

CHAPTER XVIII

The "Doll's House" was a success. Mrs. Schoville ecstasized over it in terms so immeasurable, so unqualifiable, that Jacob Welse, standing near, bent a glittering gaze upon her plump white throat and unconsciously clutched and closed his hand on an invisible windpipe. Dave Harney proclaimed its excellence effusively, though he questioned the soundness of Nora's philosophy and swore by his Puritan gods that Torvald was the longest-eared Jack in two hemispheres. Even Miss Mortimer, antagonistic as she was to the whole school, conceded that the players had redeemed it; while Matt McCarthy announced that he didn't blame Nora darlin' the least bit, though he told the Gold Commissioner privately that a song or so and a skirt dance wouldn't have hurt the performance.

"Iv course the Nora girl was right," he insisted to Harney, both of whom were walking on the heels of Frona and St. Vincent. "I'd be seein'--"

"Rubber--"

"Rubber yer gran'mother!" Matt wrathfully exclaimed.

"Ez I was sayin'," Harney continued, imperturbably, "rubber boots is goin' to go sky-high 'bout the time of wash-up. Three ounces the pair, an' you kin put your chips on that for a high card. You kin gather 'em

in now for an ounce a pair and clear two on the deal. A cinch, Matt, a dead open an' shut."

"The devil take you an' yer cinches! It's Nora darlin' I have in me mind the while."

They bade good-by to Frona and St. Vincent and went off disputing under the stars in the direction of the Opera House.

Gregory St. Vincent heaved an audible sigh. "At last."

"At last what?" Frona asked, incuriously.

"At last the first opportunity for me to tell you how well you did. You carried off the final scene wonderfully; so well that it seemed you were really passing out of my life forever."

"What a misfortune!"

"It was terrible."

"No."

"But, yes. I took the whole condition upon myself. You were not Nora, you were Frona; nor I Torvald, but Gregory. When you made your exit, capped and jacketed and travelling-bag in hand, it seemed I could not

possibly stay and finish my lines. And when the door slammed and you were gone, the only thing that saved me was the curtain. It brought me to myself, or else I would have rushed after you in the face of the audience."

"It is strange how a simulated part may react upon one," Frona speculated.

"Or rather?" St. Vincent suggested.

Frona made no answer, and they walked on without speech. She was still under the spell of the evening, and the exaltation which had come to her as Nora had not yet departed. Besides, she read between the lines of St. Vincent's conversation, and was oppressed by the timidity which comes over woman when she faces man on the verge of the greater intimacy.

It was a clear, cold night, not over-cold,--not more than forty below,--and the land was bathed in a soft, diffused flood of light which found its source not in the stars, nor yet in the moon, which was somewhere over on the other side of the world. From the south-east to the northwest a pale-greenish glow fringed the rim of the heavens, and it was from this the dim radiance was exhaled.

Suddenly, like the ray of a search-light, a band of white light ploughed overhead. Night turned to ghostly day on the instant, then

black night descended. But to the southeast a noiseless commotion was apparent. The glowing greenish gauze was in a ferment, bubbling, uprearing, downfalling, and tentatively thrusting huge bodiless hands into the upper ether. Once more a cyclopean rocket twisted its fiery way across the sky, from horizon to zenith, and on, and on, in tremendous flight, to horizon again. But the span could not hold, and in its wake the black night brooded. And yet again, broader, stronger, deeper, lavishly spilling streamers to right and left, it flaunted the midmost zenith with its gorgeous flare, and passed on and down to the further edge of the world. Heaven was bridged at last, and the bridge endured!

At this flaming triumph the silence of earth was broken, and ten thousand wolf-dogs, in long-drawn unisoned howls, sobbed their dismay and grief. Frona shivered, and St. Vincent passed his arm about her waist. The woman in her was aware of the touch of man, and of a slight tingling thrill of vague delight; but she made no resistance. And as the wolf-dogs mourned at her feet and the aurora wantoned overhead, she felt herself drawn against him closely.

"Need I tell my story?" he whispered.

She drooped her head in tired content on his shoulder, and together they watched the burning vault wherein the stars dimmed and vanished. Ebbing, flowing, pulsing to some tremendous rhythm, the prism colors hurled themselves in luminous deluge across the firmament. Then the

canopy of heaven became a mighty loom, wherein imperial purple and deep sea-green blended, wove, and interwove, with blazing woof and flashing warp, till the most delicate of tulle, fluorescent and bewildering, was daintily and airily shaken in the face of the astonished night.

Without warning the span was sundered by an arrogant arm of black. The arch dissolved in blushing confusion. Chasms of blackness yawned, grew, and rushed together. Broken masses of strayed color and fading fire stole timidly towards the sky-line. Then the dome of night towered imponderable, immense, and the stars came back one by one, and the wolf-dogs mourned anew.

"I can offer you so little, dear," the man said with a slightly perceptible bitterness. "The precarious fortunes of a gypsy wanderer."

And the woman, placing his hand and pressing it against her heart, said, as a great woman had said before her, "A tent and a crust of bread with you, Richard."