

CHAPTER XXIII

Spring, smiting with soft, warm hands, had come like a miracle, and now lingered for a dreamy spell before bursting into full-blown summer.

The snow had left the bottoms and valleys and nestled only on the north slopes of the ice-scarred ridges. The glacial drip was already in evidence, and every creek in roaring spate. Each day the sun rose earlier and stayed later. It was now chill day by three o'clock and mellow twilight at nine. Soon a golden circle would be drawn around the sky, and deep midnight become bright as high noon. The willows and aspens had long since budded, and were now decking themselves in liveries of fresh young green, and the sap was rising in the pines.

Mother nature had heaved her waking sigh and gone about her brief business. Crickets sang of nights in the stilly cabins, and in the sunshine mosquitoes crept from out hollow logs and snug crevices among the rocks,--big, noisy, harmless fellows, that had procreated the year gone, lain frozen through the winter, and were now rejuvenated to buzz through swift senility to second death. All sorts of creeping, crawling, fluttering life came forth from the warming earth and hastened to mature, reproduce, and cease. Just a breath of balmy air, and then the long cold frost again--ah! they knew it well and lost no time. Sand martins were driving their ancient tunnels into the soft clay banks, and robins singing on the spruce-garbed islands. Overhead the woodpecker knocked insistently, and in the forest depths the partridge boom-boomed and strutted in virile glory.

But in all this nervous haste the Yukon took no part. For many a thousand miles it lay cold, unsmiling, dead. Wild fowl, driving up from the south in wind-jamming wedges, halted, looked vainly for open water, and quested dauntlessly on into the north. From bank to bank stretched the savage ice. Here and there the water burst through and flooded over, but in the chill nights froze solidly as ever. Tradition has it that of old time the Yukon lay unbroken through three long summers, and on the face of it there be traditions less easy of belief.

So summer waited for open water, and the tardy Yukon took to stretching of days and cracking its stiff joints. Now an air-hole ate into the ice, and ate and ate; or a fissure formed, and grew, and failed to freeze again. Then the ice ripped from the shore and uprose bodily a yard. But still the river was loth to loose its grip. It was a slow travail, and man, used to nursing nature with pigmy skill, able to burst waterspouts and harness waterfalls, could avail nothing against the billions of frigid tons which refused to run down the hill to Bering Sea.

On Split-up Island all were ready for the break-up. Waterways have ever been first highways, and the Yukon was the sole highway in all the land. So those bound up-river pitched their poling-boats and shod their poles with iron, and those bound down caulked their scows and barges and shaped spare sweeps with axe and drawing-knife. Jacob Welse loafed and joyed in the utter cessation from work, and Frona joyed with

him in that it was good. But Baron Courbertin was in a fever at the delay. His hot blood grew riotous after the long hibernation, and the warm sunshine dazzled him with warmer fancies.

"Oh! Oh! It will never break! Never!" And he stood gazing at the surly ice and raining politely phrased anathema upon it. "It is a conspiracy, poor La Bijou, a conspiracy!" He caressed La Bijou like it were a horse, for so he had christened the glistening Peterborough canoe.

Frona and St. Vincent laughed and preached him the gospel of patience, which he proceeded to tuck away into the deepest abysses of perdition till interrupted by Jacob Welse.

"Look, Courbertin! Over there, south of the bluff. Do you make out anything? Moving?"

"Yes; a dog."

"It moves too slowly for a dog. Frona, get the glasses."

Courbertin and St. Vincent sprang after them, but the latter knew their abiding-place and returned triumphant. Jacob Welse put the binoculars to his eyes and gazed steadily across the river. It was a sheer mile from the island to the farther bank, and the sun glare on the ice was a sore task to the vision.

"It is a man." He passed the glasses to the Baron and strained absently with his naked eyes. "And something is up."

"He creeps!" the baron exclaimed. "The man creeps, he crawls, on hand and knee! Look! See!" He thrust the glasses tremblingly into Frona's hands.

Looking across the void of shimmering white, it was difficult to discern a dark object of such size when dimly outlined against an equally dark background of brush and earth. But Frona could make the man out with fair distinctness; and as she grew accustomed to the strain she could distinguish each movement, and especially so when he came to a wind-thrown pine. Sue watched painfully. Twice, after tortuous effort, squirming and twisting, he failed in breasting the big trunk, and on the third attempt, after infinite exertion, he cleared it only to topple helplessly forward and fall on his face in the tangled undergrowth.

"It is a man." She turned the glasses over to St. Vincent. "And he is crawling feebly. He fell just then this side of the log."

"Does he move?" Jacob Welse asked, and, on a shake of St. Vincent's head, brought his rifle from the tent.

He fired six shots skyward in rapid succession. "He moves!" The

correspondent followed him closely. "He is crawling to the bank. Ah! . . . No; one moment . . . Yes! He lies on the ground and raises his hat, or something, on a stick. He is waving it." (Jacob Welse fired six more shots.) "He waves again. Now he has dropped it and lies quite still."

All three looked inquiringly to Jacob Welse.

He shrugged his shoulders. "How should I know? A white man or an Indian; starvation most likely, or else he is injured."

"But he may be dying," Frona pleaded, as though her father, who had done most things, could do all things.

"We can do nothing."

"Ah! Terrible! terrible!" The baron wrung his hands. "Before our very eyes, and we can do nothing! No!" he exclaimed, with swift resolution, "it shall not be! I will cross the ice!"

He would have started precipitately down the bank had not Jacob Welse caught his arm.

"Not such a rush, baron. Keep your head."

"But--"

"But nothing. Does the man want food, or medicine, or what? Wait a moment. We will try it together."

"Count me in," St. Vincent volunteered promptly, and Frona's eyes sparkled.

While she made up a bundle of food in the tent, the men provided and rigged themselves with sixty or seventy feet of light rope. Jacob Welse and St. Vincent made themselves fast to it at either end, and the baron in the middle. He claimed the food as his portion, and strapped it to his broad shoulders. Frona watched their progress from the bank. The first hundred yards were easy going, but she noticed at once the change when they had passed the limit of the fairly solid shore-ice. Her father led sturdily, feeling ahead and to the side with his staff and changing direction continually.

St. Vincent, at the rear of the extended line, was the first to go through, but he fell with the pole thrust deftly across the opening and resting on the ice. His head did not go under, though the current sucked powerfully, and the two men dragged him out after a sharp pull. Frona saw them consult together for a minute, with much pointing and gesticulating on the part of the baron, and then St. Vincent detach himself and turn shoreward.

"Br-r-r-r," he shivered, coming up the bank to her. "It's impossible."

"But why didn't they come in?" she asked, a slight note of displeasure manifest in her voice.

"Said they were going to make one more try, first. That Courbertin is hot-headed, you know."

"And my father just as bull-headed," she smiled. "But hadn't you better change? There are spare things in the tent."

"Oh, no." He threw himself down beside her. "It's warm in the sun."

For an hour they watched the two men, who had become mere specks of black in the distance; for they had managed to gain the middle of the river and at the same time had worked nearly a mile up-stream. Frona followed them closely with the glasses, though often they were lost to sight behind the ice-ridges.

"It was unfair of them," she heard St. Vincent complain, "to say they were only going to have one more try. Otherwise I should not have turned back. Yet they can't make it--absolutely impossible."

"Yes . . . No . . . Yes! They're turning back," she announced. "But listen! What is that?"

A hoarse rumble, like distant thunder, rose from the midst of the ice.

She sprang to her feet. "Gregory, the river can't be breaking!"

"No, no; surely not. See, it is gone." The noise which had come from above had died away downstream.

"But there! There!"

Another rumble, hoarser and more ominous than before, lifted itself and hushed the robins and the squirrels. When abreast of them, it sounded like a railroad train on a distant trestle. A third rumble, which approached a roar and was of greater duration, began from above and passed by.

"Oh, why don't they hurry!"

The two specks had stopped, evidently in conversation. She ran the glasses hastily up and down the river. Though another roar had risen, she could make out no commotion. The ice lay still and motionless. The robins resumed their singing, and the squirrels were chattering with spiteful glee.

"Don't fear, Frona." St. Vincent put his arm about her protectingly.

"If there is any danger, they know it better than we, and they are taking their time."

"I never saw a big river break up," she confessed, and resigned herself

to the waiting.

The roars rose and fell sporadically, but there were no other signs of disruption, and gradually the two men, with frequent duckings, worked inshore. The water was streaming from them and they were shivering severely as they came up the bank.

"At last!" Frona had both her father's hands in hers. "I thought you would never come back."

"There, there. Run and get dinner," Jacob Welse laughed. "There was no danger."

"But what was it?"

"Stewart River's broken and sending its ice down under the Yukon ice. We could hear the grinding plainly out there."

"Ah! And it was terrible! terrible!" cried the baron. "And that poor, poor man, we cannot save him!"

"Yes, we can. We'll have a try with the dogs after dinner. Hurry, Frona."

But the dogs were a failure. Jacob Welse picked out the leaders as the more intelligent, and with grub-packs on them drove them out from the

bank. They could not grasp what was demanded of them. Whenever they tried to return they were driven back with sticks and clods and imprecations. This only bewildered them, and they retreated out of range, whence they raised their wet, cold paws and whined pitifully to the shore.

"If they could only make it once, they would understand, and then it would go like clock-work. Ah! Would you? Go on! Chook, Miriam! Chook! The thing is to get the first one across."

Jacob Welse finally succeeded in getting Miriam, lead-dog to Frona's team, to take the trail left by him and the baron. The dog went on bravely, scrambling over, floundering through, and sometimes swimming; but when she had gained the farthest point reached by them, she sat down helplessly. Later on, she cut back to the shore at a tangent, landing on the deserted island above; and an hour afterwards trotted into camp minus the grub-pack. Then the two dogs, hovering just out of range, compromised matters by devouring each other's burdens; after which the attempt was given over and they were called in.

During the afternoon the noise increased in frequency, and by nightfall was continuous, but by morning it had ceased utterly. The river had risen eight feet, and in many places was running over its crust. Much crackling and splitting were going on, and fissures leaping into life and multiplying in all directions.

"The under-tow ice has jammed below among the islands," Jacob Welse explained. "That's what caused the rise. Then, again, it has jammed at the mouth of the Stewart and is backing up. When that breaks through, it will go down underneath and stick on the lower jam."

"And then? and then?" The baron exulted.

"La Bijou will swim again."

As the light grew stronger, they searched for the man across the river. He had not moved, but in response to their rifle-shots waved feebly.

"Nothing for it till the river breaks, baron, and then a dash with La Bijou. St. Vincent, you had better bring your blankets up and sleep here to-night. We'll need three paddles, and I think we can get McPherson."

"No need," the correspondent hastened to reply. "The back-channel is like adamant, and I'll be up by daybreak."

"But I? Why not?" Baron Courbertin demanded. Frona laughed.

"Remember, we haven't given you your first lessons yet."

"And there'll hardly be time to-morrow," Jacob Welse added. "When she goes, she goes with a rush. St. Vincent, McPherson, and I will have to make the crew, I'm afraid. Sorry, baron. Stay with us another year

and you'll be fit."

But Baron Courbertain was inconsolable, and sulked for a full half-hour.