

# The Wife of a King

A Metamorphosis of the Gold Country of the Far North

By JACK LONDON

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ANCE, when the Northland was very young, the social and civic virtues were remarkable alike for their paucity and their simplicity. When the burden of domestic duties grew grievous, and the fireside mood expanded to a constant protest against its bleak loneliness, the adventurers from the Southland, in lieu of better, paid the stipulated prices and took unto themselves native wives. It was a forest of paradise to the women, for it must be confessed that the white rovers gave far better care and treatment to them than did their Indian co-partners. Of course, the white men themselves were satisfied with such deals, as were also the Indian men for that matter. Having sold their daughters and sisters for cotton blankets and obsolete rifles, and traded their warm furs for flimsy calico and bad whisky, the sons of the soil promptly and cheerfully succumbed to quick consumption and other swift diseases correlated with the blessings of a superior civilization.

It was in these days of Arcadian simplicity that Cal Galbraith journeyed through the land and fell sick on the Lower river. It was a refreshing advent in the lives of the good Sisters of the Holy Cross, who gave him shelter and medicine. Cal Galbraith became troubled with strange thoughts, which clamored for attention till he laid eyes on the Mission girl, Madeline. Yet he gave no sign, biding his time patiently. He strengthened with the coming spring, and when the sun rode the heavens in a golden circle, and the joy and

throb of life were in all the land, he gathered his still weak body together and departed.

Now Madeline, the mission girl, was an orphan. Her white father had failed to give a bald-faced grizzly the trail one day, and had died quickly. Then her Indian mother, having no man to fill the winter cache, had tried the hazardous experiment of waiting till the salmon run on fifty pounds of flour and half as many of bacon. After that the baby, Chook-ra, went to live with the good sisters, and to be thenceforth known by another name.

But Madeline still had kinsfolk, the nearest being a diabolical uncle who outraged his vitals with inordinate quantities of the white man's whisky. He strove daily to walk with the gods, and incidentally his feet sought shorter trails to the grave. When sober he suffered exquisite torture. He had no conscience. To this ancient vagabond Cal Galbraith duly presented himself, and they consumed many words and much tobacco in the conversation that followed. Promises were also made; and in the end the old heathen took a few pounds of dried salmon and his birch-bark canoe, and paddled away to the Mission of the Holy Cross.

It is not given the world to know what promises he made and what lies he told—the sisters never gossiped; but when he returned, upon his swarthy chest there was a brass crucifix, and in his canoe his niece Madeline. That night there was a grand wedding and a potlach; so that for two days to follow there was no fishing done by the village. But in the morning Madeline shook the dust of the Lower river

from her moccasins, and with her husband, in a poling boat, went to live on the Upper river in a place known as the Lower Country. And in the years which followed she was a good wife, sharing her husband's hardships and cooking his food. And she kept him in straight trails, till he learned to save his dust and to work mightily. In the end, he struck it rich, and built a cabin in Circle City; and his happiness was such that men who came to visit him in his home circle became restless at the sight of it and envied him greatly.

But the Northland began to mature, and social amenities to make their appearance. Hitherto, the Southland had sent forth its sons; but it now belched forth a new exodus, this time of its daughters. They did not fall to put new ideas in the heads of the men, and to elevate the tone of things in ways peculiarly their own. No more did the squaws gather at the dances, go roaring down the center in the good, old Virginia reels, or make merry with jolly "Dan Tucker." They fell back on their native stolidism, and uncomplainingly watched the rule of their white sisters from the cabins.

Then another exodus came over the mountains from the prolific Southland. This time it was of women that became mighty in the land. They frowned upon the Indian wives, while the other women became mild and walked humbly. There were cowards who became ashamed of their ancient covenants with the daughters of the soil, who looked with a new distaste upon their dark-skinned children; but there were also others—men—who remained true and proud of their aboriginal vows. When it became the fashion to divorce the native wives, Cal Galbraith retained his manhood, and in so doing felt the heavy hand of the women who had come last, knew least, but who ruled the land.

One day, the Upper Country, which lies far above Circle City, was pronounced rich. Dog teams carried the news to Salt Water; golden argosies freighted the lure across the North Pacific; wires and cables sang with the tidings; and the world heard for the first time of the Klondike river and the Yukon country.

Cal Galbraith had lived the years quietly. He had then been a good husband to Madeline, and she had blessed him. But somehow discontent fell upon him; he felt vague yearnings for his own kind, for the life he had been shut out from—a general sort of desire, which men sometimes feel, to break out and taste the prime of living. Besides, there drifted down the river wild rumors of the wonderful Eldorado, glowing descriptions of the city of logs and tents, and ludicrous accounts of the che-chas who had rushed in and were stampeding the whole country. Circle City was dead. The world had moved on up river and become a new and most marvelous world.

Cal Galbraith grew restless on the edge of things, and wished to see with his own eyes. So, after the wash up he weighed in a couple of hundred pounds of dust on the company's big scales, and took a draft for the same on Dawson. Then he put Tom Dixon in charge of his mine, kissed Madeline good-by, promised to be back before the first mush-ice ran, and took passage on an up-river steamer.

Madeline waited—waited through all the three months of daylight. She fed the dogs, gave much of her time to young Cal, watched the short summer fade away and the sun begin its long journey to the south. And she prayed much in the manner of the Sisters of the Holy Cross. The fall came, and with it there was mush-ice on the Yukon, and Circle City kings returning to the winter's work at their mines, but no Cal Galbraith. Tom Dixon received a letter, however, for his men studded up her winter's supply of dry pine. The company received a letter, for its dog teams filled her cache with their best provisions, and she was told that her credit was limitless.

Through all the ages man has been held the chief instigator of the woes of woman; but in this case the men held their tongues and swore harshly at one of their number who was away, while the women failed utterly to emulate them. So, without needless delay, Madeline heard strange tales of Cal Galbraith's doings; also, of a certain Greek dancer who played with men as children did with bubbles. Now Madeline was an Indian woman, and further, she had no woman friend to whom to go for wise counsel. She prayed and planned by turns, and that night, being quick of resolve and action, harnessed the dogs, and with young Cal securely lashed to the sled, stole away.

Though the Yukon still ran free, the eddy ice was growing, and each day saw the river dwindling to a slushy thread. Save him who has done the like, no man may know what she endured in traveling a hundred miles on the rim ice; nor may they understand the toll and hardship of breaking the two hundred miles of packed ice which remained after the river froze for good. But Madeline was an Indian woman, so she did these things, and one night there came a knock at Malemute Kid's door. Thereat he fed a team of starving dogs, put a healthy youngster to bed, and turned his attention to an exhausted woman. He removed her ice-bound moccasins while he listened to her tale, and stuck the point of his knife into her feet that he might see how far they were frozen.

Despite his tremendous virility, Malemute Kid was possessed of a softer, womanly element, which could win the confidence of a snarling wolf dog or draw confessions from the most wintry heart. Nor did he seek them. Hearts opened to him as spontaneously as flowers to the sun. Even the

priest, Father Roubeau, had been known to confess to him, while the men and women of the Northland were ever knocking at his door, a door from which the latch-string hung always out. To Madeline, he could do no wrong, make no mistake. She had known him from the time she first cast her lot among the people of her father's race; and to her half-barbaric mind it seemed that in him was his vision and the future there could be no intervening veil.

There were false ideals in the land. The social strictures of Dawson were not synonymous with those of the previous era, and the swift maturity of the Northland involved much wrong. Malemute Kid was aware of this, and he had Cal Galbraith's measure accurately. He knew a hasty word was the father of much evil; besides, he was minded to teach a great lesson and bring shame upon the man. So Stanley Prince, the young mining expert, was called into the conference the following night, as was also Lucky Jack Harrington and his violin. That same night, Bettles, who owed a great debt to Malemute Kid, harnessed up Cal Galbraith's dogs, lashed Cal Galbraith, Junior, to the sled, and slipped away in the dark for Stuart river.

"So: one—two—three, one—two—three. Now reverse! No, no! Start up again, Jack. See—this way." Prince executed the movement as one should who has led the cotillion.

"Now: one—two—three, one—two—three. Reverse! Ah! that's better. Try it again. I say, you know, you mustn't look at your feet. One—two—three, one—two—three. Shorter steps. You are not hanging to the gee-pole just now. Try it over. There! that's the way. One—two—three, one—two—three."

Round and round went Prince and Madeline in an interminable waltz. The table and stools had been shoved over against the wall to increase the room. Malemute Kid sat on the bunk, chin to knees, greatly interested. Jack Harrington sat beside him, scraping away on his violin and following the dancers.

It was a unique situation, the undertaking of these three men with the woman. The most pathetic part, perhaps, was the businesslike way in which they went about it. No athlete was ever trained more rigidly for a coming contest, nor wolf dog for the harness, than was she. But they had good material, for Madeline, unlike most women of her race, in her childhood had escaped the carrying of heavy burdens and the toll of the trail. Besides, she was a clean-limbed, willow creature, possessed of much grace which had not hitherto been realized. It was this grace which the men strove to bring out and knock into shape.

At the next intermission Prince discovered a new predicament.

"I say, Kid," he said, "we're wrong, all wrong. She can't learn in moccasins. Put her feet into slippers, and then on to that waxed floor—pshaw!"

Madeline raised a foot and regarded her shapeless house moccasin dubiously. In previous winters, both at Circle City and Forty Mile, she had danced many a night away with similar footgear, and there had been nothing the matter. But now—well, if there was anything wrong it was for Malemute Kid to know, not her.

But Malemute Kid did know, and he had a good eye for measures; so he put on his cap and mittens and went down the hill to pay Mrs. Eppfingwell a call. Her husband, Clove Eppfingwell, was prominent in the community as one of the great government officials. The kid had noted her slender little foot one night, at the governor's ball. And as he also knew her to be as sensible as she was pretty, it was no task to ask of her a certain small favor.

On his return, Madeline withdrew for a moment to the inner room. When she reappeared Prince was startled.

"By Jove!" he gasped. "Who'd 'a' thought it! The little witch! Why, my sister—"

"Is an English girl," interrupted Malemute Kid, "with an English foot. This girl comes of a small-footed race. Moccasins just broadened her feet healthily, while she did not misshape them by running with the dogs in her childhood."

Madeline was the wife of a king, a king whose yellow treasure could buy outright a score of fashion's puppets; yet in all her life her feet had known no gear save red-tanned mooshide. At first she looked in awe at the tiny white satin slippers; but she quickly understood the admiration which shone, manlike, in the eyes of the men.

So the training went on. Every day Malemute Kid led the girl out on long walks devoted to the correction of her carriage and the shortening of her stride. There was little likelihood of her identity being discovered, for Cal Galbraith and the rest of the old-timers were like lost children among the many strangers who had rushed into the land. Besides, the frost of the North has a bitter tongue, and the tender women of the South, to shield their cheeks from its biting caresses, were prone to the use of the canvas mask. With faces obscured and bodies lost in squirrel-skin parkas, a mother and daughter, meeting on trail, would pass as strangers.

In this way Thanksgiving night drew near. At irregular intervals Bettles sent word down from Stuart river regarding the welfare of young Cal. The time of their return was approaching. More than once a casual caller, hearing dance music and the rhythmic pulse of feet, entered, only to find Harrington scraping away and the other two beating time or arguing noisily over a mooted step. Madeline was never in evidence, having

precipitately fled to the inner room.

On one of these nights Cal Galbraith dropped in. Encouraging news had just come down from Stuart river, and Madeline had surpassed herself—not in walk alone, and carriage and grace, but in womanly roguishness. They had indulged in sharp repartee, and she had defended herself brilliantly; and then, yielding to the intoxication of the moment, and of her own power, she had bullied, and mastered, and wheedled, and patronized them with most astonishing success. And instinctively, involuntarily, they had bowed, not to her beauty, her wisdom, her wit, but to that indefinable something in woman to which man yields yet cannot name. The room was dizzy with sheer delight as she and Prince whirled through the last dance of the evening. Harrington was throwing in inconceivable flourishes, while Malemute Kid, utterly abandoned, had seized the broom and was executing mad gyrations on his own account.

At this instant the door shook with a heavy rap-rap, and their quick glances noted the lifting of the latch. But they had survived similar situations before. Harrington never broke a note. Madeline shot through the wainscot door to the inner room. The broom went hurtling under the bunk, and by the time Cal Galbraith and Louis Savoy got their heads in, Malemute Kid and Prince were in each other's arms, wildly schottisching down the room.

As a rule, Indian women do not make a practice of fainting on provocation, but Madeline came as near to it as she ever had in her life. For an hour she crouched on the floor, listening to the heavy voices of the men rumbling up and down in mimic thunder. Like familiar chords of childhood melodies, every intonation, every trick of her husband's voice, swept in upon her, fluttering her heart and weakening her knees till she lay half-fainting against the door. It was well she could neither see nor hear when he took his departure.

(CONCLUDED NEXT WEEK)

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Wednesday evening meeting, 8.00 p. m.

EVANGELICAL CHURCH  
PETER CONKLIN, PASTOR  
Sunday School, - - - - - 10.00 a. m.  
Preaching Service, - - - - - 11.00 a. m.  
Y. P. A. Meeting, - - - - - 6.15 p. m.  
Preaching Service, - - - - - 7.30 p. m.  
Prayer Meeting Wednesday, 7.30 p. m.

BAPTIST CHURCH  
E. B. PACE, Pastor  
Sunday School, - - - - - 10.00 a. m.  
Preaching Service, - - - - - 11.00 a. m.  
C. U. E. Meeting, - - - - - 6.30 p. m.  
Preaching Service, - - - - - 7.30 p. m.  
Prayer Meeting Wednesday, 7.30 p. m.

CHRISTIAN CHURCH  
Sunday School, - - - - - 10.00 a. m.  
Preaching Service, - - - - - 11.00 a. m.  
Y. P. S. C. E. Meeting, - - - - - 6.30 p. m.  
Preaching Service, - - - - - 7.30 p. m.  
Prayer Meeting Wednesday, 7.30 p. m.

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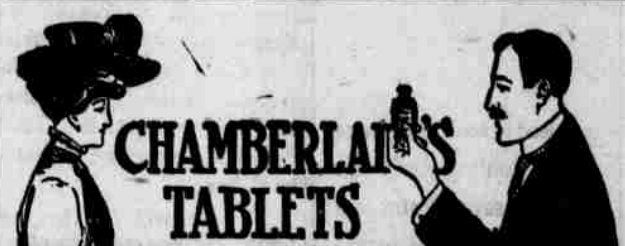
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