

CHAPTER XI

Over in the corner Vance Corliss leaned against the piano, deep in conversation with Colonel Trethaway. The latter, keen and sharp and wiry, for all his white hair and sixty-odd years, was as young in appearance as a man of thirty. A veteran mining engineer, with a record which put him at the head of his profession, he represented as large American interests as Corliss did British. Not only had a cordial friendship sprung up between them, but in a business way they had already been of large assistance to each other. And it was well that they should stand together,--a pair who held in grip and could direct at will the potent capital which two nations had contributed to the development of the land under the Pole.

The crowded room was thick with tobacco smoke. A hundred men or so, garbed in furs and warm-colored wools, lined the walls and looked on. But the mumble of their general conversation destroyed the spectacular feature of the scene and gave to it the geniality of common comradeship. For all its bizarre appearance, it was very like the living-room of the home when the members of the household come together after the work of the day. Kerosene lamps and tallow candles glimmered feebly in the murky atmosphere, while large stoves roared their red-hot and white-hot cheer.

On the floor a score of couples pulsed rhythmically to the swinging waltz-time music. Starched shirts and frock coats were not. The men

wore their wolf- and beaver-skin caps, with the gay-tasselled ear-flaps flying free, while on their feet were the moose-skin moccasins and walrus-hide muclucs of the north. Here and there a woman was in moccasins, though the majority danced in frail ball-room slippers of silk and satin. At one end of the hall a great open doorway gave glimpse of another large room where the crowd was even denser. From this room, in the lulls in the music, came the pop of corks and the clink of glasses, and as an undertone the steady click and clatter of chips and roulette balls.

The small door at the rear opened, and a woman, befurred and muffled, came in on a wave of frost. The cold rushed in with her to the warmth, taking form in a misty cloud which hung close to the floor, hiding the feet of the dancers, and writhing and twisting until vanquished by the heat.

"A veritable frost queen, my Lucile," Colonel Trethaway addressed her.

She tossed her head and laughed, and, as she removed her capes and street-moccasins, chatted with him gayly. But of Corliss, though he stood within a yard of her, she took no notice. Half a dozen dancing men were waiting patiently at a little distance till she should have done with the colonel. The piano and violin played the opening bars of a schottische, and she turned to go; but a sudden impulse made Corliss step up to her. It was wholly unpremeditated; he had not dreamed of doing it.

"I am very sorry," he said.

Her eyes flashed angrily as she turned upon him.

"I mean it," he repeated, holding out his hand. "I am very sorry. I was a brute and a coward. Will you forgive me?"

She hesitated, and, with the wisdom bought of experience, searched him for the ulterior motive. Then, her face softened, and she took his hand. A warm mist dimmed her eyes.

"Thank you," she said.

But the waiting men had grown impatient, and she was whirled away in the arms of a handsome young fellow, conspicuous in a cap of yellow Siberian wolf-skin. Corliss came back to his companion, feeling unaccountably good and marvelling at what he had done.

"It's a damned shame." The colonel's eye still followed Lucile, and Vance understood. "Corliss, I've lived my threescore, and lived them well, and do you know, woman is a greater mystery than ever. Look at them, look at them all!" He embraced the whole scene with his eyes.

"Butterflies, bits of light and song and laughter, dancing, dancing down the last tail-reach of hell. Not only Lucile, but the rest of them. Look at May, there, with the brow of a Madonna and the tongue of

a gutter-devil. And Myrtle--for all the world one of Gainsborough's old English beauties stepped down from the canvas to riot out the century in Dawson's dance-halls. And Laura, there, wouldn't she make a mother? Can't you see the child in the curve of her arm against her breast! They're the best of the boiling, I know,--a new country always gathers the best,--but there's something wrong, Corliss, something wrong. The heats of life have passed with me, and my vision is truer, surer. It seems a new Christ must arise and preach a new salvation--economic or sociologic--in these latter days, it matters not, so long as it is preached. The world has need of it."

The room was wont to be swept by sudden tides, and notably between the dances, when the revellers ebbed through the great doorway to where corks popped and glasses tinkled. Colonel Trethaway and Corliss followed out on the next ebb to the bar, where fifty men and women were lined up. They found themselves next to Lucile and the fellow in the yellow wolf-skin cap. He was undeniably handsome, and his looks were enhanced by a warm overplus of blood in the cheeks and a certain mellow fire in the eyes. He was not technically drunk, for he had himself in perfect physical control; but his was the soul-exhilaration which comes of the juice of the grape. His voice was raised the least bit and joyous, and his tongue made quick and witty--just in the unstable condition when vices and virtues are prone to extravagant expression.

As he raised his glass, the man next to him accidentally jostled his arm. He shook the wine from his sleeve and spoke his mind. It was not

a nice word, but one customarily calculated to rouse the fighting blood. And the other man's blood roused, for his fist landed under the wolf-skin cap with force sufficient to drive its owner back against Corliss. The insulted man followed up his attack swiftly. The women slipped away, leaving a free field for the men, some of whom were for crowding in, and some for giving room and fair play.

The wolf-skin cap did not put up a fight or try to meet the wrath he had invoked, but, with his hands shielding his face, strove to retreat. The crowd called upon him to stand up and fight. He nerved himself to the attempt, but weakened as the man closed in on him, and dodged away.

"Let him alone. He deserves it," the colonel called to Vance as he showed signs of interfering. "He won't fight. If he did, I think I could almost forgive him."

"But I can't see him pummelled," Vance objected. "If he would only stand up, it wouldn't seem so brutal."

The blood was streaming from his nose and from a slight cut over one eye, when Corliss sprang between. He attempted to hold the two men apart, but pressing too hard against the truculent individual, overbalanced him and threw him to the floor. Every man has friends in a bar-room fight, and before Vance knew what was taking place he was staggered by a blow from a chum of the man he had downed. Del Bishop, who had edged in, let drive promptly at the man who had attacked his

employer, and the fight became general. The crowd took sides on the moment and went at it.

Colonel Trethaway forgot that the heats of life had passed, and swinging a three-legged stool, danced nimbly into the fray. A couple of mounted police, on liberty, joined him, and with half a dozen others safeguarded the man with the wolf-skin cap.

Fierce though it was, and noisy, it was purely a local disturbance. At the far end of the bar the barkeepers still dispensed drinks, and in the next room the music was on and the dancers afoot. The gamblers continued their play, and at only the near tables did they evince any interest in the affair.

"Knock'm down an' drag'm out!" Del Bishop grinned, as he fought for a brief space shoulder to shoulder with Corliss.

Corliss grinned back, met the rush of a stalwart dog-driver with a clinch, and came down on top of him among the stamping feet. He was drawn close, and felt the fellow's teeth sinking into his ear. Like a flash, he surveyed his whole future and saw himself going one-eared through life, and in the same dash, as though inspired, his thumbs flew to the man's eyes and pressed heavily on the balls. Men fell over him and trampled upon him, but it all seemed very dim and far away. He only knew, as he pressed with his thumbs, that the man's teeth wavered reluctantly. He added a little pressure (a little more, and the man

would have been eyeless), and the teeth slackened and slipped their grip.

After that, as he crawled out of the fringe of the melee and came to his feet by the side of the bar, all distaste for fighting left him. He had found that he was very much like other men after all, and the imminent loss of part of his anatomy had scraped off twenty years of culture. Gambling without stakes is an insipid amusement, and Corliss discovered, likewise, that the warm blood which rises from hygienic gymnasium work is something quite different from that which pounds hotly along when thew matches thew and flesh impacts on flesh and the stake is life and limb. As he dragged himself to his feet by means of the bar-rail, he saw a man in a squirrel-skin parka lift a beer-mug to hurl at Trethaway, a couple of paces off. And the fingers, which were more used to test-tubes and water colors, doubled into a hard fist which smote the mug-thrower cleanly on the point of the jaw. The man merely dropped the glass and himself on the floor. Vance was dazed for the moment, then he realized that he had knocked the man unconscious,--the first in his life,--and a pang of delight thrilled through him.

Colonel Trethaway thanked him with a look, and shouted, "Get on the outside! Work to the door, Corliss! Work to the door!"

Quite a struggle took place before the storm-doors could be thrown open; but the colonel, still attached to the three-legged stool,

effectually dissipated the opposition, and the Opera House disgorged its turbulent contents into the street. This accomplished, hostilities ceased, after the manner of such fights, and the crowd scattered. The two policemen went back to keep order, accompanied by the rest of the allies, while Corliss and the colonel, followed by the Wolf-Skin Cap and Del Bishop, proceeded up the street.

"Blood and sweat! Blood and sweat!" Colonel Trethaway exulted. "Talk about putting the vim into one! Why, I'm twenty years younger if I'm a day! Corliss, your hand. I congratulate you, I do, I heartily do. Candidly, I didn't think it was in you. You're a surprise, sir, a surprise!"

"And a surprise to myself," Corliss answered. The reaction had set in, and he was feeling sick and faint. "And you, also, are a surprise. The way you handled that stool--"

"Yes, now! I flatter myself I did fairly well with it. Did you see--well, look at that!" He held up the weapon in question, still tightly clutched, and joined in the laugh against himself.

"Whom have I to thank, gentlemen?"

They had come to a pause at the corner, and the man they had rescued was holding out his hand.

"My name is St. Vincent," he went on, "and--"

"What name?" Del Bishop queried with sudden interest.

"St. Vincent, Gregory St. Vincent--"

Bishop's fist shot out, and Gregory St. Vincent pitched heavily into the snow. The colonel instinctively raised the stool, then helped Corliss to hold the pocket-miner back.

"Are you crazy, man?" Vance demanded.

"The skunk! I wish I'd hit 'm harder!" was the response. Then, "Oh, that's all right. Let go o' me. I won't hit 'm again. Let go o' me, I'm goin' home. Good-night."

As they helped St. Vincent to his feet, Vance could have sworn he heard the colonel giggling. And he confessed to it later, as he explained, "It was so curious and unexpected." But he made amends by taking it upon himself to see St. Vincent home.

"But why did you hit him?" Corliss asked, unavailingly, for the fourth time after he had got into his cabin.

"The mean, crawlin' skunk!" the pocket-miner gritted in his blankets.

"What'd you stop me for, anyway? I wish I'd hit 'm twice as hard!"