

## CHAPTER XII

"Mr. Harney, pleased to meet you. Dave, I believe, Dave Harney?" Dave Harney nodded, and Gregory St. Vincent turned to Frona. "You see, Miss Welse, the world is none so large. Mr. Harney and I are not strangers after all."

The Eldorado king studied the other's face until a glimmering intelligence came to him. "Hold on!" he cried, as St. Vincent started to speak, "I got my finger on you. You were smooth-faced then. Let's see,--'86, fall of '87, summer of '88,--yep, that's when. Summer of '88 I come floatin' a raft out of Stewart River, loaded down with quarters of moose an' strainin' to make the Lower Country 'fore they went bad. Yep, an' down the Yukon you come, in a Linderman boat. An' I was holdin' strong, ez it was Wednesday, an' my pardner ez it was Friday, an' you put us straight--Sunday, I b'lieve it was. Yep, Sunday. I declare! Nine years ago! And we swapped moose-steaks fer flour an' bakin' soda, an'--an'--an' sugar! By the Jimcracky! I'm glad to see you!"

He shoved out his hand and they shook again.

"Come an' see me," he invited, as he moved away. "I've a right tidy little shack up on the hill, and another on Eldorado. Latch-string's always out. Come an' see me, an' stay ez long ez you've a mind to. Sorry to quit you cold, but I got to traipse down to the Opery House

and collect my taxes,--sugar. Miss Frona'll tell you."

"You are a surprise, Mr. St. Vincent." Frona switched back to the point of interest, after briefly relating Harney's saccharine difficulties. "The country must indeed have been a wilderness nine years ago, and to think that you went through it at that early day! Do tell me about it."

Gregory St. Vincent shrugged his shoulders, "There is very little to tell. It was an ugly failure, filled with many things that are not nice, and containing nothing of which to be proud."

"But do tell me, I enjoy such things. They seem closer and truer to life than the ordinary every-day happenings. A failure, as you call it, implies something attempted. What did you attempt?"

He noted her frank interest with satisfaction. "Well, if you will, I can tell you in few words all there is to tell. I took the mad idea into my head of breaking a new path around the world, and in the interest of science and journalism, particularly journalism, I proposed going through Alaska, crossing the Bering Straits on the ice, and journeying to Europe by way of Northern Siberia. It was a splendid undertaking, most of it being virgin ground, only I failed. I crossed the Straits in good order, but came to grief in Eastern Siberia--all because of Tamerlane is the excuse I have grown accustomed to making."

"A Ulysses!" Mrs. Schoville clapped her hands and joined them. "A modern Ulysses! How romantic!"

"But not an Othello," Frona replied. "His tongue is a sluggard. He leaves one at the most interesting point with an enigmatical reference to a man of a bygone age. You take an unfair advantage of us, Mr. St. Vincent, and we shall be unhappy until you show how Tamerlane brought your journey to an untimely end."

He laughed, and with an effort put aside his reluctance to speak of his travels. "When Tamerlane swept with fire and sword over Eastern Asia, states were disrupted, cities overthrown, and tribes scattered like star-dust. In fact, a vast people was hurled broadcast over the land. Fleeing before the mad lust of the conquerors, these refugees swung far into Siberia, circling to the north and east and fringing the rim of the polar basin with a spray of Mongol tribes--am I not tiring you?"

"No, no!" Mrs. Schoville exclaimed. "It is fascinating! Your method of narration is so vivid! It reminds me of--of--"

"Of Macaulay," St. Vincent laughed, good-naturedly. "You know I am a journalist, and he has strongly influenced my style. But I promise you I shall tone down. However, to return, had it not been for these Mongol tribes, I should not have been halted in my travels. Instead of being forced to marry a greasy princess, and to become proficient in interclannish warfare and reindeer-stealing, I should have travelled

easily and peaceably to St. Petersburg."

"Oh, these heroes! Are they not exasperating, Frona? But what about the reindeer-stealing and the greasy princesses?"

The Gold Commissioner's wife beamed upon him, and glancing for permission to Frona, he went on.

"The coast people were Esquimo stock, merry-natured and happy, and inoffensive. They called themselves the Oukilion, or the Sea Men. I bought dogs and food from them, and they treated me splendidly. But they were subject to the Chow Chuen, or interior people, who were known as the Deer Men. The Chow Chuen were a savage, indomitable breed, with all the fierceness of the untamed Mongol, plus double his viciousness. As soon as I left the coast they fell upon me, confiscated my goods, and made me a slave."

"But were there no Russians?" Mrs. Schoville asked.

"Russians? Among the Chow Chuen?" He laughed his amusement.

"Geographically, they are within the White Tsar's domain; but politically, no. I doubt if they ever heard of him. Remember, the interior of North-Eastern Siberia is hidden in the polar gloom, a terra incognita, where few men have gone and none has returned."

"But you--"

"I chance to be the exception. Why I was spared, I do not know. It just so happened. At first I was vilely treated, beaten by the women and children, clothed in vermin-infested mangy furs, and fed on refuse. They were utterly heartless. How I managed to survive is beyond me; but I know that often and often, at first, I meditated suicide. The only thing that saved me during that period from taking my own life was the fact that I quickly became too stupefied and bestial, what of my suffering and degradation. Half-frozen, half-starved, undergoing untold misery and hardship, beaten many and many a time into insensibility, I became the sheerest animal.

"On looking back much of it seems a dream. There are gaps which my memory cannot fill. I have vague recollections of being lashed to a sled and dragged from camp to camp and tribe to tribe. Carted about for exhibition purposes, I suppose, much as we do lions and elephants and wild men. How far I so journeyed up and down that bleak region I cannot guess, though it must have been several thousand miles. I do know that when consciousness returned to me and I really became myself again, I was fully a thousand miles to the west of the point where I was captured.

"It was springtime, and from out of a forgotten past it seemed I suddenly opened my eyes. A reindeer thong was about my waist and made fast to the tail-end of a sled. This thong I clutched with both hands, like an organ-grinder's monkey; for the flesh of my body was raw and in

great sores from where the thong had cut in.

"A low cunning came to me, and I made myself agreeable and servile. That night I danced and sang, and did my best to amuse them, for I was resolved to incur no more of the maltreatment which had plunged me into darkness. Now the Deer Men traded with the Sea Men, and the Sea Men with the whites, especially the whalers. So later I discovered a deck of cards in the possession of one of the women, and I proceeded to mystify the Chow Chuen with a few commonplace tricks. Likewise, with fitting solemnity, I perpetrated upon them the little I knew of parlor legerdemain. Result: I was appreciated at once, and was better fed and better clothed.

"To make a long story short, I gradually became a man of importance. First the old people and the women came to me for advice, and later the chiefs. My slight but rough and ready knowledge of medicine and surgery stood me in good stead, and I became indispensable. From a slave, I worked myself to a seat among the head men, and in war and peace, so soon as I had learned their ways, was an unchallenged authority. Reindeer was their medium of exchange, their unit of value as it were, and we were almost constantly engaged in cattle forays among the adjacent clans, or in protecting our own herds from their inroads. I improved upon their methods, taught them better strategy and tactics, and put a snap and go into their operations which no neighbor tribe could withstand.

"But still, though I became a power, I was no nearer my freedom. It was laughable, for I had over-reached myself and made myself too valuable. They cherished me with exceeding kindness, but they were jealously careful. I could go and come and command without restraint, but when the trading parties went down to the coast I was not permitted to accompany them. That was the one restriction placed upon my movements.

"Also, it is very tottery in the high places, and when I began altering their political structures I came to grief again. In the process of binding together twenty or more of the neighboring tribes in order to settle rival claims, I was given the over-lordship of the federation. But Old Pi-Une was the greatest of the under-chiefs,--a king in a way,--and in relinquishing his claim to the supreme leadership he refused to forego all the honors. The least that could be done to appease him was for me to marry his daughter Ilswunga. Nay, he demanded it. I offered to abandon the federation, but he would not hear of it. And--"

"And?" Mrs. Schoville murmured ecstatically.

"And I married Ilswunga, which is the Chow Chuen name for Wild Deer. Poor Ilswunga! Like Swinburne's Iseult of Brittany, and I Tristram! The last I saw of her she was playing solitaire in the Mission of Irkutsky and stubbornly refusing to take a bath."

"Oh, mercy! It's ten o'clock!" Mrs. Schoville suddenly cried, her husband having at last caught her eye from across the room. "I'm so sorry I can't hear the rest, Mr. St. Vincent, how you escaped and all that. But you must come and see me. I am just dying to hear!"

"And I took you for a tenderfoot, a chechaquo," Frona said meekly, as St. Vincent tied his ear-flaps and turned up his collar preparatory to leaving.

"I dislike posing," he answered, matching her meekness. "It smacks of insincerity; it really is untrue. And it is so easy to slip into it. Look at the old-timers,--'sour-doughs' as they proudly call themselves. Just because they have been in the country a few years, they let themselves grow wild and woolly and glorify in it. They may not know it, but it is a pose. In so far as they cultivate salient peculiarities, they cultivate falseness to themselves and live lies."

"I hardly think you are wholly just," Frona said, in defence of her chosen heroes. "I do like what you say about the matter in general, and I detest posing, but the majority of the old-timers would be peculiar in any country, under any circumstances. That peculiarity is their own; it is their mode of expression. And it is, I am sure, just what makes them go into new countries. The normal man, of course, stays at home."

"Oh, I quite agree with you, Miss Welse," he temporized easily. "I did



not intend it so sweepingly. I meant to brand that sprinkling among them who are poseurs. In the main, as you say, they are honest, and sincere, and natural."

"Then we have no quarrel. But Mr. St. Vincent, before you go, would you care to come to-morrow evening? We are getting up theatricals for Christmas. I know you can help us greatly, and I think it will not be altogether unenjoyable to you. All the younger people are interested,--the officials, officers of police, mining engineers, gentlemen rovers, and so forth, to say nothing of the nice women. You are bound to like them."

"I am sure I shall," as he took her hand. "Tomorrow, did you say?"

"To-morrow evening. Good-night."

A brave man, she told herself as she went bade from the door, and a splendid type of the race.