

CHAPTER XXVII
CHAPTER XXVIII
CHAPTER XXIX
CHAPTER XXX

A Daughter of the Snows

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A DAUGHTER OF THE SNOWS

by

JACK LONDON

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CHAPTER I

"All ready, Miss Welse, though I'm sorry we can't spare one of the steamer's boats."

Frona Welse arose with alacrity and came to the first officer's side.

"We're so busy," he explained, "and gold-rushers are such perishable freight, at least--"

"I understand," she interrupted, "and I, too, am behaving as though I were perishable. And I am sorry for the trouble I am giving you, but--but--" She turned quickly and pointed to the shore. "Do you see that big

log-house? Between the clump of pines and the river? I was born there."

"Guess I'd be in a hurry myself," he muttered, sympathetically, as he piloted her along the crowded deck.

Everybody was in everybody else's way; nor was there one who failed to proclaim it at the top of his lungs. A thousand gold-seekers were clamoring for the immediate landing of their outfits. Each hatchway gaped wide open, and from the lower depths the shrieking donkey-engines were hurrying the misassorted outfits skyward. On either side of the steamer, rows of scows received the flying cargo, and on each of these scows a sweating mob of men charged the descending slings and heaved bales and boxes about in frantic search. Men waved shipping receipts and shouted over the steamer-rails to them. Sometimes two and three identified the same article, and war arose. The "two-circle" and the "circle-and-dot" brands caused endless jangling, while every whipsaw discovered a dozen claimants.

"The purser insists that he is going mad," the first officer said, as he helped Frona Welse down the gangway to the landing stage, "and the freight clerks have turned the cargo over to the passengers and quit work. But we're not so unlucky as the Star of Bethlehem," he reassured her, pointing to a steamship at anchor a quarter of a mile away. "Half of her passengers have pack-horses for Skaguay and White Pass, and the other half are bound over the Chilcoot. So they've mutinied and everything's at a standstill."

"Hey, you!" he cried, beckoning to a Whitehall which hovered discreetly on the outer rim of the floating confusion.

A tiny launch, pulling heroically at a huge tow-barge, attempted to pass between; but the boatman shot nervily across her bow, and just as he was clear, unfortunately, caught a crab. This slewed the boat around and brought it to a stop.

"Watch out!" the first officer shouted.

A pair of seventy-foot canoes, loaded with outfits, gold-rushers, and Indians, and under full sail, drove down from the counter direction. One of them veered sharply towards the landing stage, but the other pinched the Whitehall against the barge. The boatman had unshipped his oars in time, but his small craft groaned under the pressure and threatened to collapse. Whereat he came to his feet, and in short, nervous phrases consigned all canoe-men and launch-captains to eternal perdition. A man on the barge leaned over from above and baptized him with crisp and crackling oaths, while the whites and Indians in the canoe laughed derisively.

"Aw, g'wan!" one of them shouted. "Why don't yeh learn to row?"

The boatman's fist landed on the point of his critic's jaw and dropped him stunned upon the heaped merchandise. Not content with this summary act he proceeded to follow his fist into the other craft. The miner nearest him tugged vigorously at a revolver which had jammed in its shiny leather holster, while his brother argonauts, laughing, waited the outcome. But the canoe was under way again, and the Indian helmsman drove the point of his paddle into the boatman's chest and hurled him backward into the bottom of the Whitehall.

When the flood of oaths and blasphemy was at full tide, and violent assault and quick death seemed most imminent, the first officer had stolen a glance at the girl by his side. He had expected to find a shocked and frightened maiden countenance, and was not at all prepared for the flushed and deeply interested face which met his eyes.

"I am sorry," he began.

But she broke in, as though annoyed by the interruption, "No, no; not at all. I am enjoying it every bit. Though I am glad that man's revolver stuck. If it had not--"

"We might have been delayed in getting ashore." The first officer laughed, and therein displayed his tact.

"That man is a robber," he went on, indicating the boatman, who had now shoved his oars into the water and was pulling alongside. "He agreed to charge only twenty dollars for putting you ashore. Said he'd have made it twenty-five had it been a man. He's a pirate, mark me, and he will surely hang some day. Twenty dollars for a half-hour's work! Think of it!"

"Easy, sport! Easy!" cautioned the fellow in question, at the same time making an awkward landing and dropping one of his oars over-side. "You've no call to be flingin' names about," he added, defiantly, wringing out his shirt-sleeve, wet from rescue of the oar.

"You've got good ears, my man," began the first officer.

"And a quick fist," the other snapped in.

"And a ready tongue."

"Need it in my business. No gettin' 'long without it among you sea-sharks. Pirate, am I? And you with a thousand passengers packed like sardines! Charge 'em double first-class passage, feed 'em steerage grub, and bunk 'em worse 'n pigs! Pirate, eh! Me?"

A red-faced man thrust his head over the rail above and began to bellow lustily.

"I want my stock landed! Come up here, Mr. Thurston! Now! Right away! Fifty cayuses of I mine eating their heads off in this dirty kennel of yours, and it'll be a sick time you'll have if you don't hustle them ashore as fast as God'll let you! I'm losing a thousand dollars a day, and I won't stand it! Do you hear? I won't stand it! You've robbed me right and left from the time you cleared dock in Seattle, and by the hinges of hell I won't stand it any more! I'll break this company as sure as my name's Thad Ferguson! D'ye hear my spiel? I'm Thad Ferguson, and you can't come and see me any too quick for your health! D'ye hear?"

"Pirate; eh?" the boatman soliloquized. "Who? Me?"

Mr. Thurston waved his hand appeasingly at the red-faced man, and turned to the girl. "I'd like to go ashore with you, and as far as the store, but you see how busy we are. Good-by, and a lucky trip to you. I'll tell off a couple of men at once and break out your baggage. Have it up at the store to-morrow morning, sharp."

She took his hand lightly and stepped aboard. Her weight gave the leaky boat a sudden lurch, and the water hurtled across the bottom boards to her shoe-tops: but she took it coolly enough, settling herself in the stern-sheets and tucking her feet under her.

"Hold on!" the officer cried. "This will never do, Miss Welse. Come on back, and I'll get one of our boats over as soon as I can."

"I'll see you in--in heaven first," retorted the boatman, shoving off. "Let go!" he threatened.

Mr. Thurston gripped tight hold of the gunwale, and as reward for his chivalry had his knuckles rapped sharply by the oar-blade. Then he forgot himself, and Miss Welse also, and swore, and swore fervently.

"I dare say our farewell might have been more dignified," she called back to him, her laughter rippling across the water.

"Jove!" he muttered, doffing his cap gallantly. "There is a *woman!*" And a sudden hunger seized him, and a

yearning to see himself mirrored always in the gray eyes of Frona Welse. He was not analytical; he did not know why; but he knew that with her he could travel to the end of the earth. He felt a distaste for his profession, and a temptation to throw it all over and strike out for the Klondike whither she was going; then he glanced up the beetling side of the ship, saw the red face of Thad Ferguson, and forgot the dream he had for an instant dreamed.

Splash! A handful of water from his strenuous oar struck her full in the face. "Hope you don't mind it, miss," he apologized. "I'm doin' the best I know how, which ain't much."

"So it seems," she answered, good-naturedly.

"Not that I love the sea," bitterly; "but I've got to turn a few honest dollars somehow, and this seemed the likeliest way. I oughter 'a ben in Klondike by now, if I'd had any luck at all. Tell you how it was. I lost my outfit on Windy Arm, half-way in, after packin' it clean across the Pass--"

Zip! Splash! She shook the water from her eyes, squirming the while as some of it ran down her warm back.

"You'll do," he encouraged her. "You're the right stuff for this country. Goin' all the way in?"

She nodded cheerfully.

"Then you'll do. But as I was sayin', after I lost my outfit I hit back for the coast, bein' broke, to hustle up another one. That's why I'm chargin' high-pressure rates. And I hope you don't feel sore at what I made you pay. I'm no worse than the rest, miss, sure. I had to dig up a hundred for this old tub, which ain't worth ten down in the States. Same kind of prices everywhere. Over on the Skaguay Trail horseshoe nails is just as good as a quarter any day. A man goes up to the bar and calls for a whiskey. Whiskey's half a dollar. Well, he drinks his whiskey, plunks down two horseshoe nails, and it's O.K. No kick comin' on horseshoe nails. They use 'em to make change."

"You must be a brave man to venture into the country again after such an experience. Won't you tell me your name? We may meet on the Inside."

"Who? Me? Oh, I'm Del Bishop, pocket-miner; and if ever we run across each other, remember I'd give you the last shirt--I mean, remember my last bit of grub is yours."

"Thank you," she answered with a sweet smile; for she was a woman who loved the things which rose straight from the heart.

He stopped rowing long enough to fish about in the water around his feet for an old cornbeef can.

"You'd better do some bailin'," he ordered, tossing her the can. "She's leakin' worse since that squeeze."

Frona smiled mentally, tucked up her skirts, and bent to the work. At every dip, like great billows heaving along the sky-line, the glacier-fretted mountains rose and fell. Sometimes she rested her back and watched the teeming beach towards which they were heading, and again, the land-locked arm of the sea in which a score or so of great steamships lay at anchor. From each of these, to the shore and back again, flowed a steady stream of scows, launches, canoes, and all sorts of smaller craft. Man, the mighty toiler, reacting upon a hostile environment, she thought, going back in memory to the masters whose wisdom she had shared in lecture-room and midnight study. She was a ripened child of the age, and fairly understood the physical world and the workings thereof. And she had a love for the world, and a deep respect.

For some time Del Bishop had only punctuated the silence with splashes from his oars; but a thought struck

him.

"You haven't told me your name," he suggested, with complacent delicacy.

"My name is Welse," she answered. "Frona Welse."

A great awe manifested itself in his face, and grew to a greater and greater awe. "You--are--Frona--Welse?" he enunciated slowly. "Jacob Welse ain't your old man, is he?"

"Yes; I am Jacob Welse's daughter, at your service."

He puckered his lips in a long low whistle of understanding and stopped rowing. "Just you climb back into the stern and take your feet out of that water," he commanded. "And gimme holt that can."

"Am I not bailing satisfactorily?" she demanded, indignantly.

"Yep. You're doin' all right; but, but, you are--are--"

"Just what I was before you knew who I was. Now you go on rowing,--that's your share of the work; and I'll take care of mine."

"Oh, you'll do!" he murmured ecstatically, bending afresh to the oars. "And Jacob Welse is your old man? I oughter 'a known it, sure!"

When they reached the sand-spit, crowded with heterogeneous piles of merchandise and buzzing with men, she stopped long enough to shake hands with her ferryman. And though such a proceeding on the part of his feminine patrons was certainly unusual, Del Bishop squared it easily with the fact that she was Jacob Welse's daughter.

"Remember, my last bit of grub is yours," he reassured her, still holding her hand.

"And your last shirt, too; don't forget."

"Well, you're a--a--a crackerjack!" he exploded with a final squeeze. "Sure!"

Her short skirt did not block the free movement of her limbs, and she discovered with pleasurable surprise that the quick tripping step of the city pavement had departed from her, and that she was swinging off in the long easy stride which is born of the trail and which comes only after much travail and endeavor. More than one gold-rusher, shooting keen glances at her ankles and gray-gaitered calves, affirmed Del Bishop's judgment. And more than one glanced up at her face, and glanced again; for her gaze was frank, with the frankness of comradeship; and in her eyes there was always a smiling light, just trembling on the verge of dawn; and did the onlooker smile, her eyes smiled also. And the smiling light was protean-mooded,--merry, sympathetic, joyous, quizzical,--the complement of whatsoever kindled it. And sometimes the light spread over all her face, till the smile prefigured by it was realized. But it was always in frank and open comradeship.

And there was much to cause her to smile as she hurried through the crowd, across the sand-spit, and over the flat towards the log-building she had pointed out to Mr. Thurston. Time had rolled back, and locomotion and transportation were once again in the most primitive stages. Men who had never carried more than parcels in all their lives had now become bearers of burdens. They no longer walked upright under the sun, but stooped the body forward and bowed the head to the earth. Every back had become a pack-saddle, and the strap-galls were beginning to form. They staggered beneath the unwonted effort, and legs became drunken with weariness and titubated in divers directions till the sunlight darkened and bearer and burden fell by the way.