

CHAPTER XXI

"Yes; what does it all mean?" Corliss stretched lazily, and cocked up his feet on the table. He was not especially interested, but Colonel Trethaway persisted in talking seriously.

"That's it! The very thing--the old and ever young demand which man slaps into the face of the universe." The colonel searched among the scraps in his note-book. "See," holding up a soiled slip of typed paper, "I copied this out years ago. Listen. 'What a monstrous spectre is this man, this disease of the agglutinated dust, lifting alternate feet or lying drugged with slumber; killing, feeding, growing, bringing forth small copies of himself; grown up with hair like grass, fitted with eyes that glitter in his face; a thing to set children screaming. Poor soul, here for so little, cast among so many hardships, filled with desires so incommensurate and so inconsistent; savagely surrounded, savagely descended, irremediably condemned to prey upon his fellow-lives. Infinitely childish, often admirably valiant, often touchingly kind; sitting down to debate of right or wrong and the attributes of the deity; rising up to battle for an egg or die for an idea!'

"And all to what end?" he demanded, hotly, throwing down the paper, "this disease of the agglutinated dust?"

Corliss yawned in reply. He had been on trail all day and was yearning

for between-blankets.

"Here am I, Colonel Trethaway, modestly along in years, fairly well preserved, a place in the community, a comfortable bank account, no need to ever exert myself again, yet enduring life bleakly and working ridiculously with a zest worthy of a man half my years. And to what end? I can only eat so much, smoke so much, sleep so much, and this tail-dump of earth men call Alaska is the worst of all possible places in the matter of grub, tobacco, and blankets."

"But it is the living strenuously which holds you," Corliss interjected.

"Frona's philosophy," the colonel sneered.

"And my philosophy, and yours."

"And of the agglutinated dust--"

"Which is quickened with a passion you do not take into account,--the passion of duty, of race, of God!"

"And the compensation?" Trethaway demanded.

"Each breath you draw. The Mayfly lives an hour."

"I don't see it."

"Blood and sweat! Blood and sweat! You cried that after the rough and tumble in the Opera House, and every word of it was receipt in full."

"Frona's philosophy."

"And yours and mine."

The colonel threw up his shoulders, and after a pause confessed. "You see, try as I will, I can't make a pessimist out of myself. We are all compensated, and I more fully than most men. What end? I asked, and the answer forthcame: Since the ultimate end is beyond us, then the immediate. More compensation, here and now!"

"Quite hedonistic."

"And rational. I shall look to it at once. I can buy grub and blankets for a score; I can eat and sleep for only one; ergo, why not for two?"

Corliss took his feet down and sat up. "In other words?"

"I shall get married, and--give the community a shock. Communities like shocks. That's one of their compensations for being agglutinative."

"I can't think of but one woman," Corliss essayed tentatively, putting out his hand.

Trethaway shook it slowly. "It is she."

Corliss let go, and misgiving shot into his face. "But St. Vincent?"

"Is your problem, not mine."

"Then Lucile--?"

"Certainly not. She played a quixotic little game of her own and botched it beautifully."

"I--I do not understand." Corliss brushed his brows in a dazed sort of way.

Trethaway parted his lips in a superior smile. "It is not necessary that you should. The question is, Will you stand up with me?"

"Surely. But what a confoundedly long way around you took. It is not your usual method."

"Nor was it with her," the colonel declared, twisting his moustache proudly.

A captain of the North-West Mounted Police, by virtue of his magisterial office, may perform marriages in time of stress as well as execute exemplary justice. So Captain Alexander received a call from Colonel Trethaway, and after he left jotted down an engagement for the next morning. Then the impending groom went to see Frona. Lucile did not make the request, he hastened to explain, but--well, the fact was she did not know any women, and, furthermore, he (the colonel) knew whom Lucile would like to ask, did she dare. So he did it upon his own responsibility. And coming as a surprise, he knew it would be a great joy to her.

Frona was taken aback by the suddenness of it. Only the other day, it was, that Lucile had made a plea to her for St. Vincent, and now it was Colonel Trethaway! True, there had been a false quantity somewhere, but now it seemed doubly false. Could it be, after all, that Lucile was mercenary? These thoughts crowded upon her swiftly, with the colonel anxiously watching her face the while. She knew she must answer quickly, yet was distracted by an involuntary admiration for his bravery. So she followed, perforce, the lead of her heart, and consented.

Yet the whole thing was rather strained when the four of them came together, next day, in Captain Alexander's private office. There was a gloomy chill about it. Lucile seemed ready to cry, and showed a repressed perturbation quite unexpected of her; while, try as she

would, Frona could not call upon her usual sympathy to drive away the coldness which obtruded intangibly between them. This, in turn, had a consequent effect on Vance, and gave a certain distance to his manner which forced him out of touch even with the colonel.

Colonel Trethaway seemed to have thrown twenty years off his erect shoulders, and the discrepancy in the match which Frona had felt vanished as she looked at him. "He has lived the years well," she thought, and prompted mysteriously, almost with vague apprehension she turned her eyes to Corliss. But if the groom had thrown off twenty years, Vance was not a whit behind. Since their last meeting he had sacrificed his brown moustache to the frost, and his smooth face, smitten with health and vigor, looked uncommonly boyish; and yet, withal, the naked upper lip advertised a stiffness and resolution hitherto concealed. Furthermore, his features portrayed a growth, and his eyes, which had been softly firm, were now firm with the added harshness or hardness which is bred of coping with things and coping quickly,--the stamp of executiveness which is pressed upon men who do, and upon all men who do, whether they drive dogs, buck the sea, or dictate the policies of empires.

When the simple ceremony was over, Frona kissed Lucile; but Lucile felt that there was a subtle something wanting, and her eyes filled with unshed tears. Trethaway, who had felt the aloofness from the start, caught an opportunity with Frona while Captain Alexander and Corliss were being pleasant to Mrs. Trethaway.

"What's the matter, Frona?" the colonel demanded, bluntly. "I hope you did not come under protest. I am sorry, not for you, because lack of frankness deserves nothing, but for Lucile. It is not fair to her."

"There has been a lack of frankness throughout." Her voice trembled.

"I tried my best,--I thought I could do better,--but I cannot feign what I do not feel. I am sorry, but I . . . I am disappointed. No, I cannot explain, and to you least of all."

"Let's be above-board, Frona. St. Vincent's concerned?"

She nodded.

"And I can put my hand right on the spot. First place," he looked to the side and saw Lucile stealing an anxious glance to him,--"first place, only the other day she gave you a song about St. Vincent. Second place, and therefore, you think her heart's not in this present proposition; that she doesn't care a rap for me; in short, that she's marrying me for reinstatement and spoils. Isn't that it?"

"And isn't it enough? Oh, I am disappointed, Colonel Trethaway, grievously, in her, in you, in myself."

"Don't be a fool! I like you too well to see you make yourself one. The play's been too quick, that is all. Your eye lost it. Listen.

We've kept it quiet, but she's in with the elect on French Hill. Her claim's prospected the richest of the outfit. Present indication half a million at least. In her own name, no strings attached. Couldn't she take that and go anywhere in the world and reinstate herself? And for that matter, you might presume that I am marrying her for spoils. Frona, she cares for me, and in your ear, she's too good for me. My hope is that the future will make up. But never mind that--haven't got the time now.

"You consider her affection sudden, eh? Let me tell you we've been growing into each other from the time I came into the country, and with our eyes open. St. Vincent? Pshaw! I knew it all the time. She got it into her head that the whole of him wasn't worth a little finger of you, and she tried to break things up. You'll never know how she worked with him. I told her she didn't know the Welse, and she said so, too, after. So there it is; take it or leave it."

"But what do you think about St. Vincent?"

"What I think is neither here nor there; but I'll tell you honestly that I back her judgment. But that's not the point. What are you going to do about it? about her? now?"

She did not answer, but went back to the waiting group. Lucile saw her coming and watched her face.

"He's been telling you--?"

"That I am a fool," Frona answered. "And I think I am." And with a smile, "I take it on faith that I am, anyway. I--I can't reason it out just now, but. . ."

Captain Alexander discovered a prenuptial joke just about then, and led the way over to the stove to crack it upon the colonel, and Vance went along to see fair play.

"It's the first time," Lucile was saying, "and it means more to me, so much more, than to . . . most women. I am afraid. It is a terrible thing for me to do. But I do love him, I do!" And when the joke had been duly digested and they came back, she was sobbing, "Dear, dear Frona."

It was just the moment, better than he could have chosen; and capped and mittened, without knocking, Jacob Welse came in.

"The uninvited guest," was his greeting. "Is it all over? So?" And he swallowed Lucile up in his huge bearskin. "Colonel, your hand, and your pardon for my intruding, and your regrets for not giving me the word. Come, out with them! Hello, Corliss! Captain Alexander, a good day."

"What have I done?" Frona wailed, received the bear-hug, and managed to

press his hand till it almost hurt.

"Had to back the game," he whispered; and this time his hand did hurt.

"Now, colonel, I don't know what your plans are, and I don't care. Call them off. I've got a little spread down to the house, and the only honest case of champagne this side of Circle. Of course, you're coming, Corliss, and--" His eye roved past Captain Alexander with hardly a pause.

"Of course," came the answer like a flash, though the Chief Magistrate of the Northwest had had time to canvass the possible results of such unofficial action. "Got a hack?"

Jacob Welse laughed and held up a moccasined foot. "Walking be--chucked!" The captain started impulsively towards the door. "I'll have the sleds up before you're ready. Three of them, and bells galore!"

So Trethaway's forecast was correct, and Dawson vindicated its agglutinateness by rubbing its eyes when three sleds, with three scarlet-tuniced policemen swinging the whips, tore down its main street; and it rubbed its eyes again when it saw the occupants thereof.

"We shall live quietly," Lucile told Frona. "The Klondike is not all

the world, and the best is yet to come."

But Jacob Welse said otherwise. "We've got to make this thing go," he said to Captain Alexander, and Captain Alexander said that he was unaccustomed to backing out.

Mrs. Schoville emitted preliminary thunders, marshalled the other women, and became chronically seismic and unsafe.

Lucile went nowhere save to Frona's. But Jacob Welse, who rarely went anywhere, was often to be found by Colonel Trethaway's fireside, and not only was he to be found there, but he usually brought somebody along. "Anything on hand this evening?" he was wont to say on casual meeting. "No? Then come along with me." Sometimes he said it with lamb-like innocence, sometimes with a challenge brooding under his bushy brows, and rarely did he fail to get his man. These men had wives, and thus were the germs of dissolution sown in the ranks of the opposition.

Then, again, at Colonel Trethaway's there was something to be found besides weak tea and small talk; and the correspondents, engineers, and gentlemen rovers kept the trail well packed in that direction, though it was the Kings, to a man, who first broke the way. So the Trethaway cabin became the centre of things, and, backed commercially, financially, and officially, it could not fail to succeed socially.

The only bad effect of all this was to make the lives of Mrs. Schoville and divers others of her sex more monotonous, and to cause them to lose faith in certain hoary and inconsequent maxims. Furthermore, Captain Alexander, as highest official, was a power in the land, and Jacob Welse was the Company, and there was a superstition extant concerning the unwisdom of being on indifferent terms with the Company. And the time was not long till probably a bare half-dozen remained in outer cold, and they were considered a warped lot, anyway.