

CHAPTER X

The next morning Corliss was knocked out of a late bed by Bash, one of Jacob Welse's Indians. He was the bearer of a brief little note from Frona, which contained a request for the mining engineer to come and see her at his first opportunity. That was all that was said, and he pondered over it deeply. What did she wish to say to him? She was still such an unknown quantity,--and never so much as now in the light of the day before,--that he could not guess. Did she desire to give him his dismissal on a definite, well-understood basis? To take advantage of her sex and further humiliate him? To tell him what she thought of him in coolly considered, cold-measured terms? Or was she penitently striving to make amends for the unmerited harshness she had dealt him? There was neither contrition nor anger in the note, no clew, nothing save a formally worded desire to see him.

So it was in a rather unsettled and curious frame of mind that he walked in upon her as the last hour of the morning drew to a close. He was neither on his dignity nor off, his attitude being strictly non-committal against the moment she should disclose hers. But without beating about the bush, in that way of hers which he had come already to admire, she at once showed her colors and came frankly forward to him. The first glimpse of her face told him, the first feel of her hand, before she had said a word, told him that all was well.

"I am glad you have come," she began. "I could not be at peace with

myself until I had seen you and told you how sorry I am for yesterday, and how deeply ashamed I--"

"There, there. It's not so bad as all that." They were still standing, and he took a step nearer to her. "I assure you I can appreciate your side of it; and though, looking at it theoretically, it was the highest conduct, demanding the fullest meed of praise, still, in all frankness, there is much to--to--"

"Yes."

"Much to deplore in it from the social stand-point. And unhappily, we cannot leave the social stand-point out of our reckoning. But so far as I may speak for myself, you have done nothing to feel sorry for or be ashamed of."

"It is kind of you," she cried, graciously. "Only it is not true, and you know it is not true. You know that you acted for the best; you know that I hurt you, insulted you; you know that I behaved like a fish-wife, and you do know that I disgusted you--"

"No, no!" He raised his hand as though to ward from her the blows she dealt herself.

"But yes, yes. And I have all reason in the world to be ashamed. I can only say this in defence: the woman had affected me deeply--so

deeply that I was close to weeping. Then you came on the scene,--you know what you did,--and the sorrow for her bred an indignation against you, and--well, I worked myself into a nervous condition such as I had never experienced in my life. It was hysteria, I suppose. Anyway, I was not myself."

"We were neither of us ourselves."

"Now you are untrue. I did wrong, but you were yourself, as much so then as now. But do be seated. Here we stand as though you were ready to run away at first sign of another outbreak."

"Surely you are not so terrible!" he laughed, adroitly pulling his chair into position so that the light fell upon her face.

"Rather, you are not such a coward. I must have been terrible yesterday. I--I almost struck you. And you were certainly brave when the whip hung over you. Why, you did not even attempt to raise a hand and shield yourself."

"I notice the dogs your whip falls among come nevertheless to lick your hand and to be petted."

"Ergo?" she queried, audaciously.

"Ergo, it all depends," he equivocated.

"And, notwithstanding, I am forgiven?"

"As I hope to be forgiven."

"Then I am glad--only, you have done nothing to be forgiven for. You acted according to your light, and I to mine, though it must be acknowledged that mine casts the broader flare. Ah! I have it," clapping her hands in delight, "I was not angry with you yesterday; nor did I behave rudely to you, or even threaten you. It was utterly impersonal, the whole of it. You simply stood for society, for the type which aroused my indignation and anger; and, as its representative, you bore the brunt of it. Don't you see?"

"I see, and cleverly put; only, while you escape the charge of maltreating me yesterday; you throw yourself open to it to-day. You make me out all that is narrow-minded and mean and despicable, which is very unjust. Only a few minutes past I said that your way of looking at it, theoretically considered, was irreproachable. But not so when we include society."

"But you misunderstand me, Vance. Listen." Her hand went out to his, and he was content to listen. "I have always upheld that what is is well. I grant the wisdom of the prevailing social judgment in this matter. Though I deplore it, I grant it; for the human is so made. But I grant it socially only. I, as an individual, choose to regard

such things differently. And as between individuals so minded, why should it not be so regarded? Don't you see? Now I find you guilty. As between you and me, yesterday, on the river, you did not so regard it. You behaved as narrow-mindedly as would have the society you represent."

"Then you would preach two doctrines?" he retaliated. "One for the elect and one for the herd? You would be a democrat in theory and an aristocrat in practice? In fact, the whole stand you are making is nothing more or less than Jesuitical."

"I suppose with the next breath you will be contending that all men are born free and equal, with a bundle of natural rights thrown in? You are going to have Del Bishop work for you; by what equal free-born right will he work for you, or you suffer him to work?"

"No," he denied. "I should have to modify somewhat the questions of equality and rights."

"And if you modify, you are lost!" she exulted. "For you can only modify in the direction of my position, which is neither so Jesuitical nor so harsh as you have defined it. But don't let us get lost in dialectics. I want to see what I can see, so tell me about this woman."

"Not a very tasteful topic," Corliss objected.

"But I seek knowledge."

"Nor can it be wholesome knowledge."

Frona tapped her foot impatiently, and studied him.

"She is beautiful, very beautiful," she suggested. "Do you not think so?"

"As beautiful as hell."

"But still beautiful," she insisted.

"Yes, if you will have it so. And she is as cruel, and hard, and hopeless as she is beautiful."

"Yet I came upon her, alone, by the trail, her face softened, and tears in her eyes. And I believe, with a woman's ken, that I saw a side of her to which you are blind. And so strongly did I see it, that when you appeared my mind was blank to all save the solitary wail, Oh, the pity of it! The pity of it! And she is a woman, even as I, and I doubt not that we are very much alike. Why, she even quoted Browning--"

"And last week," he cut her short, "in a single sitting, she gambled away thirty thousand of Jack Dorsey's dust,--Dorsey, with two mortgages

already on his dump! They found him in the snow next morning, with one chamber empty in his revolver."

Frona made no reply, but, walking over to the candle, deliberately thrust her finger into the flame. Then she held it up to Corliss that he might see the outraged skin, red and angry.

"And so I point the parable. The fire is very good, but I misuse it, and I am punished."

"You forget," he objected. "The fire works in blind obedience to natural law. Lucile is a free agent. That which she has chosen to do, that she has done."

"Nay, it is you who forget, for just as surely Dorsey was a free agent. But you said Lucile. Is that her name? I wish I knew her better."

Corliss winced. "Don't! You hurt me when you say such things."

"And why, pray?"

"Because--because--"

"Yes?"

"Because I honor woman highly. Frona, you have always made a stand for

frankness, and I can now advantage by it. It hurts me because of the honor in which I hold you, because I cannot bear to see taint approach you. Why, when I saw you and that woman together on the trail, I--you cannot understand what I suffered."

"Taint?" There was a tightening about her lips which he did not notice, and a just perceptible lustre of victory lighted her eyes.

"Yes, taint,--contamination," he reiterated. "There are some things which it were not well for a good woman to understand. One cannot dabble with mud and remain spotless."

"That opens the field wide." She clasped and unclasped her hands gleefully. "You have said that her name was Lucile; you display a knowledge of her; you have given me facts about her; you doubtless retain many which you dare not give; in short, if one cannot dabble and remain spotless, how about you?"

"But I am--"

"A man, of course. Very good. Because you are a man, you may court contamination. Because I am a woman, I may not. Contamination contaminates, does it not? Then you, what do you here with me? Out upon you!"

Corliss threw up his hands laughingly. "I give in. You are too much

for me with your formal logic. I can only fall back on the higher logic, which you will not recognize."

"Which is--"

"Strength. What man wills for woman, that will he have."

"I take you, then, on your own ground," she rushed on. "What of Lucile? What man has willed that he has had. So you, and all men, have willed since the beginning of time. So poor Dorsey willed. You cannot answer, so let me speak something that occurs to me concerning that higher logic you call strength. I have met it before. I recognized it in you, yesterday, on the sleds."

"In me?"

"In you, when you reached out and clutched at me. You could not down the primitive passion, and, for that matter, you did not know it was uppermost. But the expression on your face, I imagine, was very like that of a woman-stealing cave-man. Another instant, and I am sure you would have laid violent hands upon me."

"Then I ask your pardon. I did not dream--"

"There you go, spoiling it all! I--I quite liked you for it. Don't you remember, I, too, was a cave-woman, brandishing the whip over your

head?

"But I am not done with you yet, Sir Doubleface, even if you have dropped out of the battle." Her eyes were sparkling mischievously, and the wee laughter-creases were forming on her cheek. "I purpose to unmask you."

"As clay in the hands of the potter," he responded, meekly.

"Then you must remember several things. At first, when I was very humble and apologetic, you made it easier for me by saying that you could only condemn my conduct on the ground of being socially unwise. Remember?"

Corliss nodded.

"Then, just after you branded me as Jesuitical, I turned the conversation to Lucile, saying that I wished to see what I could see."

Again he nodded.

"And just as I expected, I saw. For in only a few minutes you began to talk about taint, and contamination, and dabbling in mud,--and all in relation to me. There are your two propositions, sir. You may only stand on one, and I feel sure that you stand on the last one. Yes, I am right. You do. And you were insincere, confess, when you found my

conduct unwise only from the social point of view. I like sincerity."

"Yes," he began, "I was unwittingly insincere. But I did not know it until further analysis, with your help, put me straight. Say what you will, Frona, my conception of woman is such that she should not court defilement."

"But cannot we be as gods, knowing good and evil?"

"But we are not gods," he shook his head, sadly.

"Only the men are?"

"That is new-womanish talk," he frowned. "Equal rights, the ballot, and all that."

"Oh! Don't!" she protested. "You won't understand me; you can't. I am no woman's rights' creature; and I stand, not for the new woman, but for the new womanhood. Because I am sincere; because I desire to be natural, and honest, and true; and because I am consistent with myself, you choose to misunderstand it all and to lay wrong strictures upon me. I do try to be consistent, and I think I fairly succeed; but you can see neither rhyme nor reason in my consistency. Perhaps it is because you are unused to consistent, natural women; because, more likely, you are only familiar with the hot-house breeds,--pretty, helpless, well-rounded, stall-fatted little things, blissfully innocent and

criminally ignorant. They are not natural or strong; nor can they mother the natural and strong."

She stopped abruptly. They heard somebody enter the hall, and a heavy, soft-moccasined tread approaching.

"We are friends," she added hurriedly, and Corliss answered with his eyes.

"Ain't intrudin', am I?" Dave Harney grinned broad insinuation and looked about ponderously before coming up to shake hands.

"Not at all," Corliss answered. "We've bored each other till we were pining for some one to come along. If you hadn't, we would soon have been quarrelling, wouldn't we, Miss Welse?"

"I don't think he states the situation fairly," she smiled back. "In fact, we had already begun to quarrel."

"You do look a mite flustered," Harney criticised, dropping his loose-jointed frame all over the pillows of the lounging couch.

"How's the famine?" Corliss asked. "Any public relief started yet?"

"Won't need any public relief. Miss Frona's old man was too forehanded fer 'em. Scairt the daylights out of the critters, I do b'lieve.

Three thousand went out over the ice hittin' the high places, an' half ez many again went down to the caches, and the market's loosened some considerable. Jest what Welse figgered on, everybody speculated on a rise and held all the grub they could lay hand to. That helped scare the shorts, and away they stampeded fer Salt Water, the whole caboodle, a-takin' all the dogs with 'em. Say!" he sat up solemnly, "corner dogs! They'll rise suthin' unheard on in the spring when freightin' gits brisk. I've corralled a hundred a'ready, an' I figger to clear a hundred dollars clean on every hide of 'em."

"Think so?"

"Think so! I guess yes. Between we three, confidential, I'm startin' a couple of lads down into the Lower Country next week to buy up five hundred of the best huskies they kin spot. Think so! I've limbered my jints too long in the land to git caught nappin'."

Frona burst out laughing. "But you got pinched on the sugar, Dave."

"Oh, I dunno," he responded, complacently. "Which reminds me. I've got a noospaper, an' only four weeks' old, the Seattle Post-Intelligencer."

"Has the United States and Spain--"

"Not so fast, not so fast!" The long Yankee waved his arms for

silence, cutting off Frona's question which was following fast on that of Corliss.

"But have you read it?" they both demanded.

"Unh huh, every line, advertisements an' all."

"Then do tell me," Frona began. "Has--"

"Now you keep quiet, Miss Frona, till I tell you about it reg'lar. That noospaper cost me fifty dollars--caught the man comin' in round the bend above Klondike City, an' bought it on the spot. The dummy could a-got a hundred fer it, easy, if he'd held on till he made town--"

"But what does it say? Has--"

"Ez I was sayin', that noospaper cost me fifty dollars. It's the only one that come in. Everybody's jest dyin' to hear the noos. So I invited a select number of 'em to come here to yer parlors to-night, Miss Frona, ez the only likely place, an' they kin read it out loud, by shifts, ez long ez they want or till they're tired--that is, if you'll let 'em have the use of the place."

"Why, of course, they are welcome. And you are very kind to--"

He waved her praise away. "Jest ez I kalkilated. Now it so happens, ez you said, that I was pinched on sugar. So every mother's son and daughter that gits a squint at that paper to-night got to pony up five cups of sugar. Savve? Five cups,--big cups, white, or brown, or cube,--an' I'll take their IOU's, an' send a boy round to their shacks the day followin' to collect."

Frona's face went blank at the telling, then the laughter came back into it. "Won't it be jolly? I'll do it if it raises a scandal. To-night, Dave? Sure to-night?"

"Sure. An' you git a complimentary, you know, fer the loan of yer parlor."

"But papa must pay his five cups. You must insist upon it, Dave."

Dave's eyes twinkled appreciatively. "I'll git it back on him, you bet!"

"And I'll make him come," she promised, "at the tail of Dave Harney's chariot."

"Sugar cart," Dave suggested. "An' to-morrow night I'll take the paper down to the Opery House. Won't be fresh, then, so they kin git in cheap; a cup'll be about the right thing, I reckon." He sat up and cracked his huge knuckles boastfully. "I ain't ben a-burnin' daylight

sence navigation closed; an' if they set up all night they won't be up early enough in the mornin' to git ahead of Dave Harney--even on a sugar proposition."