

## CHAPTER XXIV

"Awake! You dreamers, wake!"

Frona was out of her sleeping-furs at Del Bishop's first call; but ere she had slipped a skirt on and bare feet into moccasins, her father, beyond the blanket-curtain, had thrown back the flaps of the tent and stumbled out.

The river was up. In the chill gray light she could see the ice rubbing softly against the very crest of the bank; it even topped it in places, and the huge cakes worked inshore many feet. A hundred yards out the white field merged into the dim dawn and the gray sky. Subdued splits and splutters whispered from out the obscureness, and a gentle grinding could be heard.

"When will it go?" she asked of Del.

"Not a bit too lively for us. See there!" He pointed with his toe to the water lapping out from under the ice and creeping greedily towards them. "A foot rise every ten minutes."

"Danger?" he scoffed. "Not on your life. It's got to go. Them islands"--waving his hand indefinitely down river--"can't hold up under more pressure. If they don't let go the ice, the ice'll scour them clean out of the bed of the Yukon. Sure! But I've got to be chasin'

back. Lower ground down our way. Fifteen inches on the cabin floor, and McPherson and Corliss hustlin' perishables into the bunks."

"Tell McPherson to be ready for a call," Jacob Welse shouted after him. And then to Frona, "Now's the time for St. Vincent to cross the back-channel."

The baron, shivering barefooted, pulled out his watch. "Ten minutes to three," he chattered.

"Hadn't you better go back and get your moccasins?" Frona asked.

"There will be time."

"And miss the magnificence? Hark!"

From nowhere in particular a brisk crackling arose, then died away. The ice was in motion. Slowly, very slowly, it proceeded down stream. There was no commotion, no ear-splitting thunder, no splendid display of force; simply a silent flood of white, an orderly procession of tight-packed ice--packed so closely that not a drop of water was in evidence. It was there, somewhere, down underneath; but it had to be taken on faith. There was a dull hum or muffled grating, but so low in pitch that the ear strained to catch it.

"Ah! Where is the magnificence? It is a fake!"

The baron shook his fists angrily at the river, and Jacob Welse's thick brows seemed to draw down in order to hide the grim smile in his eyes.

"Ha! ha! I laugh! I snap my fingers! See! I defy!"

As the challenge left his lips. Baron Courbertin stepped upon a cake which rubbed lightly past at his feet. So unexpected was it, that when Jacob Welse reached after him he was gone.

The ice was picking up in momentum, and the hum growing louder and more threatening. Balancing gracefully, like a circus-rider, the Frenchman whirled away along the rim of the bank. Fifty precarious feet he rode, his mount becoming more unstable every instant, and he leaped neatly to the shore. He came back laughing, and received for his pains two or three of the choicest phrases Jacob Welse could select from the essentially masculine portion of his vocabulary.

"And for why?" Courbertin demanded, stung to the quick.

"For why?" Jacob Welse mimicked wrathfully, pointing into the sleek stream sliding by.

A great cake had driven its nose into the bed of the river thirty feet below and was struggling to up-end. All the frigid flood behind crinkled and bent back like so much paper. Then the stalled cake turned completely over and thrust its muddy nose skyward. But the

squeeze caught it, while cake mounted cake at its back, and its fifty feet of muck and gouge were hurled into the air. It crashed upon the moving mass beneath, and flying fragments landed at the feet of those that watched. Caught broadside in a chaos of pressures, it crumbled into scattered pieces and disappeared.

"God!" The baron spoke the word reverently and with awe.

Frona caught his hand on the one side and her father's on the other. The ice was now leaping past in feverish haste. Somewhere below a heavy cake butted into the bank, and the ground swayed under their feet. Another followed it, nearer the surface, and as they sprang back, upreared mightily, and, with a ton or so of soil on its broad back, bowled insolently onward. And yet another, reaching inshore like a huge hand, ripped three careless pines out by the roots and bore them away.

Day had broken, and the driving white gorged the Yukon from shore to shore. What of the pressure of pent water behind, the speed of the flood had become dizzying. Down all its length the bank was being gashed and gouged, and the island was jarring and shaking to its foundations.

"Oh, great! Great!" Frona sprang up and down between the men. "Where is your fake, baron?"

"Ah!" He shook his head. "Ah! I was wrong. I am miserable. But the magnificence! Look!"

He pointed down to the bunch of islands which obstructed the bend. There the mile-wide stream divided and subdivided again,--which was well for water, but not so well for packed ice. The islands drove their wedged heads into the frozen flood and tossed the cakes high into the air. But cake pressed upon cake and shelved out of the water, out and up, sliding and grinding and climbing, and still more cakes from behind, till hillocks and mountains of ice upreared and crashed among the trees.

"A likely place for a jam," Jacob Welse said. "Get the glasses, Frona." He gazed through them long and steadily. "It's growing, spreading out. A cake at the right time and the right place . . ."

"But the river is falling!" Frona cried.

The ice had dropped six feet below the top of the bank, and the Baron Courbertin marked it with a stick.

"Our man's still there, but he doesn't move."

It was clear day, and the sun was breaking forth in the north-east. They took turn about with the glasses in gazing across the river.

"Look! Is it not marvellous?" Courbertin pointed to the mark he had made. The water had dropped another foot. "Ah! Too bad! too bad! The jam; there will be none!"

Jacob Welse regarded him gravely.

"Ah! There will be?" he asked, picking up hope.

Frona looked inquiringly at her father.

"Jams are not always nice," he said, with a short laugh. "It all depends where they take place and where you happen to be."

"But the river! Look! It falls; I can see it before my eyes."

"It is not too late." He swept the island-studded bend and saw the ice-mountains larger and reaching out one to the other. "Go into the tent, Courbertin, and put on the pair of moccasins you'll find by the stove. Go on. You won't miss anything. And you, Frona, start the fire and get the coffee under way."

Half an hour after, though the river had fallen twenty feet, they found the ice still pounding along.

"Now the fun begins. Here, take a squint, you hot-headed Gaul. The left-hand channel, man. Now she takes it!"

Courbertin saw the left-hand channel close, and then a great white barrier heave up and travel from island to island. The ice before them slowed down and came to rest. Then followed the instant rise of the river. Up it came in a swift rush, as though nothing short of the sky could stop it. As when they were first awakened, the cakes rubbed and slid inshore over the crest of the bank, the muddy water creeping in advance and marking the way.

"Mon Dieu! But this is not nice!"

"But magnificent, baron," Frona teased. "In the meanwhile you are getting your feet wet."

He retreated out of the water, and in time, for a small avalanche of cakes rattled down upon the place he had just left. The rising water had forced the ice up till it stood breast-high above the island like a wall.

"But it will go down soon when the jam breaks. See, even now it comes up not so swift. It has broken."

Frona was watching the barrier. "No, it hasn't," she denied.

"But the water no longer rises like a race-horse."

"Nor does it stop rising."

He was puzzled for the nonce. Then his face brightened. "Ah! I have it! Above, somewhere, there is another jam. Most excellent, is it not?"

She caught his excited hand in hers and detained him. "But, listen. Suppose the upper jam breaks and the lower jam holds?"

He looked at her steadily till he grasped the full import. His face flushed, and with a quick intake of the breath he straightened up and threw back his head. He made a sweeping gesture as though to include the island. "Then you, and I, the tent, the boats, cabins, trees, everything, and La Bijou! Pouf! and all are gone, to the devil!"

Frona shook her head. "It is too bad."

"Bad? Pardon. Magnificent!"

"No, no, baron; not that. But that you are not an Anglo-Saxon. The race could well be proud of you."

"And you, Frona, would you not glorify the French!"

"At it again, eh? Throwing bouquets at yourselves." Del Bishop grinned at them, and made to depart as quickly as he had come. "But



twist yourselves. Some sick men in a cabin down here. Got to get 'em out. You're needed. And don't be all day about it," he shouted over his shoulder as he disappeared among the trees.

The river was still rising, though more slowly, and as soon as they left the high ground they were splashing along ankle-deep in the water. Winding in and out among the trees, they came upon a boat which had been hauled out the previous fall. And three chechaquos, who had managed to get into the country thus far over the ice, had piled themselves into it, also their tent, sleds, and dogs. But the boat was perilously near the ice-gorge, which growled and wrestled and over-topped it a bare dozen feet away.

"Come! Get out of this, you fools!" Jacob Welse shouted as he went past.

Del Bishop had told them to "get the hell out of there" when he ran by, and they could not understand. One of them turned up an unheeding, terrified face. Another lay prone and listless across the thwarts as though bereft of strength; while the third, with the face of a clerk, rocked back and forth and moaned monotonously, "My God! My God!"

The baron stopped long enough to shake him. "Damn!" he cried. "Your legs, man!--not God, but your legs! Ah! ah!--hump yourself! Yes, hump! Get a move on! Twist! Get back from the bank! The woods, the trees, anywhere!"

He tried to drag him out, but the man struck at him savagely and held back.

"How one collects the vernacular," he confided proudly to Frona as they hurried on. "Twist! It is a strong word, and suitable."

"You should travel with Del," she laughed. "He'd increase your stock in no time."

"You don't say so."

"Yes, but I do."

"Ah! Your idioms. I shall never learn." And he shook his head despairingly with both his hands.

They came out in a clearing, where a cabin stood close to the river. On its flat earth-roof two sick men, swathed in blankets, were lying, while Bishop, Corliss, and Jacob Welse were splashing about inside the cabin after the clothes-bags and general outfit. The mean depth of the flood was a couple of feet, but the floor of the cabin had been dug out for purposes of warmth, and there the water was to the waist.

"Keep the tobacco dry," one of the sick men said feebly from the roof.

"Tobacco, hell!" his companion advised. "Look out for the flour. And the sugar," he added, as an afterthought.

"That's 'cause Bill he don't smoke, miss," the first man explained.

"But keep an eye on it, won't you?" he pleaded.

"Here. Now shut up." Del tossed the canister beside him, and the man clutched it as though it were a sack of nuggets.

"Can I be of any use?" she asked, looking up at them.

"Nope. Scurvy. Nothing'll do 'em any good but God's country and raw potatoes." The pocket-miner regarded her for a moment. "What are you doing here, anyway? Go on back to high ground."

But with a groan and a crash, the ice-wall bulged in. A fifty-ton cake ended over, splashing them with muddy water, and settled down before the door. A smaller cake drove against the out-jutting corner-logs and the cabin reeled. Courbertin and Jacob Welse were inside.

"After you," Frona heard the baron, and then her father's short amused laugh; and the gallant Frenchman came out last, squeezing his way between the cake and the logs.

"Say, Bill, if that there lower jam holds, we're goners;" the man with the canister called to his partner.

"Ay, that it will," came the answer. "Below Nulato I saw Bixbie Island swept clean as my old mother's kitchen floor."

The men came hastily together about Frona.

"This won't do. We've got to carry them over to your shack, Corliss."

As he spoke, Jacob Welse clambered nimbly up the cabin and gazed down at the big barrier. "Where's McPherson?" he asked.

"Petrified astride the ridge-pole this last hour."

Jacob Welse waved his arm. "It's breaking! There she goes!"

"No kitchen floor this time. Bill, with my respects to your old woman," called he of the tobacco.

"Ay," answered the imperturbable Bill.

The whole river seemed to pick itself up and start down the stream.

With the increasing motion the ice-wall broke in a hundred places, and from up and down the shore came the rending and crashing of uprooted trees.

Corliss and Bishop laid hold of Bill and started off to McPherson's, and Jacob Welse and the baron were just sliding his mate over the

eaves, when a huge block of ice rammed in and smote the cabin squarely. Frona saw it, and cried a warning, but the tiered logs were overthrown like a house of cards. She saw Courbertin and the sick man hurled clear of the wreckage, and her father go down with it. She sprang to the spot, but he did not rise. She pulled at him to get his mouth above water, but at full stretch his head, barely showed. Then she let go and felt about with her hands till she found his right arm jammed between the logs. These she could not move, but she thrust between them one of the roof-poles which had underlaid the dirt and moss. It was a rude handspike and hardly equal to the work, for when she threw her weight upon the free end it bent and crackled. Heedful of the warning, she came in a couple of feet and swung upon it tentatively and carefully till something gave and Jacob Welse shoved his muddy face into the air.

He drew half a dozen great breaths, and burst out, "But that tastes good!" And then, throwing a quick glance about him, Frona, Del Bishop is a most veracious man."

"Why?" she asked, perplexedly.

"Because he said you'd do, you know."

He kissed her, and they both spat the mud from their lips, laughing. Courbertin floundered round a corner of the wreckage.

"Never was there such a man!" he cried, gleefully. "He is mad, crazy! There is no appeasement. His skull is cracked by the fall, and his tobacco is gone. It is chiefly the tobacco which is lamentable."

But his skull was not cracked, for it was merely a slit of the scalp of five inches or so.

"You'll have to wait till the others come back. I can't carry." Jacob Welse pointed to his right arm, which hung dead. "Only wrenched," he explained. "No bones broken."

The baron struck an extravagant attitude and pointed down at Frona's foot. "Ah! the water, it is gone, and there, a jewel of the flood, a pearl of price!"

Her well-worn moccasins had gone rotten from the soaking, and a little white toe peeped out at the world of slime.

"Then I am indeed wealthy, baron; for I have nine others."

"And who shall deny? who shall deny?" he cried, fervently.

"What a ridiculous, foolish, lovable fellow it is!"

"I kiss your hand." And he knelt gallantly in the muck.

She jerked her hand away, and, burying it with its mate in his curly mop, shook his head back and forth. "What shall I do with him, father?"

Jacob Welse shrugged his shoulders and laughed; and she turned Courbertin's face up and kissed him on the lips. And Jacob Welse knew that his was the larger share in that manifest joy.

The river, fallen to its winter level, was pounding its ice-glut steadily along. But in falling it had rimmed the shore with a twenty-foot wall of stranded floes. The great blocks were spilled inland among the thrown and standing trees and the slime-coated flowers and grasses like the titanic vomit of some Northland monster. The sun was not idle, and the steaming thaw washed the mud and foulness from the bergs till they blazed like heaped diamonds in the brightness, or shimmered opalescent-blue. Yet they were reared hazardously one on another, and ever and anon flashing towers and rainbow minarets crumbled thunderously into the flood. By one of the gaps so made lay La Bijou, and about it, saving chechaquos and sick men, were grouped the denizens of Split-up.

"Na, na, lad; twa men'll be a plenty." Tommy McPherson sought about him with his eyes for corroboration. "Gin ye gat three i' the canoe 'twill be ower comfortable."

"It must be a dash or nothing," Corliss spoke up. "We need three men,

Tommy, and you know it."

"Na, na; twa's a plenty, I'm tellin' ye."

"But I'm afraid we'll have to do with two."

The Scotch-Canadian evinced his satisfaction openly. "Mair'd be a bother; an' I doot not ye'll mak' it all richt, lad."

"And you'll make one of those two, Tommy," Corliss went on, inexorably.

"Na; there's ithers a plenty wi'oot coontin' me."

"No, there's not. Courbertin doesn't know the first thing. St. Vincent evidently cannot cross the slough. Mr. Welse's arm puts him out of it. So it's only you and I, Tommy."

"I'll not be inqueesitive, but yon son of Anak's a likely mon. He maun pit oop a guid stroke." While the Scot did not lose much love for the truculent pocket-miner, he was well aware of his grit, and seized the chance to save himself by shoving the other into the breach.

Del Bishop stepped into the centre of the little circle, paused, and looked every man in the eyes before he spoke.

"Is there a man here'll say I'm a coward?" he demanded without preface.



Again he looked each one in the eyes. "Or is there a man who'll even hint that I ever did a curlike act?" And yet again he searched the circle. "Well and good. I hate the water, but I've never been afraid of it. I don't know how to swim, yet I've been over the side more times than it's good to remember. I can't pull an oar without batting my back on the bottom of the boat. As for steering--well, authorities say there's thirty-two points to the compass, but there's at least thirty more when I get started. And as sure as God made little apples, I don't know my elbow from my knee about a paddle. I've capsized damn near every canoe I ever set foot in. I've gone right through the bottom of two. I've turned turtle in the Canyon and been pulled out below the White Horse. I can only keep stroke with one man, and that man's yours truly. But, gentlemen, if the call comes, I'll take my place in La Bijou and take her to hell if she don't turn over on the way."

Baron Courbertin threw his arms about him, crying, "As sure as God made little apples, thou art a man!"

Tommy's face was white, and he sought refuge in speech from the silence which settled down. "I'll deny I lift a guid paddle, nor that my wind is fair; but gin ye gang a tithe the way the next jam'll be on us. For my pairt I conseeder it ay rash. Bide a wee till the river's clear, say I."

"It's no go, Tommy," Jacob Welse admonished. "You can't cash excuses

here."

"But, mon! It doesna need discreemeenation--"

"That'll do!" from Corliss. "You're coming."

"I'll naething o' the sort. I'll--"

"Shut up!" Del had come into the world with lungs of leather and larynx of brass, and when he thus jerked out the stops the Scotsman quailed and shrank down.

"Oyez! Oyez!" In contrast to Del's siren tones, Frona's were purest silver as they rippled down-island through the trees. "Oyez! Oyez! Open water! Open water! And wait a minute. I'll be with you."

Three miles up-stream, where the Yukon curved grandly in from the west, a bit of water appeared. It seemed too marvellous for belief, after the granite winter; but McPherson, untouched of imagination, began a crafty retreat.

"Bide a wee, bide a wee," he protested, when collared by the pocket-miner. "A've forgot my pipe."

"Then you'll bide with us, Tommy," Del sneered. "And I'd let you have a draw of mine if your own wasn't sticking out of your pocket."

"'Twas the baccy I'd in mind."

"Then dig into this." He shoved his pouch into McPherson's shaking hands. "You'd better shed your coat. Here! I'll help you. And private, Tommy, if you don't act the man, I won't do a thing to you. Sure."

Corliss had stripped his heavy flannel shirt for freedom; and it was plain, when Frona joined them, that she also had been shedding. Jacket and skirt were gone, and her underskirt of dark cloth ceased midway below the knee.

"You'll do," Del commended.

Jacob Welse looked at her anxiously, and went over to where she was testing the grips of the several paddles. "You're not--?" he began.

She nodded.

"You're a guid girl," McPherson broke in. "Now, a've a wumman to home, to say naething o' three bairns--"

"All ready!" Corliss lifted the bow of La Bijou and looked back.

The turbid water lashed by on the heels of the ice-run. Courbertin

took the stern in the steep descent, and Del marshalled Tommy's reluctant rear. A flat floe, dipping into the water at a slight incline, served as the embarking-stage.

"Into the bow with you, Tommy!"

The Scotsman groaned, felt Bishop breathe heavily at his back, and obeyed; Frona meeting his weight by slipping into the stern.

"I can steer," she assured Corliss, who for the first time was aware that she was coming.

He glanced up to Jacob Welse, as though for consent, and received it.

"Hit 'er up! Hit 'er up!" Del urged impatiently. "You're burnin' daylight!"