

## CHAPTER XVI

The stampede to French Hill was on by the beginning of Christmas week. Corliss and Bishop had been in no hurry to record for they looked the ground over carefully before blazing their stakes, and let a few close friends into the secret,--Harney, Welse, Trethaway, a Dutch chechaquo who had forfeited both feet to the frost, a couple of the mounted police, an old pal with whom Del had prospected through the Black Hills Country, the washerwoman at the Forks, and last, and notably, Lucile. Corliss was responsible for her getting in on the lay, and he drove and marked her stakes himself, though it fell to the colonel to deliver the invitation to her to come and be rich.

In accordance with the custom of the country, those thus benefited offered to sign over half-interests to the two discoverers. Corliss would not tolerate the proposition. Del was similarly minded, though swayed by no ethical reasons. He had enough as it stood. "Got my fruit ranch paid for, double the size I was calculatin' on," he explained; "and if I had any more, I wouldn't know what to do with it, sure."

After the strike, Corliss took it upon himself as a matter of course to look about for another man; but when he brought a keen-eyed Californian into camp, Del was duly wroth.

"Not on your life," he stormed.

"But you are rich now," Vance answered, "and have no need to work."

"Rich, hell!" the pocket-miner rejoined. "Accordin' to covenant, you can't fire me; and I'm goin' to hold the job down as long as my sweet will'll let me. Savve?"

On Friday morning, early, all interested parties appeared before the Gold Commissioner to record their claims. The news went abroad immediately. In five minutes the first stampeders were hitting the trail. At the end of half an hour the town was afoot. To prevent mistakes on their property,--jumping, moving of stakes, and mutilation of notices,--Vance and Del, after promptly recording, started to return. But with the government seal attached to their holdings, they took it leisurely, the stampeders sliding past them in a steady stream. Midway, Del chanced to look behind. St. Vincent was in sight, footing it at a lively pace, the regulation stampeding pack on his shoulders. The trail made a sharp bend at that place, and with the exception of the three of them no one was in sight.

"Don't speak to me. Don't recognize me," Del cautioned sharply, as he spoke, buttoning his nose-strap across his face, which served to quite hide his identity. "There's a water-hole over there. Get down on your belly and make a blind at gettin' a drink. Then go on by your lonely to the claims; I've business of my own to handle. And for the love of your bother don't say a word to me or to the skunk. Don't let 'm see

your face."

Corliss obeyed wonderingly, stepping aside from the beaten path, lying down in the snow, and dipping into the water-hole with an empty condensed milk-can. Bishop bent on one knee and stooped as though fastening his moccasin. Just as St. Vincent came up with him he finished tying the knot, and started forward with the feverish haste of a man trying to make up for lost time.

"I say, hold on, my man," the correspondent called out to him.

Bishop shot a hurried glance at him and pressed on. St. Vincent broke into a run till they were side by side again.

"Is this the way--"

"To the benches of French Hill?" Del snapped him short. "Betcher your life. That's the way I'm headin'. So long."

He ploughed forward at a tremendous rate, and the correspondent, half-running, swung in behind with the evident intention of taking the pace. Corliss, still in the dark, lifted his head and watched them go; but when he saw the pocket-miner swerve abruptly to the right and take the trail up Adams Creek, the light dawned upon him and he laughed softly to himself.

Late that night Del arrived in camp on Eldorado exhausted but jubilant.

"Didn't do a thing to him," he cried before he was half inside the tent-flaps. "Gimme a bite to eat" (grabbing at the teapot and running a hot flood down his throat),--"cookin'-fat, slush, old moccasins, candle-ends, anything!"

Then he collapsed upon the blankets and fell to rubbing his stiff leg-muscles while Corliss fried bacon and dished up the beans.

"What about 'm?" he exulted between mouthfuls. "Well, you can stack your chips that he didn't get in on the French Hill benches. How far is it, my man?" (in the well-mimicked, patronizing tones of St. Vincent). "How far is it?" with the patronage left out. "How far to French Hill?" weakly. "How far do you think it is?" very weakly, with a tremolo which hinted of repressed tears. "How far--"

The pocket-miner burst into roars of laughter, which were choked by a misdirected flood of tea, and which left him coughing and speechless.

"Where'd I leave 'm?" when he had recovered. "Over on the divide to Indian River, winded, plum-beaten, done for. Just about able to crawl into the nearest camp, and that's about all. I've covered fifty stiff miles myself, so here's for bed. Good-night. Don't call me in the mornin'."

He turned into the blankets all-standing, and as he dozed off Vance could hear him muttering, "How far is it, my man? I say, how far is it?"

Regarding Lucile, Corliss was disappointed. "I confess I cannot understand her," he said to Colonel Trethaway. "I thought her bench claim would make her independent of the Opera House."

"You can't get a dump out in a day," the colonel interposed.

"But you can mortgage the dirt in the ground when it prospects as hers does. Yet I took that into consideration, and offered to advance her a few thousand, non-interest bearing, and she declined. Said she didn't need it,--in fact, was really grateful; thanked me, and said that any time I was short to come and see her."

Trethaway smiled and played with his watch-chain. "What would you? Life, even here, certainly means more to you and me than a bit of grub, a piece of blanket, and a Yukon stove. She is as gregarious as the rest of us, and probably a little more so. Suppose you cut her off from the Opera House,--what then? May she go up to the Barracks and consort with the captain's lady, make social calls on Mrs. Schoville, or chum with Frona? Don't you see? Will you escort her, in daylight, down the public street?"

"Will you?" Vance demanded.

"Ay," the colonel replied, unhesitatingly, "and with pleasure."

"And so will I; but--" He paused and gazed gloomily into the fire.

"But see how she is going on with St. Vincent. As thick as thieves they are, and always together."

"Puzzles me," Trethaway admitted. "I can grasp St. Vincent's side of it. Many irons in the fire, and Lucile owns a bench claim on the second tier of French Hill. Mark me, Corliss, we can tell infallibly the day that Frona consents to go to his bed and board,--if she ever does consent."

"And that will be?"

"The day St. Vincent breaks with Lucile."

Corliss pondered, and the colonel went on.

"But I can't grasp Lucile's side of it. What she can see in St. Vincent--"

"Her taste is no worse than--than that of the rest of the women," Vance broke in hotly. "I am sure that--"

"Frona could not display poor taste, eh?" Corliss turned on his heel and walked out, and left Colonel Trethaway smiling grimly.

Vance Corliss never knew how many people, directly and indirectly, had his cause at heart that Christmas week. Two men strove in particular, one for him and one for the sake of Frona. Pete Whipple, an old-timer in the land, possessed an Eldorado claim directly beneath French Hill, also a woman of the country for a wife,--a swarthy breed, not over pretty, whose Indian mother had mated with a Russian fur-trader some thirty years before at Kutlik on the Great Delta. Bishop went down one Sunday morning to yarn away an hour or so with Whipple, but found the wife alone in the cabin. She talked a bastard English gibberish which was an anguish to hear, so the pocket-miner resolved to smoke a pipe and depart without rudeness. But he got her tongue wagging, and to such an extent that he stopped and smoked many pipes, and whenever she lagged, urged her on again. He grunted and chuckled and swore in undertones while he listened, punctuating her narrative regularly with hells! which adequately expressed the many shades of interest he felt.

In the midst of it, the woman fished an ancient leather-bound volume, all scarred and marred, from the bottom of a dilapidated chest, and thereafter it lay on the table between them. Though it remained unopened, she constantly referred to it by look and gesture, and each time she did so a greedy light blazed in Bishop's eyes. At the end, when she could say no more and had repeated herself from two to half a dozen times, he pulled out his sack. Mrs. Whipple set up the gold

scales and placed the weights, which he counterbalanced with a hundred dollars' worth of dust. Then he departed up the hill to the tent, hugging the purchase closely, and broke in on Corliss, who sat in the blankets mending moccasins.

"I'll fix 'm yet," Del remarked casually, at the same time patting the book and throwing it down on the bed.

Corliss looked up inquiringly and opened it. The paper was yellow with age and rotten from the weather-wear of trail, while the text was printed in Russian. "I didn't know you were a Russian scholar, Del," he quizzed. "But I can't read a line of it."

"Neither can I, more's the pity; nor does Whipple's woman savve the lingo. I got it from her. But her old man--he was full Russian, you know--he used to read it aloud to her. But she knows what she knows and what her old man knew, and so do I."

"And what do the three of you know?"

"Oh, that's tellin'," Bishop answered, coyly. "But you wait and watch my smoke, and when you see it risin', you'll know, too."

Matt McCarthy came in over the ice Christmas week, summed up the situation so far as Frona and St. Vincent were concerned, and did not



like it. Dave Harney furnished him with full information, to which he added that obtained from Lucile, with whom he was on good terms. Perhaps it was because he received the full benefit of the sum of their prejudice; but no matter how, he at any rate answered roll-call with those who looked upon the correspondent with disfavor. It was impossible for them to tell why they did not approve of the man, but somehow St. Vincent was never much of a success with men. This, in turn, might have been due to the fact that he shone so resplendently with women as to cast his fellows in eclipse; for otherwise, in his intercourse with men, he was all that a man could wish. There was nothing domineering or over-riding about him, while he manifested a good fellowship at least equal to their own.

Yet, having withheld his judgment after listening to Lucile and Harney, Matt McCarthy speedily reached a verdict upon spending an hour with St. Vincent at Jacob Welse's,--and this in face of the fact that what Lucile had said had been invalidated by Matt's learning of her intimacy with the man in question. Strong of friendship, quick of heart and hand, Matt did not let the grass grow under his feet. "'Tis I'll be takin' a social fling meself, as befits a mumber iv the noble Eldorado Dynasty," he explained, and went up the hill to a whist party in Dave Harney's cabin. To himself he added, "An' belike, if Satan takes his eye off his own, I'll put it to that young cub iv his."

But more than once during the evening he discovered himself challenging his own judgment. Probe as he would with his innocent wit, Matt found

himself baffled. St. Vincent certainly rang true. Simple, light-hearted, unaffected, joking and being joked in all good-nature, thoroughly democratic. Matt failed to catch the faintest echo of insincerity.

"May the dogs walk on me grave," he communed with himself while studying a hand which suffered from a plethora of trumps. "Is it the years are tellin', puttin' the frost in me veins and chillin' the blood? A likely lad, an' is it for me to misjudge because his is a-takin' way with the ladies? Just because the swate creatures smile on the lad an' flutter warm at the sight iv him? Bright eyes and brave men! 'Tis the way they have iv lovin' valor. They're shuddered an' shocked at the cruel an' bloody dades iv war, yet who so quick do they lose their hearts to as the brave butcher-bye iv a sodger? Why not? The lad's done brave things, and the girls give him the warm soft smile. Small reason, that, for me to be callin' him the devil's own cub. Out upon ye, Matt McCarthy, for a crusty old sour-dough, with vitals frozen an' summer gone from yer heart! 'Tis an ossification ye've become! But bide a wee, Matt, bide a wee," he supplemented. "Wait till ye've felt the fale iv his flesh."

The opportunity came shortly, when St. Vincent, with Frona opposite, swept in the full thirteen tricks.

"A rampse!" Matt cried. "Vincent, me lad, a rampse! Yer hand on it,

me brave!"

It was a stout grip, neither warm nor clammy, but Matt shook his head dubiously. "What's the good iv botherin'?" he muttered to himself as he shuffled the cards for the next deal. "Ye old fool! Find out first how Frona darlin' stands, an' if it's pat she is, thin 'tis time for doin'."

"Oh, McCarthy's all hunky," Dave Harney assured them later on, coming to the rescue of St. Vincent, who was getting the rough side of the Irishman's wit. The evening was over and the company was putting on its wraps and mittens. "Didn't tell you 'bout his visit to the cathedral, did he, when he was on the Outside? Well, it was suthin' like this, ez he was explainin' it to me. He went to the cathedral durin' service, an' took in the priests and choir-boys in their surplices,--parkas, he called 'em,--an' watched the burnin' of the holy incense. 'An' do ye know, Dave, he sez to me, 'they got in an' made a smudge, and there wa'n't a darned mosquito in sight.'"

"True, ivery word iv it." Matt unblushingly fathered Harney's yarn. "An' did ye niver hear tell iv the time Dave an' me got drunk on condensed milk?"

"Oh! Horrors!" cried Mrs. Schoville. "But how? Do tell us."

"'Twas durin' the time iv the candle famine at Forty Mile. Cold snap

on, an' Dave slides into me shack to pass the time o' day, and glues his eyes on me case iv condensed milk. 'How'd ye like a sip iv Moran's good whiskey?' he sez, eyin' the case iv milk the while. I confiss me mouth went wet at the naked thought iv it. 'But what's the use iv likin'?' sez I, with me sack bulgin' with emptiness.' 'Candles worth tin dollars the dozen,' sez he, 'a dollar apiece. Will ye give six cans iv milk for a bottle iv the old stuff?' 'How'll ye do it?' sez I. 'Trust me,' sez he. 'Give me the cans. 'Tis cold out iv doors, an' I've a pair iv candle-moulds.'

"An' it's the sacred truth I'm tellin' ye all, an' if ye run across Bill Moran he'll back me word; for what does Dave Harney do but lug off me six cans, freeze the milk into his candle-moulds, an' trade them in to bill Moran for a bottle iv tanglefoot!"

As soon as he could be heard through the laughter, Harney raised his voice. "It's true, as McCarthy tells, but he's only told you the half. Can't you guess the rest, Matt?"

Matt shook his head.

"Bein' short on milk myself, an' not over much sugar, I doctored three of your cans with water, which went to make the candles. An' by the bye, I had milk in my coffee for a month to come."

"It's on me, Dave," McCarthy admitted. "'Tis only that yer me host, or

I'd be shockin' the ladies with yer nortorious disgraces. But I'll lave ye live this time, Dave. Come, spade the partin' guests; we must be movin'."

"No ye don't, ye young laddy-buck," he interposed, as St. Vincent started to take Frona down the hill, "'Tis her foster-daddy sees her home this night."

McCarthy laughed in his silent way and offered his arm to Frona, while St. Vincent joined in the laugh against himself, dropped back, and joined Miss Mortimer and Baron Courbertin.

"What's this I'm hearin' about you an' Vincent?" Matt bluntly asked as soon as they had drawn apart from the others.

He looked at her with his keen gray eyes, but she returned the look quite as keenly.

"How should I know what you have been hearing?" she countered.

"Whin the talk goes round iv a maid an' a man, the one pretty an' the other not unhandsome, both young an' neither married, does it 'token aught but the one thing?"

"Yes?"

"An' the one thing the greatest thing in all the world."

"Well?" Frona was the least bit angry, and did not feel inclined to help him.

"Marriage, iv course," he blurted out. "'Tis said it looks that way with the pair of ye."

"But is it said that it is that way?"

"Isn't the looks iv it enough ?" he demanded.

"No; and you are old enough to know better. Mr. St. Vincent and I--we enjoy each other as friends, that is all. But suppose it is as you say, what of it?"

"Well," McCarthy deliberated, "there's other talk goes round, 'Tis said Vincent is over-thick with a jade down in the town--Lucile, they speak iv her."

"All of which signifies?"

She waited, and McCarthy watched her dumbly.

"I know Lucile, and I like her," Frona continued, filling the gap of his silence, and ostentatiously manoeuvring to help him on. "Do you

know her? Don't you like her?"

Matt started to speak, cleared his throat, and halted. At last, in desperation, he blurted out, "For two cents, Frona, I'd lay ye acrost me knee."

She laughed. "You don't dare. I'm not running barelegged at Dyea."

"Now don't be tasin'," he blarneyed.

"I'm not teasing. Don't you like her?--Lucile?"

"An' what iv it?" he challenged, brazenly.

"Just what I asked,--what of it?"

"Thin I'll tell ye in plain words from a man old enough to be yer father. 'Tis undacent, damnably undacent, for a man to kape company with a good young girl--"

"Thank you," she laughed, dropping a courtesy. Then she added, half in bitterness, "There have been others who--"

"Name me the man!" he cried hotly.

"There, there, go on. You were saying?"

"That it's a crying shame for a man to kape company with--with you, an' at the same time be chake by jowl with a woman iv her stamp."

"And why?"

"To come drippin' from the muck to dirty yer claneness! An' ye can ask why?"

"But wait, Matt, wait a moment. Granting your premises--"

"Little I know iv promises," he growled. "'Tis facts I'm dalin' with."

Frona bit her lip. "Never mind. Have it as you will; but let me go on and I will deal with facts, too. When did you last see Lucile?"

"An' why are ye askin'?" he demanded, suspiciously.

"Never mind why. The fact."

"Well, thin, the fore part iv last night, an' much good may it do ye."

"And danced with her?"

"A rollickin' Virginia reel, an' not sayin' a word iv a quadrille or so. Tis at square dances I excel meself."



Frona walked on in a simulated brown study, no sound going up from the twain save the complaint of the snow from under their moccasins.

"Well, thin?" he questioned, uneasily.

"An' what iv it?" he insisted after another silence.

"Oh, nothing," she answered. "I was just wondering which was the muckiest, Mr. St. Vincent or you--or myself, with whom you have both been cheek by jowl."

Now, McCarthy was unversed in the virtues of social wisdom, and, though he felt somehow the error of her position, he could not put it into definite thought; so he steered wisely, if weakly, out of danger.

"It's gettin' mad ye are with yer old Matt," he insinuated, "who has yer own good at heart, an' because iv it makes a fool iv himself."

"No, I'm not."

"But ye are."

"There!" leaning swiftly to him and kissing him. "How could I remember the Dyea days and be angry?"

"Ah, Frona darlin', well may ye say it. I'm the dust iv the dirt under yer feet, an' ye may walk on me--anything save get mad. I cud die for ye, swing for ye, to make ye happy. I cud kill the man that gave ye sorrow, were it but a thimbleful, an' go plump into hell with a smile on me face an' joy in me heart."

They had halted before her door, and she pressed his arm gratefully.

"I am not angry, Matt. But with the exception of my father you are the only person I would have permitted to talk to me about this--this affair in the way you have. And though I like you, Matt, love you better than ever, I shall nevertheless be very angry if you mention it again. You have no right. It is something that concerns me alone. And it is wrong of you--"

"To prevint ye walkin' blind into danger?"

"If you wish to put it that way, yes."

He growled deep down in his throat.

"What is it you are saying?" she asked.

"That ye may shut me mouth, but that ye can't bind me arm."

"But you mustn't, Matt, dear, you mustn't."

Again he answered with a subterranean murmur.

"And I want you to promise me, now, that you will not interfere in my life that way, by word or deed."

"I'll not promise."

"But you must."

"I'll not. Further, it's gettin' cold on the stoop, an' ye'll be frostin' yer toes, the pink little toes I fished splinters out iv at Dyea. So it's in with ye, Frona girl, an' good-night."

He thrust her inside and departed. When he reached the corner he stopped suddenly and regarded his shadow on the snow. "Matt McCarthy, yer a damned fool! Who iver heard iv a Welse not knowin' their own mind? As though ye'd niver had dalin's with the stiff-necked breed, ye calamitous son iv misfortune!"

Then he went his way, still growling deeply, and at every growl the curious wolf-dog at his heels bristled and bared its fangs.