first stone with that smugly sanctimonious air of yours?"

"You shall not talk to me in this fashion. I'll not have it."

He clutched at her sled, and even in the midst of her anger she noticed it with a little thrill of pleasure.

"Shall not? You coward!"

He reached out as though to lay hands upon her, and she raised her coiled whip to strike. But to his credit he never flinched; his white face calmly waited to receive the blow. Then she deflected the stroke, and the long lash hissed out and fell among the dogs. Swinging the whip briskly, she rose to her knees on the sled and called frantically to the animals. Hers was the better team, and she shot rapidly away from Corliss. She wished to get away, not so much from him as from herself, and she encouraged the huskies into wilder and wilder speed. She took the steep river-bank in full career and dashed like a whirlwind through the town and home. Never in her life had she been in such a condition; never had she experienced such terrible anger. And not only was she already ashamed, but she was frightened and afraid of

herself.