

## CHAPTER XXIX

Frona had gone at once to her father's side, but he was already recovering. Courbertin was brought forward with a scratched face, sprained wrist, and an insubordinate tongue. To prevent discussion and to save time, Bill Brown claimed the floor.

"Mr. Chairman, while we condemn the attempt on the part of Jacob Welse, Frona Welse, and Baron Courbertin to rescue the prisoner and thwart justice, we cannot, under the circumstances, but sympathize with them. There is no need that I should go further into this matter. You all know, and doubtless, under a like situation, would have done the same. And so, in order that we may expeditiously finish the business, I make a motion to disarm the three prisoners and let them go."

The motion was carried, and the two men searched for weapons. Frona was saved this by giving her word that she was no longer armed. The meeting then resolved itself into a hanging committee, and began to file out of the cabin.

"Sorry I had to do it," the chairman said, half-apologetically, half-defiantly.

Jacob Welse smiled. "You took your chance," he answered, "and I can't blame you. I only wish I'd got you, though."

Excited voices arose from across the cabin. "Here, you! Leggo!" "Step on his fingers, Tim!" "Break that grip!" "Ouch! Ow!" "Pry his mouth open!"

Frona saw a knot of struggling men about St. Vincent, and ran over. He had thrown himself down on the floor and, tooth and nail, was fighting like a madman. Tim Dugan, a stalwart Celt, had come to close quarters with him, and St. Vincent's teeth were sunk in the man's arm.

"Smash 'm, Tim! Smash 'm!"

"How can I, ye fule? Get a pry on his mouth, will ye?"

"One moment, please." The men made way for her, drawing back and leaving St. Vincent and Tim.

Frona knelt down by him. "Leave go, Gregory. Do leave go."

He looked up at her, and his eyes did not seem human. He breathed stertorously, and in his throat were the queer little gasping noises of one overwrought.

"It is I, Gregory." She brushed her hand soothingly across his brow.

"Don't you understand? It is I, Frona. Do leave go."

His whole body slowly relaxed, and a peaceful expression grew upon his

face. His jaw dropped, and the man's arm was withdrawn.

"Now listen, Gregory. Though you are to die--"

"But I cannot! I cannot!" he groaned. "You said that I could trust to you, that all would come well."

She thought of the chance which had been given, but said nothing.

"Oh, Frona! Frona!" He sobbed and buried his face in her lap.

"At least you can be a man. It is all that remains."

"Come on!" Tim Dugan commanded. "Sorry to bother ye, miss, but we've got to fetch 'm along. Drag 'm out, you fellys! Catch 'm by the legs, Blackey, and you, too, Johnson."

St. Vincent's body stiffened at the words, the rational gleam went out of his eyes, and his fingers closed spasmodically on Frona's. She looked entreaty at the men, and they hesitated.

"Give me a minute with him," she begged, "just a minute."

"He ain't worth it," Dugan sneered, after they had drawn apart. "Look at 'm."

"It's a damned shame," corroborated Blackey, squinting sidewise at Frona whispering in St. Vincent's ear, the while her hand wandered caressingly through his hair.

What she said they did not hear, but she got him on his feet and led him forward. He walked as a dead man might walk, and when he entered the open air gazed forth wonderingly upon the muddy sweep of the Yukon. The crowd had formed by the bank, about a pine tree. A boy, engaged in running a rope over one of the branches, finished his task and slid down the trunk to the ground. He looked quickly at the palms of his hands and blew upon them, and a laugh went up. A couple of wolf-dogs, on the outskirts, bristled up to each other and bared their fangs. Men encouraged them. They closed in and rolled over, but were kicked aside to make room for St. Vincent.

Corliss came up the bank to Frona. "What's up?" he whispered. "Is it off?"

She tried to speak, but swallowed and nodded her head.

"This way, Gregory." She touched his arm and guided him to the box beneath the rope.

Corliss, keeping step with them, looked over the crowd speculatively and felt into his jacket-pocket. "Can I do anything?" he asked, gnawing his under lip impatiently. "Whatever you say goes, Frona. I

can stand them off."

She looked at him, aware of pleasure in the sight. She knew he would dare it, but she knew also that it would be unfair. St. Vincent had had his chance, and it was not right that further sacrifice should be made. "No, Vance. It is too late. Nothing can be done."

"At least let me try," he persisted.

"No; it is not our fault that our plan failed, and . . . and . . ." Her eyes filled. "Please do not ask it of me."

"Then let me take you away. You cannot remain here."

"I must," she answered, simply, and turned to St. Vincent, who seemed dreaming.

Blackey was tying the hangman's knot in the rope's end, preparatory to slipping the noose over St. Vincent's head.

"Kiss me, Gregory," she said, her hand on his arm.

He started at the touch, and saw all eager eyes centred upon him, and the yellow noose, just shaped, in the hands of the hangman. He threw up his arms, as though to ward it off, and cried loudly, "No! no! Let me confess! Let me tell the truth, then you'll believe me!"

Bill Brown and the chairman shoved Blackey back, and the crowd gathered in. Cries and protestations rose from its midst. "No, you don't," a boy's shrill voice made itself heard. "I'm not going to go. I climbed the tree and made the rope fast, and I've got a right to stay." "You're only a kid," replied a man's voice, "and it ain't good for you." "I don't care, and I'm not a kid. I'm--I'm used to such things. And, anyway, I climbed the tree. Look at my hands." "Of course he can stay," other voices took up the trouble. "Leave him alone, Curley." "You ain't the whole thing." A laugh greeted this, and things quieted down.

"Silence!" the chairman called, and then to St. Vincent, "Go ahead, you, and don't take all day about it."

"Give us a chance to hear!" the crowd broke out again. "Put 'm on the box! Put 'm on the box!"

St. Vincent was helped up, and began with eager volubility.

"I didn't do it, but I saw it done. There weren't two men--only one. He did it, and Bella helped him."

A wave of laughter drowned him out.

"Not so fast," Bill Brown cautioned him. "Kindly explain how Bella

helped this man kill herself. Begin at the beginning."

"That night, before he turned in, Borg set his burglar alarm--"

"Burglar alarm?"

"That's what I called it,--a tin bread-pan attached to the latch so the door couldn't open without tumbling it down. He set it every night, as though he were afraid of what might happen,--the very thing which did happen, for that matter. On the night of the murder I awoke with the feeling that some one was moving around. The slush-lamp was burning low, and I saw Bella at the door. Borg was snoring; I could hear him plainly. Bella was taking down the bread-pan, and she exercised great care about it. Then she opened the door, and an Indian came in softly. He had no mask, and I should know him if ever I see him again, for a scar ran along the forehead and down over one eye."

"I suppose you sprang out of bed and gave the alarm?"

"No, I didn't," St. Vincent answered, with a defiant toss of the head, as though he might as well get the worst over with. "I just lay there and waited."

"What did you think?"

"That Bella was in collusion with the Indian, and that Borg was to be

murdered. It came to me at once."

"And you did nothing?"

"Nothing." His voice sank, and his eyes dropped to Frona, leaning against the box beneath him and steadying it. She did not seem to be affected. "Bella came over to me, but I closed my eyes and breathed regularly. She held the slush-lamp to me, but I played sleep naturally enough to fool her. Then I heard a snort of sudden awakening and alarm, and a cry, and I looked out. The Indian was hacking at Borg with a knife, and Borg was warding off with his arms and trying to grapple him. When they did grapple, Bella crept up from behind and threw her arm in a strangle-hold about her husband's neck. She put her knee into the small of his back, and bent him backward and, with the Indian helping, threw him to the floor."

"And what did you do?"

"I watched."

"Had you a revolver?"

"Yes."

"The one you previously said John Borg had borrowed?"



"Yes; but I watched."

"Did John Borg call for help?"

"Yes."

"Can you give his words?"

"He called, 'St. Vincent! Oh, St. Vincent! Oh, my God! Oh, St. Vincent, help me!'" He shuddered at the recollection, and added, "It was terrible."

"I should say so," Brown grunted. "And you?"

"I watched," was the dogged reply, while a groan went up from the crowd. "Borg shook clear of them, however, and got on his legs. He hurled Bella across the cabin with a back-sweep of the arm and turned upon the Indian. Then they fought. The Indian had dropped the knife, and the sound of Borg's blows was sickening. I thought he would surely beat the Indian to death. That was when the furniture was smashed. They rolled and snarled and struggled like wild beasts. I wondered the Indian's chest did not cave in under some of Borg's blows. But Bella got the knife and stabbed her husband repeatedly about the body. The Indian had clinched with him, and his arms were not free; so he kicked out at her sideways. He must have broken her legs, for she cried out and fell down, and though she tried, she never stood up again. Then he

went down, with the Indian under him, across the stove."

"Did he call any more for help?"

"He begged me to come to him."

"And?"

"I watched. He managed to get clear of the Indian and staggered over to me. He was streaming blood, and I could see he was very weak. 'Give me your gun,' he said; 'quick, give me it.' He felt around blindly. Then his mind seemed to clear a bit, and he reached across me to the holster hanging on the wall and took the pistol. The Indian came at him with the knife again, but he did not try to defend himself. Instead, he went on towards Bella, with the Indian still hanging to him and hacking at him. The Indian seemed to bother and irritate him, and he shoved him away. He knelt down and turned Bella's face up to the light; but his own face was covered with blood and he could not see. So he stopped long enough to brush the blood from his eyes. He appeared to look in order to make sure. Then he put the revolver to her breast and fired.

"The Indian went wild at this, and rushed at him with the knife, at the same time knocking the pistol out of his hand. It was then the shelf with the slush-lamp was knocked down. They continued to fight in the darkness, and there were more shots fired, though I do not know by

whom. I crawled out of the bunk, but they struck against me in their struggles, and I fell over Bella. That's when the blood got on my hands. As I ran out the door, more shots were fired. Then I met La Flitche and John, and . . . and you know the rest. This is the truth I have told you, I swear it!"

He looked down at Frona. She was steadying the box, and her face was composed. He looked out over the crowd and saw unbelief. Many were laughing.

"Why did you not tell this story at first?" Bill Brown demanded.

"Because . . . because . . ."

"Well?"

"Because I might have helped."

There was more laughter at this, and Bill Brown turned away from him.

"Gentlemen, you have heard this pipe dream. It is a wilder fairy story than his first. At the beginning of the trial we promised to show that the truth was not in him. That we succeeded, your verdict is ample testimony. But that he should likewise succeed, and more brilliantly, we did not expect. That he has, you cannot doubt. What do you think of him? Lie upon lie he has given us; he has been proven a chronic liar; are you to believe this last and fearfully impossible lie?"

Gentlemen, I can only ask that you reaffirm your judgment. And to those who may doubt his mendacity,--surely there are but few,--let me state, that if his story is true; if he broke salt with this man, John Borg, and lay in his blankets while murder was done; if he did hear, unmoved, the voice of the man calling to him for help; if he did lie there and watch that carnival of butchery without his manhood prompting him,--let me state, gentlemen, I say, let me state that he is none the less deserving of hanging. We cannot make a mistake. What shall it be?"

"Death!" "String him up!" "Stretch 'm!" were the cries.

But the crowd suddenly turned its attention to the river, and even Blackey refrained from his official task. A large raft, worked by a sweep at either end, was slipping past the tail of Split-up Island, close to the shore. When it was at their feet, its nose was slewed into the bank, and while its free end swung into the stream to make the consequent circle, a snubbing-rope was flung ashore and several turns taken about the tree under which St. Vincent stood. A cargo of moose-meat, red and raw, cut into quarters, peeped from beneath a cool covering of spruce boughs. And because of this, the two men on the raft looked up to those on the bank with pride in their eyes.

"Tryin' to make Dawson with it," one of them explained, "and the sun's all-fired hot."

"Nope," said his comrade, in reply to a query, "don't care to stop and trade. It's worth a dollar and a half a pound down below, and we're hustlin' to get there. But we've got some pieces of a man we want to leave with you." He turned and pointed to a loose heap of blankets which slightly disclosed the form of a man beneath. "We gathered him in this mornin', 'bout thirty mile up the Stewart, I should judge."

"Stands in need of doctorin'," the other man spoke up, "and the meat's spoilin', and we ain't got time for nothin'." "Beggar don't have anythin' to say. Don't savve the burro." "Looks as he might have been mixin' things with a grizzly or somethin',--all battered and gouged. Injured internally, from the looks of it. Where'll you have him?"

Frona, standing by St. Vincent, saw the injured man borne over the crest of the bank and through the crowd. A bronzed hand drooped down and a bronzed face showed from out the blankets. The bearers halted near them while a decision could be reached as to where he should be carried. Frona felt a sudden fierce grip on her arm.

"Look! look!" St. Vincent was leaning forward and pointing wildly at the injured man. "Look! That scar!"

The Indian opened his eyes and a grin of recognition distorted his face.

"It is he! It is he!" St. Vincent, trembling with eagerness, turned upon the crowd. "I call you all to witness! That is the man who

killed John Borg!"

No laughter greeted this, for there was a terrible earnestness in his manner. Bill Brown and the chairman tried to make the Indian talk, but could not. A miner from British Columbia was pressed into service, but his Chinook made no impression. Then La Flitche was called. The handsome breed bent over the man and talked in gutturals which only his mother's heredity made possible. It sounded all one, yet it was apparent that he was trying many tongues. But no response did he draw, and he paused disheartened. As though with sudden recollection, he made another attempt. At once a gleam of intelligence shot across the Indian's face, and his larynx vibrated to similar sounds.

"It is the Stick talk of the Upper White," La Flitche stopped long enough to explain.

Then, with knit brows and stumbling moments when he sought dim-remembered words, he plied the man with questions. To the rest it was like a pantomime,--the meaningless grunts and waving arms and facial expressions of puzzlement, surprise, and understanding. At times a passion wrote itself on the face of the Indian, and a sympathy on the face of La Flitche. Again, by look and gesture, St. Vincent was referred to, and once a sober, mirthless laugh shaped the mouths of them.

"So? It is good," La Flitche said, when the Indian's head dropped

back. "This man make true talk. He come from White River, way up. He cannot understand. He surprised very much, so many white men. He never think so many white men in the world. He die soon. His name Gow.

"Long time ago, three year, this man John Borg go to this man Gow's country. He hunt, he bring plenty meat to the camp, wherefore White River Sticks like him. Gow have one squaw, Pisk-ku. Bime-by John Borg make preparation to go 'way. He go to Gow, and he say, 'Give me your squaw. We trade. For her I give you many things.' But Gow say no. Pisk-ku good squaw. No woman sew moccasin like she. She tan moose-skin the best, and make the softest leather. He like Pisk-ku. Then John Borg say he don't care; he want Pisk-ku. Then they have a skookum big fight, and Pisk-ku go 'way with John Borg. She no want to go 'way, but she go anyway. Borg call her 'Bella,' and give her plenty good things, but she like Gow all the time." La Flitche pointed to the scar which ran down the forehead and past the eye of the Indian.

"John Borg he do that."

"Long time Gow pretty near die. Then he get well, but his head sick. He don't know nobody. Don't know his father, his mother, or anything. Just like a little baby. Just like that. Then one day, quick, click! something snap, and his head get well all at once. He know his father and mother, he remember Pisk-ku, he remember everything. His father say John Borg go down river. Then Gow go down river. Spring-time, ice very bad. He very much afraid, so many white men, and when he come to this place he travel by night. Nobody see him 'tall, but he see

everybody. He like a cat, see in the dark. Somehow, he come straight to John Borg's cabin. He do not know how this was, except that the work he had to do was good work."

St. Vincent pressed Frona's hand, but she shook her fingers clear and withdrew a step.

"He see Pisk-ku feed the dogs, and he have talk with her. That night he come and she open the door. Then you know that which was done. St. Vincent do nothing, Borg kill Bella. Gow kill Borg. Borg kill Gow, for Gow die pretty quick. Borg have strong arm. Gow sick inside, all smashed up. Gow no care; Pisk-ku dead.

"After that he go 'cross ice to the land. I tell him all you people say it cannot be; no man can cross the ice at that time. He laugh, and say that it is, and what is, must be. Anyway, he have very hard time, but he get 'cross all right. He very sick inside. Bime-by he cannot walk; he crawl. Long time he come to Stewart River. Can go no more, so he lay down to die. Two white men find him and bring him to this place. He don't care. He die anyway."

La Flitche finished abruptly, but nobody spoke. Then he added, "I think Gow damn good man."

Frona came up to Jacob Welse. "Take me away, father," she said. "I am so tired."