

CHAPTER XXVI

Frona woke, slowly, as though from a long dream. She was lying where she had fallen, across Corliss's legs, while he, on his back, faced the hot sun without concern. She crawled up to him. He was breathing regularly, with closed eyes, which opened to meet hers. He smiled, and she sank down again. Then he rolled over on his side, and they looked at each other.

"Vance."

"Yes."

She reached out her hand; his closed upon it, and their eyelids fluttered and drooped down. The river still rumbled on, somewhere in the infinite distance, but it came to them like the murmur of a world forgotten. A soft languor encompassed them. The golden sunshine dripped down upon them through the living green, and all the life of the warm earth seemed singing. And quiet was very good. Fifteen long minutes they drowsed, and woke again.

Frona sat up. "I--I was afraid," she said.

"Not you."

"Afraid that I might be afraid," she amended, fumbling with her hair.

"Leave it down. The day merits it."

She complied, with a toss of the head which circled it with a nimbus of rippling yellow.

"Tommy's gone," Corliss mused, the race with the ice coming slowly back.

"Yes," she answered. "I rapped him on the knuckles. It was terrible. But the chance is we've a better man in the canoe, and we must care for him at once. Hello! Look there!" Through the trees, not a score of feet away, she saw the wall of a large cabin. "Nobody in sight. It must be deserted, or else they're visiting, whoever they are. You look to our man, Vance,--I'm more presentable,--and I'll go and see."

She skirted the cabin, which was a large one for the Yukon country, and came around to where it fronted on the river. The door stood open, and, as she paused to knock, the whole interior flashed upon her in an astounding picture,--a cumulative picture, or series of pictures, as it were. For first she was aware of a crowd of men, and of some great common purpose upon which all were seriously bent. At her knock they instinctively divided, so that a lane opened up, flanked by their pressed bodies, to the far end of the room. And there, in the long bunks on either side, sat two grave rows of men. And midway between, against the wall, was a table. This table seemed the centre of interest. Fresh from the sun-dazzle, the light within was dim and

murky, but she managed to make out a bearded American sitting by the table and hammering it with a heavy caulking-mallet. And on the opposite side sat St. Vincent. She had time to note his worn and haggard face, before a man of Scandinavian appearance slouched up to the table.

The man with the mallet raised his right hand and said glibly, "You do most solemnly swear that what you are about to give before the court--" He abruptly stopped and glowered at the man before him. "Take off your hat!" he roared, and a snicker went up from the crowd as the man obeyed.

Then he of the mallet began again. "You do most solemnly swear that what you are about to give before the court shall be the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth, so help you God?"

The Scandinavian nodded and dropped his hand.

"One moment, gentlemen." Frona advanced up the lane, which closed behind her.

St. Vincent sprang to his feet and stretched out his arms to her.

"Frona," he cried, "oh, Frona, I am innocent!"

It struck her like a blow, the unexpectedness of it, and for the instant, in the sickly light, she was conscious only of the ring of

white faces, each face set with eyes that burned. Innocent of what? she thought, and as she looked at St. Vincent, arms still extended, she was aware, in a vague, troubled way, of something distasteful.

Innocent of what? He might have had more reserve. He might have waited till he was charged. She did not know that he was charged with anything.

"Friend of the prisoner," the man with the mallet said authoritatively. "Bring a stool for'ard, some of you."

"One moment . . ." She staggered against the table and rested a hand on it. "I do not understand. This is all new . . ." But her eyes happened to come to rest on her feet, wrapped in dirty rags, and she knew that she was clad in a short and tattered skirt, that her arm peeped forth through a rent in her sleeve, and that her hair was down and flying. Her cheek and neck on one side seemed coated with some curious substance. She brushed it with her hand, and caked mud rattled to the floor.

"That will do," the man said, not unkindly. "Sit down. We're in the same box. We do not understand. But take my word for it, we're here to find out. So sit down."

She raised her hand. "One moment--"

"Sit down!" he thundered. "The court cannot be disturbed."

A hum went up from the crowd, words of dissent, and the man pounded the table for silence. But Frona resolutely kept her feet.

When the noise had subsided, she addressed the man in the chair. "Mr. Chairman: I take it that this is a miners' meeting." (The man nodded.) "Then, having an equal voice in the managing of this community's affairs, I demand to be heard. It is important that I should be heard."

"But you are out of order. Miss--er--"

"Welse!" half a dozen voices prompted.

"Miss Welse," he went on, an added respect marking his demeanor, "it grieves me to inform you that you are out of order. You had best sit down."

"I will not," she answered. "I rise to a question of privilege, and if I am not heard, I shall appeal to the meeting."

She swept the crowd with her eyes, and cries went up that she be given a fair show. The chairman yielded and motioned her to go on.

"Mr. Chairman and men: I do not know the business you have at present before you, but I do know that I have more important business to place before you. Just outside this cabin is a man probably dying from

starvation. We have brought him from across the river. We should not have bothered you, but we were unable to make our own island. This man I speak of needs immediate attention."

"A couple of you nearest the door go out and look after him," the chairman ordered. "And you, Doc Holiday, go along and see what you can do."

"Ask for a recess," St. Vincent whispered.

Frona nodded her head. "And, Mr. Chairman, I make a motion for a recess until the man is cared for."

Cries of "No recess!" and "Go on with the business!" greeted the putting of it, and the motion was lost.

"Now, Gregory," with a smile and salutation as she took the stool beside him, "what is it?"

He gripped her hand tightly. "Don't believe them, Frona. They are trying to"--with a gulping swallow--"to kill me."

"Why? Do be calm. Tell me."

"Why, last night," he began hurriedly, but broke off to listen to the Scandinavian previously sworn, who was speaking with ponderous slowness.

"I wake wide open quick," he was saying. "I coom to the door. I there hear one shot more."

He was interrupted by a warm-complexioned man, clad in faded mackinaws.

"What did you think?" he asked.

"Eh?" the witness queried, his face dark and troubled with perplexity.

"When you came to the door, what was your first thought?"

"A-w-w," the man sighed, his face clearing and infinite comprehension sounding in his voice. "I have no moccasins. I t'ink pretty damn cold." His satisfied expression changed to naive surprise when an outburst of laughter greeted his statement, but he went on stolidly.

"One more shot I hear, and I run down the trail."

Then Corliss pressed in through the crowd to Frona, and she lost what the man was saying.

"What's up?" the engineer was asking. "Anything serious? Can I be of any use?"

"Yes, yes." She caught his hand gratefully. "Get over the back-channel somehow and tell my father to come. Tell him that Gregory St. Vincent is in trouble; that he is charged with-- What are you

charged with, Gregory?" she asked, turning to him.

"Murder."

"Murder?" from Corliss.

"Yes, yes. Say that he is charged with murder; that I am here; and that I need him. And tell him to bring me some clothes. And, Vance,"--with a pressure of the hand and swift upward look,--"don't take any . . . any big chances, but do try to make it."

"Oh, I'll make it all right." He tossed his head confidently and proceeded to elbow his way towards the door.

"Who is helping you in your defence?" she asked St. Vincent.

He shook his head. "No. They wanted to appoint some one,--a renegade lawyer from the States, Bill Brown,--but I declined him. He's taken the other side, now. It's lynch law, you know, and their minds are made up. They're bound to get me."

"I wish there were time to hear your side."

"But, Frona, I am innocent. I--"

"S-sh!" She laid her hand on his arm to hush him, and turned her

attention to the witness.

"So the noospaper feller, he fight like anything; but Pierre and me, we pull him into the shack. He cry and stand in one place--"

"Who cried?" interrupted the prosecuting lawyer.

"Him. That feller there." The Scandinavian pointed directly at St. Vincent. "And I make a light. The slush-lamp I find spilt over most everything, but I have a candle in my pocket. It is good practice to carry a candle in the pocket," he affirmed gravely. "And Borg he lay on the floor dead. And the squaw say he did it, and then she die, too."

"Said who did it?"

Again his accusing finger singled out St. Vincent. "Him. That feller there."

"Did she?" Frona whispered.

"Yes," St. Vincent whispered back, "she did. But I cannot imagine what prompted her. She must have been out of her head."

The warm-faced man in the faded mackinaws then put the witness through a searching examination, which Frona followed closely, but which elicited little new.

"You have the right to cross-examine the witness," the chairman informed St. Vincent. "Any questions you want to ask?"

The correspondent shook his head.

"Go on," Frona urged.

"What's the use?" he asked, hopelessly. "I'm fore-doomed. The verdict was reached before the trial began."

"One moment, please." Frona's sharp command arrested the retiring witness. "You do not know of your own knowledge who committed this murder?"

The Scandinavian gazed at her with a bovine expression on his leaden features, as though waiting for her question to percolate to his understanding.

"You did not see who did it?" she asked again.

"Aw, yes. That feller there," accusative finger to the fore. "She say he did."

There was a general smile at this.

"But you did not see it?"

"I hear some shooting."

"But you did not see who did the shooting?"

"Aw, no; but she said--"

"That will do, thank you," she said sweetly, and the man retired.

The prosecution consulted its notes. "Pierre La Fliche!" was called out.

A slender, swart-skinned man, lithe of figure and graceful, stepped forward to the open space before the table. He was darkly handsome, with a quick, eloquent eye which roved frankly everywhere. It rested for a moment on Frona, open and honest in its admiration, and she smiled and half-nodded, for she liked him at first glance, and it seemed as though they had met of old time. He smiled pleasantly back, the smooth upper lip curling brightly and showing beautiful teeth, immaculately white.

In answer to the stereotyped preliminaries he stated that his name was that of his father's, a descendant of the coureurs du bois. His mother--with a shrug of the shoulders and flash of teeth--was a breed. He was born somewhere in the Barrens, on a hunting trip, he

did not know where. Ah, oui, men called him an old-timer. He had come into the country in the days of Jack McQuestion, across the Rockies from the Great Slave.

On being told to go ahead with what he knew of the matter in hand, he deliberated a moment, as though casting about for the best departure.

"In the spring it is good to sleep with the open door," he began, his words sounding clear and flute-like and marked by haunting memories of the accents his forbears put into the tongue. "And so I sleep last night. But I sleep like the cat. The fall of the leaf, the breath of the wind, and my ears whisper to me, whisper, whisper, all the night long. So, the first shot," with a quick snap of the fingers, "and I am awake, just like that, and I am at the door."

St. Vincent leaned forward to Frona. "It was not the first shot."

She nodded, with her eyes still bent on La Flitche, who gallantly waited.

"Then two more shot," he went on, "quick, together, boom-boom, just like that. 'Borg's shack,' I say to myself, and run down the trail. I think Borg kill Bella, which was bad. Bella very fine girl," he confided with one of his irresistible smiles. "I like Bella. So I run. And John he run from his cabin like a fat cow, with great noise. 'What the matter?' he say; and I say, 'I don't know.' And then

something come, wheugh! out of the dark, just like that, and knock John down, and knock me down. We grab everywhere all at once. It is a man. He is in undress. He fight. He cry, 'Oh! Oh! Oh!' just like that. We hold him tight, and bime-by pretty quick, he stop. Then we get up, and I say, 'Come along back.'

"Who was the man?"

La Flitche turned partly, and rested his eyes on St. Vincent.

"Go on."

"So? The man he will not go back; but John and I say yes, and he go."

"Did he say anything?"

"I ask him what the matter; but he cry, he . . . he sob, huh-tsch, huh-tsch, just like that."

"Did you see anything peculiar about him?"

La Flitche's brows drew up interrogatively.

"Anything uncommon, out of the ordinary?"

"Ah, oui; blood on the hands." Disregarding the murmur in the room,

he went on, his facile play of feature and gesture giving dramatic value to the recital. "John make a light, and Bella groan, like the hair-seal when you shoot him in the body, just like that when you shoot him in the body under the flipper. And Borg lay over in the corner. I look. He no breathe 'tall.

"Then Bella open her eyes, and I look in her eyes, and I know she know me, La Flitche. 'Who did it, Bella?' I ask. And she roll her head on the floor and whisper, so low, so slow, 'Him dead?' I know she mean Borg, and I say yes. Then she lift up on one elbow, and look about quick, in big hurry, and when she see Vincent she look no more, only she look at Vincent all the time. Then she point at him, just like that." Suiting the action to the word, La Flitche turned and thrust a wavering finger at the prisoner. "And she say, 'Him, him, him.' And I say, 'Bella, who did it?' And she say, 'Him, him, him. St. Vincha, him do it.' And then"--La Flitche's head fell limply forward on his chest, and came back naturally erect, as he finished, with a flash of teeth, "Dead."

The warm-faced man, Bill Brown, put the quarter-breed through the customary direct examination, which served to strengthen his testimony and to bring out the fact that a terrible struggle must have taken place in the killing of Borg. The heavy table was smashed, the stool and the bunk-board splintered, and the stove over-thrown. "Never did I see anything like it," La Flitche concluded his description of the wreck. "No, never."

Brown turned him over to Frona with a bow, which a smile of hers paid for in full. She did not deem it unwise to cultivate cordiality with the lawyer. What she was working for was time--time for her father to come, time to be closeted with St. Vincent and learn all the details of what really had occurred. So she put questions, questions, interminable questions, to La Flitche. Twice only did anything of moment crop up.

"You spoke of the first shot, Mr. La Flitche. Now, the walls of a log cabin are quite thick. Had your door been closed, do you think you could have heard that first shot?"

He shook his head, though his dark eyes told her he divined the point she was endeavoring to establish.

"And had the door of Borg's cabin been closed, would you have heard?"

Again he shook his head.

"Then, Mr. La Flitche, when you say the first shot, you do not mean necessarily the first shot fired, but rather the first shot you heard fired?"

He nodded, and though she had scored her point she could not see that it had any material bearing after all.

Again she worked up craftily to another and stronger climax, though she felt all the time that La Flitche fathomed her.

"You say it was very dark, Mr. La Flitche?"

"Ah, oui; quite dark."

"How dark? How did you know it was John you met?"

"John make much noise when he run. I know that kind of noise."

"Could you see him so as to know that it was he?"

"Ah, no."

"Then, Mr. La Flitche," she demanded, triumphantly, "will you please state how you knew there was blood on the hands of Mr. St. Vincent?"

His lip lifted in a dazzling smile, and he paused a moment. "How? I feel it warm on his hands. And my nose--ah, the smoke of the hunter camp long way off, the hole where the rabbit hide, the track of the moose which has gone before, does not my nose tell me?" He flung his head back, and with tense face, eyes closed, nostrils quivering and dilated, he simulated the quiescence of all the senses save one and the concentration of his whole being upon that one. Then his eyes

fluttered partly open and he regarded her dreamily. "I smell the blood on his hands, the warm blood, the hot blood on his hands."

"And by gad he can do it!" some man exclaimed.

And so convinced was Frona that she glanced involuntarily at St. Vincent's hands, and saw there the rusty-brown stains on the cuffs of his flannel shirt.

As La Flitche left the stand, Bill Brown came over to her and shook hands. "No more than proper I should know the lawyer for the defence," he said, good-naturedly, running over his notes for the next witness.

"But don't you think it is rather unfair to me?" she asked, brightly.

"I have not had time to prepare my case. I know nothing about it except what I have gleaned from your two witnesses. Don't you think, Mr. Brown," her voice rippling along in persuasive little notes, "don't you think it would be advisable to adjourn the meeting until to-morrow?"

"Hum," he deliberated, looking at his watch.

"Wouldn't be a bad idea. It's five o'clock, anyway, and the men ought to be cooking their suppers."

She thanked him, as some women can, without speech; yet, as he looked down into her face and eyes, he experienced a subtler and greater

satisfaction than if she had spoken.

He stepped to his old position and addressed the room. "On consultation of the defence and the prosecution, and upon consideration of the lateness of the hour and the impossibility of finishing the trial within a reasonable limit, I--hum--I take the liberty of moving an adjournment until eight o'clock to-morrow morning."

"The ayes have it," the chairman proclaimed, coming down from his place and proceeding to build the fire, for he was a part-owner of the cabin and cook for his crowd.