

CHAPTER XXX

Next morning, Jacob Welse, for all of the Company and his millions in mines, chopped up the day's supply of firewood, lighted a cigar, and went down the island in search of Baron Courbertin. Frona finished the breakfast dishes, hung out the robes to air, and fed the dogs. Then she took a worn Wordsworth from her clothes-bag, and, out by the bank, settled herself comfortably in a seat formed by two uprooted pines. But she did no more than open the book; for her eyes strayed out and over the Yukon to the eddy below the bluffs, and the bend above, and the tail of the spit which lay in the midst of the river. The rescue and the race were still fresh with her, though there were strange lapses, here and there, of which she remembered little. The struggle by the fissure was immeasurable; she knew not how long it lasted; and the race down Split-up to Roubreau Island was a thing of which her reason convinced her, but of which she recollected nothing.

The whim seized her, and she followed Corliss through the three days' events, but she tacitly avoided the figure of another man whom she would not name. Something terrible was connected therewith, she knew, which must be faced sooner or later; but she preferred to put that moment away from her. She was stiff and sore of mind as well as of body, and will and action were for the time being distasteful. It was more pleasant, even, to dwell on Tommy, on Tommy of the bitter tongue and craven heart; and she made a note that the wife and children in Toronto should not be forgotten when the Northland paid its dividends

to the Welse.

The crackle of a foot on a dead willow-twigg roused her, and her eyes met St. Vincent's.

"You have not congratulated me upon my escape," he began, breezily.

"But you must have been dead-tired last night. I know I was. And you had that hard pull on the river besides."

He watched her furtively, trying to catch some cue as to her attitude and mood.

"You're a heroine, that's what you are, Frona," he began again, with exuberance. "And not only did you save the mail-man, but by the delay you wrought in the trial you saved me. If one more witness had gone on the stand that first day, I should have been duly hanged before Gow put in an appearance. Fine chap, Gow. Too bad he's going to die."

"I am glad that I could be of help," she replied, wondering the while what she could say.

"And of course I am to be congratulated--"

"Your trial is hardly a thing for congratulation," she spoke up quickly, looking him straight in the eyes for the moment. "I am glad that it came out as it did, but surely you cannot expect me to

congratulate you."

"O-o-o," with long-drawn inflection. "So that's where it pinches." He smiled good-humoredly, and moved as though to sit down, but she made no room for him, and he remained standing. "I can certainly explain. If there have been women--"

Frona had been clinching her hand nervously, but at the word burst out in laughter.

"Women?" she queried. "Women?" she repeated. "Do not be ridiculous, Gregory."

"After the way you stood by me through the trial," he began, reproachfully, "I thought--"

"Oh, you do not understand," she said, hopelessly. "You do not understand. Look at me, Gregory, and see if I can make you understand. Your presence is painful to me. Your kisses hurt me. The memory of them still burns my cheek, and my lips feel unclean. And why? Because of women, which you may explain away? How little do you understand! But shall I tell you?"

Voices of men came to her from down the river-bank, and the splashing of water. She glanced quickly and saw Del Bishop guiding a poling-boat against the current, and Corliss on the bank, bending to the tow-rope.

"Shall I tell you why, Gregory St. Vincent?" she said again. "Tell you why your kisses have cheapened me? Because you broke the faith of food and blanket. Because you broke salt with a man, and then watched that man fight unequally for life without lifting your hand. Why, I had rather you had died in defending him; the memory of you would have been good. Yes, I had rather you had killed him yourself. At least, it would have shown there was blood in your body."

"So this is what you would call love?" he began, scornfully, his fretting, fuming devil beginning to rouse. "A fair-weather love, truly. But, Lord, how we men learn!"

"I had thought you were well lessoned," she retorted; "what of the other women?"

"But what do you intend to do?" he demanded, taking no notice. "I am not an easy man to cross. You cannot throw me over with impunity. I shall not stand for it, I warn you. You have dared do things in this country which would blacken you were they known. I have ears. I have not been asleep. You will find it no child's play to explain away things which you may declare most innocent."

She looked at him with a smile which carried pity in its cold mirth, and it goaded him.

"I am down, a thing to make a jest upon, a thing to pity, but I promise you that I can drag you with me. My kisses have cheapened you, eh? Then how must you have felt at Happy Camp on the Dyea Trail?"

As though in answer, Corliss swung down upon them with the tow-rope.

Frona beckoned a greeting to him. "Vance," she said, "the mail-carrier has brought important news to father, so important that he must go outside. He starts this afternoon with Baron Courbertin in La Bijou. Will you take me down to Dawson? I should like to go at once, to-day.

"He . . . he suggested you," she added shyly, indicating St. Vincent.