

Bindloss Harold

The Protector



Harold Bindloss

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CHAPTER I – A FRIEND IN NEED

A light breeze was blowing down the inlet, scented with the smell of the firs, and the tiny ripples it chased across the water splashed musically against the bows of the canoe. There was a thud as the blade struck the water, and the long, light hull forged onwards with slightly lifted, bird's-head prow, while the two men swung forward for the next stroke with a rhythmic grace of motion. They knelt, facing forward, in the bottom of the craft; and dissimilar as they were in features and, to some extent, in character, the likeness between them was stronger than the difference. Both bore the unmistakable stamp of a wholesome life spent in vigorous labour in the open. Their eyes were clear, and like those of most bushmen singularly steady; their skin was weather-darkened, and they were leanly muscular.

On either side of the lane of green water giant firs, Cedars and balsams, crept down the rocky hills to the whitened driftwood fringe. They formed part of the great coniferous forest which rolls westwards from the wet coast range of Canada's Pacific province, and, overleaping the Strait, spreads across the rugged and beautiful wilderness of Vancouver Island. Ahead, clusters of little frame houses showed up here and there in openings among the trees, and a small sloop, towards which the canoe was heading, lay anchored near the wharf.

The men had plied the paddle during most of that day, from inclination rather than necessity, because they could have hired Siwash Indians to undertake the labour for them, had they been so minded. They were, though their appearance did not suggest it, moderately prosperous; but their prosperity was of recent date, and they had been accustomed to doing everything for themselves, as are most of the men who dwell among the woods and ranges of British Columbia.

Vane, who knelt nearest the bows, was twenty-seven years of age, and he had spent nine of them chopping trees, driving cattle, poling canoes, and assisting in the search for useful minerals among the snow-clad ranges. He wore a wide, grey felt hat which had lost its shape from frequent wettings, an old shirt of the same colour, and blue duck trousers, rent in places; but the light attire revealed a fine muscular symmetry. He had brown hair and brown eyes, and a certain warmth of colouring which showed through the deep bronze of his skin hinted at a sanguine and somewhat impatient temperament.

His companion, Carroll, had lighter hair and grey eyes, and his appearance was a little less vigorous and a little more refined, though he, too, had toiled hard and borne many privations in the wilderness. His dress resembled Vane's. The two had located a valuable mineral property some months earlier, and though this does not invariably follow, had held their own against city financiers during the negotiations that preceded the floating of a company to work the mine. That they had succeeded in securing a good deal of the stock was largely due to Vane's pertinacity, and said something for his acumen; but both had been trained in a very hard school.

As the wooden houses ahead rose higher and the sloop's grey hull grew into sharper shape upon the clear green shining of the brine, Vane broke into a snatch of song.

“Had I the wings of a dove, I would fly,
Just for to-night, to the Old Country.”

He stopped and laughed. “It's nine years since I've seen it, but I can't get those lines out of my head. Perhaps it's because of the girl who sang them. Somehow, I felt sorry for her. She had remarkably fine eyes.”

“Sea-blue,” said his companion. “I don’t grasp the connection between the last two remarks.”

“Neither do I,” Vane admitted. “I suppose there isn’t one. But they weren’t sea-blue, unless you mean the depth of indigo, when you’re out of sounding. They’re Irish eyes.”

“You’re not Irish. There’s not a trace of the Celt in you, unless it’s your habit of getting indignant with the folks who don’t share your views.”

“No, sir,” answered Vane. “By birth, I’m North Country – England, I mean. Over there, we’re respectable before everything, and smart at getting hold of whatever’s worth having. As a matter of fact, you Ontario Scotsmen are mighty like us.”

“You certainly came out well ahead of those city men who put up the dollars,” said Carroll. “I guess it’s in the blood, though I fancied they would take the mine from you.”

Vane brought his paddle down with a thud. “Just for to-night, to the Old Country,” he hummed, and added: “It sticks to one.”

“Why did you leave the Old Country?”

“That’s a blamed injudicious question to ask, but you shall have an answer. There was a row at home – I was a sentimentalist then and just eighteen – and as the result of it I came out to Canada.” His voice changed and grew softer. “I hadn’t many relatives, and except one sister, they’re all gone now. That reminds me – she’s not going to lecture for the county education authorities any longer.”

The sloop was close ahead, and, slackening the paddling they ran alongside. Vane glanced at his watch when they had climbed on board.

“Supper will be finished at the hotel,” he remarked. “You had better get the stove lighted. It’s your turn, and that rascally Siwash seems to have gone off again. If he’s not back when we’re ready, we’ll sail without him.”

Carroll, accordingly, prepared the meal, and when they had finished it they lay on deck smoking with a content which was not altogether accounted for by a satisfied appetite. They had spent several anxious months, during which they had come very near the end of their slender resources, arranging for the exploitation of the mine, and now at last the work was over. Vane had that day made his final plans for the construction of a road and wharf by which the ore could be economically shipped for reduction, or as the alternative to this, for the erection of a small smelting plant. They had bought the sloop as a convenient means of conveyance and shelter, since they could live in some comfort on board. Now they could take their ease for a while, which was a very unusual thing to both of them.

“I suppose you’re bent on sailing this craft back?” Carroll said at length, “We could hire a couple of Siwash to take her home while we rode across the island and got the cars to Victoria. Besides, there’s that steamboat coming down the coast to-night.”

“Either way would cost a good deal extra, Vane pointed out.

“That’s true,” Carroll agreed with an amused look, “You could charge it to the Company.”

Vane laughed. “You and I have a big stake in the concern, and I haven’t got used to spending money unnecessarily yet. I’ve been mighty glad to earn 2.50 by working from sun-up until dark, though I didn’t always get it afterwards. So have you.”

“How are you going to dispose of your dollars, then? You have a balance in cash, as well as the shares.”

“It has occurred to me that I might spend a few months in the Old Country. Have you ever been over?”

“I was across some time ago, but if you would sooner I went with you, I’ll come along. We could start as soon as we’ve arranged the few matters left open in Vancouver.”

Vane was glad to hear it. He knew little about Carroll’s antecedents, but the latter was obviously a man of education, and they had been comrades for the last three years. During that time they had learnt to trust each other, and to bear with each other’s idiosyncrasies. Filling his pipe again as he lay in the fading sunlight, Vane looked back on the nine years he had passed in Canada; and allowing

for the periods of exposure to cold and wet, and the almost ceaseless toil, he admitted that he might have spent them more unpleasantly.

Having quarrelled with his relatives, he had come out with only a few pounds and had promptly set about earning a living with his hands. When he had been in the country several years, however, a friend of the family had sent him a small sum, and the young man had made a judicious use of the money. The lot he bought outside a wooden town doubled in value, and the share he took in a new orchard paid him well; but he had held aloof from the cities, and his only recklessness had been prospecting journeys into the wilderness. Prospecting for minerals is at once an art and a gamble, but even in this direction, in which he had had keen wits against him, Vane had held his own; but there was one side of life with which he was practically unacquainted.

There are no social amenities on the rangeside or in the bush, and women are scarce. Vane had lived in Spartan simplicity; his passions had remained unstirred, and now he was seven-and-twenty, sound and vigorous of body and, as a rule, level of head. At length, however, there was to be a change. He had earned an interlude of leisure, and he meant to enjoy it, without, as he prudently determined, making a fool of himself.

Presently Carroll took his pipe from his mouth.

“Are you going ashore to the show to-night?” he asked.

“Yes,” said Vane lazily. “It’s a long while since I’ve struck another entertainment of any kind, and that yellow-haired mite’s dancing is one of the prettiest things I’ve seen.”

“You’ve been twice already,” Carroll pointed out. “The girl with the blue eyes sings her first song rather well.”

“I think so,” Vane agreed with a significant absence of embarrassment. “In this case a good deal depends upon the singing – the interpretation, don’t they call it? The thing’s on the border, and I’ve struck places where they’d have made it gross; but the girl only brought out the mischief. Strikes me she didn’t see there was anything else in it.”

“That’s curious, considering the crowd she goes about with,” Carroll suggested. “Aren’t you cultivating a critical faculty?”

Vane disregarded the ironical question. “She’s Irish; that accounts for a good deal.” He paused and looked thoughtful. “If I knew how to do it, I’d like to give the child who dances five dollars. It must be a tough life, and her mother – the woman at the piano – looks ill. I wonder why they came to a place like this?”

“Struck a cold streak at Nanaimo, the storekeeper told me,” Carroll replied. “Anyway, since we’re to start at sun-up, I’m staying here.” Then he smiled. “Has it struck you that your attendance in the front seats is liable to misconception?”

His companion rose without answering and dropped into the canoe. Thrusting her off, he drove the craft towards the wharf with vigorous strokes, and Carroll shook his head whimsically as he watched him.

“Anybody except myself would conclude that he was waking up at last,” he said.

A minute or two later, Vane swung himself up on to the wharf and strode into the wooden settlement. There were one or two hydraulic mines and a pulp mill in the vicinity, and though the place was by no means populous, a company of third-rate entertainers had arrived some days earlier. On reaching the rude wooden building in which they had given their performance and finding it closed, he accosted a lounge.

“What’s become of the show?” he asked.

“Busted,” replied the man. “Didn’t take the boys’ fancy, and the crowd went out with the stage this afternoon, though I heard that two of the women stayed behind.”

Vane turned away with a slight sense of compassion. He, however, dismissed the matter from his mind, and having been kneeling in a cramped position in the canoe most of the day, decided to stroll along the waterside before going back to the sloop.

Great firs stretched out their sombre branches over the smooth shingle, and now the sun had gone their clean resinous smell was heavy on the dew-cooled air. Here and there brushwood grew among out-cropping rock, and catching sight of what looked like a stripe of woven fabric beneath a brake, he strode towards it. Then he stopped with a start, for a young woman lay with her face hidden from him in an attitude of dejected abandonment. He was about to turn away softly, when she started and looked up at him. Her eyes were wet, but they were of the deep blue he had described to Carroll, and he stood still.

“You shouldn’t give way like that,” he said.

It was all he could think of; but he spoke without obtrusive assurance or pronounced embarrassment, and the girl, who shook out her crumpled skirt over one little foot with a swift movement, choked back a sob, and favoured him with a glance of keen scrutiny as she rose to a sitting posture. She was quick at reading character – the life she led had made that necessary – and his manner and appearance were reassuring. She, however, said nothing, and sitting down on a neighbouring boulder, he took out his pipe from force of habit.

“Well,” he added, in much the same tone as he would have used to a distressed child, “what’s the trouble?”

She told him, speaking on impulse. “They’ve gone off and left me. The takings didn’t meet expenses.”

“That’s bad,” said Vane gravely. “Do you mean they’ve left you alone?”

“No,” replied the girl; “in a way it’s worse than that. I suppose I could go – somewhere – but there’s Mrs. Marvin and Elsie.”

“The child who danced?”

The girl assented, and Vane looked thoughtful.

“The three of you stick together,” he suggested.

“Of course. Mrs. Marvin’s the only friend I have.”

“Then I suppose you’ve no idea what to do?”

His companion confessed it, and explained that it was the cause of her distress and that they had had bad luck of late. Vane could understand that as he looked at her; her dress was shabby, and he fancied she had not been bountifully fed.

“If you stayed here a few days, you could go out with the next stage, and get on to Victoria with the cars,” he said. He paused and continued diffidently: “It could be arranged with the hotel-keeper.”

She laughed in a half-hysterical manner, and he remembered that fares were high in the country.

“I suppose you have no money,” he added, with blunt directness. “I want you to tell Mrs. Marvin that I’ll lend her enough to take you all to Victoria.”

Her face crimsoned, which was not quite what he had expected, and he suddenly felt embarrassed.

“No,” she replied; “I can’t do that. For one thing, it would be too late when we got to Victoria. I think we could get an engagement if we reached Vancouver in time to get to Kamloops by – ”

Vane knitted his brows when he heard the date, and it was a moment or two before he spoke.

“Then,” he said, “there’s only one way you can do so. There’s a little steamboat coming down the coast to-night, and I had half thought of intercepting her and handing the skipper some letters to post in Victoria. He knows me. That’s my sloop yonder, and if I put you on board the steamer, you’d reach Vancouver in good time. We would have sailed at sun-up anyway.”

The girl hesitated, which struck Vane as natural, and turned partly from him. He surmised that she did not know what to make of his offer, though her need was urgent. In the meanwhile he stood up.

“Come along and talk it over with Mrs. Marvin,” he went on. “I’d better tell you I’m Wallace Vane of the Clermont mine. Of course, I know your name from the programme.”

She rose and they walked back to the hotel. Once more it struck him that the girl was pretty and graceful. On reaching the hotel, he sat down on the verandah while she went in, and a few minutes

later the elder woman came out and looked at him much as the girl had done. He grew hot under her gaze and repeated his offer in the curtest terms.

“If this breeze holds, we’ll put you on board the steamer soon after daybreak,” he explained.

The woman’s face softened, and he recognised now that there had been suspicion in it. “Thank you,” she added, “we’ll come.” Then she added with an eloquent gesture: “You don’t know what it means to us.”

Vane merely took off his hat and turned away, but a minute or two afterwards he met the hotel-keeper.

“Do these people owe you anything?” he asked.

“Five dollars,” answered the man.

Vane handed him a bill. “Take it out of this, and make any excuse you like. I’m going to put them on board the steamboat.”

The man made no comment, and Vane, striding down to the beach, sent a hail ringing across the water. Carroll appeared on the sloop’s deck and answered him.

“Hallo!” he cried. “What’s the trouble?”

“Get ready the best supper you can manage for three people as quick as you can.”

Then he turned away in a hurry, wondering rather uneasily what Carroll would say when he grasped the situation.

CHAPTER II – A BREEZE OF WIND

There were signs of a change in the weather when Vane walked down to the wharf with his passengers, for a cold wind which had sprung up struck an eerie sighing from the sombre firs and sent the white mists streaming along the hillside. There was a watery moon in the sky, and on reaching the end of the wharf Vane fancied that the singer hesitated; but the elder woman laid her hand upon the girl's arm reassuringly and she got into the canoe. In a few minutes Vane ran the craft alongside the sloop and saw the amazement in Carroll's face by the glow from the cabin skylight. He, however, fancied that his comrade would rise to the occasion and he handed his guests up.

"My partner, Carroll. Mrs. Marvin and her daughter; Miss Kitty Blake. You have seen them already," he said. "They're coming down with us to catch the steamer."

Carroll bowed, and Vane, who thrust back the cabin slide, motioned the others below. The place was brightly lighted by a nickelled lamp, though it was scarcely four feet high and the centreboard trunk occupied the middle of it. A wide, cushioned locker ran along each side a foot above the floor, and a swing table, fixed above the trunk, filled up most of the space between. There was no cloth upon the table, but it was invitingly laid out with canned fruit, coffee, hot flapjacks, and a big lake trout.

"You must help yourselves while we get sail upon the boat," said Vane. "The saloon's at your disposal, my partner and I have the fo'c'sle. You will notice there are blankets yonder, and as we'll have smooth water most of the way you should get some sleep."

He withdrew, closing the slide, and went forward with Carroll to shorten in the cable; but when they stopped beside the bitts his companion broke into a soft laugh.

"Is there anything to amuse you?" Vane asked curtly.

"Well," said Carroll with an air of reflection, "it strikes me you're making a rather unconventional use of your new prosperity, and it might be prudent to consider how your friends in Vancouver may regard the adventure."

Vane sat down upon the bitts and took out his pipe. "One trouble in talking to you is that I never know whether you're in earnest or not. You trot out your cold-blooded worldly wisdom, and then you grin at it."

"I think that's the only philosophic attitude," replied Carroll. "It's possible to grow furiously indignant with the restraints stereotyped people lay on one; but on the whole it's wiser to bow to them and chuckle. After all, they've some foundation."

Vane looked up at him sharply.

"You've been right in the advice you have given me more than once: you seem to know how prosperous and what you call stereotyped folks look at things. But you've never explained where you got the knowledge."

"That," said Carroll, "is quite another matter."

"Anyway," continued Vane, "there's one remark of yours I'd like to answer. You would, no doubt, consider I made a legitimate use of my money when I entertained that crowd of city people – some of whom would have plundered me if they could have managed it – in Vancouver. I didn't grudge it, but I was a little astonished when I saw the wine and cigar bill. It struck me that the best of them scarcely noticed what they got – I think they'd been up against it at one time, as we have; and it would have done the rest of the guzzlers good if they'd had to work all day with the shovel on pork and flapjacks. But we'll let that go. What have you and I done that we should swill in champagne, while a girl with a face like that one below and a child who dances like a fairy haven't enough to eat? You know what I paid for the last cigars. What confounded hogs we are!"

Carroll laughed outright. There was not an ounce of superfluous flesh upon his comrade, who was hardened and toughened by determined labour, and the term hog appeared singularly inappropriate.

“Well,” said Carroll, “you’ll no doubt get used to the new conditions by and by, and in regard to your latest exploit there’s a motto on your insignia of the Garter which might meet the case. But hadn’t we better heave her over her anchor?”

They seized the chain and as it ran below a sharp, musical rattle rang out, for the hollow hull flung back the metallic clinking like a sounding board. When the cable was short-up, they grasped the halyards and the big gaff mainsail rose flapping up the mast. They set it and turned to the headsails, for though, strictly speaking, a sloop only carries one, the term is loosely applied in places, and as Vane had changed her rig there were two of them.

“It’s a fair wind, and I expect we’ll find more weight in it lower down,” said Carroll. “We’ll let the staysail lie and run her with the jib.”

They set the jib and broke out the anchor. Vane took the helm, and the sloop, slanting over until her deck on one side dipped close to the frothing brine, drove away into, the darkness. The lights of the settlement faded among the trees, and when Carroll coming aft flung a strip of canvas over the skylight, his comrade could see the black hills and climbing firs on both sides slip by. Sliding vapours streaked them, a crisp splashing sound made by the curling ripples followed the vessel; the canoe surged along noisily astern, and the frothing and gurgling grew louder at the bows. They were running down one of the deep, forest-shrouded inlets which, resembling the Norwegian fiords, pierce the Pacific littoral of Canada.

“I wonder how the wind is outside,” Vane said.

Carroll looked round and saw the white mists stream athwart the pines on a promontory they were skirting. “That’s more than I can tell. In these troughs among the hills it either blows straight up or directly down, and I dare say we’ll find it different when we reach the sound. One thing’s certain – there’s some weight in it now.”

Vane nodded agreement, though an idea that troubled him crept into his mind. “I understand the steamboat skipper will run in to land some Siwash he’s bringing down. It will be awkward in the dark if the wind’s onshore.”

Carroll made no comment, and they drove on, until as they swept round the point the sloop, slanting sharply, dipped her lee rail in the froth.

“We’ll have to tie down a reef,” he said.

Vane told him to take the tiller and scrambling forward, rapped upon the cabin side, which he flung back. Mrs. Marvin lay upon the leeward locker with a blanket across her and the little girl at her feet; Miss Blake sat on the weather one with a book in her hand.

“We’re going to take some sail off the boat,” he said. “You needn’t be disturbed by the noise.”

“When do you expect to meet the steamer?” Miss Blake inquired.

“Not for two or three hours, anyway,” Vane answered, with a hint of uncertainty in his voice. Then, as he fancied the girl had noticed it, he closed the slide.

“Down helm!” he said to Carroll, and there was a banging and thrashing of canvas as the sloop came up into the wind. They held her there, with the jib aback, while they hauled the canoe on board, which was not an easy task, and then with difficulty hove down a reef in the mainsail. It was heavy work, because there was nobody at the helm, and the craft falling off once or twice as they leaned out upon the boom with toes on her depressed lee rail, threatened to hurl them into the frothing water. Neither of them were trained sailors, but on that coast with its inlets and sounds and rivers the wanderer learns to handle sail and paddle and canoe-pole.

They finished their task, and when Vane seized the helm Carroll sat down under the shelter of the coaming, out of the flying spray.

“We’ll probably have some trouble putting your friends on board the steamer, even if she runs in,” he remarked. “What are you going to do if there’s no sign of her?”

“It’s a question I’ve been shirking for the last half-hour,” Vane confessed.

"I'd like to point out that it would be very slow work beating back up this inlet, and if we did so there isn't a stage across the island for several days. No doubt you remember you have to see that contractor on Thursday, and there's the directors' meeting."

"It's uncommonly awkward," Vane answered dubiously.

Carroll laughed. "It strikes me your guests will have to stay where they are, whether they like it or not; but there's one consolation – if this wind is from the north-west, which is most likely, it will be a fast run to Victoria. And now I'll try to get some sleep."

He disappeared down a scuttle forward, leaving Vane somewhat disturbed in mind. He had merely contemplated taking his guests for a few hours' run, but to have them on board for, perhaps, several days was a very different thing. Besides, he was far from sure that they would understand the necessity for the latter, in which case the situation might become difficult. In the meanwhile, the sloop drove on, until at last towards morning the beach fell back on each hand and she met the long swell tumbling in from the Pacific. The wind was from the north-west and blowing moderately hard; there was no light yet in the sky above the black heights to the east of him, and the swell grew higher and steeper, breaking white here and there. The sloop plunged over it wildly, hurling the spray aloft, and it cost him a determined effort to haul his sheets in as the wind drew ahead. Shortly afterwards, the beach faded altogether on one hand, and he saw that the sea was piled up into foaming ridges. It seemed most improbable that the steamer would run in to land her Indian passengers, and he drove the sloop on with showers of stinging brine beating into her wet canvas and whirling about him.

By and by he noticed that a stream of smoke was pouring from the short funnel of the stove, and soon afterwards the cabin slide opened. Miss Blake crept out and stood up in the well, gazing forward while she clutched the coaming.

Day was now breaking, and Vane could see that her thin dress was blown flat against her. There was something graceful in her pose, and it struck him that she had a very pretty slender figure.

"Where's the steamer?" she asked.

It was a question Vane had dreaded; but he answered it honestly: "I can't tell you. It's very likely that she has gone straight on to Victoria."

He read suspicion in her suddenly hardening face.

"You expected this when you asked us to come on board!" she cried.

"No," said Vane, whose face grew hot. "On my honour, I did nothing of the kind. There was only a moderate breeze when we left, and when it freshened enough to make it unlikely that the steamer would run in, I was as vexed as you seem to be. As it happened, I couldn't go back. I must get on to Victoria as soon as possible."

She looked at him searchingly.

"Then what are we to do?" she asked.

There was distress in the cry, but Vane answered it in his most matter-of-fact tone: "So far as I can see, you can only reconcile yourself to staying on board. We'll have a fresh fair wind for Victoria once we're round the next head, and with luck we ought to get there late to-night."

"You're sure you'll be there, then?"

"I'm sorry I can't even promise that: it depends upon the weather," he replied. "But you mustn't stand up in the spray. You're getting wet through."

She still clung to the coaming, but he fancied that her misgivings were vanishing; and he spoke again: "How are Mrs. Marvin and the little girl? I see you have lighted the stove."

The girl sat down, shivering, in the partial shelter of the coaming, and at last a gleam of amusement which he thought was partly compassionate shone in her eyes.

"I'm afraid they're – far from well. That was why I lighted the fire; I wanted to make them some tea. I thought you wouldn't mind."

Vane smiled. "Everything's at your service. Go and get your breakfast, and put on a coat you'll find below if you come out again."

She disappeared, and Vane felt relieved. Though the explanation had proved less difficult than he had anticipated, he was glad that it was over. Half an hour later she appeared again, carrying a loaded tray, and he wondered at the ease of her movements, for the sloop was plunging viciously.

"I've brought you some breakfast. You have been up all night," she said.

Vane laughed. "As I can only take one hand from the helm, you will have to cut up the bread and canned stuff for me. Draw that box out and sit down beneath the coaming if you mean to stay."

She did as he told her. The well was some four feet long, and the bottom of it about half that distance below the level of the deck. As the result of this, she sat close to his feet, while he balanced himself on the coaming, gripping the tiller. He noticed that she had brought an oilskin jacket with her.

"Hadn't you better put this on first? There's a good deal of spray," she said.

Vane struggled into the jacket with some difficulty, and she smiled as she handed him up a slice of bread and canned meat. "I suppose," she said, "you can only manage one piece at once?"

"Thank you. That's about as much as you could expect one to be capable of, even allowing for the bushman's appetite. I'm surprised to see you looking so fresh."

"Oh!" said the girl, "I used to go out with the mackerel boats at home; we lived at the ferry. It was a mile across the lough, and with the wind westerly the sea worked in."

"The lough?" said Vane. "I told Carroll you were from the Green Isle."

It struck him that this was, perhaps, imprudent, since it implied that they had been discussing her; but, on the other hand, he thought the candour of the statement was in his favour. Then he added: "Have you been long out here?"

Her face grew wistful. "Four years," she answered. "I came out with Larry – he's my brother. He was a forester at home, and he took small contracts for clearing land. Then he married – and I left him."

Vane made a sign of comprehension. "I see. Where's Larry now?"

"He went to Oregon. There was no answer to my last letter; I've lost sight of him."

"And you go about with Mrs. Marvin? Is her husband alive?"

Sudden anger flared up in the girl's blue eyes, though, he knew it was not directed against him.

"Yes," she said. "It's a pity he is. Men of his kind always seem to live."

It occurred to Vane, that Miss Blake, who had evidently a spice of temper, could be a staunch partisan; and he also noticed that now he had inspired her with some degree of trust in himself, her conversation was marked by an ingenious candour. For all that, she changed the subject.

"Another piece, or some tea?" she asked.

"Tea first," said Vane, and they both laughed when she afterwards handed him a double slice of bread.

"These sandwiches strike me as unusually nice," he informed her. "It's exceptionally good tea, too."

The blue eyes gleamed with amusement, "You have been in the cold all night – but I was once in a restaurant." She watched the effect of this statement on him. "You know I really can't sing – I was never taught, anyway, though there were some of the settlements where we did rather well."

Vane hummed a few bars of a song. "I don't suppose you realise what one ballad of yours has done. I'd almost forgotten the Old Country, but the night I heard you I felt I must go back and see it again. What's more, Carroll and I are going shortly; it's your doing."

This was a matter of fact, but Kitty Blake had produced a deeper effect on him, although he was not aware of it yet.

"It's a shame to keep you handing me things to eat," he added disconnectedly. "Still, I'd like another piece."

She smiled, delighted, as she passed the food to him. "You can't help yourself and steer the boat. Besides – after the restaurant – I don't mind waiting on you."

Vane made no comment, but he watched her with satisfaction while he ate, and as one result of it the sloop plunged heavily into the frothing sea. There was no sign of the others, and they were alone on the waste of tumbling water in the early dawn. The girl was pretty, and there was a pleasing daintiness about her.

She belonged to the people – there was no doubt of that; but then Vane had a strong faith in the people, native-born and adopted, of the Pacific slope. It was from them he had received the greatest kindnesses he could remember. They were cheerful optimists; indomitable grapplers with forest and flood, who did almost incredible things with axe and saw and giant-powder. They lived in lonely ranch houses, tents, and rudely flung up shacks; driving the new roads along the rangeside, risking life and limb in wild-cat adits. They were quick to laughter and reckless in hospitality.

Then with an effort he brushed the hazy thoughts away. Kitty Blake was merely a guest of his; in another day he would land her in Victoria, and that would be the end of it. He was assuring himself of this when Carroll crawled up through the scuttle forward and came aft to join them. In spite of his prudent reflections, Vane was by no means certain that he was pleased to see him.

CHAPTER III – AN AFTERNOON ASHORE

Half the day had slipped by, when the breeze freshened further and the sun broke through. The sloop was then rolling wildly as she drove along with the peak of her mainsail lowered before a big following sea. Vane looked thoughtful as he gripped the helm, because a head ran out from the beach he was following three or four miles way, and he would have to haul the boat up to windward to get round it. This would bring the combers upon her quarter, or, worse still, abeam. Kitty Blake was below; Mrs. Marvin had made no appearance yet, and he spoke to Carroll, who was standing in the well.

“The sea’s breaking more sharply, and we’d get uncommonly wet before we hammered round yonder head,” he said. “There’s an inlet on this side of it where we ought to find good shelter.”

“The trouble is that if you stay there long you’ll be too late for the directors’ meeting,” Carroll answered.

“They can’t have the meeting without me, and, if it’s necessary, they can wait,” Vane pointed out. “I’ve had to. Many an hour I’ve spent cooling my heels in offices before the head of the concern could find time to attend to me. No doubt it was part of the game, and done to impress me with a due sense of my unimportance.”

“It’s possible,” Carroll agreed, smiling.

Kitty Blake made her appearance in the cabin entrance just then, and Vane smiled at her.

“We’re going to give you a rest,” he announced. “There’s an inlet close ahead where we should find smooth water, and we’ll put you all ashore until the wind drops.”

There was no suspicion in the girl’s face now, and she gave him a grateful glance before she disappeared below with the consoling news.

Soon afterwards, Vane luffed into a tiny bay, where the sloop rode upright in the sunshine, with loose canvas flapping softly in a faint breeze while the cable rattled down.

They got the canoe over, and when he had landed Mrs. Marvin and her little girl, both of whom looked very woebegone and the worse for the voyage, into her, Vane glanced round.

“Isn’t Miss Blake coming?” he asked.

Mrs. Marvin, who was suggestively pallid, smiled. “She’s changing her dress.” She glanced at her own crumpled attire and added: “I’m past thinking of such things as that.”

They waited some minutes, and then Vane called to Kitty, who appeared in the entrance to the cabin, “Won’t you look in the locker, and bring anything you think would be nice? We’ll make a fire and have supper on the beach; if it isn’t first-rate, you’ll be responsible.”

A few minutes later they paddled ashore, and Vane landed them on a strip of shingle with a wall of rock behind it, to which dark firs clung in the rifts and crannies. The sunshine streamed into the hollow, the wind was cut off, and not far away a crystal stream came splashing down a ravine.

Vane, who had brought an axe, made a fire of resinous wood, and Carroll and Kitty prepared a bountiful supper. After it was finished Carroll carried the plates away to the stream, towards which Mrs. Marvin and the little girl followed him, and Vane and Kitty were left beside the fire. She sat on a log of driftwood, and he lay on the warm shingle with his pipe in his hand. The clear green water splashed and tinkled upon the pebbles close at his feet, and a faint, elfin sighing fell from the firs above them. It was very old music, the song of the primeval wilderness, and though he had heard it often, it had a strange, unsettling effect upon him as he languidly watched his companion. There was no doubt that she was pleasant to look upon; but although he failed to recognise this clearly, it was to a large extent an impersonal interest he took in her. She was not so much an attractive young woman with qualities that pleased him, as a type of something that had so far not come into his life; something which he vaguely felt that he had missed. One could have fancied that by some deep-sunk intuition she surmised this fact, and felt the security of it.

“So you believe you can get an engagement if you reach Vancouver in time,” he said at length. Kitty assented, and he asked, “How long will it last?”

“I can’t tell. Perhaps a few weeks. It depends upon how the boys are pleased with the show.”

“It must be a hard life,” Vane broke out. “You must make very little – scarcely enough, I suppose, to carry you on from one engagement to another. After all, weren’t you as well off at the restaurant? Didn’t they treat you properly?”

She coloured a little at the question. “Oh, yes; at least, I have no fault to find with the man who kept it, or his wife.”

Vane made a hasty sign of comprehension. He supposed that the difficulty had arisen from the conduct of one or more of the regular customers. He felt he would very much like to meet the man whose undesired attentions had driven his companion from her occupation.

“Did you never try to learn keeping accounts or typewriting?” he asked.

“I tried it once, but the mill shut down.”

“I’ve an idea that I could find you a post,” Vane made the suggestion casually, though he was troubled by an inward diffidence.

He saw a tinge of warmer colour creep into the girl’s cheeks.

“No,” she said decidedly. “It wouldn’t do.”

The man knitted his brows, though he fancied that she was right. “Well,” he replied, “I don’t want to be officious – but how can I help?”

“You can’t help at all.”

Vane, who saw that she meant it, lay smoking in silence for a minute or two. Then Carroll came up with Mrs. Marvin and the child, and he felt strongly stirred when the little girl walked up to him shyly with a basket filled with shells. He drew her down beside him, with an arm about her waist, while he examined her treasures, and then glancing up met Kitty’s eyes and felt his face grow hot with an emotion he failed to analyse. The child was delicate; life had scanty pleasure to offer her, but now she was happy.

“They’re so pretty, and there are lots of them,” she said. “Can’t we stay here longer and gather some more?”

“Yes,” said Vane, conscious that Carroll, who had heard the question, was watching him. “You shall stay and get as many as you want. I’m afraid you don’t like the sloop.”

“No,” replied the child gravely, “I don’t like it when it jumps. After I woke up it jumped all the time.”

“Never mind,” said Vane. “The boat will keep still to-night, and I don’t think there’ll be any waves to roll her about to-morrow. We’ll bring you ashore first thing in the morning.”

He talked to her for a few minutes, and then strolled along the beach with Carroll.

“Why did you promise that child to stay here?” Carroll asked.

“Because I felt like doing so.”

“I needn’t remind you that you’ve an appointment with Horsfield about the smelter, and there’s a meeting of the board next day. If we started now and caught the first steamer across, you wouldn’t have much time to spare.”

“That’s correct. I shall have to wire from Victoria that I’ve been detained.”

Carroll laughed expressively. “Do you mean to keep your directors waiting to please a child?”

“I suppose that’s one reason. Anyway, I don’t propose to hustle the little girl and her mother on board the steamer helpless with sea sickness,” He paused and a gleam of humour crept into his eyes. “As I told you, I’ve no objection to letting the directors wait my pleasure.”

“But they set the concern on its feet.”

“Just so,” said Vane coolly. “On the other hand, they got excellent value for their services – and I found the mine. What’s more, during the preliminary negotiations most of them treated me very casually.”

“Well?” said Carroll.

“There’s going to be a difference now, I’ve a board of directors; one way or another, I’ve had to pay for the privilege pretty dearly; but I don’t intend that they should run the Clermont mine.”

Carroll glanced at him with open amusement. There had been a marked change in Vane since he had floated the company, but it was one that did not astonish his comrade. Carroll had long suspected him of latent capabilities, which had suddenly sprung to life.

“You ought to see Horsfield before you meet the board,” he pointed out.

“I’m not sure,” Vane answered. “In fact, I’m uncertain whether I’ll give Horsfield the contract, even if we decide about the smelter. I don’t want a man with too firm a hold up against me.”

“But if he put his money in with the idea of getting certain pickings?”

“He didn’t explain his intentions, and I made no promises,” Vane answered dryly. “He’ll get his dividends; that’ll satisfy him.”

They rejoined the others, and when the white mists crept lower down from the heights above and the chill of the dew was in the air, Vane launched the canoe.

“It’s getting late, and there’s a long run in front of us to-morrow,” he informed his passengers. “The sloop will lie as still as if moored in a pond, and you’ll have her all to yourselves. Carroll and I are going to camp ashore.”

He paddled them off to the boat, and coming back with some blankets cut a few armfuls of spruce twigs in a ravine and spread them out beside the fire. Then sitting down just clear of the scented smoke, he lighted his pipe and asked an abrupt question: “What do you think of Kitty Blake?”

“Well,” said Carroll cautiously, “I must confess that I’ve taken some interest in the girl; partly because you were obviously doing so. In a general way, what I noticed rather surprised me. It wasn’t what I expected.”

“You smart folks are as often wrong as the rest of us. I suppose you looked for cold-blooded assurance, tempered by what one might call experienced coquetry?”

“Something of the kind,” Carroll agreed. “As you say, I was wrong. There are only two ways of explaining Miss Blake, and the first’s the one that would strike most people. That is, she’s acting a part, possibly with an object; holding her natural self in check, and doing it cleverly.”

Vane laughed scornfully. “I wouldn’t have entertained that idea for five minutes.”

“Then,” said Carroll, “there’s the other explanation. It’s simply that the girl’s life hasn’t affected her. Somehow she has kept fresh and wholesome.”

“There’s no doubt of it,” said Vane shortly.

“You offered to help her in some way?”

“I did; I don’t know how you guessed it. I said I’d find her a situation. She wouldn’t hear of it.”

“She was wise,” said Carroll. “Vancouver isn’t a very big place yet, and the girl has more sense than you have. What did you say?”

“Nothing. You interrupted us. But I’m going to sleep.”

He rolled himself up in his blanket and lay down among the soft spruce twigs, but Carroll sat still in the darkness and smoked his pipe out. Then he glanced at his comrade, who lay still, breathing evenly.

“No doubt you’ll be considered fortunate,” he said, apostrophizing him half aloud. “You’ve had power and responsibility thrust upon you. What will you make of them?”

Then he, too, lay down, and only the soft splash of the tiny ripples broke the silence while the fire sank lower.

They sailed next morning and eventually arrived in Victoria after the boat which crossed the Strait had gone, but the breeze was fair from the westwards, and after dispatching a telegram Vane put to sea again. The sloop made a quick passage, and for most of the time her passengers lounged in the sunshine on her gently-slanted deck. It was evening when they ran through the Narrows into Vancouver’s land-locked harbour.

Half an hour later, Vane landed his passengers, and it was not until he had left them they discovered that he had thrust a roll of paper currency into the little girl's hand. Then he and Carroll set off for the C.P.R. hotel.

CHAPTER IV – A CHANGE OF ENVIRONMENT

On the evening after his arrival in Vancouver, Vane, who took Carroll with him, paid a visit to one of his directors and, in accordance with the invitation, reached the latter's dwelling some little time before the arrival of other guests, whose acquaintance it was considered advisable that he should make.

Vane and his companion were ushered into a small room with an uncovered floor and simple, hardwood furniture. It was obviously a working room, for, as a rule, the work of the Western business man goes on continuously except when he is asleep; but a somewhat portly lady with a good-humoured face reclined in a rocking-chair. A gaunt, elderly man of rugged appearance rose from his seat at a writing-table as his guests entered.

"So ye have come at last," he said. "I had you shown in here, because this room is mine, and I can smoke when I like. The rest of the house is Mrs. Nairn's, and it seems that her friends do not appreciate the smell of my cigars. I'm not sure that I can blame them."

Mrs. Nairn smiled placidly. "Alec," she explained, "leaves them lying everywhere, and I do not like the stubs on the stairs. But sit ye down and he will give ye one."

Vane felt at home with both of them. He had met people of their kind before, and, allowing for certain idiosyncrasies, considered them the salt of the Dominion. Nairn had done good service to his adopted country, developing her new industries, with some profit to himself, for he was of Scottish extraction; but while close at a bargain he could be generous afterwards. When his guests were seated he laid two cigar boxes on the table.

"Those," he said, pointing to one of them, "are mine. I think ye had better try the others; they're for visitors."

Vane, who had already noticed the aroma of the cigar that was smouldering on a tray, decided that he was right, and dipped his hand into the second box, which he passed to Carroll.

"Now," said Nairn, "we can talk comfortably, and Clara will listen. Afterwards it's possible she will favour me with her opinion."

Mrs. Nairn smiled at them encouragingly, and her husband proceeded: "One or two of my colleagues were no pleased at ye for putting off the meeting."

"The sloop was small, and it was blowing rather hard," Vane explained.

"Maybe," said Nairn. "For all that, the tone of your message was not altogether conciliatory. It informed us that ye would arrange for the postponed meeting at your earliest convenience. Ye didna mention ours."

"I pointed that out to him, and he said it didn't matter," Carroll broke in, laughing.

Nairn spread out his hands in expostulation, but there was dry appreciation in his eyes. "Young blood must have its way." Then he paused. "Ye will not have said anything to Horsfield yet about the smelter?"

"No. So far, I'm not sure it would pay us to put up the plant, and the other man's terms were lower."

"Maybe," Nairn answered, and he made the word very expressive. "Ye have had the handling of the thing; but henceforward it will be necessary to get the sanction of the board. However, ye will meet Horsfield to-night. We expect him and his sister."

Vane thought he had been favoured with a hint, but he also fancied that his host was not inimical and was merely reserving his judgment. The latter changed the subject.

"So ye're going to England for a holiday," he remarked. "Ye'll have friends who'll be glad to see ye?"

"I've one sister and no other near relatives, but I expect to spend some time with folks you know. The Chisholms are old family friends and, as you will remember, it was through them I first

approached you.” Then obeying one of the impulses which occasionally swayed him he turned to Mrs. Nairn. “I’m grateful to them for sending me the letter of introduction to your husband. He didn’t treat me as the others did when I first went round this city with a few mineral specimens.”

He had expected nothing when he spoke, but there was a responsive look in the lady’s face which hinted that he had made a friend; and as a matter of fact, he owed a good deal to his host.

“So ye are meaning to stay with Chisholm,” Nairn exclaimed. “We had Evelyn here two years ago and Clara said something about her coming out again.”

“I never heard of that, but it’s nine years since I saw Evelyn.”

“Then there’s a surprise in store for ye,” said Nairn. “I believe they’ve a bonny place, and there’s no doubt Chisholm will make ye welcome.”

The slight pause was expressive. It implied that Nairn, who had a somewhat biting humour, could furnish a reason for Chisholm’s hospitality if he desired, and Vane was confirmed in this supposition when he saw the warning look which his hostess cast at her husband.

“It’s likely that we’ll have Evelyn again in the fall,” she broke in. “It’s a very small world, Mr. Vane.”

“It’s a far cry from Vancouver to England,” said Vane. “How did you come to know Chisholm?”

Nairn answered him. “Our acquaintance began with business, and he’s a kind of connection of Colquhoun’s.”

Colquhoun was a man of some importance, who held a Crown appointment, and Vane felt inclined to wonder why Chisholm had not sent him a letter to him. Afterwards he guessed at the reason, which was not flattering to himself or his host. The latter and he chatted awhile on business topics, until there was a sound of voices below, and going down in company with Mrs. Nairn they found two or three new arrivals in the entrance hall. More came in, and when they sat down to supper, Vane was given a place beside a lady whom he had already met.

Jessie Horsfield was about his own age; tall and slight of figure, with regular features, a rather colourless face, and eyes of a cold, light blue. There was, however, something which Vane considered striking in her appearance, and he was gratified by her graciousness to him. Her brother sat almost opposite to them, a tall, spare man, with an expressionless countenance, except for the aggressive hardness in his eyes. Vane had noticed this look in them, and it had roused his dislike; but he had not observed it in those of Miss Horsfield, though it was present now and then. Nor did he realise that while she chatted, she was unobtrusively studying him; She had not favoured him with much notice when she was in his company on a previous occasion; he had been a man of no importance then.

“I suppose you are glad you have finished your work in the bush,” she remarked presently. “It must be nice to get back to civilisation.”

“Yes,” Vane assented; “it’s remarkably nice after living for nine years in the wilderness.”

A fresh dish was laid before him, and his companion smiled. “You didn’t get things of this kind among the pines.”

“No,” said Vane. “In fact, cookery is one of the chopper’s trials. You come back dead tired, and often very wet, to your lonely tent, and then there’s a fire to make and supper to get before you can rest. It happens now and then that you’re too played out to trouble, and go to sleep instead.”

“Dreadful,” said the girl, sympathetically. “But you have been in Vancouver before.”

“Except on the last occasion, I stayed down near the water-front. We were not provided with luxurious quarters or suppers of this kind then.”

Jessie nodded. “It’s romantic, and though you must be glad it’s over, there must be some satisfaction in feeling that you owe the change to your own efforts. Doesn’t it give you a feeling that in some degree you’re master of your fate? I fancy I should like that.”

It was subtle flattery, and there were reasons why it appealed to the man. He had wandered about the province in search of employment, besides being beaten down at many a small bargain

by more fortunately situated men. Now, however, he had resolved that there should be a difference: instead of begging favours, he would dictate terms.

"I should have imagined it," he said, in answer to her last remark, and he was right, for Jessie Horsfield was a clever woman, who loved power and influence. Then she abruptly changed the subject.

"It was you who located the Clermont mine, wasn't it?" she asked. "I read something about it in the papers; I think they said it was copper."

This vagueness was misleading, because her brother had given her a good deal of information about the mine.

"Yes," said Vane, who was willing to take up any subject she suggested; "it's copper, but there's some silver combined with it. Of course, the value of any ore depends upon two things – the percentage of the metal, and the cost of extracting it."

She waited with flattering interest, and he added: "In both respects, Clermont produce is promising."

After that he did not remember what they talked about; but the time passed rapidly and he was surprised when Mrs. Nairn rose and the company drifted away by twos and threes towards the verandah. Left by himself a moment, he came upon Carroll sauntering down a corridor, and the latter stopped him.

"I've had a chat with Horsfield," he remarked.

"Well?" said Vane.

"He may have merely meant to make himself agreeable, and he may have wished to extract information about you. If the latter was his object, he was not successful."

"Ah!" said Vane thoughtfully. "Nairn's straight, anyway, and to be relied upon. I like him and his wife."

"So do I," Carroll agreed.

He moved away, and a few moments later Horsfield joined Vane, who had strolled out on to the verandah.

"I don't know if it's a very suitable time to mention it, but are you any nearer a decision about that smelter yet?" he said. "Candidly, I'd like the contract."

"No," said Vane. "I can't make up my mind, and I may postpone the matter indefinitely. It might prove more profitable to ship the ore out for reduction."

Horsfield examined his cigar. "Of course, I can't press you; but I may perhaps suggest that as we'll have to work together in other matters, I might be able to give you a *quid pro quo*."

"That occurred to me," said Vane, "On the other hand, I don't know how much importance I ought to attach to the consideration."

His companion laughed with apparent good-humour. "Oh, well!" he answered, "I must wait until you're ready."

He strolled away, and presently joined his sister.

"How does Vane strike you?" he asked. "You seem to get on with him."

"I've an idea that you won't find him easy to influence, and the girl looked at her brother pointedly.

"I'm inclined to agree with you," said Horsfield. "In spite of that, he's a man worth cultivating."

He passed on to speak to Nairn, and by and by Vane sat down beside Jessie in a corner of a big room. It was simply furnished, but spacious and lofty and looked out across the verandah. It was pleasant to lounge there and feel that Miss Horsfield had good-naturedly taken him under her wing, which seemed to describe her attitude.

"As Mrs. Nairn tells me you are going to England, I suppose we shall not see you in Vancouver for some months," she said presently. "This city really isn't a bad place to live in."

Vane felt gratified. She implied that he would be an acquisition and included him among the number of her acquaintances. "I fancy I shall find it a particularly pleasant one," he responded. "Indeed, I'm inclined to be sorry I've made arrangements to leave it very shortly."

"That is pure good-nature," his companion laughed.

She changed the subject, and Vane found her conversation entertaining. She said nothing of any consequence, but she knew how to make a glance or a changed inflection expressive. He was sorry when she left him, but she smiled at him before she moved away.

"If you and Mr. Carroll care to call, I am generally at home in the afternoon," she said.

She crossed the room, and Vane, who joined Nairn, remained near him until he took his departure.

It was late the next afternoon, and an Empress liner from China and Japan had arrived an hour or two earlier, when he and Carroll reached the C.P.R. station. The Atlantic train was waiting, and an unusual number of passengers were hurrying about the cars. They were, for the most part, prosperous people, business men and tourists from England, going home that way, and when Vane found Mrs. Marvin and Kitty, he was once more conscious of a stirring of compassion. Kitty smiled at him diffidently.

"You have been so kind," she began, and, pausing, added with a tremor in her voice: "But the tickets –"

"Pshaw!" said Vane. "If it will ease your mind, you can send me what they cost after the first full house you draw."

"How shall we address you?"

"Clermont Mineral Exploitation. I don't want to think I'm going to lose sight of you."

Kitty turned away from him a moment, and then looked back.

"I'm afraid you must make up your mind to that," she said.

Vane could not remember his answer, though he afterwards tried; but just then an official strode along beside the cars calling to the passengers, and when a bell began tolling Vane hurried the girl and her companions on to a platform. Mrs. Marvin entered the car, Elsie held up her face to kiss him before she disappeared, and he and Kitty were left alone. She held out her hand, and a liquid gleam crept into her eyes.

"We can't thank you properly," she said. "Good-bye."

"No," Vane protested. "You mustn't say that."

"Yes," said Kitty firmly. "It's good-bye. You'll be carried on in a moment."

Vane gazed down at her, and afterwards wondered at what he did; but she looked so forlorn and desolate, and the pretty face was so close to him. Stooping swiftly, he kissed her, and had a thrilling fancy that she did not recoil; then the cars lurched forward, and he swung himself down.

CHAPTER V – THE OLD COUNTRY

A month had passed since Vane said good-bye to Kitty, when he and Carroll alighted one evening at a little station in the north of England.

The train went on, and Vane stood still, looking about him with a poignant recollection of how he had last waited on that platform, sick at heart, but gathering his youthful courage for the effort that he must make. It all came back to him; the dejection, the sense of loneliness; for he was then going out to the Western Dominion in which he had not a friend. Now he was returning prosperous and successful. But once again the feeling of loneliness was with him – most of those whom he had left behind had made a longer journey than his.

Then he noticed an elderly man in livery approaching, and held out his hand with a smile of pleasure.

“You haven’t changed a bit, Jim,” he said.

“A bit stiffer in the joints, and maybe a bit sourer,” was the answer; then the man’s wrinkled face relaxed. “I’m main glad to see thee, Mr. Wallace. Master wad have come, only he’d t’ gan t’ Manchester suddenly.”

Vane helped him to place their baggage in the trap, and then, gathering up the reins, bade him sit behind. After half an hour’s ride through a country rolled in ridge and valley, Vane pulled up where a stile path led across a strip of meadow.

“You can drive round; we’ll be there before you,” he said to the groom as he got down.

Carroll and he crossed the meadow, and passing round a clump of larches, came suddenly into sight of an old grey house with a fir wood rolling down the hillside close behind it. The building was long and low, weather-worn and stained with lichens where the creepers and climbing roses left the stone exposed. The bottom row of mullioned windows opened upon a terrace, and in front of the latter ran a low wall with a mossy coping on which was placed urns bright with geraniums. It was pierced by an opening approached by shallow stairs on which a peacock stood, and between them and the two men stretched a sweep of lawn. A couple of minutes later a lady met them in the hall, and held out her hand to Vane effusively. She was middle-aged, and had once been handsome, Carroll thought, but there were wrinkles about her eyes, which had a hint of hardness in them.

“Welcome home, Wallace,” she said. “It should not be difficult to look upon the Dene as that – you were here so often once upon a time.”

“Thank you,” said Vane. “I felt tempted to ask Jim to drive me round by the Low Wood; I wanted to see the place again.”

“I’m glad you didn’t,” and the lady smiled sympathetically. “The house is shut up and going to pieces. It would have been depressing to-night.”

Vane presented Carroll. Mrs. Chisholm’s manner was gracious; but for no particular reason Carroll wondered if she would have extended the same welcome to either, had his comrade not come back the discoverer of a mine.

“Tom was sorry he couldn’t wait to meet you, but he had to leave for Manchester on some urgent business,” she informed Vane, and looked round as a girl with disordered hair came up to them.

“This is Mabel,” she said. “I hardly think you will remember her.”

“I’ve carried her across the meadow,” smilingly remarked Vane.

The girl greeted the strangers demurely, and favoured Vane with a critical gaze. “So you’re Wallace Vane – who found the Clermont mine. Though I don’t remember you, I’ve heard a good deal about you lately. Very pleased to make your acquaintance.”

Vane’s eyes twinkled as he shook hands with her. Her manner was quaintly formal, but he fancied there was a spice of mischief hidden behind it, and in the meanwhile Carroll, watching his hostess, surmised that her daughter’s remarks had not altogether pleased her. She, however, chatted

with them until the man who had driven them appeared with their baggage, when they were shown their respective rooms.

Vane was the first to go down, and reaching the hall found nobody there, though a clatter of dishes and clink of silver suggested that a meal was being laid out in an adjoining room. Sitting down near the hearth, he looked about him.

His eyes rested on many objects that he recognised, but as his glance travelled to and fro it occurred to him that much of what he saw conveyed a hint that economy was needful.

By and by he heard a patter of feet, and looking up saw a girl descending the stairs in the fading stream of light. She was clad in trailing white, which gleamed against the dark oak and rustled softly as it flowed about a tall, finely-outlined and finely-poised figure. She had hair of dark brown with paler lights in its curling tendrils, gathered back from a neck that showed a faintly warmer whiteness, than the snowy fabric beneath it. It was, however, her face which seized Vane's attention; the level brows, the quiet, deep brown eyes, the straight, cleanly-cut nose, and the subtle suggestion of steadfastness and pride which they all conveyed. He rose with a cry that had pleasure and eagerness in it: "Evelyn!"

She came down, moving lightly but, as he noticed, with a rhythmic grace, and laid a firm, cool hand in his.

"I'm glad to see you back, Wallace," she said. "But you have changed."

"I'm not sure that's kind. In some ways you haven't changed at all; I would have known you anywhere."

"Nine years is a long time to remember any one."

Vane had seen few women during that period; but he was not a fool, and he recognised that this was no occasion for an attempt at gallantry. There was nothing coquettish in Evelyn's words, nor were they ironical. She had answered in the tranquil, matter-of-fact manner which, as he remembered, usually characterised her.

"It's a little while since you landed, isn't it?" she added.

"A week," said Vane. "I'd some business in London, and then I went on to look up Lucy. She had just gone up to town, and I missed her. I shall go up again to see her as soon as she answers my note."

"It won't be necessary. She's coming here for a fortnight very soon."

"That's kind," said Vane. "Whom have I to thank for suggesting it?"

"Does it matter? It was a natural thing to ask your only sister – who is a friend of mine. We have plenty of room, and the place is quiet."

"It used not to be. If I remember, your mother generally had it full part of the year."

"Things have changed," said Evelyn quietly.

Vane was baffled by something in her manner. Evelyn had never been effusive – that was not her way – but now, while she was cordial, she did not seem disposed to resume their acquaintance where it had been broken off. After all, he could hardly have expected this.

"Mabel is like you, as you used to be," he said. "It struck me as soon as I saw her; but when she began to talk there was a difference."

"Yes," she said. "I think you're right in both respects. Mopsy has the courage of her convictions. She's an open rebel."

There was no bitterness in her tone. Evelyn's manner was never pointed, but Vane fancied that she had said a meaning thing, one that might explain what he found puzzling in her attitude, when he held the key to it. Then she went on: "Mopsy was dubious about you before you arrived, but I'm pleased to say she now seems reassured."

Then Carroll came down, and a few moments later Mrs. Chisholm appeared and they went in to dinner in a low-ceilinged room. Nobody said anything of importance, but by and by Mabel turned to Vane.

"I suppose you have brought your pistols with you," she said.

"I never owned one," Vane informed her.

The girl looked at him with an excellent assumption of incredulity. "Then you have never shot anybody in British Columbia?"

Carroll laughed, as if this greatly pleased him, but Vane's face was rather grave as he answered her.

"No," he said. "I'm thankful I haven't."

"Then the West must be getting what the Archdeacon – he's Flora's husband, you know – calls decadent," the girl retorted.

"She's incorrigible," Mrs. Chisholm interposed with a smile.

Carroll, who was sitting next to Mabel, leaned towards her confidentially. "In case you feel badly disappointed, I'll let you into a secret," he said. "When we feel real savage, we take the axe instead."

Evelyn fancied that Vane winced at this, but Mabel looked openly regretful.

"Can either of you pick up a handkerchief going at full gallop on horseback?" she inquired.

"I'm sorry I can't, and I've never seen Wallace do so," Carroll answered, laughing, and Mrs. Chisholm shook her head at her daughter.

"Miss Clifford complained of your inattention to the study of English last quarter," she said severely.

Mabel made no answer, though Vane thought it would have relieved her to grimace, and by and by the meal came to an end. Some time afterwards, Mrs. Chisholm rose from her seat in the drawing-room.

"We keep early hours at the Dene, but you will retire when you like," she said. "As Tom is away, I had better tell you that you will find syphons and whisky in the smoking-room. I have had the lamp lighted."

"Thank you," Vane replied with a smile. "I'm afraid you have taken more trouble on our account than you need have done. Except on special occasions we have generally confined ourselves to strong green tea."

Mabel looked at him in amazement. "Oh!" she said, "the West is certainly decadent. You should be here when the otter hounds are out. Why, it was only –"

She broke off abruptly beneath her mother's withering glance, and when they were left alone, Vane and Carroll strolled out upon the terrace, pipe in hand.

"I suppose you could put in a few weeks here," Vane remarked.

"I could," Carroll replied. "There's an – atmosphere – about these old houses that appeals to me, perhaps because we have nothing like it in Canada. Besides, I think your friends mean to make things pleasant."

"I'm glad you like them."

Carroll understood that his comrade would not resent a candid expression of opinion. "I do; the girls in particular. They interest me. The younger one's of a type that's common in our country, though it's generally given room for free development into something useful there. Mabel's chaffing at the curb. It remains to be seen if she'll kick, and hurt herself in doing so, presently."

Vane, who remembered that Evelyn had said something to the same effect, had already discovered that Carroll possessed a keen insight in certain matters.

"And her sister?" he suggested.

"You won't mind my saying that I'm inclined to be sorry for her? She has learned repression – been driven into line. That girl has character, but it's being cramped and stunted. You live in walled-in compartments in this country."

Vane strolled along the terrace thoughtfully. He was not offended, and he understood his companion's attitude. Like other men of education and good upbringing, driven by unrest or disaster to the untrammelled life of the bush, Carroll had gained sympathy as well as knowledge. Facing facts candidly, he seldom indulged in decided protest against any of them. On the other hand, Vane was on occasion liable to outbreaks of indignation.

“Well,” said the latter at length, “I guess it’s time to go to bed.”

CHAPTER VI – UPON THE HEIGHTS

Vane rose early next morning, as he had been accustomed to do, and taking a towel with him made his way across dewy meadows and between tall hedgerows to the tarn. Stripping where the rabbit-cropped sward met the mossy boulders, he swam out joyously, breasting the little ripples which splashed and sparkled beneath the breeze that had got up with the sun. Coming back where the water lay in shadow beneath a larch wood, which as yet had not wholly lost its vivid green, he disturbed the paddling moor-hens and put up a mallard from a clump of swaying reeds. Then he dressed and turned homewards.

Scrambling over a limestone wall tufted thick with parsley fern, he noticed Mabel stooping down over an object which lay among the heather where a rough cartroad approached a wooden bridge. On joining her, he saw that it was a finely-built canoe with a hole in one bilge she was examining. She looked up at him ruefully, as she said, "Very sad, isn't it? That stupid Little did it with his clumsy cart."

"I think it could be mended," Vane replied.

"Old Beavan – he's the wheelwright – said it couldn't, and dad said I could hardly expect him to send the canoe back to Kingston. He bought it for me at an exhibition." Then a thought seemed to strike her. "Perhaps you had something to do with canoes in Canada?"

"I used to pole one loaded with provisions up a river, and carry the lot round several falls. You're fond of paddling."

"I love it. I used to row the fishing-punt, but it's too old to be safe, and now the canoe's smashed I can't go out."

"Well," said Vane, "we'll walk across and see what we can find in Beavan's shop."

They crossed the heath to a tiny hamlet nestling in a hollow of a limestone crag. There Vane made friends with the wheelwright, who regarded him dubiously at first, and obtained a piece of larch board from him. The grizzled North countryman watched him closely as he set a plane, which is a delicate operation, and then raised no objection when Vane made use of his work bench. After that, Vane, who had sawn up the board, borrowed a few tools and copper nails, and he and Mabel went back to the canoe. On the way she glanced at him curiously.

"I wasn't sure old Beavan would let you have the things," she remarked. "It isn't often he'll lend even a hammer, but he seemed to take to you; I think it was the way you handled his plane."

"It's strange what little things win some people's good opinion, isn't it?"

"Oh! don't," she exclaimed. "That's how the Archdeacon talks. I thought you were different."

The man acquiesced in the rebuke, and after an hour's labour at the canoe, scraped the red lead he had used off his hands, and sat down beside the craft. By and by he became conscious that his companion was regarding him with what seemed to be approval.

"I really think you'll do, and we'll get on," she informed him. "If you had been the wrong kind you would have worried about your red hands. Still, you could have rubbed them on the heather, instead of on your socks."

"I might have thought of that," Vane agreed. "But, you see, I've been accustomed to wearing old clothes. Anyway, you'll be able to launch the canoe as soon as the joint's dry."

"There's one thing I should have told you," the girl replied. "Dad would have sent the canoe away to be mended if it hadn't been so far. He's very good when things don't ruffle him; but he hasn't been fortunate lately. The lead mine takes a good deal of money."

Vane admired her loyalty, and refrained from taking advantage of her candour, though there were one or two questions he would have liked to ask. When he was last in England, Chisholm had been generally regarded as a man of means, though it was rumoured that he was addicted to hazardous speculations. Mabel, who did not seem to mind his silence, went on:

"I heard Stevens – he's the gamekeeper – tell Beavan that dad should have been a rabbit because he's so fond of burrowing. No doubt, that meant he couldn't keep out of mines."

Vane made no comment, and to change the subject, reminded her: "Don't you think it's getting on for breakfast time?"

"It won't be for a good while yet. We don't get up early, and though Evelyn used to, it's different now. We went out on the tarn every morning, even in the rain; but I suppose that's not good for one's complexion, though bothering about such things doesn't seem to be worth while. Aunt Julia couldn't do anything for Evelyn, though she had her in London for some time. Flora is our shining light."

"What did she do?" Vane inquired.

"She married the Archdeacon, and he isn't so very dried up. I've seen him smile when I talked to him."

"I'm not astonished at that, Mabel."

His companion looked up at him demurely. "My name's not Mabel – to you. I'm Mopsy to the family, but my special friends call me Mops. You're one of the few people one can be natural with, and I'm getting sick – you won't be shocked at that – of having to be the opposite."

Half an hour later, Vane, who had seldom had to wait so long for it, sat down to breakfast. All he saw spoke of ease and taste and leisure. Evelyn, who sat opposite him, looked wonderfully fresh in her white dress. Mopsy was as amusing as she dared to be; but he felt drawn back to the restless world again as he glanced at his hostess and saw the wrinkles round her eyes and a hint of cleverly-hidden strain in her expression. He fancied a good deal could be inferred from the fragments of information her youngest daughter had let drop.

It was the latter who suggested that they should picnic upon the summit of a lofty hill, from which there was a striking view; and as this met with the approval of Mrs. Chisholm, who excused herself from accompanying them, they set out an hour later. The day was bright, with glaring sunshine, and a moderate breeze drove up wisps of ragged cloud that dappled the hills with flitting shadow.

Vane carried the provisions in a fishing-creel, and on leaving the head of the valley they climbed leisurely up easy slopes, slipping on the crisp hill grass now and then. By and by they plunged into tangled heather on a bolder ridge, which was rent by black gullies, down which at times wild torrents poured. This did not trouble either of the men, but Vane was surprised at the ease with which Evelyn threaded her way across the heath. She wore a short skirt, and he noticed the supple grace of her movements and the delicate colour the wind had brought into her face. She had changed since they left the valley. She seemed to have flung off something, and her laugh had a gayer ring; but while she chatted with him he was still conscious of a subtle reserve in her manner.

Climbing still, they reached the haunts of the cloud-berries and brushed through broad patches of the snowy blossoms that open their gleaming cups among the moss and heather.

Then turning the flank of a steep ascent, they reached the foot of a shingly scree, and sat down to lunch in the warm sunshine, where the wind was cut off by the peak above. Beneath them a great rift opened up among the rocks, and far beyond the blue lake in the depths of it they caught the silver gleam of the distant sea.

The creel was promptly emptied, and when Mabel afterwards took Carroll away to see if he could get up a chimney in some neighbouring crags, Vane lay resting on one elbow not far from Evelyn. She was looking down the long hollow, with the sunshine upon her face.

"You didn't seem to mind the climb," he said.

"I enjoyed it. I am fond of the mountains, and I have to thank you for a day among them."

On the surface, the words offered an opening for a complimentary rejoinder, but Vane was too shrewd to seize it. He had made one venture, and he surmised that a second one would not please her.

"They're almost at your door," he said. "One would imagine you could indulge in a scramble among them whenever it pleased you."

“There are a good many things that look so close and still are out of reach,” Evelyn answered with a smile that somehow troubled him. Then her manner changed. “You are content with this?”

Vane gazed about him; at purple crags in shadow, glistening threads of water that fell among the rocks, and long slopes that lay steeped in softest colour, under the summer sky.

“Content is scarcely the right word for it,” he assured her. “If it wasn’t so still and serene up here, I’d be riotously happy. There are reasons for this quite apart from the scenery: for one, it’s pleasant to feel that I need do nothing but what I like for the next few months.”

“The sensation must be unusual. I wonder if, even in your case, it will last so long.”

Vane laughed and stretched out one of his hands. It was lean and brown, and she could see the marks of old scars on the knuckles.

“In my case,” he answered, “it has only come once in a lifetime, and if it isn’t too presumptuous, I think I’ve earned it.” He indicated his battered fingers. “That’s the result of holding a wet and slippery drill, but those aren’t the only marks I carry about with me – though I’ve been more fortunate than many fine comrades.”

“I suppose one must get hurt now and then,” said Evelyn, who had noticed something that pleased her in his voice as he concluded. “After all, a bruise that’s only skin-deep doesn’t trouble one long, and no doubt some scars are honourable. It’s slow corrosion that’s the deadliest.” She broke off with a laugh, and added: “Moralising’s out of place on a day like this, and they’re not frequent in the North. In a way, that’s their greatest charm.”

Vane nodded.

“Yes,” he said. “On the face of it, the North is fickle, though to those who know it that’s a misleading term. To some of us it’s always the same, and its dark grimness makes you feel the radiance of its smile. For all that, I think we’re going to see a sudden change in the weather.”

Half of the wide circle their view would have commanded was cut off by the scree, but long wisps of leaden cloud began to stream across the crags above, intensifying, until it seemed unnatural, the glow of light and colour on the rest.

“I wonder if Mopsy is leading Mr. Carroll into any mischief; they have been gone some time,” said Evelyn. “She has a trick of getting herself, and other people into difficulties. I suppose he is an old friend of yours, unless, perhaps, he’s acting as your secretary.”

Vane’s eyes twinkled. “If he came in any particular capacity, it’s as bear-leader. You see, there are a good many things I’ve forgotten in the bush, and as I left this country young, there are no doubt some I never learned.”

“And so you make Mr. Carroll your confidential adviser. How did he gain the necessary experience?”

“That,” replied Vane, “is more than I can tell you, but I’m inclined to believe he has been at one of the universities; Toronto, most likely. Anyhow, on the whole he acts as a judicious restraint.”

“But don’t you really know anything about him?”

“Only what some years of close companionship have taught me.”

Evelyn looked surprised, and he spread out his hands in a humorous manner. “A good many people have had to take me in that way, and they seemed willing to do so; the thing’s not uncommon in the West. Why should I be more particular than they were?”

Just then Mabel and Carroll appeared. The latter’s garments were stained in places as if he had been scrambling over mossy rocks, and his pockets bulged.

“We’ve found some sundew and two ferns I don’t know, as well as all sorts of other things,” she announced.

“That’s correct,” said Carroll; “I’ve got them. I guess they’re going to fill up most of the creel.”

Mabel superintended their transfer, and then addressed the others generally: “I think we ought to go up the Pike now, when we have the chance. It isn’t much of a climb from here. Besides, the quickest way back to the road is across the top and down the other side.”

Evelyn agreed, and they set out, following a sheep-path which skirted the screes, until they left the bank of sharp stones behind, and faced a steep ascent. Parts of it necessitated a breathless scramble, and the sunlight faded from the hills as they climbed, while thicker wisps of cloud drove across the ragged summit. They reached the latter at length and stopped, bracing themselves against a rush of chilly breeze, while they looked down upon a wilderness of leaden-coloured rock. Long trails of mist were creeping in and out among the crags, and here and there masses of it gathered round the higher slopes.

"I think the Pike's grandest in this weather," Mabel declared. "Look below, Mr. Carroll, and you'll see the mountain is like a starfish. It has prongs running out from it."

Carroll did as she directed him, and noticed three diverging ridges springing off from the shoulder of the peak. Their crests, which were narrow, led down towards the valley, but their sides fell in rent and fissured crags to great black hollows.

"You can get down two of them," Mabel went on. "The first is the nearest to the road, but the third's the easiest. It takes you to the Hause; that's the gap between it and the next hill."

A few big drops began to fall, and Evelyn cut her sister's explanations short.

"We had better make a start at once," she said.

They set out, Mabel and Carroll leading and drawing farther away from the two behind; and the rain began in earnest as they descended. Rock slope and scattered stones were slippery, and Vane found it difficult to keep his footing on some of their lichenized surfaces. He, however, was relieved to see that his companion seldom hesitated, and they made their way downwards cautiously, until, near the spot where the three ridges diverged, they walked into a belt of drifting mist. The peak above them was suddenly blotted out, and Evelyn bade Vane hail Carroll and Mabel, who had disappeared. He sent a shout ringing through the vapour, and caught a faint and unintelligible reply, after which a flock of sheep fled past and dislodged a rush of sliding stones. Vane heard the latter rattle far down the hillside, and when he called again a blast of chilly wind whirled his voice away. There was a faint echo above him, and then silence again.

"It looks as if they were out of hearing, and the slope ahead of us seems uncommonly steep by the way those stones went down," he remarked. "Do you think Mabel has taken Carroll down the Stanghyll ridge?"

"I can't tell," said Evelyn. "It's comforting to remember that she knows it better than I do. I think we ought to make for the Hause; there's only one place that's really steep. Keep up to the left a little; the Scale Crags must be close beneath us."

They moved on cautiously, skirting what seemed to be a pit of profound depth in which dim vapours whirled, while the rain, which grew thicker, beat into their faces.

CHAPTER VII – STORM-STAYED

The weather was not the only thing that troubled Vane as he stumbled on through the mist. Any unathletic tourist from the cities could have gone up without much difficulty by the way they had ascended, but it was different coming down on the opposite side of the mountain. There, their route laid across banks of sharp-pointed stones that rested lightly on the steep slope, interspersed with out-cropping rocks which were growing dangerously slippery; and a wilderness of crags pierced by three great radiating chasms lay beneath.

After half an hour's arduous scramble, he decided that they must be close upon the top of the last rift, and stood still for a minute looking about him. The mist was now so thick that he could scarcely see thirty yards ahead, but the way it drove past him indicated that it was blowing up a hollow. On one hand a rampart of hillside loomed dimly out of it; in front there was a dark patch that looked like the face of a dripping rock; and between the latter and the hill a boggy stretch of grass ran back into the vapour. Then he turned, and glanced at Evelyn with some concern. Her skirt was heavy with moisture, and the rain dripped from the brim of her hat, but she smiled at him reassuringly.

"It's not the first time I've got wet," she said.

Vane felt relieved on one account. He had imagined that a woman hated to feel draggled and untidy, and he was willing to own that in his case fatigue usually tended towards shortness of temper. Though the scramble had scarcely taxed his powers, he fancied that Evelyn, had already done as much as one could expect of her.

"I must prospect about a bit," he said. "Scardale's somewhere below us; but if I remember, it's an awkward descent to the head of it, and I'm not sure of the right entrance to the Hause."

"I've only once been down this way, and that was a long while ago," Evelyn replied.

Vane left her, and plodded away across the grass. When he had grown scarcely distinguishable in the haze, he turned and waved his hand.

"I know where we are; the head of the beck's close by," he cried.

Evelyn joined him at the edge of a trickle of water splashing in a peaty hollow, and they followed it down, seeing only odd strips of hillside amidst the vapour, until at length the ground grew softer and Vane, going first, sank among the long green moss almost to his knees.

"That won't do. Stand still, please," he said. "I'll try a little to the right."

He tried in one or two directions; but wherever he went he sank over his boots, and, coming back, he informed his companion that they had better go straight ahead.

"I know there's no bog worth speaking of; the Hause is a regular tourist track," he added, and suddenly stripped off his jacket. "First of all, you'll put this on; I'm sorry I didn't think of it before."

Evelyn demurred, and he rolled up the jacket. "You have to choose between doing what I ask and watching me pitch it into the beck," he declared. "I'm a rather determined person, and it would be a pity to throw the thing away, particularly as the rain hasn't got through it yet."

She yielded, and after he had held up the garment while she put it on, he spoke again:

"There's another thing; I'm going to carry you for the next hundred yards, or possibly farther."

"No," said Evelyn firmly. "On that point my determination is as strong as yours."

Vane made a sign of acquiescence. "You can have your way for a minute; I expect it will be long enough."

He was correct, Evelyn moved forward a pace or two, and then stopped with the skirt she had gathered up brushing the quivering emerald moss, and her boots, which were high ones, hidden in the latter. She had some difficulty in pulling them out. Then Vane coolly picked her up.

"All you have to do is to keep still for the next few minutes," he informed her in a most matter-of-fact voice.

Evelyn did not move, though had he shown any sign of self-conscious hesitation she would at once have shaken herself loose. He was conscious of a thrill and a certain stirring of his blood, but this, he decided, must be sternly ignored, and his task occupied most of his attention. It was not an easy one, and he stumbled once or twice, but he accomplished it and set the girl down safely on firmer ground.

“Now,” he said, “there’s only the drop to the dale, but we must endeavour to keep out of the beck.”

His voice and air were unembarrassed, though he was breathless, and Evelyn fancied that in this and the incident of the jacket he had revealed the forceful, natural manners of the West. It was the first glimpse she had had of them, though she had watched for one, and she was not displeased. The man had merely done what was most advisable, with practical sense.

A little farther on, a shoot of falling water swept out of the mist above and came splashing down a crag, spread out in frothing threads. It flowed across their path, reunited in a deep gully which they sprang across, and then fell tumultuously into the beck, which was now ten or twelve feet below on one side of them. They clung to the rock as they traced it downwards, stepping cautiously from ledge to ledge. At times a stone plunged into the mist beneath them, and Vane grasped the girl’s arm or held out a steadying hand, but he was never fussy or needlessly concerned. When she wanted help, it was offered at the right moment; but that was all, and she thought that had she been alarmed, which was not the case, her companion’s manner would have been more comforting than persistent solicitude. He was, she decided, one who could be relied upon in an emergency.

Though caution was still necessary, the next stage of the journey was easier, and by and by they reached a winding dale. They followed it downwards, splashing through water part of the time, and at length came into sight of a cluster of little houses standing between a river and a big fir wood.

“It must be getting on towards evening,” said Evelyn. “Mopsy and Carroll probably went down the Ridge, and as it runs out lower down the valley, they’ll be almost at home.”

“It’s six o’clock,” said Vane, glancing at his watch. “You can’t walk home in the rain, and it’s a long while since lunch. If Adam Bell and his wife are still at the ‘Golden Fleece,’ we’ll get something to eat there and borrow you dry clothes. He’ll drive us home afterwards.”

Evelyn made no objections. She was very wet and beginning to feel weary, and they were some distance from home. She restored him his jacket, and a few minutes later they entered an old hostelry which, like many others among these hills, was a farm as well as an inn. The landlady, who recognised Vane with pleased surprise, took Evelyn away with her, and afterwards provided Vane with some of her husband’s clothes. Then she lighted a fire, and when she had laid out a meal in the guest-room, Evelyn came in, attired in a dress of lilac print.

“It’s Maggie Bell’s,” she explained demurely. “Her mother’s things were rather large. Adam is away at a sheep auction, and they have only the trap he went in, but they expect him back in an hour or so.”

“Then we must wait,” said Vane. “Worse misfortunes have befallen me.”

They made an excellent meal, and then Vane drew up a wicker chair to the fire for Evelyn and sat down opposite to her. Outside, the rain dripped from the mossy flagstone eaves, and the song of the river stole in monotonous cadence into the room.

Evelyn was silent and Vane said nothing for a while. He had been in the air all day, and though this was nothing new to him, he was content to sit lazily still and leave the opening of conversation to his companion. In the meanwhile it was pleasant to glance towards her now and then. The pale-tinted dress became her, and he felt that the room would have looked less cheerful had she been away.

The effect she had on him was difficult to analyse, though he lazily tried. She appealed to him by the grace of her carriage, the poise of her head, her delicate colouring, and the changing lights in her eyes; but behind these points something stronger and deeper was expressed through them. He fancied she possessed qualities he had not hitherto encountered, which would become more precious

when they were fully understood. He thought of her as wholesome in mind; one who sought for the best; but she was also endowed with an ethereal something that could not be defined.

Then a simile struck him: she was like the snow that towers high into the empyrean in British Columbia; in which he was wrong, for there was warm human passion in the girl, though it was sleeping yet. By and by, he told himself, he was getting absurdly sentimental, and he instinctively fumbled for his pipe and stopped. Evelyn noticed this and smiled.

"You needn't hesitate," she said. "The Dene is redolent of cigars, and Gerald smokes everywhere when he is at home."

"Is he likely to turn up?" Vane asked. "It's ever so long since I've seen him."

"I'm afraid not. In fact, Gerald's rather under a cloud just now. I may as well tell you this, because you are sure to hear of it sooner or later. He has been extravagant, and, as he assures us, extraordinarily unlucky."

"Stocks and shares?" suggested Vane, who was acquainted with some of the family tendencies.

Evelyn hesitated a moment. "That would have been more readily forgiven him. I believe he has speculated on the turf as well."

Vane was surprised, since he understood that Gerald Chisholm was a barrister, and betting on the turf was not an amusement he would have associated with that profession.

"Then," he said thoughtfully, "I must run up and see him later on."

Evelyn felt sorry she had spoken. Gerald needed help, which his father was not in a position to offer. She was not censorious of other people's faults; but it was impossible to be blind to some aspects of her brother's character, and she would have preferred that Vane should not meet Gerald while the latter was embarrassed by financial difficulties. She changed the subject.

"Several of the things you told me about your life in Canada interested me," she said. "It must have been bracing to feel that you depended upon your own efforts and stood on your own feet, free from all the hampering customs that are common here."

"The position has its disadvantages. You have no family influence behind you; nothing to fall back upon. If you can't make good your footing you must go down. It's curious that just before I came over here a lady I met in Vancouver expressed an opinion very like yours. She said it must be pleasant to feel that one was, to some extent at least, master of one's fate."

"Then she merely explained my meaning more clearly than I have done."

"One could have imagined that she has everything she could reasonably wish for. If I'm not transgressing, so have you. It's strange you should both harbour the same idea."

"I don't think it's uncommon among young women nowadays. There's a grandeur in the thought that one's fate lies in the hands of the high unseen powers; but to allow one's life to be moulded by – one's neighbours' prejudices and preconceptions is a different matter. Besides, if unrest and human striving were sent, was it only that they should be repressed?"

Vane sat silent a moment or two. He had noticed the brief pause and fancied that she had changed one of the words that followed it. He did not think it was her neighbours' opinions she most chafed against.

"It's not a point I've been concerned about," he replied at length. "In a general way, I did what I wanted."

"Which is a privilege that is denied to us." Evelyn spoke without bitterness, and added a moment later: "What do women who are left to their own resources do in Western Canada?"

"Some of them marry; I suppose that's the most natural thing," said Vane with an air of reflection that amused her. "Anyway, they have plenty of opportunities. There's a preponderating number of unattached young men in the newly-opened parts of the Dominion."

"Things are different here, or perhaps we want more than they do across the Atlantic," said Evelyn. "What becomes of the others?"

"They wait in the hotels; learn stenography and typewriting, and go into offices and stores."

“And earn just enough to live upon meagrely? If their wages are high, they must pay out more. That follows, doesn’t it?”

“To some extent.”

“Is there nothing better open to them?”

“No,” said Vane thoughtfully; “not unless they’re trained for it and become specialised. That implies peculiar abilities and a systematic education with one end in view: you can’t enter the arena to fight for the higher prizes unless you’re properly armed. The easiest way for a woman to acquire power and influence is by a judicious marriage. No doubt it’s the same here.”

“It is,” replied Evelyn smiling. “A man is more fortunately situated.”

“I suppose he is. If he’s poor, he’s rather walled in, too; but he breaks through now and then. In the newer countries he gets an opportunity.”

Vane abstractedly examined his pipe, which he had not lighted yet. It was clear that the girl was dissatisfied with her surroundings, and had for some reason temporarily relaxed the restraint she generally laid upon herself; but he felt that if she were wise, she would force herself to be content. She was of too fine a fibre to plunge into the struggle that many women had to wage, and though he did not doubt her courage, she had not been trained for it. He had noticed that among men it was the cruder and less developed organisations that proved hardiest in adverse situations; one needed a strain of primitive vigour. There was, it seemed, only one means of release for her, and that was a happy marriage. But a marriage could not be happy unless the suitor was all that she desired, and Evelyn would be fastidious, though her family would, no doubt, only look for wealth and station. He imagined that this was where the trouble lay. He would wait and keep his eyes open. Shortly after he arrived at this decision, there was a rattle of wheels outside and the landlord, who came in, greeted him with rude cordiality. In another minute or two Vane handed Evelyn into the gig, and Bill drove them home through the rain.

CHAPTER VIII – LUCY VANE

Bright sunshine streamed down out of a cloudless sky when Vane stood talking with his sister upon the terrace in front of the Dene one afternoon shortly after his ascent of the Pike in Evelyn's company. He leaned against the low wall, frowning, for Lucy had hitherto avoided a discussion of the subject which occupied their attention, and now, as he would have said, he could not make her listen to reason.

She stood in front of him, with the point of her parasol pressed firmly into the gravel, and her lips set, though there was a smile which suggested forbearance in her eyes. Lucy was tall and spare of figure; a year younger than her brother, and of somewhat determined character. She earned her living in a northern manufacturing town by lecturing on domestic economy for the public authorities. Vane understood that she also took part in Suffrage propaganda. She had a thin, forceful face, which was seldom characterised by repose.

"After all," Vane broke out, "what I've been urging is a very natural thing. I don't like to think of your being forced to work as you are doing, and I've tried to show that it wouldn't cost me any self-denial to make you an allowance. There's no reason why you should be at the beck and call of those committees any longer."

Lucy's smile grew plainer. "I don't think that describes my position very accurately."

"It's possible," Vane agreed with a trace of dryness. "No doubt you insist on the chairman or lady president giving way to you; but that doesn't affect the question. You have to work, anyway."

"But I like it, and it keeps me in some degree of comfort."

The man turned half impatiently and glanced about him. The front of the old grey house was flooded with light, and the lawn below the terrace glowed luminously green. The shadows of the hollies and cypresses were thin and unsubstantial, but where a beach overarched the grass, Evelyn and Mrs. Chisholm, attired in light draperies, reclined in basket chairs. Carroll, who wore thin grey tweed, stood close by, talking to Mabel, and Chisholm sat a little apart upon a bench with a newspaper in his hand. He looked half asleep, and a languorous, stillness pervaded the whole scene.

"Wouldn't you like this kind of thing as well?" he asked. "Of course, I mean what it implies – the power to take life easily and get as much enjoyment as possible out of it. It wouldn't be difficult, if you would only take what I'd be glad to give you." He indicated the languid figures in the foreground. "You could, for instance, spend your time among folks like these; and, after all, it's what you were meant to do."

"Well," said Lucy, "I believe I'm more at home with the other kind of folks – those in poverty, squalor, and ignorance. I've an idea they've a stronger claim on me, but that's not a point I can urge. The fact is, I've chosen my career, and there are practical reasons why I shouldn't abandon it. I had a good deal of trouble in getting a footing, and if I fell out now, it would be harder still to take my place in the ranks again."

"But you wouldn't require to do so."

"I can't be sure. I don't want to hurt you; but, after all, your success was sudden, and one understands that it isn't wise to depend upon an income derived from mining properties."

"None of you ever did believe in me."

"I suppose there's some truth in that; you really did give us some trouble. Somehow you were different – you wouldn't fit in – though I believe the same thing applied to me, for that matter."

"And now you don't expect my prosperity to last?"

The girl hesitated, but she was candid by nature. "Perhaps I had better answer. You have it in you to work determinedly and, when it's necessary, to do things that men with less courage would shrink from; but I doubt if yours is the temperament that leads to success. You haven't the huckster's instincts; you're not cold-blooded enough. You wouldn't cajole your friends or truckle to your enemies."

“If I adopted the latter course, it would be very much against the grain,” Vane confessed.

Lucy laughed. “Well,” she said, “I mean to go on earning my living; but you can take me up to London for a few days and buy me some hats and things. Then I don’t mind you giving something to the Emancipation Society.”

“I don’t know if I believe in emancipation or not, but you can have ten guineas.”

“Thank you,” said Lucy, glancing round towards Carroll, who was approaching them with Mabel. “I’ll give you a piece of advice – stick to that man. He’s cooler and less headstrong than you are; he’ll prove a useful friend.”

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