

The Wife of a King

A Metamorphosis of the Gold Country of the Far North

By JACK LONDON

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"When do you expect to go back to Circle City?" Malemute Kid asked simply.

"Haven't thought much about it," he replied. "Don't think till after the ice breaks."

"And Madeline?"

He flushed at the question, and there was a quick droop to his eyes. Malemute Kid could have despised him for that, had he known men less. "I guess she's all right," the Circle City king answered hastily, and in an apologetic manner. "Tom Dixon" got charge of my interests, you know, and he sees to it that she has everything she wants."

Malemute Kid laid hand upon his arm, and hushed him suddenly. They had stepped without. Overhead, the aurora, a gorgeous wanton, flaunted miracles of color; beneath lay the sleeping town. Far below, a solitary dog gave tongue. The king again began to speak, but the Kid pressed his hand for silence. The sound multiplied. Dog after dog took up the strain till the full-throated chorus swayed the night.

Cal Galbraith shivered slightly as it died away in half-caught sobs. The Kid read his thoughts openly, and wandered back with him through all the weary days of famine and disease; and with him was also the patient Madeline, sharing his pains and perils never doubting, never complaining. His mind's retina vibrated to a score of pictures, stern, clear-cut and the hand of the past drew back with heavy fingers on his heart. It was the psychological moment. Malemute Kid was half tempted to play his re-

serve card and win the game; but the lesson was too mild as yet, and he let it pass. The next instant they had gripped hands, and the king's beaded moccasins were drawing protests from the outraged snow as he crunched down the hill.

Madeline in collapse was another woman to the mischievous creature of an hour before, whose laughter had been so infectious and whose heightened color and flashing eyes had made her teachers for the while forget. Weak and nerveless, she sat in the chair just as she had been dropped there by Prince and Harrington. Malemute Kid frowned. This would never do. When the time of meeting her husband came to hand, she must carry things off with high-handed imperiousness. It was very necessary she should do it after the manner of white women, else the victory would be no victory at all. So he talked to her, sternly, without mincing of words, and initiated her into the weaknesses of his own sex, till she came to understand what simpletons men were after all, and why the word of their women was law.

A few days before Thanksgiving night, Malemute Kid made another call on Mrs. Eppingwell. She promptly overhauled her feminine fripperies, paid a protracted visit to the dry goods department of the P. C. company, and returned with the Kid to make Madeline's acquaintance. After that came a period such as the cabin had never seen before, and what with cutting, and fitting, and basting, and stitching, and numerous other wonderful and unknowable things, the male



The King Felt Baffled, Defeated.

conspirators were more often banished the premises than not. At such times the opera house opened its double storm doors to them. So often did they put their heads together, and so deeply did they drink to curious toasts, that the loungers scented unknown creeks of incalculable richness, and it is known that several che-chas and at least one old timer kept their stampeding packs stored behind the bar, ready to hit the trail at a moment's notice.

Mrs. Eppingwell was a woman of capacity; so, when she turned Madeline over to her trainers on Thanksgiving night she was so transformed that they were almost afraid of her. Prince wrapped a Hudson Bay blanket about her with a mock reverence more real than feigned, while Malemute Kid whose arm she had taken, found it a severe trial to resume his wonted mentorship. Harrington, with the list of purchase still running through his head, dragged along in the rear, nor opened his mouth once all the way down into the town. When they came to the back door of the opera house they took the blanket from Madeline's shoulders and spread it on the snow, slipping out of Prince's moccasins, she stepped upon it in new satin slippers. The masquerade was at its height. She hesitated, but they jerked open the door and shoved her in. Then they ran around to come in by the front entrance.

"Where is Freda?" the old timers questioned, while the che-chas were equally energetic in asking who Freda was. The ballroom buzzed with her name. It was on everybody's lips. Grizzled "sour-dough boys," day laborers at the mines but proud of their degree, either patronized the spruce-looking tenderfeet and lied eloquently, the "sour-dough boys" being specially created to toy with truth, or gave them savage looks of indignation because of their ignorance. Perhaps forty kings of the Upper and Lower countries were on the floor, each deeming himself hot on the trail and sturdily backing his judgment with the yellow dust of the realm. An assistant was sent to the man at the scales, upon whom had fallen the burden of weighing up the sacks, while several of the gamblers, with the rules of chance at their finger ends, made up alluring books on the field and favorites.

Which was Freda? Time and again the Greek dancer was thought to have been discovered, but each discovery brought panic to the betting ring and a frantic registering of new wagers by those who wished to hedge. Malemute Kid took an interest in the hunt, his advent being hailed uproariously by the revelers, who knew him to a man. The Kid had a good eye for the trick of a step, and ear for the lilt of a voice, and private choice was a marvelous creature who scintillated as the "Aurora Borealis." But the Greek dancer was too subtle for even his penetration. The majority of the gold hunters seemed to have centered their verdict on the "Russian Princess," who was the most graceful in the room, and hence could be no other than Freda Moloof.

During a quadrille a roar of satisfaction went up. She was discovered. At previous balls, in the figure "all hands round," Freda had displayed an inimitable step and variation peculiarly her own. As the figure was called, the "Russian Princess" gave the unique rhythm to limb and body. A chorus of I-told-you-so's shook the squared roof beams, when lo! it was noticed that the "Aurora Borealis" and another mask, the "Spirit of the Pole," were performing the same trick equally well. And when two twin "Sun Dogs" and a "Frost Queen" followed suit, a second assistant was dispatched to the aid of the man at the scales.

Battles came off trail in the midst of the excitement, descending upon them in a hurricane of frost. His rimmed brows turned to cataracts as he whirled about; his mustache, still frozen, seemed jammed with diamonds and turned the light in varicolored rays; while the flying feet slipped on the chunks of ice which rattled from

his moccasins and Scotch socks. A Northland dance is quite an informal affair, the men of the creeks and trails having lost whatever fastidiousness they may have at one time possessed; and only in the high official circles are conventions at all observed. Here, caste carried no significance. Millionaires and paupers, dog drivers and mounted policemen, joined hands with "ladies in the center," and swept around the circle performing most remarkable capers.

In his quest for the Greek dancer, Cal Galbraith managed to get into the same set with the "Russian Princess," toward whom popular suspicion had turned. But by the time he had guided her through one dance, he was willing not only to stake his millions that she was not Freda, but that he had had his arm about her waist before. When or where he could not tell, but the puzzling sense of familiarity so wrought upon him that he turned his attention to the discovery of her identity. Malemute Kid might have aided him instead of occasionally taking the "Princess" for a few turns and talking earnestly to her in low tones. But it was Jack Harrington who paid the "Russian Princess" the most assiduous court. Once he drew Cal Galbraith aside and hazarded, wild guesses as to who she was, and explained to him that he was going in to win. This ruffled the Circle City king, and he forgot both Madeline and Freda in the new quest.

It was soon noised about that the "Russian Princess" was not Freda Moloof. Interest deepened. Here was a fresh enigma. They knew Freda though they could not find her, but here was somebody they had found and did not know. Even the women could not place her, and they knew every good dancer in the camp. Many took her for one of the official clique, indulging in a silly escapade. Not a few asserted she would disappear before the unmasking. Others were equally positive that she was the woman reporter of the Kansas City "Sun," come to write them up at ninety dollars per column. And the men at the scales worked busily.

At one o'clock every couple took to the floor. The unmasking began amid laughter and delight, like that of care-free children. There was no end of oh's and ah's as mask after mask was lifted. The scintillating "Aurora Borealis" became the brawny negress whose income from washing the community's clothes ran at about five hundred a month. The twin "Sun Dogs" discovered mustaches on their upper lips, and were recognized as brother fraction kings of Eldorado. In one of the most prominent sets, and the slowest in uncovering, was Cal Galbraith with the "Spirit of the Pole." Opposite him was Jack Harrington and the "Russian Princess." The rest had discovered themselves, yet the Greek dancer was still missing. All eyes were upon the group. Cal Galbraith, in response to their cries, lifted his partner's mask. Freda's wonderful face and brilliant eyes flashed out upon them. A roar went up, to be hushed suddenly in the new and absorbing mystery of the "Russian Princess." Her face was still hidden, and Jack Harrington was struggling with her. The dancers tittered on the tiptoes of expectancy. He crushed her dainty costume roughly, and then—and then the revelers exploded. The joke was on them. They had danced all night with a tabooed native woman.

But those that knew, and they were many, ceased abruptly, and a hush fell upon the room. Cal Galbraith crossed over with great strides, angrily, and spoke to Madeline in polyglot Chinook. But she retained her composure, apparently oblivious to the fact that she was the cynosure of all eyes, and answered him in English. She showed neither fright nor anger, and Malemute Kid chuckled at her well-bred equanimity. The king felt baffled, defeated; his common Sitwah wife had passed beyond him.

"Come!" he said finally. "Come on home."
"I beg pardon," she replied; "I have agreed to go to supper with Mr. Harrington. Besides, there's no end of dances promised."

Harrington extended his arm to lead her away. He evinced not the slightest distaste toward showing his back, but Malemute Kid had by this time edged in closer. The Circle City king was stunned. Twice his hand dropped to his belt, and twice the Kid gathered himself to spring; but the retreating couple passed safely through the supper-room door, where canned oysters were spread at five dollars the plate. The crowd sighed audibly, broke up into couples, and followed them. Freda pouted and went in with Cal Galbraith; but she had a good heart and a sure tongue, and she spoiled his oysters for him. What she said is of no importance, but his face went red and white. The supper room was filled with a pandemonium of voices, which ceased suddenly as Cal Galbraith stepped over to his wife's table. Since the unmasking, considerable weights of dust had been placed as to the outcome. Everybody watched with breathless interest. Harrington's blue eyes were steady, but under the overhanging tablecloth the latest in six-guns balanced on his knees. Madeline looked up, casually, with little interest.

"May—May I have the next round dance with you?" the king stammered. The wife of the king glanced at her card and inclined her head.

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