

**A Daughter of the Snows**

**By**

**Jack London**

## 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 | 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. Other men, exulting secretly, piled their goods on two-wheeled go-carts and pulled out blithely enough, only to stall at the first spot where the great round boulders invaded the trail. Whereat they generalized anew upon the principles of Alaskan travel, discarded the go-cart, or trundled it back to the beach and sold it at fabulous price to the last man landed. Tenderfeet, with ten pounds of Colt's revolvers, cartridges, and hunting-knives belted about them, wandered valiantly up the trail, and crept back softly, shedding revolvers, cartridges, and knives in despairing showers. And so, in gasping and bitter sweat, these sons of Adam suffered for Adam's sin.

Frona felt vaguely disturbed by this great throbbing rush of gold-mad men, and the old scene with its clustering associations seemed blotted out by these toiling aliens. Even the old landmarks appeared strangely unfamiliar. It was the same, yet not the same. Here, on the grassy flat, where she had played as a child and shrunk back at the sound of her voice echoing from glacier to glacier, ten thousand men tramped ceaselessly up and down, grinding the tender herbage into the soil and mocking the stony silence. And just up the trail were ten thousand men

who had passed by, and over the Chilcoot were ten thousand more. And behind, all down the island-studded Alaskan coast, even to the Horn, were yet ten thousand more, harnessers of wind and steam, hasteners from the ends of the earth. The Dyea River as of old roared turbulently down to the sea; but its ancient banks were gored by the feet of many men, and these men labored in surging rows at the dripping tow-lines, and the deep-laden boats followed them as they fought their upward way. And the will of man strove with the will of the water, and the men laughed at the old Dyea River and gored its banks deeper for the men who were to follow.

The doorway of the store, through which she had once run out and in, and where she had looked with awe at the unusual sight of a stray trapper or fur-trader, was now packed with a clamorous throng of men. Where of old one letter waiting a claimant was a thing of wonder, she now saw, by peering through the window, the mail heaped up from floor to ceiling. And it was for this mail the men were clamoring so insistently. Before the store, by the scales, was another crowd. An Indian threw his pack upon the scales, the white owner jotted down the weight in a note-book, and another pack was thrown on. Each pack was in the straps, ready for the packer's back and the precarious journey over the Chilcoot. Frona edged in closer. She was interested in freights. She remembered in her day when the solitary prospector or trader had his outfit packed over for six cents,--one hundred and twenty dollars a ton.

The tenderfoot who was weighing up consulted his guide-book. "Eight cents," he said to the Indian. Whereupon the Indians laughed scornfully and chorused, "Forty cents!" A pained expression came into his face, and he looked about him anxiously. The sympathetic light in Frona's eyes caught him, and he regarded her with intent blankness. In reality he was busy reducing a three-ton outfit to terms of cash at forty dollars per hundred-weight. "Twenty-four hundred dollars for thirty miles!" he cried. "What can I do?"

Frona shrugged her shoulders. "You'd better pay them the forty cents," she advised, "else they will take off their straps."

The man thanked her, but instead of taking heed went on with his haggling. One of the Indians stepped up and proceeded to unfasten his pack-straps. The tenderfoot wavered, but just as he was about to give in, the packers jumped the price on him to forty-five cents. He smiled after a sickly fashion, and nodded his head in token of surrender. But another Indian joined the group and began whispering excitedly. A cheer went up, and before the man could realize it they had jerked off their straps and departed, spreading the news as they went that freight to Lake Linderman was fifty cents.

Of a sudden, the crowd before the store was perceptibly agitated. Its members whispered excitedly one to another, and all their eyes were focussed upon three men approaching from up the trail. The trio were ordinary-looking creatures, ill-clad and even ragged. In a more stable

community their apprehension by the village constable and arrest for vagrancy would have been immediate. "French Louis," the tenderfeet whispered and passed the word along. "Owns three Eldorado claims in a block," the man next to Frona confided to her. "Worth ten millions at the very least." French Louis, striding a little in advance of his companions, did not look it. He had parted company with his hat somewhere along the route, and a frayed silk kerchief was wrapped carelessly about his head. And for all his ten millions, he carried his own travelling pack on his broad shoulders. "And that one, the one with the beard, that's Swiftwater Bill, another of the Eldorado kings."

"How do you know?" Frona asked, doubtfully.

"Know!" the man exclaimed. "Know! Why his picture has been in all the papers for the last six weeks. See!" He unfolded a newspaper. "And a pretty good likeness, too. I've looked at it so much I'd know his mug among a thousand."

"Then who is the third one?" she queried, tacitly accepting him as a fount of authority.

Her informant lifted himself on his toes to see better. "I don't know," he confessed sorrowfully, then tapped the shoulder of the man next to him. "Who is the lean, smooth-faced one? The one with the blue shirt and the patch on his knee?"

Just then Frona uttered a glad little cry and darted forward. "Matt!" she cried. "Matt McCarthy!"

The man with the patch shook her hand heartily, though he did not know her and distrust was plain in his eyes.

"Oh, you don't remember me!" she chattered. "And don't you dare say you do! If there weren't so many looking, I'd hug you, you old bear!"

"And so Big Bear went home to the Little Bears," she recited, solemnly. "And the Little Bears were very hungry. And Big Bear said, 'Guess what I have got, my children.' And one Little Bear guessed berries, and one Little Bear guessed salmon, and t'other Little Bear guessed porcupine. Then Big Bear laughed 'Whoof! Whoof!' and said, 'A Nice Big Fat Man!'"

As he listened, recollection avowed itself in his face, and, when she had finished, his eyes wrinkled up and he laughed a peculiar, laughable silent laugh.

"Sure, an' it's well I know ye," he explained; "but for the life iv me I can't put me finger on ye."

She pointed into the store and watched him anxiously.

"Now I have ye!" He drew back and looked her up and down, and his

expression changed to disappointment. "It cudden be. I mistook ye. Ye cud niver a-lived in that shanty," thrusting a thumb in the direction of the store.

Frona nodded her head vigorously.

"Thin it's yer ownself afther all? The little motherless darlin', with the goold hair I combed the knots out iv many's the time? The little witch that run barefoot an' barelegged over all the place?"

"Yes, yes," she corroborated, gleefully.

"The little divil that stole the dog-team an' wint over the Pass in the dead o' winter for to see where the world come to an ind on the ither side, just because old Matt McCarthy was afther tellin' her fairy stories?"

"O Matt, dear old Matt! Remember the time I went swimming with the Siwash girls from the Indian camp?"

"An' I dragged ye out by the hair o' yer head?"

"And lost one of your new rubber boots?"

"Ah, an' sure an' I do. And a most shockin' an' immodest affair it was! An' the boots was worth tin dollars over yer father's counter."

"And then you went away, over the Pass, to the Inside, and we never heard a word of you. Everybody thought you dead."

"Well I recollect the day. An' ye cried in me arms an' wuddent kiss yer old Matt good-by. But ye did in the ind," he exclaimed, triumphantly, "whin ye saw I was goin' to lave ye for sure. What a wee thing ye were!"

"I was only eight."

"An' 'tis twelve year agone. Twelve year I've spint on the Inside, with niver a trip out. Ye must be twinty now?"

"And almost as big as you," Frona affirmed.

"A likely woman ye've grown into, tall, an' shapely, an' all that." He looked her over critically. "But ye cud 'a' stood a bit more flesh, I'm thinkin'."

"No, no," she denied. "Not at twenty, Matt, not at twenty. Feel my arm, you'll see." She doubled that member till the biceps knotted.

"'Tis muscle," he admitted, passing his hand admiringly over the swelling bunch; "just as though ye'd been workin' hard for yer livin'."

"Oh, I can swing clubs, and box, and fence," she cried, successively striking the typical postures; "and swim, and make high dives, chin a bar twenty times, and--and walk on my hands. There!"

"Is that what ye've been doin'?' I thought ye wint away for book-larnin'," he commented, dryly.

"But they have new ways of teaching, now, Matt, and they don't turn you out with your head crammed--"

"An' yer legs that spindly they can't carry it all! Well, an' I forgive ye yer muscle."

"But how about yourself, Matt?" Frona asked. "How has the world been to you these twelve years?"

"Behold!" He spread his legs apart, threw his head back, and his chest out. "Ye now behold Mister Matthew McCarthy, a king iv the noble Eldorado Dynasty by the strength iv his own right arm. Me possessions is limitless. I have more dust in wan minute than iver I saw in all me life before. Me intintion for makin' this trip to the States is to look up me ancestors. I have a firm belafe that they wance existed. Ye may find nuggets in the Klondike, but niver good whiskey. 'Tis likewise me intintion to have wan drink iv the rate stuff before I die. Afther that 'tis me sworn resolve to return to the superveshion iv me Klondike properties. Indade, and I'm an Eldorado king; an' if ye'll be

wantin' the lind iv a tidy bit, it's meself that'll loan it ye."

"The same old, old Matt, who never grows old," Frona laughed.

"An' it's yerself is the thrue Welse, for all yer prize-fighter's muscles an' yer philosopher's brains. But let's wander inside on the heels of Louis an' Swiftwater. Andy's still tindin' store, I'm told, an' we'll see if I still linger in the pages iv his mimory."

"And I, also." Frona seized him by the hand. It was a bad habit she had of seizing the hands of those she loved. "It's ten years since I went away."

The Irishman forged his way through the crowd like a pile-driver, and Frona followed easily in the lee of his bulk. The tenderfeet watched them reverently, for to them they were as Northland divinities. The buzz of conversation rose again.

"Who's the girl?" somebody asked. And just as Frona passed inside the door she caught the opening of the answer: "Jacob Welse's daughter. Never heard of Jacob Welse? Where have you been keeping yourself?"