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KAREN.

A CANADIAN ROMANCE.

I.

It was a Mennonite clearing on the Upper Ottawa. All round, a stunted pine-forest covered the low granite hills—slim stems scarcely able to root themselves obliquely in the rare clefts of that barren ice-worn rock. In the foreground, a deep lake slumbered calm between high crags, the peaty soil that surrounded its margin starred thick underfoot with great white cups of the creeping American calla-lily. A group of log-huts occupied a nook by the shore; behind them, some rude corn-plots; then the unbroken forest. It was a beautiful scene, but very sombre and desolate; most romantic to sketch, most gloomy to live in. Above all in winter!

To this lonely spot, miles away from the world, a small colony of Russian religious fanatics had drifted, to take refuge from the despotism of the Orthodox Church. They are a simple, toilsome, God-fearing lot, these bronze-faced and bearded Mennonites, very austere and ascetic—a sort of mild-eyed, melancholy Russian edition of the Quakers or the Moravians; and they flock to Canada, partly because the country is congenially cold and forest-clad, but partly also because the life and the mode of labour there exactly suit them. In those unbroken wilds, far from the din of cities, they fell timber, and plant Indian corn, and speak with tongues, and worship God in their own quaint fashion, no man hindering. The winter is hard on the Upper Ottawa, but the iron grip of the Czar is many degrees harder. It sinks often below the zero of human endurance.

In the spring, however, even the Mennonite fancy lightly turns to thoughts of love. Now it was a glorious spring day, of the true American sort, when the maples were just clothing themselves in the first wan green of early youth, and the blood-root was opening its pale petals timidly to the warm Canadian sun. A young man and a girl stood on the trail through the wood that led from Nijni Ouralsk to Robinson's Portage, the next raw settlement. They were Russians by birth, but their speech was English; the common-school system of the country had given them that. The young man was tall, and lissome, and blue-eyed, and handsome; the girl was shrinking and delicate, like an Indian pipe-plant.

"To-morrow we shall know all, Karen," the young man was saying hopefully, as he held her hand in his, though she half strove to disengage it, like one who tries hard to do her duty, in spite of inclination. "To-morrow we shall know all; and, perhaps, we shall know the best—the very best—my darling."

The girl looked back at him doubtfully, with a very wistful look. Tears swam in her dim eyes. She was very much in love with him. "And perhaps we shall know the worst," she said, with a sigh of resignation. "It is as the Lord wills it, Ivan."

Ivan raised that little white hand, all trembling, to his lips. Karen was always a pessimist—though he hadn't such a fine word at his tongue's tip to express it with. He kissed the struggling little hand with profound devotion. These Russians are intense in whatever they do.

"And if it comes to the worst," he said, in very tentative tones, "if it goes against us, you will obey them, Karen?"

The girl drew back as if shocked.

"Oh, Ivan!" she cried, in alarm. "You would not surely rebel! It is His will, Ivan!"

The young man passed a puzzled hand over his fair brown beard.

"It is His will, I suppose," he said slowly, "since the Elders tell us so. But it's very mysterious."

Karen gazed deep into his true eyes—those clear, honest blue eyes of his, and answered with a burst—

"I sometimes think He won't put this burden upon our two poor hearts, Ivan. I have prayed so hard. I think you *must* draw me."

"I think so, too," Ivan answered, with the hopeful optimism of early manhood. "For I also have prayed. Prayed earnestly, fervently."

"Ah, yes, but perhaps your prayers were too carnal," the girl exclaimed in an anxious voice, with a faint shade of terror

passing slowly across her face. "It may be ill for our souls that your petition should be answered. And Peter Verstoff has prayed too. I know he loves me."

"But not as *I* love you, Karen," Ivan cried, all eager, with a red glow on his face. "No, my child, not as I love you! Oh yes, I know he follows you about, and sighs after you, and dreams of you. How could he help it, indeed? There's no girl in all Ouralsk a man could love but you." He plucked two white snow-blossoms, with a tiny sprig of tamarack for feathery verdure, and placed them reverently in the opening of her simple bodice. "Peter Verstoff!" he exclaimed once more, with profound contempt in his tone. "I tell you, Karen, he hasn't got it in him. Peter doesn't know how to love as I do!"

"I'm afraid not," Karen answered demurely, true to her austere faith. "I'm afraid you make an idol of one who is, after all, but of the earth, earthy. For your soul's sake, I may be denied you. It is as He wills, Ivan."

"If you *are* denied me——" Ivan began, in a wild outburst of hot youth. But Karen clapped her small hand on his mouth disapprovingly.

"Oh, don't say it, dear Ivan," she cried, with a persuasive look. "For both our sakes, don't say it! It may be counted against us, to-morrow. Let us be wise. Let us be humble. I'll go home and pray. Much may be done by praying."

The young man leant forward, and pursed his lips. Even Mennonites are human. "Just this once, Karen! This once!" he said, oh so softly and wistfully.

Karen drew back, all tremulous. "But, Ivan," she cried, aghast, "is it right? Is it allowed us? Should we do so, unbetrothed? Suppose, to-morrow, I was to belong to Peter?"

The young man smiled, and held her sweet face between his two hands, unabashed. No such scruples checked him. He answered never a word, but stooped down and kissed her. A thrill ran through Karen's blood at that delicious touch. "Let Peter guard his own!" the young man said lightly. "While I can I will take one." He was a terrible reprobate!

Karen tore herself away from him with a sudden rush of remorse. "This is sinful," she cried. "This is sinful!—sinful! How could I ever allow you! Oh, Ivan, let us go home and pray harder than ever. Temptation besets us. Perhaps to-morrow all this will be imputed for sin to us."

II.

Next morning, in the little log shanty that served for chapel to the settlement, the Elders of the Church assembled in due form to carry out a solemn religious ceremony. Seven young men and five young women stood in line facing one another to right and left before the table that filled the place of an altar. Four of the young women were hard-faced stern-featured Russian Canadians, strong of build and bronzed by the sun, born drudges of the log-huts, with no souls above their slavery. The fifth was Karen. All the young men looked eagerly at her with longing in their eyes, but most of all Ivan Utovitch and Peter Verstoff.

The Elders, all burly men with bushy Russian beards, ranged themselves in a row beside the plain deal table. No smile seemed possible for those hard cold lips. The fanatical asceticism of the Muscovite mind, that speaks out on every page of Tolstoi's or Dostoeffsky's, had soured their faces. One had but to look at them to see at a glance that love, as we Westerns understand it, was to them a mere worldly toy, whose name was never so much as to be spoken among them. The will of the flesh was an enemy to be held resolutely at arm's length, with all their force, for ever. The notion of marrying a woman merely because you loved her was a notion, to them, wafted straight from the devil.

The presiding Elder looked round, and held up his hand for silence. A deep hush fell at once upon the little assembly of believers. All felt only too profoundly the full importance of the moment. For the future of ten lives—nay, more, of ten thousand unborn souls—trembled that day in the balance.

"Friends," the presiding Elder began, in fluent vulgar Russian, "we of the Lord's folk have met in chapel this morning for the performance of a very solemn function. For the third time since we came here, to this lodge in the wilderness, our young men and maidens, by the Church's desire, are to be joined together in holy wedlock. The Lord has prospered seven sons of our flock so that in due time they have become separate house-masters; and to these five of our daughters shall five of the seven be duly united. Not for the lust of the flesh or the pride of the eyes are they to be joined together, but for the godly upbringing of the lambs of the fold, in time to come, to fulfil our places. Therefore, according to the holy custom of the Church, to us Elders delivered, we do not permit that each man should choose for himself a wife, after the fashion of the world, according to his own carnal desires and longings. We bring our young men and maidens here bodily before the Lord, certain that He will choose for them of His Divine goodness more wisely than either they or we can. We will pray for His guidance on the lots that we cast; then we will proceed to assign husband to wife, in full confidence of right, after the wont of the Saints, under the heavenly benediction."

The rude farmers and hard-worked housewives in the body of the chapel fell on their knees in concert as he spoke these words. So did the Elders who stood by the table. The young men and women, whose fate was at issue, ranged still in their appointed place, bowing their heads silently.

The Elder prayed a long extempore prayer. The congregation listened, and answered "Amen." Then the Elder said once more, "Our maidens will give praise." The five girls, raising their heads, sang a favourite Russian hymn to a simple melody. Four of them sang like born drudges of the log-huts. But Karen's voice, though untrained, was like the voice of the nightingale. When they had finished, the Elder placed seven slips of paper, with ostentatious openness, in a bag on his right, and five slips in a similar bag on his left. "Come up, Vera Rustoff!" he cried, singling a child with his eye from the congregation below. "For out of the mouths of babes and sucklings has He ordained praise. Come up, and be our minister."

The child stood forward, half reluctant, and took her place with much trembling at the table beside him. She was a rosy, small girl, with fair hair, like one of Fra Angelico's angels.

"Draw a paper!" the Elder said. The child drew one, and handed it to him.

"Nicolas Koscialkovski!" the Elder read out, unfolding it. "Draw another, Vera Rustoff." And the child drew one. There was a deep pause of suspense. It was the name of a woman.

"Leopolda Sianojenska!" the Elder went on, still droning in the same business-like voice as before. "Nicolas and Leopolda, it is the Lord's will. Stand forward, you two, and join hands for betrothal."

Without a moment's hesitation, without a word of reluctance, though with a painful twitching that he could not quite

subdue at the corners of his mouth, one of the stalwart young men stepped forward, and accepted his destiny. At the same moment the least pleasing of the four born drudges stepped forward in turn, and took her future husband's hand in hers with a certain stolid and honest uncomplaining indifference. It was the Lord's doing. Who were they that they should repine at it?

"Draw yet a third," the Elder went on, as those two clasped hands and stood aside from among the candidates. And the child, dipping her hand into the bag, drew one.

"Fedor Noross," the old man read out, without one tinge of emotion. It was his own son's name. He gazed at the lad blankly. Even *he* was interested now. What wife would be vouchsafed him?

"Again!"

And the child drew. Another deep pause.

"Sophie Alexandrovitch," the Elder said, with a slight gasp. And silently a second pair stepped forward to the sacrifice.

The child drew again, this time unbidden. The Elder read out a name. "Peter Verstoff," he said. Peter Verstoff's face was rigid with suspense. The child's hand plunged deep into the answering bag. "Karen Selistoff," the Elder read out, unfolding the paper. A sigh of relief burst from many lips at once. Peter Verstoff's face flushed crimson in a second. Karen's grew white as the flowers at her bosom—the flowers that Ivan had placed there yesterday—two milky snow-blossoms backed with a spray of tamarack. There was a moment's lull. Everybody felt the great event of the day was finished.

"Peter and Karen," the presiding Elder said, breaking the solemn silence, "it is the Lord's will. Come forward, you two, and join hands for betrothal."

Peter Verstoff stepped forward—tremulous, ruddy, exultant. The Lord had indeed heard his earnest petition! The effectual fervent prayer of a righteous man availeth much! He had won her! He had won her!

Karen hung back for a moment—pale, reluctant, uncertain. A terrible conflict was going on unseen in her breast. It was love against duty—duty as she conceived it. Nay, more, against conscience, religion, faith, authority, the express will of Heaven there openly revealed to her.

Ivan hung upon her movements with mute eagerness for a second. Would she obey or rebel? Oh, great heavens, what a sacrilege!

Then slowly, reluctantly, obeying, as she thought, the higher law, Karen stepped forward, and held out her hand, trembling. "It is the Lord's will!" she said faintly, while two tears stole down her cheek. Her heart belied her words. But Religion had conquered.

At that second Ivan broke forth from the rank with an ashen face and quivering lips, held his hand up in warning, as if to forbid the betrothal. The revulsion of the moment had revealed many truths to him, hidden away till then behind the thick cloak of authority in the fanatical faith he had learnt from childhood to reverence. "It is *not* the Lord's will!" he cried, with desperate energy, and with the wild force of helplessness, though the words half choked him. "It is *not* the Lord's will! This thing is of Satan! Your lottery is a disgrace! We have guides with us far purer than any casting of paper lots—the voice of Nature, the voice of instinct, the voice of our own hearts, the voice of all that is most divine and most sacred within us. Let us listen to those, not to meaningless oracles. If we will not hear them, no lot will help us. This is heathenish divination, I tell you, not Christian worship. Is it for us to neglect the plain promptings of the good feelings that God has given us in favour of such chances as the tossing of names in a bag? Karen, Karen, hold forth your hand. It isn't his. It is mine. I claim it! I claim it!"

Karen gazed up in his face, all aghast, with a thrill of wondering admiration. It was wrong of him; oh, how wrong! But still, she loved and admired him for it. Her cheek flushed red again. She clasped her hands hard for a moment over her heaving breast. Then she looked from Peter to Ivan, and from Ivan to Peter. Which of the two must she obey? Love or Religion?

But the presiding Elder, with the infinite quiet dignity of the Russian peasant, waving her aside to her place, took no notice of the brawler. "Karen Selistoff," he said austerely, lifting her right hand in his, "the Lord has spoken. Disobey not His will for the will of the flesh, lest ill betide you. Resist the devil and he will flee from you! Take no heed of this apostate! Give your hand as the Lord ordains to Peter Verstoff."

The colour fled suddenly from Karen's face once more. She dared not turn her eyes for one glance at Ivan. The voice of the Elder was the voice of the Church. What woman could disregard it? With a deadly effort, she stretched forth that white marble hand. It was cold as ice. In a wild burst of delight, Peter Verstoff clasped it, for, in the eyes of the Church, they two were now finally married.

Ivan waited for no more; he could stand it no longer. Before the very faces of those harsh ascetics, he flung himself fiercely upon Karen's neck; he kissed her on her lips; he strained her hard to his bosom. "Good-bye," he said, in English, with hot tears on his cheek. "Good-bye, my darling! This is no place for me now; I will go to Toronto."

And, shaking off the dust of the Mennonite faith from his feet, as it were, he strode forth alone, leaving the scandalized Church to rejoice at its leisure that it was so easily rid of so unworthy a member.

But Karen fell fainting into the arms of her betrothed husband.

III.

A great deal may happen in five years; above all, in a new country.

During the next five years, Ivan lived much; so much, indeed, that his previous existence seemed separated from him by the whole length of a lifetime. New ideas, new worlds crowded thick upon his brain. He had left the narrow age of the Mennonites behind for ever, and had emerged all at once into the full blaze and glare of the Nineteenth Century.

The Nineteenth Century laid hold upon him with a firm hand. In Toronto, that busy, bustling, modern Toronto, the quick young Russian, with his fresh intelligence all unwarped and undimmed by the blunting influence of custom, expanded and developed as none but a Russian could expand and develop—and even he only under the stimulus of the vivid and quickening Western environment. Ivan's advance was rapid and steady. He began upon the railway, where he picked up with ease the first rudiments of mechanics; then he took a place in turn in an electric lighting establishment; after that, he soon set to work to make inventions of his own; and before three years were fairly over he had gone on so far that he perfected and patented an improved electro-motor on his special pattern. Edison spoke with respect of "this new man Utovitch," and Erastus Wiman, the Canadian millionaire, helped to float the shares in all the young inventor's new schemes and companies.

During those five rapid years in Toronto, however, Ivan heard little or nothing in any way of Karen. She was married to Peter Verstoff—so much he knew from stray letters from the village; but soon after her wedding, the couple had left Nijni Ouralsk in search of work, and had "gone forth into the world," as his simple correspondents phrased it in their native Russian. But the world is big even in this age of steam. Where Karen might be Ivan hadn't the least idea. Nevertheless, for her sake he still held himself always disengaged and unmarried. Perhaps the Muscovite leaven in part wrought that resolve within him. Your Russian is always ascetic in heart. If he couldn't have Karen he would die a bachelor.

Well, at the end of five years, the prospects of the electro-motor had improved so immensely that the directors of his company urged Ivan with great warmth to undertake a journey to England and France in order to push his patents with European capitalists. Ivan consented, nothing loth, and took his passage from New York, to see for himself, for the first time in his life, the wonders and glories of old-world civilization.

It is an event in a man's life, his maiden trip to Europe.

As Ivan lounged on the deck of the *Atlas*, the first day out from Sandy Hook, in a long wicker chair, a fellow-passenger, well dressed in a handsome fur-lined overcoat, attracted his attention, leaning against the bulwarks. Something in the man's figure and build seemed strangely familiar to him. Surely, Ivan thought, he had seen that tall shape and that well-set head before. In Toronto? or where? The passenger turned round as he gazed, and their eyes met with a start. Ivan turned pale with surprise. It was Peter Verstoff!

Could Karen be on board? Was he once more to see her?

Too full of that one absorbing thought to remember all the incidents of their last meeting, Ivan Utovitch stepped forward with outstretched hand to greet his old friend of the Upper Ottawa clearing. But Verstoff—naturally enough, no doubt—seemed somewhat less eager than Ivan himself to renew their lapsed acquaintance. He held out his hand coldly; it was sleek and well-gloved. Ivan surveyed the man as he did so from head to foot. A great change had come over the simple Russian backwoodsman—as great as the change in Ivan himself, possibly. His very dress, his manner—his whole mien proclaimed it. Verstoff was rich, well-clad, cosmopolitanized, European.

"How's this?" Ivan cried in surprise. "You've got on, like myself! You seem to have done well for yourself in this world's goods. How are you? And Karen?"

"Thanks," his fellow-countryman answered in a more frigid tone, with just a trifle of affectation, "Madame Verstoff is well. Many things have happened to us since I had the pleasure of seeing you last at Nijni Ouralsk. We don't live in America now. I'm on my way back to Europe."

"And your wife?" Ivan cried, unable to repress his eagerness.

“No, not my wife,” Verstoff answered, still stiffly, looking hard at his fur cuffs. “Her professional engagements didn’t allow her, in fact, to accompany me on this trip across the water. I came over alone, to make arrangements beforehand for the American tour she proposes to undertake next winter.”

“Karen’s not on the stage, surely?” Ivan exclaimed, bewildered. His beautiful, pure Karen? Such a profanation as that would indeed be too terrible.

“No, not on the stage, unfortunately,” her husband echoed with a faint tone of half-suppressed regret. “Madame Verstoff’s profound religious convictions won’t allow her to sing in opera, I grieve to say—at least, not as yet. A year or two more may, of course, do wonders. She has broadened: she has broadened. Indeed, we’ve all of us broadened a good deal, no doubt, Utovitch, since we left Nijni Ouralsk. Oh, yes, we’ve heard of your discoveries and your rise in life. You must have heard of my wife’s, too, though perhaps you didn’t recognize her under the Italianized name. She sings only in oratorio, and as Madame Catarina Veristo.”

“What! not the great soprano?” Ivan exclaimed, astonished. For her fame had reached even to the Toronto workshops.

Peter Verstoff nodded. “Yes, she had always a good voice,” he admitted with marital pride. “We thought so at Ouralsk.”

“She sang like an angel!” Ivan put in enthusiastically.

“Exactly,” Verstoff assented. “So all the critics say. Well, when we moved to New York, we learned for the first time its commercial value, and found it had only to be cultivated aright to make it one of the most paying concerns in all America. So I made up my mind at once to exploit the discovery. I borrowed money for the speculation from admiring friends, took Madame Verstoff for three years to Brussels and Munich, gave her the best musical training that Europe could afford—and at the end of that time launched her on the world fully found—launched her off hand in Vienna. She took the stage by storm; ever since, it has been one long triumphal progress. Ever since she’s been coining money—that’s the only word I know for it; just coining money!”

Ivan gazed at him aghast. And *this* was the simple, toilsome, God-fearing Peter Verstoff, who, as Karen had said, wrestled hard in prayer for her! Ah, well—ah, well, it is an age of evolution! Truly, as he himself so tersely expressed it, Verstoff had broadened a good deal since leaving Nijni Ouralsk. But some natures, Ivan thought to himself, with a curl of the lip, are just like rivers—as they grow broad, they grow shallow, most painfully shallow. The deceitfulness of riches had been too much for Verstoff. Better one day of that old Mennonite earnestness than a hundred years of this Mammonite self-complacency. The old-fashioned backwoodsman in his woollen shirt and toque was worth fifty of the new-fangled, fine-spoken, cosmopolitan gentleman in his fur-lined coat and his neatly buttoned gaiters!

And Karen? Had she “broadened,” too, in the same way, Ivan wondered? Had she developed into a worldly-wise professional singer? Had she taken kindly to that sea on which Verstoff had “launched” her? And even as he thought so, Ivan hated himself in his heart for so much as thinking it.

IV.

After this first recognition, Verstoff seemed for the next few days rather to avoid Ivan Utovitch. At that, Ivan, after his kind, was somewhat naïvely surprised. For he was still in many ways the unsophisticated son of the soil. Too loyal himself to dream of rousing jealousy, he hardly knew how easily jealousy can be aroused in the minds of others.

So for the first three days, Verstoff lounged about on deck in his fur-lined coat, taking little notice in any way of Ivan Utovitch.

On the third night out, they were off the Banks of Newfoundland. You know the Banks of old, no doubt—cold, calm, and foggy. Ivan sat on deck, wrapped in his warmest coat. Verstoff stood a little way off by the companion-ladder, looking over into the water, and smoking a very fragrant cigar. It was a dark, raw night. The sea was smooth, with a long, glassy swell, but the engines had slowed, and were going half-speed. Impossible from the bridge to see as far as the bow for fog and darkness.

But Ivan, who was quite new to sea-going ways, watched the sailors languidly, as they threw something overboard, attached to a cord, and then hauled it up quick again in monotonous succession. What it all meant, he hadn't the slightest idea: not soundings certainly. For at each rapid haul, they called out a number afresh, in a sing-song voice: "Thirty-seven; thirty-six; thirty-four and a half; thirty-four; thirty-three and three-quarters!"

Ivan listened unconcerned. It was nothing to him. On so calm a night the bare notion of danger seemed absolutely inconceivable.

At last the sailors hauled, and gave an audible "Whew!" "How much?" the officer cried who superintended the work. And the quarter-master answered, in a hushed tone of expectation, "Just above thirty-two! They can't be far off now, sir!"

At the word, Verstoff lounged over with a rather pale face. "That's bad," he said quietly, "very bad indeed; they must stop her, or back her!"

"Why so?" Ivan asked innocently. "What's wrong? What are they trying to find out with this thing there, anyhow?"

"Trying?" Verstoff echoed. "Why, don't you know? The temperature of the water, to be sure! It's almost on freezing. You can guess what that means. We must be close upon icebergs!"

Scarcely were the words out of his mouth when a terrible jar thrilled loud and fierce through the hull from stem to stern. The whole framework staggered. Three bells rang sharp, with a quick note, in the engine-room below. The great ship stopped dead short, and seemed to reel in terror. She had struck against something huge, that shattered her bows like glass. Then Ivan was aware that tons and tons of ice lay tossed in vast fragments over the forward deck. All was tremor and gurgle. Black water was rushing in as he looked towards the fore-castle. They had come into collision, end on, with an iceberg!

In one second, the deck was all alive with struggling terrified humanity. "Lower the boats!" was the word; and then Ivan understood that the ship was sinking. Already the wild water was pouring resistlessly into the hold, by vast floods at a time, through the shattered bows. It was a case of total wreck. The *Atlas* was filling with ominous speed. One chance alone remained—to lower the boats as fast as human hands could lower them.

And still the hubbub thickened, and still the turmoil increased. Passengers came rushing up, half clad, from their state-rooms. From every ladder and gangway they surged towards the quarter-deck. The water stood ankle-deep in the passages by this time. Sailors loosed the boats from the davits with practised haste, and hurried in the women and children with rough, kindly hands. Officers lent their aid, and ordered the procedure with the coolness of their craft in any great emergency. The captain on the bridge gave his orders above the cries and shouts of the terrified passengers in a loud voice of command, and his men obeyed like so many passionless automata. The electric lights had gone out. The fires were smothered. All was noise and darkness.

In such a juncture as this, the old Ouralsk training told with both Ivan and Verstoff. With one accord they both turned,

unbidden, to aid the sailors in lowering the boats and marshalling the passengers. No thought of self occurred to either. It was duty or death.

But when the last boat was lowered, and the last passenger provided with a vacant seat, the captain, descending, turned round to the crew and the few men who had helped them. "Save yourselves, boys!" he cried in a loud voice, coming down to the quarter-deck. "Every man for his own neck! Take the belts and life-rafts! Never mind the ship. She won't last thirty seconds."

And, indeed, the water by that time had almost reached the deck, and the ship was sinking before their eyes in a great swirling eddy.

In this last extremity, Ivan seized one of the deck-seats, which doubled back into a life-raft. He said not a word; but Verstoff helped him to unbend it. Between them, they pushed it off, and jumped on together. A sailor, hard by, in charge of the provisioning, flung them a small barrel of biscuits and a keg of fresh water. The biscuits reached their mark, but the keg fell short. As they looked, the *Altas* swang round and careened, then she disappeared with a great gurgle into the black abyss of the ocean. They were alone, on the raft, in the midst of the Atlantic.

Three days later, two worn and haggard men floated hopelessly by themselves, with a waterlogged raft, on a boundless ocean. By good luck it had remained calm, and they had been caught by the Gulf Stream, which carried them eastward in its flow; but what words can tell, even so, the agony and suspense of those three nights on the open Atlantic? The wind was rising now, and the little lopping waves that it drove into small crests began to break over the raft, wetting the two men to the skin, already cold and wretched enough as they were in their thirst and misery.

For three whole days and nights they had not tasted water.

A thought rose up, as they sat there in despair, into Ivan's mind. The Russian peasant nature doesn't cling to life with the same unreasoning persistence as our more sophisticated English temperament. The raft was weighed down by two people's weight. With one only it would ride higher, and the waves would take a longer time before they could sweep completely over it. He looked at Verstoff, who sat there, the picture of despondency, hugging his knees with his hands. In a few brief words, Ivan explained his idea. "Peter," he added, calling him once more by the name he had always used, till then, from childhood, "you're married; I'm single; you are Karen's husband; it is right that I should go. If ever you reach land safe, tell her I leapt from the raft to save you."

He stood up, and made ready to plunge headlong into the sea. In an agony of remorse, Verstoff rose, like one possessed, and laid his hand with a firm grip on his old friend's arm. "No, Ivan," he said, holding him back by main force. "Not you! Not you! If either of us goes, it must be *I* who do it. Anywhere but here, I wouldn't have confessed it to you for a world. But here, face to face as I stand with death, I will tell you the truth. I have always known it. Ever since that day at Nijni Ouralsk, those words you said to her have been audible in my ears. You were right. I was wrong. I should never have taken her. You said, 'Hold back your hand, Karen! It's mine! I claim it!' And ever since then I've known you spoke the truth. The Elders of the Church gave me her body that day. But they couldn't give me her heart. It was yours! It was yours! Live on, and take it."

As he spoke, with the wild energy of self-renunciation spurring him on beyond himself, Verstoff flung off the fur coat he was wearing, and stood, in act to leap, with one hand aloft to heaven. It was Ivan's turn now to hold him back and restrain him. "Stop, Peter," he cried, laying his hand upon that stalwart arm, with a fierce force of restraint. "You have no right to do this. You are her's. You must live for her. I may do as I like. My life is my own. But your life is Karen's. You *must* not get rid of it."

Verstoff turned to him piteously. He was pale as death. How the real man came out at this juncture, from beneath the mere veneer of cosmopolitan polish! "Ivan," he cried aloud, in the agony of his self-abasement; "she would be happier with you. She was your's from the beginning. I sinned in taking her—the Church misled me. Let me die to atone for it. Go home and comfort her."

Ivan glanced around with a bitter smile at the gathering waves. "There's small hope for either of us to go home," he answered, grasping his friend's hand hard. "But, Peter, I could never allow you to do that. Sit down again, and let us both face it out together. After all, it would be more terrible still than it is, if either of us were to stand quite alone by himself in the midst of the ocean."

For even as he spoke, a second thought, yet more terrible, rose spontaneous in his soul. How could either of them ever face Karen again, with this message on his lips—that he had allowed the other to die for her sake on the mid-Atlantic?

VI.

They sat that day out, for the most part in the silence of despair. From hour to hour the waves rose higher, and washed over the raft time and again, in ever-increasing force, drenching them through and through to the skin; but the two men still crouched side by side in speechless misery, peering, in vain, with weary eyes for a speck of white sail on that monotonous horizon.

Towards late afternoon, Verstoff began to grow delirious with thirst. The fever increased upon him. He babbled feebly of thousands of francs and exacting managers. His talk was of Karen. Ivan held him in his arms, lest the waves should wash his failing body overboard. And now a still more ghastly terror disturbed Ivan Utovitch's mind. Suppose Peter were to die, there in his very arms, and he himself were to be picked up alive by some passing ship afterwards! How could he ever face Verstoff's widow with that tale upon his lips? Would Karen believe he had done his best in that final crisis to save her husband's life?

That internal torment was worse to him now than all the terrors of the sea, or of hunger and thirst. It almost decided him to jump off as he first intended. But as things now stood, even that resort was impossible: do what he would, he couldn't desert Verstoff.

By sunset, for the first time, rain began to fall, at first in stray drops, then steadily, heavily. At sea rain means fresh water. With a burst of relief Ivan held out his handkerchief, caught the precious drops in its folds as they fell, and wrung them out eagerly into Verstoff's mouth. Only after he had done so five or six times running did Ivan venture to pour a little at last upon his own parched tongue. For Karen's sake, though he died himself, he must do his very best to save her husband.

It rained without intermission for some hours at a stretch, and they were able to quench their thirst as much as they liked before the shower ended. Meanwhile, darkness came on. A fourth night of horrors opened out before them. Verstoff couldn't hold out much longer; cold and exposure were killing him.

And if he died, Ivan thought, he would feel himself almost a suspected murderer.

About eleven o'clock, as Ivan judged, a faint gleam showed dim upon the water to westward. He shaded his eyes, and looked out through the rain towards the dark horizon. Slowly the faint gleam divided itself up into two vague red lights, and then by degrees drew nearer and nearer. Yes, yes; it drew nearer! It was coming towards them! It was a liner under full steam! No doubt about that. Would she pass close enough to see them? Could they manage in that thick gloom to attract her attention?

Twenty minutes of intense anxiety followed. Ivan saw the great ship shaping her course straight towards them. His heart beat high. Surely, surely she would pass alongside! She would be well within hailing distance. He could wave his handkerchief above his head and signal to the look-out! He could——

And then, all at once, with an awful revulsion of still blacker despair, a new horror burst upon him. She was coming near indeed, but too near! She was bearing down upon them in a straight line. Her great sharp bows, and her gigantic shearwater were ploughing the sea with mad haste to devour them. That knife-like edge—keen, powerful, irresistible—would cut in two their frail raft without ever feeling or knowing it. He held his breath, and looked up. Great heavens, the huge monster was close upon them. There was nothing for it now but to die together. He shut his eyes tight, and clasped Verstoff spasmodically.

Next instant, he was aware, by a sudden bound of the raft, that the wash from the steamer's bows had caught them on its crest and cast them out of her course; they were tossing in the trough of the wave by the great creature's broadside.

With one last despairing effort, Ivan staggered to his feet, and waved his handkerchief wildly over his head towards the passing steamer. He shouted with all his voice. He cried aloud through the gloom. He gesticulated and shrieked like a madman.

There was another faint pause. Then a voice spoke out clear from the liner's fore-castle. "Raft on the starboard bow!" it cried aloud, in sharp tones. "Two men on the raft! More survivors from the *Atlas*!"

It was the steamer's look-out man. He had seen them! He had seen them!

In a second, a search-light was turned hastily over the waters where they tossed helpless in the trough. The giant ship slackened speed; she slowed; she was at a standstill. A boat!—a boat! Something danced on the waves. They were saved! They were saved! Men were coming to rescue them!

Ten minutes later Ivan and Verstoff lay half dead on the deck of a Cunard liner. Passengers offered them food and drink, while the doctor leaned over them with his flask of brandy.

It was almost too late; Verstoff was seriously ill with cold and exposure. He reached Liverpool just alive, and that was all. Ivan watched by his berth till they got him into port. Then the ship's doctor took him on to rooms in London, where Karen was hastily summoned by telegram from Berlin to meet him.

At such a moment of suspense Ivan couldn't bear to see her.

Before a week was out, a pencilled note arrived at his hotel. He tore it open and read it. There were just four lines, with no beginning at all. "My poor husband died, conscious, at five o'clock this morning. He knew every one to the last. He told me of all your kindness. So many—many thanks. It was good of you.—KAREN."

When men have faced deadly peril together, all else is forgotten. Ivan burst into tears as he read that letter. His thoughts went back to the old days when they had roamed side by side as boys in the woods of the Upper Ottawa, and when Karen as yet was nothing to either of them.

VII.

Even so, for six months, Ivan never sought to meet his old love in her solitary widowhood. So many things prevented him. He was busy with the affairs of his company in London and Paris. Karen might have developed and changed so much meanwhile! She might not wish to see him. Above all, respect for Karen's own feelings restrained him so soon after her loss from communicating with her.

At the end of six months, however, an announcement appeared in the *Figaro* one day that Madame Catarina Veristo, the famous soprano, so long in retirement, would appear next evening at a concert in Vienna for the first time since the death of her husband.

It was at a *café* on the Boulevards that Ivan read those words. He didn't hesitate one second. In half an hour his portmanteau was packed, and he was on his way to the Gare de l'Est—destination, Vienna.

The concert-room where Karen—his Karen—was to sing was densely packed and crowded with an enthusiastic audience. Ivan secured a seat with difficulty halfway down the hall. He waited anxiously while the minor stars performed their parts. What would Karen be like now? How would success have changed her? Would the great singer care at all for her old Canadian lover? For he hadn't seen her, of course, since she was a girl of eighteen in the dark pine forest at Nijni Ouralsk on the Upper Ottawa.

At last, a movement, a stir, a craning of necks in eager expectation. One great storm of applause rent the air on every side as a pale, frail girl, in a simple black dress, stepped timidly on to the platform, and glided forward towards the footlights. A thrill ran through Ivan's frame at the familiar figure. It was Karen indeed—no one else—just the same sweet, old Karen. She was shrinking and delicate, like an Indian pipe-plant.

She advanced to the front, graceful, modest, tremulous, with a roll of music clasped nervously in her tender little hand, and began to pour forth her spontaneous song—so it seemed—in exquisitely pathetic modulation. Ivan thrilled once more at the sound. It was the same beautiful voice he had known in the log hut at Nijni Ouralsk—trained and strengthened, to be sure, by five years of study and assiduous practice, but natural and rich and daintily sweet-toned as of yore. Ivan looked at her and loved. The beauty of holiness shone in every feature. A great renunciation had but heightened the tender charm of that exquisite face. Sorrow had made Karen more lovely and more lovable than ever.

For many minutes she sang as though the room before her were absolutely empty, and she were pouring forth her full heart in unpremeditated music. Then, in the midst of the song, at a very critical moment, her eye chanced to wander down the central aisle, and caught Ivan's fixed on her face with wrapt and eager attention. At that sight she started; her mouth twitched nervously. She knew him at a glance, though he sat there, not in the old familiar Canadian toque and jersey, but in the black evening dress of a European gentleman. For one second she faltered, as though she would fail in her piece. A delicate flush broke like dawn over her cheek; she seemed to forgot her song; she seemed to forgot her audience. The whole hall sat hushed at this unexpected pause in the diva's performance. But it was only for a second. Next instant, Karen had recovered herself, and with her eyes fixed firmly on that one swimming spot in the central aisle—with Ivan for its focus—was pouring forth her whole soul in one wild, spasmodic burst of swan-like music. The audience hung entranced. It was marvellous, marvellous! Never before, said the Vienna papers next day, had Madame Veristo conquered her native timidity with such utter inspiration, such entire self-forgetfulness. She seemed lost in her song: one would say she existed in her voice alone. All else was as though it were not. She was wrapped up in her art as in a cloak of invisibility.

At the end of her song, the applause burst forth still more rapturous than ever. Loud cries of "Bis!—Bis!" rent the air like thunder. But Karen heeded them not. Walking backwards, as in a maze, she bowed herself off the platform. Two minutes later, an attendant made his way up through the crowded alley with a note for Ivan. He tore it open hastily. It was short—but long enough. "Come and see me after the concert in my room here.—KAREN."

He went. She received him at the door of her robing-room with one white little hand stretched out, tenderly, to meet him. "At last!" she said, trembling. He closed the door and looked hard at her. She stood before him there in her simple little black grenadine evening dress—the selfsame Karen he had known in those far woods by the Ottawa. His heart was full. He took her two hands in his and held them in silence for a moment. Then he clasped her to his breast: "My Karen!—my

Karen!”

“Ivan!” Karen cried simply, “you were right—I was wrong. The Church taught me ill. You would have taught me better. We have truer guides, as you said, within us, than the casting of a lot. I chose badly that day when you called out, ‘Your hand is mine!’ Oh, Ivan, I have paid for it. Forgive me!—forgive me!”

“Then you have loved me always!” Ivan cried, half beside himself with delight.

Karen answered not a word. She only slipped her white hand into the bosom of her bodice, and drew out something. Ivan had noticed that she kept pressing one palm there hard as she sang, when her eyes caught his, and that she went on pressing through the rest of the song, as if to keep that wild heart of hers from bounding and bursting. She handed the thing across to him with a beautiful smile. He took it reverently. It was a tiny square packet, containing something that evidently had lain long next her own pure heart. “Undo it,” she murmured, rosy-red with a certain tremulous joy. And Ivan undid it.

It contained just a couple of dried Canadian flowers—two faded white snow-blossoms, and a feathery spray of tamarack.

They were the flowers he had given her the day before her marriage. She had worn them ever since next her bosom, no doubt. Then he thought of the words Peter Verstoff spoke on the raft that night: “Her hand is mine; but her heart—her heart is always yours, Ivan.”



Transcriber's Note

This text has been preserved as in the original, including archaic and inconsistent spelling, punctuation and grammar, except that obvious printer's errors have been silently corrected.

[The end of *Karen* by Grant Allen]