

## CHAPTER XX

Where nature shows the rough hand, the sons of men are apt to respond with kindred roughness. The amenities of life spring up only in mellow lands, where the sun is warm and the earth fat. The damp and soggy climate of Britain drives men to strong drink; the rosy Orient lures to the dream splendors of the lotus. The big-bodied, white-skinned northern dweller, rude and ferocious, bellows his anger uncouthly and drives a gross fist into the face of his foe. The supple south-sojourner, silken of smile and lazy of gesture, waits, and does his work from behind, when no man looketh, gracefully and without offence. Their ends are one; the difference lies in their ways, and therein the climate, and the cumulative effect thereof, is the determining factor. Both are sinners, as men born of women have ever been; but the one does his sin openly, in the clear sight of God; the other--as though God could not see--veils his iniquity with shimmering fancies, hiding it like it were some splendid mystery.

These be the ways of men, each as the sun shines upon him and the wind blows against him, according to his kind, and the seed of his father, and the milk of his mother. Each is the resultant of many forces which go to make a pressure mightier than he, and which moulds him in the predestined shape. But, with sound legs under him, he may run away, and meet with a new pressure. He may continue running, each new pressure prodding him as he goes, until he dies and his final form will be that predestined of the many pressures. An exchange of

cradle-babes, and the base-born slave may wear the purple imperially, and the royal infant begs an alms as wheedlingly or cringe to the lash as abjectly as his meanest subject. A Chesterfield, with an empty belly, chancing upon good fare, will gorge as faithfully as the swine in the next sty. And an Epicurus, in the dirt-igloo of the Eskimos, will wax eloquent over the whale oil and walrus blubber, or die.

Thus, in the young Northland, frosty and grim and menacing, men stripped off the sloth of the south and gave battle greatly. And they stripped likewise much of the veneer of civilization--all of its follies, most of its foibles, and perhaps a few of its virtues. Maybe so; but they reserved the great traditions and at least lived frankly, laughed honestly, and looked one another in the eyes.

And so it is not well for women, born south of fifty-three and reared gently, to knock loosely about the Northland, unless they be great of heart. They may be soft and tender and sensitive, possessed of eyes which have not lost the lustre and the wonder, and of ears used only to sweet sounds; but if their philosophy is sane and stable, large enough to understand and to forgive, they will come to no harm and attain comprehension. If not, they will see things and hear things which hurt, and they will suffer greatly, and lose faith in man--which is the greatest evil that may happen them. Such should be sedulously cherished, and it were well to depute this to their men-folk, the nearer of kin the better. In line, it were good policy to seek out a cabin on the hill overlooking Dawson, or--best of all--across the Yukon

on the western bank. Let them not move abroad unheralded and unaccompanied; and the hillside back of the cabin may be recommended as a fit field for stretching muscles and breathing deeply, a place where their ears may remain undefiled by the harsh words of men who strive to the utmost.

Vance Corliss wiped the last tin dish and filed it away on the shelf, lighted his pipe, and rolled over on his back on the bunk to contemplate the moss-chinked roof of his French Hill cabin. This French Hill cabin stood on the last dip of the hill into Eldorado Creek, close to the main-travelled trail; and its one window blinked cheerily of nights at those who journeyed late.

The door was kicked open, and Del Bishop staggered in with a load of fire-wood. His breath had so settled on his face in a white rime that he could not speak. Such a condition was ever a hardship with the man, so he thrust his face forthwith into the quivering heat above the stove. In a trice the frost was started and the thawed streamlets dancing madly on the white-hot surface beneath. Then the ice began to fall from his beard in chunks, rattling on the lid-tops and simmering spitefully till spurted upward in clouds of steam.

"And so you witness an actual phenomenon, illustrative of the three forms of matter," Vance laughed, mimicking the monotonous tones of the demonstrator; "solid, liquid, and vapor. In another moment you will

have the gas."

"Th--th--that's all very well," Bishop spluttered, wrestling with an obstructing piece of ice until it was wrenched from his upper lip and slammed stoveward with a bang.

"How cold do you make it, Del? Fifty?"

"Fifty?" the pocket-miner demanded with unutterable scorn, wiping his face. "Quicksilver's been solid for hours, and it's been gittin' colder an' colder ever since. Fifty? I'll bet my new mittens against your old moccasins that it ain't a notch below seventy."

"Think so?"

"D'ye want to bet?"

Vance nodded laughingly.

"Centigrade or Fahrenheit?" Bishop asked, suddenly suspicious.

"Oh, well, if you want my old moccasins so badly," Vance rejoined, feigning to be hurt by the other's lack of faith, "why, you can have them without betting."

Del snorted and flung himself down on the opposite bunk. "Think yer

funny, don't you?" No answer forthcoming, he deemed the retort conclusive, rolled over, and fell to studying the moss chinks.

Fifteen minutes of this diversion sufficed. "Play you a rubber of crib before bed," he challenged across to the other bunk.

"I'll go you." Corliss got up, stretched, and moved the kerosene lamp from the shelf to the table, "Think it will hold out?" he asked, surveying the oil-level through the cheap glass.

Bishop threw down the crib-board and cards, and measured the contents of the lamp with his eye. "Forgot to fill it, didn't I? Too late now. Do it to-morrow. It'll last the rubber out, sure."

Corliss took up the cards, but paused in the shuffling. "We've a big trip before us, Del, about a month from now, the middle of March as near as I can plan it,--up the Stuart River to McQuestion; up McQuestion and back again down the Mayo; then across country to Mazy May, winding up at Henderson Creek--"

"On the Indian River?"

"No," Corliss replied, as he dealt the hands; "just below where the Stuart taps the Yukon. And then back to Dawson before the ice breaks."

The pocket-miner's eyes sparkled. "Keep us hustlin'; but, say, it's a

trip, isn't it! Hunch?"

"I've received word from the Parker outfit on the Mayo, and McPherson isn't asleep on Henderson--you don't know him. They're keeping quiet, and of course one can't tell, but . . ."

Bishop nodded his head sagely, while Corliss turned the trump he had cut. A sure vision of a "twenty-four" hand was dazzling him, when there was a sound of voices without and the door shook to a heavy knock.

"Come in!" he bawled. "An' don't make such a row about it! Look at that"--to Corliss, at the same time facing his hand--"fifteen-eight, fifteen-sixteen, and eight are twenty-four. Just my luck!"

Corliss started swiftly to his feet. Bishop jerked his head about. Two women and a man had staggered clumsily in through the door, and were standing just inside, momentarily blinded by the light.

"By all the Prophets! Cornell!" The pocket-miner wrung the man's hand and led him forward. "You recollect Cornell, Corliss? Jake Cornell, Thirty-Seven and a Half Eldorado."

"How could I forget?" the engineer acknowledged warmly, shaking his hand. "That was a miserable night you put us up last fall, about as miserable as the moose-steak was good that you gave us for breakfast."

Jake Cornell, hirsute and cadaverous of aspect, nodded his head with emphasis and deposited a corpulent demijohn on the table. Again he nodded his head, and glared wildly about him. The stove caught his eye and he strode over to it, lifted a lid, and spat out a mouthful of amber-colored juice. Another stride and he was back.

"Course I recollect the night," he rumbled, the ice clattering from his hairy jaws. "And I'm danged glad to see you, that's a fact." He seemed suddenly to remember himself, and added a little sheepishly, "The fact is, we're all danged glad to see you, ain't we, girls?" He twisted his head about and nodded his companions up. "Blanche, my dear, Mr. Corliss--hem--it gives me . . . hem . . . it gives me pleasure to make you acquainted. Cariboo Blanche, sir. Cariboo Blanche."

"Pleased to meet you." Cariboo Blanche put out a frank hand and looked him over keenly. She was a fair-featured, blondish woman, originally not unpleasing of appearance, but now with lines all deepened and hardened as on the faces of men who have endured much weather-beat.

Congratulating himself upon his social proficiency, Jake Cornell cleared his throat and marshalled the second woman to the front. "Mr. Corliss, the Virgin; I make you both acquainted. Hem!" in response to the query in Vance's eyes--"Yes, the Virgin. That's all, just the Virgin."

She smiled and bowed, but did not shake hands. "A toff" was her secret comment upon the engineer; and from her limited experience she had been led to understand that it was not good form among "toffs" to shake hands.

Corliss fumbled his hand, then bowed, and looked at her curiously. She was a pretty, low-browed creature; darkly pretty, with a well-favored body, and for all that the type was mean, he could not escape the charm of her over-brimming vitality. She seemed bursting with it, and every quick, spontaneous movement appeared to spring from very excess of red blood and superabundant energy.

"Pretty healthy proposition, ain't she?" Jake Cornell demanded, following his host's gaze with approval.

"None o' your gammon, Jake," the Virgin snapped back, with lip curled contemptuously for Vance's especial benefit. "I fancy it'd be more in keeping if you'd look to pore Blanche, there."

"Fact is, we're plum ding dong played out," Jake said. "An' Blanche went through the ice just down the trail, and her feet's like to freezin'."

Blanche smiled as Corliss piloted her to a stool by the fire, and her stern mouth gave no indication of the pain she was suffering. He turned away when the Virgin addressed herself to removing the wet



footgear, while Bishop went rummaging for socks and moccasins.

"Didn't go in more'n to the ankles," Cornell explained confidentially;  
"but that's plenty a night like this."

Corliss agreed with a nod of the head.

"Spotted your light, and--hem--and so we come. Don't mind, do you?"

"Why, certainly not--"

"No intrudin'?"

Corliss reassured him by laying hand on his shoulder and cordially pressing him to a seat. Blanche sighed luxuriously. Her wet stockings were stretched up and already steaming, and her feet basking in the capacious warmth of Bishop's Siwash socks. Vance shoved the tobacco canister across, but Cornell pulled out a handful of cigars and passed them around.

"Uncommon bad piece of trail just this side of the turn," he remarked stentoriously, at the same time flinging an eloquent glance at the demijohn. "Ice rotten from the springs and no sign till you're into it." Turning to the woman by the stove, "How're you feeling, Blanche?"

"Tony," she responded, stretching her body lazily and redisposing her

feet; "though my legs ain't as limber as when we pulled out."

Looking to his host for consent, Cornell tilted the demijohn over his arm and partly filled the four tin mugs and an empty jelly glass.

"Wot's the matter with a toddy?" the Virgin broke in; "or a punch?"

"Got any lime juice?" she demanded of Corliss.

"You 'ave? Jolly!" She directed her dark eyes towards Del. "'Ere, you, cookie! Trot out your mixing-pan and sling the kettle for 'ot water. Come on! All hands! Jake's treat, and I'll show you 'ow! Any sugar, Mr. Corliss? And nutmeg? Cinnamon, then? O.K. It'll do. Lively now, cookie!"

"Ain't she a peach?" Cornell confided to Vance, watching her with mellow eyes as she stirred the steaming brew.

But the Virgin directed her attentions to the engineer. "Don't mind 'im, sir," she advised. "'E's more'n arf-gorn a'ready, a-'itting the jug every blessed stop."

"Now, my dear--" Jake protested.

"Don't you my-dear me," she sniffed. "I don't like you."

"Why?"

"Cos . . ." She ladled the punch carefully into the mugs and meditated. "Cos you chew tobacco. Cos you're whiskery. Wot I take to is smooth-faced young chaps."

"Don't take any stock in her nonsense," the Fraction King warned, "She just does it a-purpose to get me mad."

"Now then!" she commanded, sharply. "Step up to your licker! 'Ere's 'ow!"

"What'll it be?" cried Blanche from the stove.

The elevated mugs wavered and halted.

"The Queen, Gawd bless 'er!" the Virgin toasted promptly.

"And Bill!" Del Bishop interrupted.

Again the mugs wavered.

"Bill 'oo?" the Virgin asked, suspiciously.

"McKinley."

She favored him with a smile. "Thank you, cookie, you're a trump. Now! 'Ere's a go, gents! Take it standing. The Queen, Gawd bless 'er, and Bill McKinley!"

"Bottoms up!" thundered Jake Cornell, and the mugs smote the table with clanging rims.

Vance Corliss discovered himself amused and interested. According to Frona, he mused ironically,--this was learning life, was adding to his sum of human generalizations. The phrase was hers, and he rolled it over a couple of times. Then, again, her engagement with St. Vincent crept into his thought, and he charmed the Virgin by asking her to sing. But she was coy, and only after Bishop had rendered the several score stanzas of "Flying Cloud" did she comply. Her voice, in a weakly way, probably registered an octave and a half; below that point it underwent strange metamorphoses, while on the upper levels it was devious and rickety. Nevertheless she sang "Take Back Your Gold" with touching effect, which brought a fiery moisture into the eyes of the Fraction King, who listened greedily, for the time being experiencing unwonted ethical yearnings.

The applause was generous, followed immediately by Bishop, who toasted the singer as the "Enchantress of Bow Bells," to the reverberating "bottoms up!" of Jake Cornell.

Two hours later, Frona Welse rapped. It was a sharp, insistent rap, penetrating the din within and bringing Corliss to the door.

She gave a glad little cry when she saw who it was. "Oh; it is you, Vance! I didn't know you lived here."

He shook hands and blocked the doorway with his body. Behind him the Virgin was laughing and Jake Cornell roaring:

"Oh, cable this message along the track;  
The Prod's out West, but he's coming back;  
Put plenty of veal for one on the rack,  
Trolla lala, la la la, la la!"

"What is it?" Vance questioned. "Anything up?"

"I think you might ask me in." There was a hint of reproach in Frona's voice, and of haste. "I blundered through the ice, and my feet are freezing."

"O Gawd!" in the exuberant tones of the Virgin, came whirling over Vance's shoulder, and the voices of Blanche and Bishop joining in a laugh against Cornell, and that worthy's vociferous protestations. It seemed to him that all the blood of his body had rushed into his face.

"But you can't come in, Frona. Don't you hear them?"

"But I must," she insisted. "My feet are freezing."

With a gesture of resignation he stepped aside and closed the door after her. Coming suddenly in from the darkness, she hesitated a moment, but in that moment recovered her sight and took in the scene. The air was thick with tobacco smoke, and the odor of it, in the close room, was sickening to one fresh from the pure outside. On the table a column of steam was ascending from the big mixing-pan. The Virgin, fleeing before Cornell, was defending herself with a long mustard spoon. Evading him and watching her chance, she continually daubed his nose and cheeks with the yellow smear. Blanche had twisted about from the stove to see the fun, and Del Bishop, with a mug at rest half-way to his lips, was applauding the successive strokes. The faces of all were flushed.

Vance leaned nervelessly against the door. The whole situation seemed so unthinkably impossible. An insane desire to laugh came over him, which resolved itself into a coughing fit. But Frona, realizing her own pressing need by the growing absence of sensation in her feet, stepped forward.

"Hello, Del!" she called.

The mirth froze on his face at the familiar sound and he slowly and unwilling turned his head to meet her. She had slipped the hood of her

parka back, and her face, outlined against the dark fur, rosy with the cold and bright, was like a shaft of the sun shot into the murk of a boozing-ken. They all knew her, for who did not know Jacob Welse's daughter? The Virgin dropped the mustard-spoon with a startled shriek, while Cornell, passing a dazed hand across his yellow markings and consummating the general smear, collapsed on the nearest stool. Cariboo Blanche alone retained her self-possession, and laughed softly.

Bishop managed to articulate "Hello!" but was unable to stave off the silence which settled down.

Frona waited a second, and then said, "Good-evening, all."

"This way." Vance had recovered himself, and seated her by the stove opposite Blanche. "Better get your things off quickly, and be careful of the heat. I'll see what I can find for you."

"Some cold water, please," she asked. "It will take the frost out. Del will get it."

"I hope it is not serious?"

"No." She shook her head and smiled up to him, at the same time working away at her ice-coated moccasins. "There hasn't been time for more than surface-freezing. At the worst the skin will peel off."

An unearthly silence brooded in the cabin, broken only by Bishop filling a basin from the water-bucket, and by Corliss seeking out his smallest and daintiest house-moccasins and his warmest socks.

Frona, rubbing her feet vigorously, paused and looked up. "Don't let me chill the festivities just because I'm cold," she laughed. "Please go on."

Jake Cornell straightened up and cleared his throat inanely, and the Virgin looked over-dignified; but Blanche came over and took the towel out of Frona's hands.

"I wet my feet in the same place," she said, kneeling down and bringing a glow to the frosted feet.

"I suppose you can manage some sort of a fit with them. Here!" Vance tossed over the house-moccasins and woollen wrappings, which the two women, with low laughs and confidential undertones, proceeded to utilize.

"But what in the world were you doing on trail, alone, at this time of night?" Vance asked. In his heart he was marvelling at the coolness and pluck with which she was carrying off the situation.

"I know beforehand that you will censure me," she replied, helping Blanche arrange the wet gear over the fire. "I was at Mrs. Stanton's;



but first, you must know, Miss Mortimer and I are staying at the Pently's for a week. Now, to start fresh again. I intended to leave Mrs. Stanton's before dark; but her baby got into the kerosene, her husband had gone down to Dawson, and--well, we weren't sure of the baby up to half an hour ago. She wouldn't hear of me returning alone; but there was nothing to fear; only I had not expected soft ice in such a snap."

"How'd you fix the kid?" Del asked, intent on keeping the talk going now that it had started.

"Chewing tobacco." And when the laughter had subsided, she went on: "There wasn't any mustard, and it was the best I could think of. Besides, Matt McCarthy saved my life with it once, down at Dyea when I had the croup. But you were singing when I came in," she suggested. "Do go on."

Jake Cornell hawed prodigiously. "And I got done."

"Then you, Del. Sing 'Flying Cloud' as you used to coming down the river."

"Oh, 'e 'as!" said the Virgin.

"Then you sing. I am sure you do."

She smiled into the Virgin's eyes, and that lady delivered herself of a coster ballad with more art than she was aware. The chill of Frona's advent was quickly dissipated, and song and toast and merriment went round again. Nor was Frona above touching lips to the jelly glass in fellowship; and she contributed her quota by singing "Annie Laurie" and "Ben Bolt." Also, but privily, she watched the drink saturating the besotted souls of Cornell and the Virgin. It was an experience, and she was glad of it, though sorry in a way for Corliss, who played the host lamely.

But he had little need of pity. "Any other woman--" he said to himself a score of times, looking at Frona and trying to picture numerous women he had known by his mother's teapot, knocking at the door and coming in as Frona had done. Then, again, it was only yesterday that it would have hurt him, Blanche's rubbing her feet; but now he gloried in Frona's permitting it, and his heart went out in a more kindly way to Blanche. Perhaps it was the elevation of the liquor, but he seemed to discover new virtues in her rugged face.

Frona had put on her dried moccasins and risen to her feet, and was listening patiently to Jake Cornell, who hiccoughed a last incoherent toast.

"To the--hic--man," he rumbled, cavernously, "the man--hic--that made--that made--"

"The blessed country," volunteered the Virgin.

"True, my dear--hic. To the man that made the blessed country.

To--hic--to Jacob Welse!"

"And a rider!" Blanche cried. "To Jacob Welse's daughter!"

"Ay! Standing! And bottoms up!"

"Oh! she's a jolly good fellow," Del led off, the drink ruddying his cheek.

"I'd like to shake hands with you, just once," Blanche said in a low voice, while the rest were chorusing.

Frona slipped her mitten, which she had already put on, and the pressure was firm between them.

"No," she said to Corliss, who had put on his cap and was tying the ear-flaps; "Blanche tells me the Pently's are only half a mile from here. The trail is straight. I'll not hear of any one accompanying me.

"No!" This time she spoke so authoritatively that he tossed his cap into the bunk. "Good-night, all!" she called, sweeping the roisterers with a smile.

But Corliss saw her to the door and stepped outside. She glanced up to him. Her hood was pulled only partly up, and her face shone alluringly under the starlight.

"I--Frona . . . I wish--"

"Don't be alarmed," she whispered. "I'll not tell on you, Vance."

He saw the mocking glint in her eyes, but tried to go on. "I wish to explain just how--"

"No need. I understand. But at the same time I must confess I do not particularly admire your taste--"

"Frona!" The evident pain in his voice reached her.

"Oh, you big foolish!" she laughed. "Don't I know? Didn't Blanche tell me she wet her feet?"

Corliss bowed his head. "Truly, Frona, you are the most consistent woman I ever met. Furthermore," with a straightening of his form and a dominant assertion in his voice, "this is not the last."

She tried to stop him, but he continued. "I feel, I know that things will turn out differently. To fling your own words back at you, all the factors have not been taken into consideration. As for St. Vincent

. . . I'll have you yet. For that matter, now could not be too soon!"

He flashed out hungry arms to her, but she read quicker than he moved, and, laughing, eluded him and ran lightly down the trail.

"Come back, Frona! Come back!" he called, "I am sorry."

"No, you're not," came the answer. "And I'd be sorry if you were.  
Good-night."

He watched her merge into the shadows, then entered the cabin. He had utterly forgotten the scene within, and at the first glance it startled him. Cariboo Blanche was crying softly to herself. Her eyes were luminous and moist, and, as he looked, a lone tear stole down her cheek. Bishop's face had gone serious. The Virgin had sprawled head and shoulders on the table, amid overturned mugs and dripping lees, and Cornell was tittubating over her, hiccoughing, and repeating vacuously, "You're all right, my dear. You're all right."

But the Virgin was inconsolable. "O Gawd! Wen I think on wot is, an' was . . . an' no fault of mine. No fault of mine, I tell you!" she shrieked with quick fierceness. "'Ow was I born, I ask? Wot was my old man? A drunk, a chronic. An' my old woman? Talk of Whitechapel! 'Oo guv a cent for me, or 'ow I was dragged up? 'Oo cared a rap, I say? 'Oo cared a rap?"

A sudden revulsion came over Corliss. "Hold your tongue!" he ordered.

The Virgin raised her head, her loosened hair streaming about her like a Fury's. "Wot is she?" she sneered. "Sweet'eat?"

Corliss whirled upon her savagely, face white and voice shaking with passion.

The Virgin cowered down and instinctively threw up her hands to protect her face. "Don't 'it me, sir!" she whined. "Don't 'it me!"

He was frightened at himself, and waited till he could gather control.

"Now," he said, calmly, "get into your things and go. All of you.

Clear out. Vamose."

"You're no man, you ain't," the Virgin snarled, discovering that physical assault was not imminent.

But Corliss herded her particularly to the door, and gave no heed.

"A-turning ladies out!" she sniffed, with a stumble over the threshold;

"No offence," Jake Cornell muttered, pacifically; "no offence."

"Good-night. Sorry," Corliss said to Blanche, with the shadow of a forgiving smile, as she passed out.

"You're a toff! That's wot you are, a bloomin' toff!" the Virgin howled back as he shut the door.

He looked blankly at Del Bishop and surveyed the sodden confusion on the table. Then he walked over and threw himself down on his bunk. Bishop leaned an elbow on the table and pulled at his wheezy pipe. The lamp smoked, flickered, and went out; but still he remained, filling his pipe again and again and striking endless matches.

"Del! Are you awake?" Corliss called at last.

Del grunted.

"I was a cur to turn them out into the snow. I am ashamed."

"Sure," was the affirmation.

A long silence followed. Del knocked the ashes out and raised up.

"Sleep?" he called.

There was no reply, and he walked to the bunk softly and pulled the blankets over the engineer.