

CHAPTER XIX

How-ha was only an Indian woman, bred of a long line of fish-eating, meat-rending carnivores, and her ethics were as crude and simple as her blood. But long contact with the whites had given her an insight into their way of looking at things, and though she grunted contemptuously in her secret soul, she none the less understood their way perfectly. Ten years previous she had cooked for Jacob Welse, and served him in one fashion or another ever since; and when on a dreary January morning she opened the front door in response to the deep-tongued knocker, even her stolid presence was shaken as she recognized the visitor. Not that the average man or woman would have so recognized. But How-ha's faculties of observing and remembering details had been developed in a hard school where death dealt his blow to the lax and life saluted the vigilant.

How-ha looked up and down the woman who stood before her. Through the heavy veil she could barely distinguish the flash of the eyes, while the hood of the parka effectually concealed the hair, and the parka proper the particular outlines of the body. But How-ha paused and looked again. There was something familiar in the vague general outline. She quested back to the shrouded head again, and knew the unmistakable poise. Then How-ha's eyes went blar as she traversed the simple windings of her own brain, inspecting the bare shelves taciturnly stored with the impressions of a meagre life. No disorder; no confused mingling of records; no devious and

interminable impress of complex emotions, tangled theories, and bewildering abstractions--nothing but simple facts, neatly classified and conveniently collated. Unerringly from the stores of the past she picked and chose and put together in the instant present, till obscurity dropped from the woman before her, and she knew her, word and deed and look and history.

"Much better you go 'way quickety-quick," How-ha informed her.

"Miss Welse. I wish to see her."

The strange woman spoke in firm, even tones which betokened the will behind, but which failed to move How-ha.

"Much better you go," she repeated, stolidly.

"Here, take this to Frona Welse, and--ah! would you!" (thrusting her knee between the door and jamb) "and leave the door open."

How-ha scowled, but took the note; for she could not shake off the grip of the ten years of servitude to the superior race.

May I see you?

LUCILE.

So the note ran. Frona glanced up expectantly at the Indian woman.

"Um kick toes outside," How-ha explained. "Me tell um go 'way quickety-quick? Eh? You t'ink yes? Um no good. Um--"

"No. Take her,"--Frona was thinking quickly,--"no; bring her up here."

"Much better--"

"Go!"

How-ha grunted, and yielded up the obedience she could not withhold; though, as she went down the stairs to the door, in a tenebrous, glimmering way she wondered that the accident of white skin or swart made master or servant as the case might be.

In the one sweep of vision, Lucile took in Frona smiling with extended hand in the foreground, the dainty dressing-table, the simple finery, the thousand girlish evidences; and with the sweet wholesomeness of it pervading her nostrils, her own girlhood rose up and smote her. Then she turned a bleak eye and cold ear on outward things.

"I am glad you came," Frona was saying. "I have so wanted to see you again, and--but do get that heavy parka off, please. How thick it is, and what splendid fur and workmanship!"

"Yes, from Siberia." A present from St. Vincent, Lucile felt like adding, but said instead, "The Siberians have not yet learned to scamp their work, you know."

She sank down into the low-seated rocker with a native grace which could not escape the beauty-loving eye of the girl, and with proud-poised head and silent tongue listened to Frona as the minutes ticked away, and observed with impersonal amusement Frona's painful toil at making conversation.

"What has she come for?" Frona asked herself, as she talked on furs and weather and indifferent things.

"If you do not say something, Lucile, I shall get nervous, soon," she ventured at last in desperation. "Has anything happened?"

Lucile went over to the mirror and picked up, from among the trinkets beneath, a tiny open-work miniature of Frona. "This is you? How old were you?"

"Sixteen."

"A sylph, but a cold northern one."

"The blood warms late with us," Frona reproved; "but is--"

"None the less warm for that," Lucile laughed. "And how old are you now?"

"Twenty."

"Twenty," Lucile repeated, slowly. "Twenty," and resumed her seat.

"You are twenty. And I am twenty-four."

"So little difference as that!"

"But our blood warms early." Lucile voiced her reproach across the unfathomable gulf which four years could not plumb.

Frona could hardly hide her vexation. Lucile went over and looked at the miniature again and returned.

"What do you think of love?" she asked abruptly, her face softening unheralded into a smile.

"Love?" the girl quavered.

"Yes, love. What do you know about it? What do you think of it?"

A flood of definitions, glowing and rosy, sped to her tongue, but Frona swept them aside and answered, "Love is immolation."

"Very good--sacrifice. And, now, does it pay?"

"Yes, it pays. Of course it pays. Who can doubt it?"

Lucile's eyes twinkled amusedly.

"Why do you smile?" Frona asked.

"Look at me, Frona." Lucile stood up and her face blazed. "I am twenty-four. Not altogether a fright; not altogether a dunce. I have a heart. I have good red blood and warm. And I have loved. I do not remember the pay. I know only that I have paid."

"And in the paying were paid," Frona took up warmly. "The price was the reward. If love be fallible, yet you have loved; you have done, you have served. What more would you?"

"The whelpage love," Lucile sneered.

"Oh! You are unfair."

"I do you justice," Lucile insisted firmly. "You would tell me that

you know; that you have gone unveiled and seen clear-eyed; that without placing more than lips to the brim you have divined the taste of the dregs, and that the taste is good. Bah! The whelpage love! And, oh, Frona, I know; you are full womanly and broad, and lend no ear to little things, but"--she tapped a slender finger to forehead--"it is all here. It is a heady brew, and you have smelled the fumes overmuch. But drain the dregs, turn down the glass, and say that it is good. No, God forbid!" she cried, passionately. "There are good loves. You should find no masquerade, but one fair and shining."

Frona was up to her old trick,--their common one,--and her hand slid down Lucile's arm till hand clasped in hand. "You say things which I feel are wrong, yet may not answer. I can, but how dare I? I dare not put mere thoughts against your facts. I, who have lived so little, cannot in theory give the lie to you who have lived so much--"

"For he who lives more lives than one, more lives than one must die."

From out of her pain, Lucile spoke the words of her pain, and Frona, throwing arms about her, sobbed on her breast in understanding. As for Lucile, the slight nervous ingathering of the brows above her eyes smoothed out, and she pressed the kiss of motherhood, lightly and secretly, on the other's hair. For a space,--then the brows

ingathered, the lips drew firm, and she put Frona from her.

"You are going to marry Gregory St. Vincent?"

Frona was startled. It was only a fortnight old, and not a word had been breathed. "How do you know?"

"You have answered." Lucile watched Frona's open face and the bold running advertisement, and felt as the skilled fencer who fronts a tyro, weak of wrist, each opening naked to his hand. "How do I know?" She laughed harshly. "When a man leaves one's arms suddenly, lips wet with last kisses and mouth areek with last lies!"

"And--?"

"Forgets the way back to those arms."

"So?" The blood of the Welse pounded up, and like a hot sun dried the mists from her eyes and left them flashing. "Then that is why you came. I could have guessed it had I given second thought to Dawson's gossip."

"It is not too late." Lucile's lip curled. "And it is your way."

"And I am mindful. What is it? Do you intend telling me what he has done, what he has been to you. Let me say that it is useless. He is

a man, as you and I are women."

"No," Lucile lied, swallowing her astonishment.

"I had not thought that any action of his would affect you. I knew you were too great for that. But--have you considered me?"

Frona caught her breath for a moment. Then she straightened out her arms to hold the man in challenge to the arms of Lucile.

"Your father over again," Lucile exclaimed. "Oh, you impossible Welses!"

"But he is not worthy of you, Frona Welse," she continued; "of me, yes. He is not a nice man, a great man, nor a good. His love cannot match with yours. Bah! He does not possess love; passion, of one sort and another, is the best he may lay claim to. That you do not want. It is all, at the best, he can give you. And you, pray what may you give him? Yourself? A prodigious waste! But your father's yellow--"

"Don't go on, or I shall refuse to listen. It is wrong of you." So Frona made her cease, and then, with bold inconsistency, "And what may the woman Lucile give him?"

"Some few wild moments," was the prompt response; "a burning burst of

happiness, and the regrets of hell--which latter he deserves, as do
I. So the balance is maintained, and all is well."

"But--but--"

"For there is a devil in him," she held on, "a most alluring devil,
which delights me, on my soul it does, and which, pray God, Frona,
you may never know. For you have no devil; mine matches his and
mates. I am free to confess that the whole thing is only an
attraction. There is nothing permanent about him, nor about me. And
there's the beauty, the balance is preserved."

Frona lay back in her chair and lazily regarded her visitor, Lucile
waited for her to speak. It was very quiet.

"Well?" Lucile at last demanded, in a low, curious tone, at the same
time rising to slip into her parka.

"Nothing. I was only waiting."

"I am done."

"Then let me say that I do not understand you," Frona summed up,
coldly. "I cannot somehow just catch your motive. There is a flat
ring to what you have said. However, of this I am sure: for some
unaccountable reason you have been untrue to yourself to-day. Do not

ask me, for, as I said before, I do not know where or how; yet I am none the less convinced. This I do know, you are not the Lucile I met by the wood trail across the river. That was the true Lucile, little though I saw of her. The woman who is here to-day is a strange woman. I do not know her. Sometimes it has seemed she was Lucile, but rarely. This woman has lied, lied to me, and lied to me about herself. As to what she said of the man, at the worst that is merely an opinion. It may be she has lied about him likewise. The chance is large that she has. What do you think about it?"

"That you are a very clever girl, Frona. That you speak sometimes more truly than you know, and that at others you are blinder than you dream."

"There is something I could love in you, but you have hidden it away so that I cannot find it."

Lucile's lips trembled on the verge of speech. But she settled her parka about her and turned to go.

Frona saw her to the door herself, and How-ha pondered over the white who made the law and was greater than the law.

When the door had closed, Lucile spat into the street. "Faugh! St. Vincent! I have defiled my mouth with your name!" And she spat again.

"Come in."

At the summons Matt McCarthy pulled the latch-string, pushed the door open, and closed it carefully behind him.

"Oh, it is you!" St. Vincent regarded his visitor with dark abstraction, then, recollecting himself, held out his hand. "Why, hello, Matt, old man. My mind was a thousand miles away when you entered. Take a stool and make yourself comfortable. There's the tobacco by your hand. Take a try at it and give us your verdict."

"An' well may his mind be a thousand miles away," Matt assured himself; for in the dark he had passed a woman on the trail who looked suspiciously like Lucile. But aloud, "Sure, an' it's day-dramin' ye mane. An' small wondher."

"How's that?" the correspondent asked, cheerily.

"By the same token that I met Lucile down the trail a piece, an' the heels iv her moccasins pointing to yer shack. It's a bitter tongue the jade slings on occasion," Matt chuckled.

"That's the worst of it." St. Vincent met him frankly. "A man looks sidewise at them for a passing moment, and they demand that the

moment be eternal."

Off with the old love's a stiff proposition, eh?"

"I should say so. And you understand. It's easy to see, Matt, you've had some experience in your time."

"In me time? I'll have ye know I'm not too old to still enjoy a bit iv a fling."

"Certainly, certainly. One can read it in your eyes. The warm heart and the roving eye, Matt!" He slapped his visitor on the shoulder with a hearty laugh.

"An' I've none the best iv ye, Vincent. 'Tis a wicked lad ye are, with a takin' way with the ladies--as plain as the nose on yer face. Manny's the idle kiss ye've given, an' manny's the heart ye've broke. But, Vincent, bye, did ye iver know the rale thing?"

"How do you mean?"

"The rale thing, the rale thing--that is--well, have ye been iver a father?"

St. Vincent shook his head.

"And niver have I. But have ye felt the love iv a father, thin?"

"I hardly know. I don't think so."

"Well, I have. An' it's the rale thing, I'll tell ye. If iver a man suckled a child, I did, or the next door to it. A girl child at that, an' she's woman grown, now, an' if the thing is possible, I love her more than her own blood-father. Bad luck, exciptin' her, there was niver but one woman I loved, an' that woman had mated beforetime. Not a soul did I brathe a word to, trust me, nor even herself. But she died. God's love be with her."

His chin went down upon his chest and he quested back to a flaxen-haired Saxon woman, strayed like a bit of sunshine into the log store by the Dyea River. He looked up suddenly, and caught St. Vincent's stare bent blankly to the floor as he mused on other things.

"A truce to foolishness, Vincent."

The correspondent returned to himself with an effort and found the Irishman's small blue eyes boring into him.

"Are ye a brave man, Vincent?"

For a second's space they searched each other's souls. And in that space Matt could have sworn he saw the faintest possible flicker or

flutter in the man's eyes.

He brought his fist down on the table with a triumphant crash. "By God, yer not!"

The correspondent pulled the tobacco jug over to him and rolled a cigarette. He rolled it carefully, the delicate rice paper crisping in his hand without a tremor; but all the while a red tide mounting up from beneath the collar of his shirt, deepening in the hollows of the cheeks and thinning against the cheekbones above, creeping, spreading, till all his face was aflame.

"'Tis good. An' likely it saves me fingers a dirty job. Vincent, man, the girl child which is woman grown slapes in Dawson this night. God help us, you an' me, but we'll niver hit again the pillow as clane an' pure as she! Vincent, a word to the wise: ye'll niver lay holy hand or otherwise upon her."

The devil, which Lucile had proclaimed, began to quicken,--a fuming, fretting, irrational devil.

"I do not like ye. I kape me raysons to meself. It is sufficient. But take this to heart, an' take it well: should ye be mad enough to make her yer wife, iv that damned day ye'll niver see the inding, nor lay eye upon the bridal bed. Why, man, I cud bate ye to death with

me two fists if need be. But it's to be hoped I'll do a nater job.
Rest aisy. I promise ye."

"You Irish pig!"

So the devil burst forth, and all unaware, for McCarthy found himself
eye-high with the muzzle of a Colt's revolver.

"Is it loaded?" he asked. "I belave ye. But why are ye lingerin'?
Lift the hammer, will ye?"

The correspondent's trigger-finger moved and there was a warning
click.

"Now pull it. Pull it, I say. As though ye cud, with that flutter
to yer eye."

St. Vincent attempted to turn his head aside.

"Look at me, man!" McCarthy commanded. "Kape yer eyes on me when ye
do it."

Unwillingly the sideward movement was arrested, and his eyes returned
and met the Irishman's.

"Now!"

St. Vincent ground his teeth and pulled the trigger--at least he thought he did, as men think they do things in dreams. He willed the deed, flashed the order forth; but the flutter of his soul stopped it.

"'Tis paralyzed, is it, that shaky little finger?" Matt grinned into the face of the tortured man. "Now turn it aside, so, an' drop it, gently . . . gently . . . gently." His voice crooned away in soothing diminuendo.

When the trigger was safely down, St. Vincent let the revolver fall from his hand, and with a slight audible sigh sank nervelessly upon a stool. He tried to straighten himself, but instead dropped down upon the table and buried his face in his palsied hands. Matt drew on his mittens, looking down upon him pityingly the while, and went out, closing the door softly behind him.