

## CHAPTER XXII

Quite an exodus took place in Dawson in the spring. Men, because they had made stakes, and other men, because they had made none, bought up the available dogs and rushed out for Dyea over the last ice.

Incidentally, it was discovered that Dave Harney possessed most of these dogs.

"Going out?" Jacob Welse asked him on a day when the meridian sun for the first time felt faintly warm to the naked skin.

"Well, I calkilate not. I'm clearin' three dollars a pair on the moccasins I cornered, to say nothing but saw wood on the boots. Say, Welse, not that my nose is out of joint, but you jest cinched me everlastin' on sugar, didn't you?"

Jacob Welse smiled.

"And by the Jimcracky I'm squared! Got any rubber boots?"

"No; went out of stock early in the winter." Dave snickered slowly.

"And I'm the pertickler party that hocus-pocused 'em."

"Not you. I gave special orders to the clerks. They weren't sold in lots."

"No more they wa'n't. One man to the pair and one pair to the man, and a couple of hundred of them; but it was my dust they chucked into the scales an nobody else's. Drink? Don't mind. Easy! Put up your sack. Call it rebate, for I kin afford it. . . Goin' out? Not this year, I guess. Wash-up's comin'."

A strike on Henderson the middle of April, which promised to be sensational, drew St. Vincent to Stewart River. And a little later, Jacob Welse, interested on Gallagher Gulch and with an eye riveted on the copper mines of White River, went up into the same district, and with him went Frona, for it was more vacation than business. In the mean time, Corliss and Bishop, who had been on trail for a month or more running over the Mayo and McQuestion Country, rounded up on the left fork of Henderson, where a block of claims waited to be surveyed.

But by May, spring was so far advanced that travel on the creeks became perilous, and on the last of the thawing ice the miners travelled down to the bunch of islands below the mouth of the Stewart, where they went into temporary quarters or crowded the hospitality of those who possessed cabins. Corliss and Bishop located on Split-up Island (so called through the habit parties from the Outside had of dividing there and going several ways), where Tommy McPherson was comfortably situated. A couple of days later, Jacob Welse and Frona arrived from a hazardous trip out of White River, and pitched tent on the high ground at the upper end of Split-up. A few chechaquos, the first of the spring rush, strung in exhausted and went into camp against the

breaking of the river. Also, there were still men going out who, barred by the rotten ice, came ashore to build poling-boats and await the break-up or to negotiate with the residents for canoes. Notably among these was the Baron Courbertin.

"Ah! Excruciating! Magnificent! Is it not?"

So Frona first ran across him on the following day. "What?" she asked, giving him her hand.

"You! You!" doffing his cap. "It is a delight!"

"I am sure--" she began.

"No! No!" He shook his curly mop warmly. "It is not you. See!" He turned to a Peterborough, for which McPherson had just mulcted him of thrice its value. "The canoe! Is it not--not--what you Yankees call--a bute?"

"Oh, the canoe," she repeated, with a falling inflection of chagrin.

"No! No! Pardon!" He stamped angrily upon the ground. "It is not so. It is not you. It is not the canoe. It is--ah! I have it now! It is your promise. One day, do you not remember, at Madame Schoville's, we talked of the canoe, and of my ignorance, which was sad, and you promised, you said--"

"I would give you your first lesson?"

"And is it not delightful? Listen! Do you not hear? The rippling--ah! the rippling!--deep down at the heart of things! Soon will the water run free. Here is the canoe! Here we meet! The first lesson! Delightful! Delightful!"

The next island below Split-up was known as Roubeau's Island, and was separated from the former by a narrow back-channel. Here, when the bottom had about dropped out of the trail, and with the dogs swimming as often as not, arrived St. Vincent--the last man to travel the winter trail. He went into the cabin of John Borg, a taciturn, gloomy individual, prone to segregate himself from his kind. It was the mischance of St. Vincent's life that of all cabins he chose Borg's for an abiding-place against the break-up.

"All right," the man said, when questioned by him. "Throw your blankets into the corner. Bella'll clear the litter out of the spare bunk."

Not till evening did he speak again, and then, "You're big enough to do your own cooking. When the woman's done with the stove you can fire away."

The woman, or Bella, was a comely Indian girl, young, and the prettiest

St. Vincent had run across. Instead of the customary greased swarthiness of the race, her skin was clear and of a light-bronze tone, and her features less harsh, more felicitously curved, than those common to the blood.

After supper, Borg, both elbows on table and huge misshapen hands supporting chin and jaws, sat puffing stinking Siwash tobacco and staring straight before him. It would have seemed ruminative, the stare, had his eyes been softer or had he blinked; as it was, his face was set and trance-like.

"Have you been in the country long?" St. Vincent asked, endeavoring to make conversation.

Borg turned his sullen-black eyes upon him, and seemed to look into him and through him and beyond him, and, still regarding him, to have forgotten all about him. It was as though he pondered some great and weighty matter--probably his sins, the correspondent mused nervously, rolling himself a cigarette. When the yellow cube had dissipated itself in curling fragrance, and he was deliberating about rolling a second, Borg suddenly spoke.

"Fifteen years," he said, and returned to his tremendous cogitation.

Thereat, and for half an hour thereafter, St. Vincent, fascinated, studied his inscrutable countenance. To begin with, it was a massive

head, abnormal and top-heavy, and its only excuse for being was the huge bull-throat which supported it. It had been cast in a mould of elemental generousness, and everything about it partook of the asymmetrical crudeness of the elemental. The hair, rank of growth, thick and unkempt, matted itself here and there into curious splotches of gray; and again, grinning at age, twisted itself into curling locks of lustreless black--locks of unusual thickness, like crooked fingers, heavy and solid. The shaggy whiskers, almost bare in places, and in others massing into bunchgrass-like clumps, were plentifully splashed with gray. They rioted monstrously over his face and fell raggedly to his chest, but failed to hide the great hollowed cheeks or the twisted mouth. The latter was thin-lipped and cruel, but cruel only in a passionless sort of way. But the forehead was the anomaly,--the anomaly required to complete the irregularity of the face. For it was a perfect forehead, full and broad, and rising superbly strong to its high dome. It was as the seat and bulwark of some vast intelligence; omniscience might have brooded there.

Bella, washing the dishes and placing them away on the shelf behind Borg's back, dropped a heavy tin cup. The cabin was very still, and the sharp rattle came without warning. On the instant, with a brute roar, the chair was overturned and Borg was on his feet, eyes blazing and face convulsed. Bella gave an inarticulate, animal-like cry of fear and cowered at his feet. St. Vincent felt his hair bristling, and an uncanny chill, like a jet of cold air, played up and down his spine. Then Borg righted the chair and sank back into his old position, chin

on hands and brooding ponderously. Not a word was spoken, and Bella went on unconcernedly with the dishes, while St. Vincent rolled, a shaky cigarette and wondered if it had been a dream.

Jacob Welse laughed when the correspondent told him. "Just his way," he said; "for his ways are like his looks,--unusual. He's an unsociable beast. Been in the country more years than he can number acquaintances. Truth to say, I don't think he has a friend in all Alaska, not even among the Indians, and he's chummed thick with them off and on. 'Johnny Sorehead,' they call him, but it might as well be 'Johnny Break-um-head,' for he's got a quick temper and a rough hand. Temper! Some little misunderstanding popped up between him and the agent at Arctic City. He was in the right, too,--agent's mistake,--but he tabooed the Company on the spot and lived on straight meat for a year. Then I happened to run across him at Tanana Station, and after due explanations he consented to buy from us again."

"Got the girl from up the head-waters of the White," Bill Brown told St. Vincent. "Welse thinks he's pioneering in that direction, but Borg could give him cards and spades on it and then win out. He's been over the ground years ago. Yes, strange sort of a chap. Wouldn't hanker to be bunk-mates with him."

But St. Vincent did not mind the eccentricities of the man, for he spent most of his time on Split-up Island with Frona and the Baron. One day, however, and innocently, he ran foul of him. Two Swedes,

hunting tree-squirrels from the other end of Roubau Island, had stopped to ask for matches and to yarn a while in the warm sunshine of the clearing. St. Vincent and Borg were accommodating them, the latter for the most part in meditative monosyllables. Just to the rear, by the cabin-door, Bella was washing clothes. The tub was a cumbersome home-made affair, and half-full of water, was more than a fair match for an ordinary woman. The correspondent noticed her struggling with it, and stepped back quickly to her aid.

With the tub between them, they proceeded to carry it to one side in order to dump it where the ground drained from the cabin. St. Vincent slipped in the thawing snow and the soapy water splashed up. Then Bella slipped, and then they both slipped. Bella giggled and laughed, and St. Vincent laughed back. The spring was in the air and in their blood, and it was very good to be alive. Only a wintry heart could deny a smile on such a day. Bella slipped again, tried to recover, slipped with the other foot, and sat down abruptly. Laughing gleefully, both of them, the correspondent caught her hands to pull her to her feet. With a bound and a bellow, Borg was upon them. Their hands were torn apart and St. Vincent thrust heavily backward. He staggered for a couple of yards and almost fell. Then the scene of the cabin was repeated. Bella cowered and grovelled in the muck, and her lord towered wrathfully over her.

"Look you," he said in stifled gutturals, turning to St. Vincent. "You sleep in my cabin and you cook. That is enough. Let my woman alone."



Things went on after that as though nothing had happened; St. Vincent gave Bella a wide berth and seemed to have forgotten her existence. But the Swedes went back to their end of the island, laughing at the trivial happening which was destined to be significant.