

## CHAPTER XIII

Gregory St. Vincent swiftly became an important factor in the social life of Dawson. As a representative of the Amalgamated Press Association, he had brought with him the best credentials a powerful influence could obtain, and over and beyond, he was well qualified socially by his letters of introduction. It developed in a quiet way that he was a wanderer and explorer of no small parts, and that he had seen life and strife pretty well all over the earth's crust. And withal, he was so mild and modest about it, that nobody, not even among the men, was irritated by his achievements. Incidentally, he ran across numerous old acquaintances. Jacob Welse he had met at St. Michael's in the fall of '88, just prior to his crossing Bering Straits on the ice. A month or so later, Father Barnum (who had come up from the Lower River to take charge of the hospital) had met him a couple of hundred miles on his way north of St. Michael's. Captain Alexander, of the Police, had rubbed shoulders with him in the British Legation at Peking. And Bettles, another old-timer of standing, had met him at Fort o' Yukon nine years before.

So Dawson, ever prone to look askance at the casual comer, received him with open arms. Especially was he a favorite with the women. As a promoter of pleasures and an organizer of amusements he took the lead, and it quickly came to pass that no function was complete without him. Not only did he come to help in the theatricals, but insensibly, and as a matter of course, he took charge. Frona, as her friends charged, was

suffering from a stroke of Ibsen, so they hit upon the "Doll's House," and she was cast for Nora. Corliss, who was responsible, by the way, for the theatricals, having first suggested them, was to take Torvald's part; but his interest seemed to have died out, or at any rate he begged off on the plea of business rush. So St. Vincent, without friction, took Torvald's lines. Corliss did manage to attend one rehearsal. It might have been that he had come tired from forty miles with the dogs, and it might have been that Torvald was obliged to put his arm about Nora at divers times and to toy playfully with her ear; but, one way or the other, Corliss never attended again.

Busy he certainly was, and when not away on trail he was closeted almost continually with Jacob Welse and Colonel Trethaway. That it was a deal of magnitude was evidenced by the fact that Welse's mining interests involved alone mounted to several millions. Corliss was primarily a worker and doer, and on discovering that his thorough theoretical knowledge lacked practical experience, he felt put upon his mettle and worked the harder. He even marvelled at the silliness of the men who had burdened him with such responsibilities, simply because of his pull, and he told Trethaway as much. But the colonel, while recognizing his shortcomings, liked him for his candor, and admired him for his effort and for the quickness with which he came to grasp things actual.

Del Bishop, who had refused to play any hand but his own, had gone to work for Corliss because by so doing he was enabled to play his own

hand better. He was practically unfettered, while the opportunities to further himself were greatly increased. Equipped with the best of outfits and a magnificent dog-team, his task was mainly to run the various creeks and keep his eyes and ears open. A pocket-miner, first, last, and always, he was privately on the constant lookout for pockets, which occupation did not interfere in the least with the duty he owed his employer. And as the days went by he stored his mind with miscellaneous data concerning the nature of the various placer deposits and the lay of the land, against the summer when the thawed surface and the running water would permit him to follow a trace from creek-bed to side-slope and source.

Corliss was a good employer, paid well, and considered it his right to work men as he worked himself. Those who took service with him either strengthened their own manhood and remained, or quit and said harsh things about him. Jacob Welse noted this trait with appreciation, and he sounded the mining engineer's praises continually. Frona heard and was gratified, for she liked the things her father liked; and she was more gratified because the man was Corliss. But in his rush of business she saw less of him than formerly, while St. Vincent came to occupy a greater and growing portion of her time. His healthful, optimistic spirit pleased her, while he corresponded well to her idealized natural man and favorite racial type. Her first doubt--that if what he said was true--had passed away. All the evidence had gone counter. Men who at first questioned the truth of his wonderful adventures gave in after hearing him talk. Those to any extent

conversant with the parts of the world he made mention of, could not but acknowledge that he knew what he talked about. Young Soley, representing Bannock's News Syndicate, and Holmes of the Fairweather, recollected his return to the world in '91, and the sensation created thereby. And Sid Winslow, Pacific Coast journalist, had made his acquaintance at the Wanderers' Club shortly after he landed from the United States revenue cutter which had brought him down from the north. Further, as Frona well saw, he bore the ear-marks of his experiences; they showed their handiwork in his whole outlook on life. Then the primitive was strong in him, and his was a passionate race pride which fully matched hers. In the absence of Corliss they were much together, went out frequently with the dogs, and grew to know each other thoroughly.

All of which was not pleasant to Corliss, especially when the brief intervals he could devote to her were usually intruded upon by the correspondent. Naturally, Corliss was not drawn to him, and other men, who knew or had heard of the Opera House occurrence, only accepted him after a tentative fashion. Trethaway had the indiscretion, once or twice, to speak slightly of him, but so fiercely was he defended by his admirers that the colonel developed the good taste to thenceforward keep his tongue between his teeth. Once, Corliss, listening to an extravagant panegyric bursting from the lips of Mrs. Schoville, permitted himself the luxury of an incredulous smile; but the quick wave of color in Frona's face, and the gathering of the brows, warned him.

At another time he was unwise enough and angry enough to refer to the Opera House broil. He was carried away, and what he might have said of that night's happening would have redounded neither to St. Vincent's credit nor to his own, had not Frona innocently put a seal upon his lips ere he had properly begun.

"Yes," she said. "Mr. St. Vincent told me about it. He met you for the first time that night, I believe. You all fought royally on his side,--you and Colonel Trethaway. He spoke his admiration unreservedly and, to tell the truth, with enthusiasm."

Corliss made a gesture of depreciation.

"No! no! From what he said you must have behaved splendidly. And I was most pleased to hear. It must be great to give the brute the rein now and again, and healthy, too. Great for us who have wandered from the natural and softened to sickly ripeness. Just to shake off artificiality and rage up and down! and yet, the inmost mentor, serene and passionless, viewing all and saying: 'This is my other self. Behold! I, who am now powerless, am the power behind and ruleth still! This other self, mine ancient, violent, elder self, rages blindly as the beast, but 'tis I, sitting apart, who discern the merit of the cause and bid him rage or bid him cease!' Oh, to be a man!"

Corliss could not help a humoring smile, which put Frona upon defence

at once.

"Tell me, Vance, how did it feel? Have I not described it rightly? Were the symptoms yours? Did you not hold aloof and watch yourself play the brute?"

He remembered the momentary daze which came when he stunned the man with his fist, and nodded.

"And pride?" she demanded, inexorably. "Or shame?"

"A--a little of both, and more of the first than the second," he confessed. "At the time I suppose I was madly exultant; then afterwards came the shame, and I tossed awake half the night."

"And finally?"

"Pride, I guess. I couldn't help it, couldn't down it. I awoke in the morning feeling as though I had won my spurs. In a subconscious way I was inordinately proud of myself, and time and again, mentally, I caught myself throwing chests. Then came the shame again, and I tried to reason back my self-respect. And last of all, pride. The fight was fair and open. It was none of my seeking. I was forced into it by the best of motives. I am not sorry, and I would repeat it if necessary."

"And rightly so." Frona's eyes were sparkling. "And how did Mr. St.

Vincent acquit himself?"

"He? . . . . Oh, I suppose all right, creditably. I was too busy watching my other self to take notice."

"But he saw you."

"Most likely so. I acknowledge my negligence. I should have done better, the chances are, had I thought it would have been of interest to you--pardon me. Just my bungling wit. The truth is, I was too much of a greenhorn to hold my own and spare glances on my neighbors."

So Corliss went away, glad that he had not spoken, and keenly appreciating St. Vincent's craft whereby he had so adroitly forestalled adverse comment by telling the story in his own modest, self-effacing way.

Two men and a woman! The most potent trinity of factors in the creating of human pathos and tragedy! As ever in the history of man, since the first father dropped down from his arboreal home and walked upright, so at Dawson. Necessarily, there were minor factors, not least among which was Del Bishop, who, in his aggressive way, stepped in and accelerated things. This came about in a trail-camp on the way to Miller Creek, where Corliss was bent on gathering in a large number of low-grade claims which could only be worked profitably on a large

scale.

"I'll not be wastin' candles when I make a strike, savvy!" the pocket-miner remarked savagely to the coffee, which he was settling with a chunk of ice. "Not on your life, I guess rather not!"

"Kerosene?" Corliss queried, running a piece of bacon-rind round the frying-pan and pouring in the batter.

"Kerosene, hell! You won't see my trail for smoke when I get a gait on for God's country, my wad in my poke and the sunshine in my eyes. Say! How'd a good juicy tenderloin strike you just now, green onions, fried potatoes, and fixin's on the side? S'help me, that's the first proposition I'll hump myself up against. Then a general whoop-la! for a week--Seattle or 'Frisco, I don't care a rap which, and then--"

"Out of money and after a job."

"Not on your family tree!" Bishop roared. "Cache my sack before I go on the tear, sure pop, and then, afterwards, Southern California. Many's the day I've had my eye on a peach of a fruit farm down there--forty thousand'll buy it. No more workin' for grub-stakes and the like. Figured it out long; ago,--hired men to work the ranch, a manager to run it, and me ownin' the game and livin' off the percentage. A stable with always a couple of bronchos handy; handy to slap the packs and saddles on and be off and away whenever the fever



for chasin' pockets came over me. Great pocket country down there, to the east and along the desert."

"And no house on the ranch?"

"Cert! With sweet peas growin' up the sides, and in back a patch for vegetables--string-beans and spinach and radishes, cucumbers and 'sparagrass, turnips, carrots, cabbage, and such. And a woman inside to draw me back when I get to runnin' loco after the pockets. Say, you know all about minin'. Did you ever go snoozin' round after pockets? No? Then just steer clear. They're worse than whiskey, horses, or cards. Women, when they come afterwards, ain't in it. Whenever you get a hankerin' after pockets, go right off and get married. It's the only thing'll save you; and even then, mebbe, it won't. I ought 'a' done it years ago. I might 'a' made something of myself if I had. Jerusalem! the jobs I've jumped and the good things chucked in my time, just because of pockets! Say, Corliss, you want to get married, you do, and right off. I'm tellin' you straight. Take warnin' from me and don't stay single any longer than God'll let you, sure!"

Corliss laughed.

"Sure, I mean it. I'm older'n you, and know what I'm talkin'. Now there's a bit of a thing down in Dawson I'd like to see you get your hands on. You was made for each other, both of you."

Corliss was past the stage when he would have treated Bishop's meddling as an impertinence. The trail, which turns men into the same blankets and makes them brothers, was the great leveller of distinctions, as he had come to learn. So he flopped a flapjack and held his tongue.

"Why don't you waltz in and win?" Del demanded, insistently. "Don't you cotton to her? I know you do, or you wouldn't come back to cabin, after bein' with her, a-walkin'-like on air. Better waltz in while you got a chance. Why, there was Emmy, a tidy bit of flesh as women go, and we took to each other on the jump. But I kept a-chasin' pockets and chasin' pockets, and delayin'. And then a big black lumberman, a Kanuck, began sidlin' up to her, and I made up my mind to speak--only I went off after one more pocket, just one more, and when I got back she was Mrs. Somebody Else.

"So take warnin'. There's that writer-guy, that skunk I poked outside the Opera House. He's walkin' right in and gettin' thick; and here's you, just like me, a-racin' round all creation and lettin' matrimony slide. Mark my words, Corliss! Some fine frost you'll come slippin' into camp and find 'em housekeepin'. Sure! With nothin' left for you in life but pocketing!"

The picture was so unpleasant that Corliss turned surly and ordered him to shut up.

"Who? Me?" Del asked so aggrievedly that Corliss laughed.

"What would you do, then?" he asked.

"Me? In all kindness I'll tell you. As soon as you get back you go and see her. Make dates with her ahead till you got to put 'em on paper to remember 'em all. Get a cinch on her spare time ahead so as to shut the other fellow out. Don't get down in the dirt to her,--she's not that kind,--but don't be too high and mighty, neither. Just so-so--savve? And then, some time when you see she's feelin' good, and smilin' at you in that way of hers, why up and call her hand. Of course I can't say what the showdown'll be. That's for you to find out. But don't hold off too long about it. Better married early than never. And if that writer-guy shoves in, poke him in the breadbasket--hard! That'll settle him plenty. Better still, take him off to one side and talk to him. Tell'm you're a bad man, and that you staked that claim before he was dry behind the ears, and that if he comes nosin' around tryin' to file on it you'll beat his head off."

Bishop got up, stretched, and went outside to feed the dogs. "Don't forget to beat his head off," he called back. "And if you're squeamish about it, just call on me. I won't keep 'm waitin' long."