

## CHAPTER XIV

"Ah, the salt water, Miss Welse, the strong salt water and the big waves and the heavy boats for smooth or rough--that I know. But the fresh water, and the little canoes, egg-shells, fairy bubbles; a big breath, a sigh, a heart-pulse too much, and pouf! over you go; not so, that I do not know." Baron Courbertin smiled self-commiseratingly and went on. "But it is delightful, magnificent. I have watched and envied. Some day I shall learn."

"It is not so difficult," St. Vincent interposed. "Is it, Miss Welse? Just a sure and delicate poise of mind and body--"

"Like the tight-rope dancer?"

"Oh, you are incorrigible," Frona laughed. "I feel certain that you know as much about canoes as we."

"And you know?--a woman?" Cosmopolitan as the Frenchman was, the independence and ability for doing of the Yankee women were a perpetual wonder to him. "How?"

"When I was a very little girl, at Dyea, among the Indians. But next spring, after the river breaks, we'll give you your first lessons, Mr. St. Vincent and I. So you see, you will return to civilization with accomplishments. And you will surely love it."

"Under such charming tutorship," he murmured, gallantly. "But you, Mr. St. Vincent, do you think I shall be so successful that I may come to love it? Do you love it?--you, who stand always in the background, sparing of speech, inscrutable, as though able but unwilling to speak from out the eternal wisdom of a vast experience." The baron turned quickly to Frona. "We are old friends, did I not tell you? So I may, what you Americans call, josh with him. Is it not so, Mr. St. Vincent?"

Gregory nodded, and Frona said, "I am sure you met at the ends of the earth somewhere."

"Yokohama," St. Vincent cut in shortly; "eleven years ago, in cherry-blossom time. But Baron Courbertin does me an injustice, which stings, unhappily, because it is not true. I am afraid, when I get started, that I talk too much about myself."

"A martyr to your friends," Frona conciliated. "And such a teller of good tales that your friends cannot forbear imposing upon you."

"Then tell us a canoe story," the baron begged. "A good one! A--what you Yankees call--a hair-raiser!"

They drew up to Mrs. Schoville's fat wood-burning stove, and St. Vincent told of the great whirlpool in the Box Canyon, of the terrible corkscrew

in the mane of the White Horse Rapids, and of his cowardly comrade, who, walking around, had left him to go through alone--nine years before when the Yukon was virgin.

Half an hour later Mrs. Schoville bustled in, with Corliss in her wake.

"That hill! The last of my breath!" she gasped, pulling off her mittens.

"Never saw such luck!" she declared none the less vehemently the next moment.

"This play will never come off! I never shall be Mrs. Linden! How can I? Krogstad's gone on a stampede to Indian River, and no one knows when he'll be back! Krogstad" (to Corliss) "is Mr. Maybrick, you know. And Mrs. Alexander has the neuralgia and can't stir out. So there's no rehearsal to-day, that's flat!" She attitudinized dramatically: "Yes, in my first terror! But a day has passed, and in that day I have seen incredible things in this house! Helmer must know everything! There must be an end to this unhappy secret! O Krogstad, you need me, and I--I need you,' and you are over on the Indian River making sour-dough bread, and I shall never see you more!"

They clapped their applause.

"My only reward for venturing out and keeping you all waiting was my meeting with this ridiculous fellow." She shoved Corliss forward. "Oh! you have not met! Baron Courbertin, Mr. Corliss. If you strike it rich,

baron, I advise you to sell to Mr. Corliss. He has the money-bags of Croesus, and will buy anything so long as the title is good. And if you don't strike, sell anyway. He's a professional philanthropist, you know.

"But would you believe it!" (addressing the general group) "this ridiculous fellow kindly offered to see me up the hill and gossip along the way--gossip! though he refused point-blank to come in and watch the rehearsal. But when he found there wasn't to be any, he changed about like a weather-vane. So here he is, claiming to have been away to Miller Creek; but between ourselves there is no telling what dark deeds--"

"Dark deeds! Look!" Frona broke in, pointing to the tip of an amber mouth-piece which projected from Vance's outside breast-pocket. "A pipe! My congratulations."

She held out her hand and he shook good-humoredly.

"All Del's fault," he laughed. "When I go before the great white throne, it is he who shall stand forth and be responsible for that particular sin."

"An improvement, nevertheless," she argued. "All that is wanting is a good round swear-word now and again."

"Oh, I assure you I am not unlearned," he retorted. "No man can drive dogs else. I can swear from hell to breakfast, by damn, and back again,

if you will permit me, to the last link of perdition. By the bones of Pharaoh and the blood of Judas, for instance, are fairly efficacious with a string of huskies; but the best of my dog-driving nomenclature, more's the pity, women cannot stand. I promise you, however, in spite of hell and high water--"

"Oh! Oh!" Mrs. Schoville screamed, thrusting her fingers into her ears.

"Madame," Baron Courbertin spoke up gravely, "it is a fact, a lamentable fact, that the dogs of the north are responsible for more men's souls than all other causes put together. Is it not so? I leave it to the gentlemen."

Both Corliss and St. Vincent solemnly agreed, and proceeded to detonate the lady by swapping heart-rending and apposite dog tales.

St. Vincent and the baron remained behind to take lunch with the Gold Commissioner's wife, leaving Frona and Corliss to go down the hill together. Silently consenting, as though to prolong the descent, they swerved to the right, cutting transversely the myriad foot-paths and sled roads which led down into the town. It was a mid-December day, clear and cold; and the hesitant high-noon sun, having laboriously dragged its pale orb up from behind the southern land-rim, balked at the great climb to the zenith, and began its shamefaced slide back beneath the earth. Its oblique rays refracted from the floating frost particles till the air was filled with glittering jewel-dust--resplendent, blazing, flashing light

and fire, but cold as outer space.

They passed down through the scintillant, magical sheen, their moccasins rhythmically crunching the snow and their breaths wreathing mysteriously from their lips in sprayed opalescence. Neither spoke, nor cared to speak, so wonderful was it all. At their feet, under the great vault of heaven, a speck in the midst of the white vastness, huddled the golden city--puny and sordid, feebly protesting against immensity, man's challenge to the infinite!

Calls of men and cries of encouragement came sharply to them from close at hand, and they halted. There was an eager yelping, a scratching of feet, and a string of ice-rimed wolf-dogs, with hot-lolling tongues and dripping jaws, pulled up the slope and turned into the path ahead of them. On the sled, a long and narrow box of rough-sawed spruce told the nature of the freight. Two dog-drivers, a woman walking blindly, and a black-robed priest, made up the funeral cortege. A few paces farther on the dogs were again put against the steep, and with whine and shout and clatter the unheeding clay was hauled on and upward to its ice-hewn hillside chamber.

"A zone-conqueror," Frona broke voice.

Corliss found his thought following hers, and answered, "These battlers of frost and fighters of hunger! I can understand how the dominant races have come down out of the north to empire. Strong to venture, strong to

endure, with infinite faith and infinite patience, is it to be wondered at?"

Frona glanced at him in eloquent silence.

"We smote with our swords," he chanted; "to me it was a joy like having my bright bride by me on the couch.' I have marched with my bloody sword, and the raven has followed me. Furiously we fought; the fire passed over the dwellings of men; we slept in the blood of those who kept the gates."

"But do you feel it, Vance?" she cried, her hand flashing out and resting on his arm.

"I begin to feel, I think. The north has taught me, is teaching me. The old things come back with new significance. Yet I do not know. It seems a tremendous egotism, a magnificent dream."

"But you are not a negro or a Mongol, nor are you descended from the negro or Mongol."

"Yes," he considered, "I am my father's son, and the line goes back to the sea-kings who never slept under the smoky rafters of a roof or drained the ale-horn by inhabited hearth. There must be a reason for the dead-status of the black, a reason for the Teuton spreading over the earth as no other race has ever spread. There must be something in race

heredity, else I would not leap at the summons."

"A great race, Vance. Half of the earth its heritage, and all of the sea! And in threescore generations it has achieved it all--think of it! threescore generations!--and to-day it reaches out wider-armed than ever. The smiter and the destroyer among nations! the builder and the law-giver! Oh, Vance, my love is passionate, but God will forgive, for it is good. A great race, greatly conceived; and if to perish, greatly to perish! Don't you remember:

"Trembles Yggdrasil's ash yet standing; groans that ancient tree, and the Jotun Loki is loosed. The shadows groan on the ways of Hel, until the fire of Surt has consumed the tree. Hrym steers from the east, the waters rise, the mundane snake is coiled in jotun-rage. The worm heats the water, and the eagle screams; the pale of beak tears carcasses; the ship Naglfar is loosed. Surt from the south comes with flickering flame; shines from his sword the Val-god's sun."

Swaying there like a furred Valkyrie above the final carnage of men and gods, she touched his imagination, and the blood surged exultingly along unknown channels, thrilling and uplifting.

"The stony hills are dashed together, the giantesses totter; men tread the path of Hel, and heaven is cloven. The sun darkens, earth in ocean sinks, fall from heaven the bright stars, fire's breath assails the all-nourishing tree, towering fire plays against heaven itself."

Outlined against the blazing air, her brows and lashes white with frost, the jewel-dust striking and washing against hair and face, and the south-sun lighting her with a great redness, the man saw her as the genius of the race. The traditions of the blood laid hold of him, and he felt strangely at one with the white-skinned, yellow-haired giants of the younger world. And as he looked upon her the mighty past rose before him, and the caverns of his being resounded with the shock and tumult of forgotten battles. With bellowing of storm-winds and crash of smoking North Sea waves, he saw the sharp-beaked fighting galleys, and the sea-flung Northmen, great-muscled, deep-chested, sprung from the elements, men of sword and sweep, marauders and scourgers of the warm south-lands! The din of twenty centuries of battle was roaring in his ear, and the clamor for return to type strong upon him. He seized her hands passionately.

"Be the bright bride by me, Frona! Be the bright bride by me on the couch!"

She started and looked down at him, questioningly. Then the import of it reached her and she involuntarily drew back. The sun shot a last failing flicker across the earth and vanished. The fire went out of the air, and the day darkened. Far above, the hearse-dogs howled mournfully.

"No," he interrupted, as words formed on her lips. "Do not speak. I know my answer, your answer . . . now . . . I was a fool . . . Come,

let us go down."

It was not until they had left the mountain behind them, crossed the flat, and come out on the river by the saw-mill, that the bustle and skurry of human life made it seem possible for them to speak. Corliss had walked with his eyes moodily bent to the ground; and Frona, with head erect and looking everywhere, stealing an occasional glance to his face. Where the road rose over the log run-way of the mill the footing was slippery, and catching at her to save her from falling, their eyes met.

"I--I am grieved," she hesitated. And then, in unconscious self-defence, "It was so . . . I had not expected it--just then."

"Else you would have prevented?" he asked, bitterly.

"Yes. I think I should have. I did not wish to give you pain--"

"Then you expected it, some time?"

"And feared it. But I had hoped . . . I . . . Vance, I did not come into the Klondike to get married. I liked you at the beginning, and I have liked you more and more,--never so much as to-day,--but--"

"But you had never looked upon me in the light of a possible husband--that is what you are trying to say."

As he spoke, he looked at her side-wise, and sharply; and when her eyes met his with the same old frankness, the thought of losing her maddened him.

"But I have," she answered at once. "I have looked upon you in that light, but somehow it was not convincing. Why, I do not know. There was so much I found to like in you, so much--"

He tried to stop her with a dissenting gesture, but she went on.

"So much to admire. There was all the warmth of friendship, and closer friendship,--a growing camaraderie, in fact; but nothing more. Though I did not wish more, I should have welcomed it had it come."

"As one welcomes the unwelcome guest."

"Why won't you help me, Vance, instead of making it harder? It is hard on you, surely, but do you imagine that I am enjoying it? I feel because of your pain, and, further, I know when I refuse a dear friend for a lover the dear friend goes from me. I do not part with friends lightly."

"I see; doubly bankrupt; friend and lover both. But they are easily replaced. I fancy I was half lost before I spoke. Had I remained silent, it would have been the same anyway. Time softens; new associations, new thoughts and faces; men with marvellous adventures--"

She stopped him abruptly.

"It is useless, Vance, no matter what you may say. I shall not quarrel with you. I can understand how you feel--"

"If I am quarrelsome, then I had better leave you." He halted suddenly, and she stood beside him. "Here comes Dave Harney. He will see you home. It's only a step."

"You are doing neither yourself nor me kindness." She spoke with final firmness. "I decline to consider this the end. We are too close to it to understand it fairly. You must come and see me when we are both calmer. I refuse to be treated in this fashion. It is childish of you." She shot a hasty glance at the approaching Eldorado king. "I do not think I deserve it at your hands. I refuse to lose you as a friend. And I insist that you come and see me, that things remain on the old footing."

He shook his head.

"Hello!" Dave Harney touched his cap and slowed down loose-jointedly. "Sorry you didn't take my tip? Dogs gone up a dollar a pound since yesterday, and still a-whoopin'. Good-afternoon, Miss Frona, and Mr. Corliss. Goin' my way?"

"Miss Welse is." Corliss touched the visor of his cap and half-turned on his heel.

"Where're you off to?" Dave demanded.

"Got an appointment," he lied.

"Remember," Frona called to him, "you must come and see me."

"Too busy, I'm afraid, just now. Good-bye. So long, Dave."

"Jeminy!" Dave remarked, staring after him; "but he's a hustler. Always busy--with big things, too. Wonder why he didn't go in for dogs?"