

THE UNQUENCHABLE FIRE:

Or, The Tragedy of the Wild.

CHAPTER XII.—(Cont'd)

Once let him get upon the trail with the "stuff," and Jean and his sister could go hang. They would never get him, he told himself. He had not lived in these latitudes for five-and-twenty years for nothing. But he ever came back to the pitiful admission that he was not yet on the trail, nor had he got the treasure. And time was passing. Suddenly his eyes settled themselves upon a distant spot beyond the creek. Something had caught his attention, and that something was moving. The sound of Jean's lumbering movements continued. Victor no longer heeded them. His attention was fixed upon that movement on the distant slope.

And gradually his brow lightened, and something akin to a smile spread over his features. Then he moved back to his counter, and, procuring a small calendar, glanced hastily at the date. His look of satisfaction deepened, and his smile became one of triumph. Surely the devil was with him. Here, in the blackest moment of his despair, was the means he had sought. Yonder moving object was the laden dog-train coming up from Edmonton. It was his half-yearly supplies. Now he would see those wits were the sharpest, his or those of the pig-headed Jean. The man who had dared to dictate to Victor Gagnon. And the trader laughed silently.

Gagnon's plan had come to him in a flash. The moment he had recognized that the Company's dog-train was approaching he had realized the timeliness of its coming. It would be at his door within an hour and a half.

Jean's voice calling him broke in upon his meditations. He was about to pass the summons by unheeded. Then he altered his mind. Better not force his gaoler to seek him. His eyes might see what he had seen, and his suspicions might be aroused if he thought that he, Victor, had seen the dog-train coming and had said nothing. So he turned and obeyed the call with every appearance of reluctance.

Jean eyed his prisoner coldly as he drew up beside him.

"Wal, I've waited for you to say as you'll marry Davi', an' ye ain't had the savvy to wag yer tongue right. I'm goin' to quit. The snow's goin' fast. They dogs o' mine is gettin' saft fer want o' work. I'm goin' to light right out o' here, Victor, an' the boodle's goin' wi' me."

Jean was the picture of strong, unimaginative purpose. But Victor had that in his mind which made him bold.

"Ye've held me prisoner, Jean. Ye've played the skunk. Guess you ain't goin' now. Neither is my share o' the contents o' that chest. Savvy? If ye think o' moving that wad we're goin' to scrap. I ain't no coyote."

Jean thought for a while. His lean face displayed no emotion. His pant figure dwarfed the trader almost to nothing, but he seemed to weigh the situation well before he committed himself.

"At last he grunted, which was his way of announcing that his decision was taken.

"I'll have they dogs hitched this afternoon," he said slowly and with meaning.

"An' I'll set right here by the door," said Gagnon. "Guess the door'll let you pass, but it ain't big enough fer the chest to git through."

Victor sat himself down as he said, and deliberately pulled out a large revolver. This he laid across his lap. And then the two men eyed each other. Jean was in no way taken aback. In fact, nothing seemed to put him out of his deliberate manner. He allowed the challenge to pass and went out. But he returned almost immediately and thrust his head in through the doorway.

"There won't be no need fer scrappin' yet awhile," he said. "I lous I've changed my way o' thinkin'. The Company's dog-train is comin' up the valley, I guess. When they've gone, we'll see." And Victor smiled to himself when

the giant had once more departed. Then he put his pistol away.

"Wal, that's settled," he said to himself. "The boodle stops right here. Now we'll see, Jean Leblonde, who's runnin' this layout. Ther's whisky aboard that train. Mebbe you ain't like to fergit that. You'll taste, sure. As ye jest sed, 'we'll see.'"

The trader knew his man. The great Jean had all the half-breed's weaknesses as well as more than a usual supply of their better features. Sober he was more than dangerous, now that he had shown his real intentions, for he was a man not likely to be turned from his purpose. But Victor knew his fondness for drink, and herein lay the kernel of his plan. With him it was a case of now or never. He must throw everything to the winds for that money, or be burdened with a wife he did not want, and a brother-in-law he wanted less, with only a third of that which his greedy heart thirsted for. No, he would measure swords with Jean, and though his blade was less stout than that of the stolid giant, he relied upon its superior keenness and lightness. He meant to win.

The Company's dog-train came up; two sleds, each hauled by ten great huskies. They were laden down with merchandise—groceries, blankets, implements, medicines, and a supply of spirits, for medicinal purposes only. Just the usual freight which comes to every trader in the Wild. Such stuff as trappers and Indians need, and are willing to take in part payment for their furs. But Victor only cared for the supply of spirits just then. That, and he paid unusual attention to the condition of the dogs.

The train was escorted by two half-breeds, one driving each sled. These were experienced hands, servants who had grown old in the service of the Company. Men whose responsibility began when they hit the trail, and ceased when they arrived at their destination.

Pierre was a grizzled veteran, and his was the charge of the journey. Ambrose was his assistant. Victor understood these men, and made no delay in displaying his hospitality when the work of unloading was completed. A ten-gallon keg of Hudson's Bay rum was part of the consignment, and this was tapped at once by the wily trader.

The four men were gathered in the back room of the store when Victor turned on the tap and the thick brown stream gurgled forth from the cask. He poured out a tot for each of the train drivers. Then he stood uncertainly and looked over at Jean. The latter had seated himself over against the stove, and appeared to take little interest in what was going on. Victor stood with one foot tapping the floor impatiently. He had been quick to notice that Jean's great eyes had stolen in the direction of the little oaken keg. At last he threw the tin beaker aside as if in disgust. He played his part consummately.

"Tain't no go, boys. I'm not drinkin'. Ther's what. Look at him," he cried, pointing at Jean. "We've had words, I guess, him and me, an' he's that riled as he don't notion sippin' good thick rum wi' us. Wal, I guess it'll keep, what you boys can't do in. Ther's the pannikin, ther's the keg. Jest help yourselves, lads, when you fancy. I ain't tasin' with bad blood runnin' in this shack."

"What, no drink?" cried old Pierre, his face beaming with oily geniality. "Dis no lak ole time, Victor. What's de fuss? Mebbe I tink right. Squaw, Vic, squaw!" The old boy chuckled heartily at his pleasantry. He was a French-Canadian half-breed, and spoke with a strong foreign accent. Ambrose joined in the laugh.

"Ho, Jean! man," cried the latter. "No had blood, I'm guessin'. Ther's good thick rum, lad, an' I mind you're a mighty partial most generally."

Victor had started the ball rollin', and he knew that neither Pierre nor Ambrose was likely to

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let it rest until they had had all the rum they wanted. Everything had been made snug for the night, so they only had their own pleasure to consider. As Ambrose's challenge fell upon his ears, Jean looked up. His eyes were very bright, and they rested longingly upon the keg on their way to the driver's face. He shook his head, but there was not much decision in the movement.

Pierre, seeing the action, stepped up to him and shook a warning finger in his face.

"Hey, you, Jean-le-gros, pig-head! We come four hundred mile to see you. We bring you drink, everything. You not say 'How.' We not welcome. Bah, I spit! In my Quebec we lak our friends to come. We treat. Bah, I spit again."

Jean looked slightly abashed. Then Ambrose chimed in.

"Out of the durned way, froggy," he said, swinging Pierre aside by the shoulder. "You don't understand our ways, I guess. Ther' ain't no slobberin' wi' white folk. Here, you Vic, hold out yer hand, man, and shake wi' Jean. We're goin' to have a time tonight, or I'll quit the road for ever."

Victor shrugged. Then he picked up a pannikin and filled it with rum. He held it out in his left hand towards Jean while he offered his right in token of friendship. Jean eyed the outstretched hand. Then he looked at the rum, and the insidious odor filled his nostrils. The temptation was too great, as Victor knew it would be, for him. He thrust one great hand into the trader's, and the two men shook; then he took the drink and gulped it down.

The armistices was declared, and Victor, in imagination, already saw the treasure his.

Now the pannikin passed round merrily. The room reeked with the pungent odor of the spirit, and all was apparently harmonious. Victor resigned his post as dispenser of liquor to Ambrose, and began his series of stock entertainments. He drank as little as possible himself, though he could not openly shirk his drink, and he always kept one eye upon Jean to see that he was well supplied; and so the time slipped by.

After the first taste Jean became a different man; he laughed and jested in his slow, coarse fashion, and, with him, all seemed good-fellowship. Pierre and Ambrose soon began to get drunk, and Victor's voice, as he sang, was mostly drowned by the rolling tones of these hoary-headed old sinners as they droned out the choruses of his songs.

Now, as the merriment waxed, Victor was able to shirk his drink deliberately. Jean seemed insatiable, and soon his great body swayed in a most drunken fashion, and he clung to his seat as if fearing to trust his legs. He joined in every chorus, and never lost an opportunity of addressing Victor in terms of deepest friendliness. And in every pause in the noise he seized upon the chance to burst out into some wild ditty of his own. Victor watched with cat-like vigilance, and what he saw pleased him mightily. Jean was drunk. And he would see to it that before he had done the giant would be hopelessly so.

Evening came on. Ambrose was the first to collapse. The others laughed and left him to his deep, dreamless slumber upon the floor. Victor was weary of it all, but he knew he must see the game out. Jean's eyelids were drooping heavily, and he, too, seemed on the verge of collapse. Only old Pierre, hardened to the ways of his life, flagged not. Suddenly the Frenchman saw Jean's head droop forward. In a moment he was on his unsteady legs and filling a pannikin to the brim. He laughed as he drew Victor's attention, and the latter nodded approval. Then he put it to the giant's lips. The big man sipped a little of it, then, his head falling further forward, he upset the pannikin, and the contents poured upon the earthen floor. At the same time, as though utterly helpless, he rolled off his seat and fell to the ground, snoring heavily. Pierre shouted his delight. Only

Victor and he were left. They knew how to take their liquor, the old hands. His pride of achievement was great. He would see Victor under the table, too, he told himself. He stood over the trader while the latter drank a bumper. Then he himself drank to the dregs. It was the last straw. He swayed and lurched to the outer door. There he stood for a moment, then the cold night air did for him what the rum had been powerless to do. Without warning he fell in a heap upon the doorstep as unconscious as though he had been struck dead. Victor alone kept his head.

The trader rose from his seat and stretched himself. Then, stealthily, he went the round of the prostrate men. He shook Ambrose, but could not wake him. Jean he stood over for a while and silently watched the stern face. There was not a shade of consciousness in its expression. He bent down and touched him. Still no movement. He shook him gently, then more roughly. He was like a log. Victor grinned with a fiendish leer.

"Guess he's fixed," he muttered. Then he went out into the store and came to the door where old Pierre had fallen. The Frenchman was no better than the others.

"Good. By Gar, Jean, my friend, I've done you," he said to himself as, reassured, he went back to the inner room. He was none too steady himself, but he had all his wits about him. The chest was near the bed. He picked it up and opened it. The treasure was there safe enough. He closed the lid and took it up in his arms and passed out of the store. Nor did he look back. He was anxious to be gone.

(To be continued.)

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ENGLISH SOCIETY.

Lavish Entertaining and the Boisterous Kitchen Lancers.

It takes a very great personage indeed to carry the principle of being unostentatious into modern entertaining, says the Gentleman of London. The almost universal idea nowadays seems to provide gorgeous flowers, the dernier cri in music, and any amount of succulent viands as a bribe to smart young men and women of fashion if haply they be kind enough to come and dine or dance.

Yet even in society there are yet one or two houses where a simple buffet supper is thought to be all sufficient," the writer continues, "and I know of one dual house where plates of biscuits and sandwiches, with lemonade and claret cup, are considered ample refreshment for the very distinguished guests who are from time to time invited to evening parties in that particular mansion.

"A sudden irruption of balls has brought to the fore some severe protests by chaperons and others on the subject of up to date dancing. As usual the controversy centres round that hybrid development of our old friend Lancers yelet 'Kitchen.' Really, though, in spite of what chaperons may write to the papers, the fashion of dancing Lancers in a somewhat rollicking spirit is quite a quarter of a century old and preceded the arrival of the modern girl who is not content to do anything except 'at the double.'"

"The only difference I can see in the Kitchen Lancers of to-day and the Kitchen Lancers of the middle '80's is that nowadays the young men from time to time lift the young women off their feet, whirl them round a little in midair and deposit them once more on terra firma. This has really rather a pretty effect and certainly need not involve romping.

"Valsing, on the other hand, is absolutely different from what it was in the late Victorian days, and to my mind the present style is decidedly more graceful than the fast deus tempus which jumpy and with arm stuck out at right angles was the gentlest mode when the chaperons of to-day were going out. The effect of a ballroom in motion is nowadays far prettier than it used to be, and a very practical gain brought about by the slow measure and reversing the up to date vals is that there are much fewer collisions and torn clothes than there were ever before."

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"But times change, and thus to-day, even in far away Iceland, where news from the outside world is slow to creep in, we have at last



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