

The Scorn of Women

Jack London

Once Freda and Mrs. Eppingwell clashed.

Now Freda was a Greek girl and a dancer. At least she purported to be Greek; but this was doubted by many, for her classic face had over-much strength in it, and the tides of hell which rose in her eyes made at rare moments her ethnology the more dubious. To a few--men--this sight had been vouchsafed, and though long years may have passed, they have not forgotten, nor will they ever forget. She never talked of herself, so that it were well to let it go down that when in repose, expurgated, Greek she certainly was. Her furs were the most magnificent in all the country from Chilcoot to St. Michael's, and her name was common on the lips of men. But Mrs. Eppingwell was the wife of a captain; also a social constellation of the first magnitude, the path of her orbit marking the most select coterie in Dawson,--a coterie captioned by the profane as the "official clique." Sitka Charley had travelled trail with her once, when famine drew tight and a man's life was less than a cup of flour, and his judgment placed her above all women. Sitka Charley was an Indian; his criteria were primitive; but his word was flat, and his verdict a hall-mark in every camp under the circle.

These two women were man-conquering, man-subduing machines, each in her own way, and their ways were different. Mrs. Eppingwell ruled in her own house, and at the Barracks, where were younger sons galore, to say nothing of the chiefs of the police, the executive, and the judiciary. Freda ruled down in the town; but the men she ruled were the same who functioned socially at the Barracks or were fed tea and canned preserves at the hand of Mrs. Eppingwell in her hillside cabin of rough-hewn logs. Each knew the other existed; but their lives were apart as the Poles, and while they must have heard stray bits of news and were curious, they were never known to ask a question. And there would have been no trouble had not a free lance in the shape of the model- woman come into the land on the first ice, with a spanking dog- team and a cosmopolitan reputation. Loraine Lisznayi-- alliterative, dramatic, and Hungarian--precipitated the strife, and because of her Mrs. Eppingwell left her hillside and invaded Freda's domain, and Freda likewise went up from the town to spread confusion and embarrassment at the Governor's ball.

All of which may be ancient history so far as the Klondike is concerned, but very few, even in Dawson, know the inner truth of the matter; nor beyond those few are there any fit to measure the wife of the captain or the Greek dancer. And that all are now permitted to understand, let honor be accorded Sitka Charley. From his lips fell the main facts in the screed herewith presented. It ill befits that Freda herself should have waxed confidential to a mere scribbler of words, or that Mrs. Eppingwell made mention of the things which happened. They may have spoken, but it is unlikely.

II

Floyd Vanderlip was a strong man, apparently. Hard work and hard grub had no terrors for him, as his early history in the country attested. In danger he was a lion, and when he held in check half a thousand starving men, as he once did, it was remarked that no cooler eye ever took the glint of sunshine on a rifle-sight. He had but one weakness, and even that,

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rising from out his strength, was of a negative sort. His parts were strong, but they lacked co-ordination. Now it happened that while his centre of amateness was pronounced, it had lain mute and passive during the years he lived on moose and salmon and chased glowing Eldorados over chill divides. But when he finally blazed the corner-post and centre-stakes on one of the richest Klondike claims, it began to quicken; and when he took his place in society, a full-fledged Bonanza King, it awoke and took charge of him. He suddenly recollected a girl in the States, and it came to him quite forcibly, not only that she might be waiting for him, but that a wife was a very pleasant acquisition for a man who lived some several degrees north of 53. So he wrote an appropriate note, enclosed a letter of credit generous enough to cover all expenses, including trousseau and chaperon, and addressed it to one Flossie. Flossie? One could imagine the rest. However, after that he built a comfortable cabin on his claim, bought another in Dawson, and broke the news to his friends.

And just here is where the lack of co-ordination came into play. The waiting was tedious, and having been long denied, the amative element could not brook further delay. Flossie was coming; but Loraine Lisznayi was here. And not only was Loraine Lisznayi here, but her cosmopolitan reputation was somewhat the worse for wear, and she was not exactly so young as when she posed in the studios of artist queens and received at her door the cards of cardinals and princes. Also, her finances were unhealthy. Having run the gamut in her time, she was now not averse to trying conclusions with a Bonanza King whose wealth was such that he could not guess it within six figures. Like a wise soldier casting about after years of service for a comfortable billet, she had come into the Northland to be married. So, one day, her eyes flashed up into Floyd Vanderlip's as he was buying table linen for Flossie in the P. C. Company's store, and the thing was settled out of hand.

When a man is free much may go unquestioned, which, should he be rash enough to cumber himself with domestic ties, society will instantly challenge. Thus it was with Floyd Vanderlip. Flossie was coming, and a low buzz went up when Loraine Lisznayi rode down the main street behind his wolf-dogs. She accompanied the lady reporter of the "Kansas City Star" when photographs were taken of his Bonanza properties, and watched the genesis of a six-column article. At that time they were dined royally in Flossie's cabin, on Flossie's table linen. Likewise there were comings and goings, and junketings, all perfectly proper, by the way, which caused the men to say sharp things and the women to be spiteful. Only Mrs. Eppingwell did not hear. The distant hum of wagging tongues rose faintly, but she was prone to believe good of people and to close her ears to evil; so she paid no heed.

Not so with Freda. She had no cause to love men, but, by some strange alchemy of her nature, her heart went out to women,--to women whom she had less cause to love. And her heart went out to Flossie, even then travelling the Long Trail and facing into the bitter North to meet a man who might not wait for her. A shrinking, clinging sort of a girl, Freda pictured her, with weak mouth and pretty pouting lips, blow-away sun-kissed hair, and eyes full of the merry shallows and the lesser joys of life. But she also pictured Flossie, face nose-strapped and frost-rimed, stumbling wearily behind the dogs. Wherefore she smiled, dancing one night, upon Floyd Vanderlip.

Few men are so constituted that they may receive the smile of Freda unmoved; nor among them can Floyd Vanderlip be accounted. The grace he had found with the model-woman had caused him to re-measure himself, and by the favor in which he now stood with the

Greek dancer he felt himself doubly a man. There were unknown qualities and depths in him, evidently, which they perceived. He did not know exactly what those qualities and depths were, but he had a hazy idea that they were there somewhere, and of them was bred a great pride in himself. A man who could force two women such as these to look upon him a second time, was certainly a most remarkable man. Some day, when he had the time, he would sit down and analyze his strength; but now, just now, he would take what the gods had given him. And a thin little thought began to lift itself, and he fell to wondering whatever under the sun he had seen in Flossie, and to regret exceedingly that he had sent for her. Of course, Freda was out of the running. His dumps were the richest on Bonanza Creek, and they were many, while he was a man of responsibility and position. But Loraine Lisznayi--she was just the woman. Her life had been large; she could do the honors of his establishment and give tone to his dollars.

But Freda smiled, and continued to smile, till he came to spend much time with her. When she, too, rode down the street behind his wolf-dogs, the model-woman found food for thought, and the next time they were together dazzled him with her princes and cardinals and personal little anecdotes of courts and kings. She also showed him dainty missives, superscribed, "My dear Loraine," and ended "Most affectionately yours," and signed by the given name of a real live queen on a throne. And he marvelled in his heart that the great woman should deign to waste so much as a moment upon him. But she played him cleverly, making flattering contrasts and comparisons between him and the noble phantoms she drew mainly from her fancy, till he went away dizzy with self-delight and sorrowing for the world which had been denied him so long. Freda was a more masterful woman. If she flattered, no one knew it. Should she stoop, the stoop were unobserved. If a man felt she thought well of him, so subtly was the feeling conveyed that he could not for the life of him say why or how. So she tightened her grip upon Floyd Vanderlip and rode daily behind his dogs.

And just here is where the mistake occurred. The buzz rose loudly and more definitely, coupled now with the name of the dancer, and Mrs. Eppingwell heard. She, too, thought of Flossie lifting her moccasined feet through the endless hours, and Floyd Vanderlip was invited up the hillside to tea, and invited often. This quite took his breath away, and he became drunken with appreciation of himself. Never was man so maltreated. His soul had become a thing for which three women struggled, while a fourth was on the way to claim it. And three such women!

But Mrs. Eppingwell and the mistake she made. She spoke of the affair, tentatively, to Sitka Charley, who had sold dogs to the Greek girl. But no names were mentioned. The nearest approach to it was when Mrs. Eppingwell said, "This--er--horrid woman," and Sitka Charley, with the model-woman strong in his thoughts, had echoed, "--er--horrid woman." And he agreed with her, that it was a wicked thing for a woman to come between a man and the girl he was to marry. "A mere girl, Charley," she said, "I am sure she is. And she is coming into a strange country without a friend when she gets here. We must do something." Sitka Charley promised his help, and went away thinking what a wicked woman this Loraine Lisznayi must be, also what noble women Mrs. Eppingwell and Freda were to interest themselves in the welfare of the unknown Flossie.

Now Mrs. Eppingwell was open as the day. To Sitka Charley, who took her once past the Hills of Silence, belongs the glory of having memorialized her clear-searching eyes, her

clear-ringing voice, and her utter downright frankness. Her lips had a way of stiffening to command, and she was used to coming straight to the point. Having taken Floyd Vanderlip's measurement, she did not dare this with him; but she was not afraid to go down into the town to Freda. And down she went, in the bright light of day, to the house of the dancer. She was above silly tongues, as was her husband, the captain. She wished to see this woman and to speak with her, nor was she aware of any reason why she should not. So she stood in the snow at the Greek girl's door, with the frost at sixty below, and parleyed with the waiting-maid for a full five minutes. She had also the pleasure of being turned away from that door, and of going back up the hill, wroth at heart for the indignity which had been put upon her. "Who was this woman that she should refuse to see her?" she asked herself. One would think it the other way around, and she herself but a dancing girl denied at the door of the wife of a captain. As it was, she knew, had Freda come up the hill to her,--no matter what the errand,--she would have made her welcome at her fire, and they would have sat there as two women, and talked, merely as two women. She had overstepped convention and lowered herself, but she had thought it different with the women down in the town. And she was ashamed that she had laid herself open to such dishonor, and her thoughts of Freda were unkind.

Not that Freda deserved this. Mrs. Eppingwell had descended to meet her who was without caste, while she, strong in the traditions of her own earlier status, had not permitted it. She could worship such a woman, and she would have asked no greater joy than to have had her into the cabin and sat with her, just sat with her, for an hour. But her respect for Mrs. Eppingwell, and her respect for herself, who was beyond respect, had prevented her doing that which she most desired. Though not quite recovered from the recent visit of Mrs. McFee, the wife of the minister, who had descended upon her in a whirlwind of exhortation and brimstone, she could not imagine what had prompted the present visit. She was not aware of any particular wrong she had done, and surely this woman who waited at the door was not concerned with the welfare of her soul. Why had she come? For all the curiosity she could not help but feel, she steeled herself in the pride of those who are without pride, and trembled in the inner room like a maid on the first caress of a lover. If Mrs. Eppingwell suffered going up the hill, she too suffered, lying face downward on the bed, dry-eyed, dry-mouthed, dumb.

Mrs. Eppingwell's knowledge of human nature was great. She aimed at universality. She had found it easy to step from the civilized and contemplate things from the barbaric aspect. She could comprehend certain primal and analogous characteristics in a hungry wolf-dog or a starving man, and predicate lines of action to be pursued by either under like conditions. To her, a woman was a woman, whether garbed in purple or the rags of the gutter; Freda was a woman. She would not have been surprised had she been taken into the dancer's cabin and encountered on common ground; nor surprised had she been taken in and flaunted in prideless arrogance. But to be treated as she had been treated, was unexpected and disappointing. Ergo, she had not caught Freda's point of view. And this was good. There are some points of view which cannot be gained save through much travail and personal crucifixion, and it were well for the world that its Mrs. Eppingwells should, in certain ways, fall short of universality. One cannot understand defilement without laying hands to pitch, which is very sticky, while there be plenty willing to undertake the experiment. All of which is of small concern, beyond the fact that it gave Mrs. Eppingwell ground for grievance, and bred for her a greater love in the Greek girl's heart.

III

And in this way things went along for a month,--Mrs. Eppingwell striving to withhold the man from the Greek dancer's blandishments against the time of Flossie's coming; Flossie lessening the miles each day on the dreary trail; Freda pitting her strength against the model-woman; the model-woman straining every nerve to land the prize; and the man moving through it all like a flying shuttle, very proud of himself, whom he believed to be a second Don Juan.

It was nobody's fault except the man's that Loraine Lisznayi at last landed him. The way of a man with a maid may be too wonderful to know, but the way of a woman with a man passeth all conception; whence the prophet were indeed unwise who would dare forecast Floyd Vanderlip's course twenty-four hours in advance. Perhaps the model-woman's attraction lay in that to the eye she was a handsome animal; perhaps she fascinated him with her old- world talk of palaces and princes; leastwise she dazzled him whose life had been worked out in uncultured roughness, and he at last agreed to her suggestion of a run down the river and a marriage at Forty Mile. In token of his intention he bought dogs from Sitka Charley,--more than one sled is necessary when a woman like Loraine Lisznayi takes to the trail, and then went up the creek to give orders for the superintendence of his Bonanza mines during his absence.

He had given it out, rather vaguely, that he needed the animals for sledding lumber from the mill to his sluices, and right here is where Sitka Charley demonstrated his fitness. He agreed to furnish dogs on a given date, but no sooner had Floyd Vanderlip turned his toes up-creek, than Charley hied himself away in perturbation to Loraine Lisznayi. Did she know where Mr. Vanderlip had gone? He had agreed to supply that gentleman with a big string of dogs by a certain time; but that shameless one, the German trader Meyers, had been buying up the brutes and skimmed the market. It was very necessary he should see Mr. Vanderlip, because of the shameless one he would be all of a week behindhand in filling the contract. She did know where he had gone? Up- creek? Good! He would strike out after him at once and inform him of the unhappy delay. Did he understand her to say that Mr. Vanderlip needed the dogs on Friday night? that he must have them by that time? It was too bad, but it was the fault of the shameless one who had bid up the prices. They had jumped fifty dollars per head, and should he buy on the rising market he would lose by the contract. He wondered if Mr. Vanderlip would be willing to meet the advance. She knew he would? Being Mr. Vanderlip's friend, she would even meet the difference herself? And he was to say nothing about it? She was kind to so look to his interests. Friday night, did she say? Good! The dogs would be on hand.

An hour later, Freda knew the elopement was to be pulled off on Friday night; also, that Floyd Vanderlip had gone up-creek, and her hands were tied. On Friday morning, Devereaux, the official courier, bearing despatches from the Governor, arrived over the ice. Besides the despatches, he brought news of Flossie. He had passed her camp at Sixty Mile; humans and dogs were in good condition; and she would doubtless be in on the morrow. Mrs. Eppingwell experienced a great relief on hearing this; Floyd Vanderlip was safe up-creek, and ere the Greek girl could again lay hands upon him, his bride would be on the ground. But that afternoon her big St. Bernard, valiantly defending her front stoop, was downed by a foraging party of trail-starved Malemites. He was buried beneath the hirsute mass for about thirty seconds, when rescued by a couple of axes and as many stout men.

Had he remained down two minutes, the chances were large that he would have been roughly apportioned and carried away in the respective bellies of the attacking party; but as it was, it was a mere case of neat and expeditious mangling. Sitka Charley came to repair the damages, especially a right fore-paw which had inadvertently been left a fraction of a second too long in some other dog's mouth. As he put on his mittens to go, the talk turned upon Flossie and in natural sequence passed on to the--"er horrid woman." Sitka Charley remarked incidentally that she intended jumping out down river that night with Floyd Vanderlip, and further ventured the information that accidents were very likely at that time of year.

So Mrs. Eppingwell's thoughts of Freda were unkindler than ever. She wrote a note, addressed it to the man in question, and intrusted it to a messenger who lay in wait at the mouth of Bonanza Creek. Another man, bearing a note from Freda, also waited at that strategic point. So it happened that Floyd Vanderlip, riding his sled merrily down with the last daylight, received the notes together. He tore Freda's across. No, he would not go to see her. There were greater things afoot that night. Besides, she was out of the running. But Mrs. Eppingwell! He would observe her last wish,--or rather, the last wish it would be possible for him to observe,--and meet her at the Governor's ball to hear what she had to say. From the tone of the writing it was evidently important; perhaps-- He smiled fondly, but failed to shape the thought. Confound it all, what a lucky fellow he was with the women any way! Scattering her letter to the frost, he mushed the dogs into a swinging lope and headed for his cabin. It was to be a masquerade, and he had to dig up the costume used at the Opera House a couple of months before. Also, he had to shave and to eat. Thus it was that he, alone of all interested, was unaware of Flossie's proximity.

"Have them down to the water-hole off the hospital, at midnight, sharp. Don't fail me," he said to Sitka Charley, who dropped in with the advice that only one dog was lacking to fill the bill, and that that one would be forthcoming in an hour or so. "Here's the sack. There's the scales. Weigh out your own dust and don't bother me. I've got to get ready for the ball."

Sitka Charley weighed out his pay and departed, carrying with him a letter to Loraine Lisznayi, the contents of which he correctly imagined to refer to a meeting at the water-hole of the hospital, at midnight, sharp.

IV

Twice Freda sent messengers up to the Barracks, where the dance was in full swing, and as often they came back without answers. Then she did what only Freda could do--put on her furs, masked her face, and went up herself to the Governor's ball. Now there happened to be a custom--not an original one by any means--to which the official clique had long since become addicted. It was a very wise custom, for it furnished protection to the womankind of the officials and gave greater selectness to their revels. Whenever a masquerade was given, a committee was chosen, the sole function of which was to stand by the door and peep beneath each and every mask. Most men did not clamor to be placed upon this committee, while the very ones who least desired the honor were the ones whose services were most required. The chaplain was not well enough acquainted with the faces and places of the townspeople to know whom to admit and whom to turn away. In like condition were the several other worthy gentlemen who would have asked nothing better than to so serve. To fill the coveted place, Mrs. McFee would have risked her chance of salvation, and did,

one night, when a certain trio passed in under her guns and muddled things considerably before their identity was discovered. Thereafter only the fit were chosen, and very ungracefully did they respond.

On this particular night Prince was at the door. Pressure had been brought to bear, and he had not yet recovered from amaze at his having consented to undertake a task which bid fair to lose him half his friends, merely for the sake of pleasing the other half. Three or four of the men he had refused were men whom he had known on creek and trail,--good comrades, but not exactly eligible for so select an affair. He was canvassing the expediency of resigning the post there and then, when a woman tripped in under the light. Freda! He could swear it by the furs, did he not know that poise of head so well. The last one to expect in all the world. He had given her better judgment than to thus venture the ignominy of refusal, or, if she passed, the scorn of women. He shook his head, without scrutiny; he knew her too well to be mistaken. But she pressed closer. She lifted the black silk ribbon and as quickly lowered it again. For one flashing, eternal second he looked upon her face. It was not for nothing, the saying which had arisen in the country, that Freda played with men as a child with bubbles. Not a word was spoken. Prince stepped aside, and a few moments later might have been seen resigning, with warm incoherence, the post to which he had been unfaithful.

A woman, flexible of form, slender, yet rhythmic of strength in every movement, now pausing with this group, now scanning that, urged a restless and devious course among the revellers. Men recognized the furs, and marvelled,--men who should have served upon the door committee; but they were not prone to speech. Not so with the women. They had better eyes for the lines of figure and tricks of carriage, and they knew this form to be one with which they were unfamiliar; likewise the furs. Mrs. McFee, emerging from the supper-room where all was in readiness, caught one flash of the blazing, questing eyes through the silken mask-slits, and received a start. She tried to recollect where she had seen the like, and a vivid picture was recalled of a certain proud and rebellious sinner whom she had once encountered on a fruitless errand for the Lord.

So it was that the good woman took the trail in hot and righteous wrath, a trail which brought her ultimately into the company of Mrs. Eppingwell and Floyd Vanderlip. Mrs. Eppingwell had just found the opportunity to talk with the man. She had determined, now that Flossie was so near at hand, to proceed directly to the point, and an incisive little ethical discourse was titillating on the end of her tongue, when the couple became three. She noted, and pleasurably, the faintly foreign accent of the "Beg pardon" with which the furred woman prefaced her immediate appropriation of Floyd Vanderlip; and she courteously bowed her permission for them to draw a little apart.

Then it was that Mrs. McFee's righteous hand descended, and accompanying it in its descent was a black mask torn from a startled woman. A wonderful face and brilliant eyes were exposed to the quiet curiosity of those who looked that way, and they were everybody. Floyd Vanderlip was rather confused. The situation demanded instant action on the part of a man who was not beyond his depth, while *he* hardly knew where he was. He stared helplessly about him. Mrs. Eppingwell was perplexed. She could not comprehend. An explanation was forthcoming, somewhere, and Mrs. McFee was equal to it.

"Mrs. Eppingwell," and her Celtic voice rose shrilly, "it is with great pleasure I make you acquainted with Freda Moloof, *Miss* Freda Moloof, as I understand."

Freda involuntarily turned. With her own face bared, she felt as in a dream, naked, upon her turned the clothed features and gleaming eyes of the masked circle. It seemed, almost, as though a hungry wolf-pack girdled her, ready to drag her down. It might chance that some felt pity for her, she thought, and at the thought, hardened. She would by far prefer their scorn. Strong of heart was she, this woman, and though she had hunted the prey into the midst of the pack, Mrs. Eppingwell or no Mrs. Eppingwell, she could not forego the kill.

But here Mrs. Eppingwell did a strange thing. So this, at last, was Freda, she mused, the dancer and the destroyer of men; the woman from whose door she had been turned. And she, too, felt the imperious creature's nakedness as though it were her own. Perhaps it was this, her Saxon disinclination to meet a disadvantaged foe, perhaps, forsooth, that it might give her greater strength in the struggle for the man, and it might have been a little of both; but be that as it may, she did do this strange thing. When Mrs. McFee's thin voice, vibrant with malice, had raised, and Freda turned involuntarily, Mrs. Eppingwell also turned, removed her mask, and inclined her head in acknowledgment.

It was another flashing, eternal second, during which these two women regarded each other. The one, eyes blazing, meteoric; at bay, aggressive; suffering in advance and resenting in advance the scorn and ridicule and insult she had thrown herself open to; a beautiful, burning, bubbling lava cone of flesh and spirit. And the other, calm-eyed, cool-browed, serene; strong in her own integrity, with faith in herself, thoroughly at ease; dispassionate, imperturbable; a figure chiselled from some cold marble quarry. Whatever gulf there might exist, she recognized it not. No bridging, no descending; her attitude was that of perfect equality. She stood tranquilly on the ground of their common womanhood. And this maddened Freda. Not so, had she been of lesser breed; but her soul's plummet knew not the bottomless, and she could follow the other into the deeps of her deepest depths and read her aright. "Why do you not draw back your garment's hem?" she was fain to cry out, all in that flashing, dazzling second. "Spit upon me, revile me, and it were greater mercy than this!" She trembled. Her nostrils distended and quivered. But she drew herself in check, returned the inclination of head, and turned to the man.

"Come with me, Floyd," she said simply. "I want you now."

"What the--" he began explosively, and quit as suddenly, discreet enough to not round it off. Where the deuce had his wits gone, anyway? Was ever a man more foolishly placed? He gurgled deep down in his throat and high up in the roof of his mouth, heaved as one his big shoulders and his indecision, and glared appealingly at the two women.

"I beg pardon, just a moment, but may I speak first with Mr. Vanderlip?" Mrs. Eppingwell's voice, though flute-like and low, predicated will in its every cadence.

The man looked his gratitude. He, at least, was willing enough.

"I'm very sorry," from Freda. "There isn't time. He must come at once." The conventional phrases dropped easily from her lips, but she could not forbear to smile inwardly at their inadequacy and weakness. She would much rather have shrieked.

"But, Miss Moloof, who are you that you may possess yourself of Mr. Vanderlip and command his actions?"

Whereupon relief brightened his face, and the man beamed his approval. Trust Mrs. Eppingwell to drag him clear. Freda had met her match this time.

"I--I--" Freda hesitated, and then her feminine mind putting on its harness--"and who are you to ask this question?"

"I? I am Mrs. Eppingwell, and--"

"There!" the other broke in sharply. "You are the wife of a captain, who is therefore your husband. I am only a dancing girl. What do you with this man?"

"Such unprecedented behavior!" Mrs. McFee ruffled herself and cleared for action, but Mrs. Eppingwell shut her mouth with a look and developed a new attack.

"Since Miss Moloof appears to hold claims upon you, Mr. Vanderlip, and is in too great haste to grant me a few seconds of your time, I am forced to appeal directly to you. May I speak with you, alone, and now?"

Mrs. McFee's jaws brought together with a snap. That settled the disgraceful situation.

"Why, er--that is, certainly," the man stammered. "Of course, of course," growing more effusive at the prospect of deliverance.

Men are only gregarious vertebrates, domesticated and evolved, and the chances are large that it was because the Greek girl had in her time dealt with wilder masculine beasts of the human sort; for she turned upon the man with hell's tides aflood in her blazing eyes, much as a bespangled lady upon a lion which has suddenly imbibed the pernicious theory that he is a free agent. The beast in him fawned to the lash.

"That is to say, ah, afterward. To-morrow, Mrs. Eppingwell; yes, to-morrow. That is what I meant." He solaced himself with the fact, should he remain, that more embarrassment awaited. Also, he had an engagement which he must keep shortly, down by the water-hole off the hospital. Ye gods! he had never given Freda credit! Wasn't she magnificent!

"I'll thank you for my mask, Mrs. McFee."

That lady, for the nonce speechless, turned over the article in question.

"Good-night, Miss Moloof." Mrs. Eppingwell was royal even in defeat.

Freda reciprocated, though barely downing the impulse to clasp the other's knees and beg forgiveness--no, not forgiveness, but something, she knew not what, but which she none the less greatly desired.

The man was for her taking his arm; but she had made her kill in the midst of the pack, and that which led kings to drag their vanquished at the chariot-tail, led her toward the door alone, Floyd Vanderlip close at heel and striving to re-establish his mental equilibrium.

It was bitter cold. As the trail wound, a quarter of a mile brought them to the dancer's cabin, by which time her moist breath had coated her face frostily, while his had massed his heavy mustache till conversation was painful. By the greenish light of the aurora borealis, the quicksilver showed itself frozen hard in the bulb of the thermometer which hung outside the door. A thousand dogs, in pitiful chorus, wailed their ancient wrongs and claimed mercy from the unheeding stars. Not a breath of air was moving. For them there was no shelter from the cold, no shrewd crawling to leeward in snug nooks. The frost was everywhere, and they lay in the open, ever and anon stretching their trail-stiffened muscles and lifting the long wolf-howl.

They did not talk at first, the man and the woman. While the maid helped Freda off with her wraps, Floyd Vanderlip replenished the fire; and by the time the maid had withdrawn to an inner room, his head over the stove, he was busily thawing out his burdened upper lip. After that he rolled a cigarette and watched her lazily through the fragrant eddies. She stole a glance at the clock. It lacked half an hour of midnight. How was she to hold him? Was he angry for that which she had done? What was his mood? What mood of hers could meet his best? Not that she doubted herself. No, no. Hold him she could, if need be at pistol point, till Sitka Charley's work was done, and Devereaux's too.

There were many ways, and with her knowledge of this her contempt for the man increased. As she leaned her head on her hand, a fleeting vision of her own girlhood, with its mournful climacteric and tragic ebb, was vouchsafed her, and for the moment she was minded to read him a lesson from it. God! it must be less than human brute who could not be held by such a tale, told as she could tell it, but--bah! He was not worth it, nor worth the pain to her. The candle was positioned just right, and even as she thought of these things sacredly shameful to her, he was pleasuring in the transparent pinkiness of her ear. She noted his eye, took the cue, and turned her head till the clean profile of the face was presented. Not the least was that profile among her virtues. She could not help the lines upon which she had been builded, and they were very good; but she had long since learned those lines, and though little they needed, was not above advantaging them to the best of her ability. The candle began to flicker. She could not do anything ungracefully, but that did not prevent her improving upon nature a bit, when she reached forth and deftly snuffed the red wick from the midst of the yellow flame. Again she rested head on hand, this time regarding the man thoughtfully, and any man is pleased when thus regarded by a pretty woman.

She was in little haste to begin. If dalliance were to his liking, it was to hers. To him it was very comfortable, soothing his lungs with nicotine and gazing upon her. It was snug and warm here, while down by the water-hole began a trail which he would soon be hitting through the chilly hours. He felt he ought to be angry with Freda for the scene she had created, but somehow he didn't feel a bit wrathful. Like as not there wouldn't have been any scene if it hadn't been for that McFee woman. If he were the Governor, he would put a poll tax of a hundred ounces a quarter upon her and her kind and all gospel sharks and sky pilots. And certainly Freda had behaved very ladylike, held her own with Mrs. Eppingwell besides. Never gave the girl credit for the grit. He looked lingeringly over her, coming back now and again to the eyes, behind the deep earnestness of which he could not guess lay concealed a deeper sneer. And, Jove, wasn't she well put up! Wonder why she looked at him so? Did she want to marry him, too? Like as not; but she wasn't the only one. Her looks were in her favor, weren't they? And young--younger than Loraine Lisznayi. She couldn't be more than twenty-three or four, twenty-five at most. And she'd never get stout. Anybody

could guess that the first time. He couldn't say it of Loraine, though. *She* certainly had put on flesh since the day she served as model. Huh! once he got her on trail he'd take it off. Put her on the snowshoes to break ahead of the dogs. Never knew it to fail, yet. But his thought leaped ahead to the palace under the lazy Mediterranean sky--and how would it be with Loraine then? No frost, no trail, no famine now and again to cheer the monotony, and she getting older and piling it on with every sunrise. While this girl Freda--he sighed his unconscious regret that he had missed being born under the flag of the Turk, and came back to Alaska.

"Well?" Both hands of the clock pointed perpendicularly to midnight, and it was high time he was getting down to the water-hole.

"Oh!" Freda started, and she did it prettily, delighting him as his fellows have ever been delighted by their womankind. When a man is made to believe that a woman, looking upon him thoughtfully, has lost herself in meditation over him, that man needs be an extremely cold-blooded individual in order to trim his sheets, set a lookout, and steer clear.

"I was just wondering what you wanted to see me about," he explained, drawing his chair up to hers by the table.

"Floyd," she looked him steadily in the eyes, "I am tired of the whole business. I want to go away. I can't live it out here till the river breaks. If I try, I'll die. I am sure of it. I want to quit it all and go away, and I want to do it at once."

She laid her hand in mute appeal upon the back of his, which turned over and became a prison. Another one, he thought, just throwing herself at him. Guess it wouldn't hurt Loraine to cool her feet by the water-hole a little longer.

"Well?" This time from Freda, but softly and anxiously.

"I don't know what to say," he hastened to answer, adding to himself that it was coming along quicker than he had expected. "Nothing I'd like better, Freda. You know that well enough." He pressed her hand, palm to palm. She nodded. Could she wonder that she despised the breed?

"But you see, I--I'm engaged. Of course you know that. And the girl's coming into the country to marry me. Don't know what was up with me when I asked her, but it was a long while back, and I was all-fired young--"

"I want to go away, out of the land, anywhere," she went on, disregarding the obstacle he had reared up and apologized for. "I have been running over the men I know and reached the conclusion that--that--"

"I was the likeliest of the lot?"

She smiled her gratitude for his having saved her the embarrassment of confession. He drew her head against his shoulder with the free hand, and somehow the scent of her hair got into his nostrils. Then he discovered that a common pulse throbbed, throbbed, throbbed, where their palms were in contact. This phenomenon is easily comprehensible from a

physiological standpoint, but to the man who makes the discovery for the first time, it is a most wonderful thing. Floyd Vanderlip had caressed more shovel-handles than women's hands in his time, so this was an experience quite new and delightfully strange. And when Freda turned her head against his shoulder, her hair brushing his cheek till his eyes met hers, full and at close range, luminously soft, ay, and tender--why, whose fault was it that he lost his grip utterly? False to Flossie, why not to Loraine? Even if the women did keep bothering him, that was no reason he should make up his mind in a hurry. Why, he had slathers of money, and Freda was just the girl to grace it. A wife she'd make him for other men to envy. But go slow. He must be cautious.

"You don't happen to care for palaces, do you?" he asked.

She shook her head.

"Well, I had a hankering after them myself, till I got to thinking, a while back, and I've about sized it up that one'd get fat living in palaces, and soft and lazy."

"Yes, it's nice for a time, but you soon grow tired of it, I imagine," she hastened to reassure him. "The world is good, but life should be many-sided. Rough and knock about for a while, and then rest up somewhere. Off to the South Seas on a yacht, then a nibble of Paris; a winter in South America and a summer in Norway; a few months in England--"

"Good society?"

"Most certainly--the best; and then, heigho! for the dogs and sleds and the Hudson Bay Country. Change, you know. A strong man like you, full of vitality and go, could not possibly stand a palace for a year. It is all very well for effeminate men, but you weren't made for such a life. You are masculine, intensely masculine."

"Think so?"

"It does not require thinking. I know. Have you ever noticed that it was easy to make women care for you?"

His dubious innocence was superb.

"It is very easy. And why? Because you are masculine. You strike the deepest chords of a woman's heart. You are something to cling to,--big-muscled, strong, and brave. In short, because you *are* a man."

She shot a glance at the clock. It was half after the hour. She had given a margin of thirty minutes to Sitka Charley; and it did not matter, now, when Devereaux arrived. Her work was done. She lifted her head, laughed her genuine mirth, slipped her hand clear, and rising to her feet called the maid.

"Alice, help Mr. Vanderlip on with his parka. His mittens are on the sill by the stove."

The man could not understand.

"Let me thank you for your kindness, Floyd. Your time was invaluable to me, and it was indeed good of you. The turning to the left, as you leave the cabin, leads the quickest to the water-hole. Good-night. I am going to bed."

Floyd Vanderlip employed strong words to express his perplexity and disappointment. Alice did not like to hear men swear, so dropped his parka on the floor and tossed his mittens on top of it. Then he made a break for Freda, and she ruined her retreat to the inner room by tripping over the parka. He brought her up standing with a rude grip on the wrist. But she only laughed. She was not afraid of men. Had they not wrought their worst with her, and did she not still endure?

"Don't be rough," she said finally. "On second thought," here she looked at his detaining hand, "I've decided not to go to bed yet a while. Do sit down and be comfortable instead of ridiculous. Any questions?"

"Yes, my lady, and reckoning, too." He still kept his hold. "What do you know about the water-hole? What did you mean by--no, never mind. One question at a time."

"Oh, nothing much. Sitka Charley had an appointment there with somebody you may know, and not being anxious for a man of your known charm to be present, fell back upon me to kindly help him. That's all. They're off now, and a good half hour ago."

"Where? Down river and without me? And he an Indian!"

"There's no accounting for taste, you know, especially in a woman."

"But how do I stand in this deal? I've lost four thousand dollars' worth of dogs and a tidy bit of a woman, and nothing to show for it. Except you," he added as an afterthought, "and cheap you are at the price."

Freda shrugged her shoulders.

"You might as well get ready. I'm going out to borrow a couple of teams of dogs, and we'll start in as many hours."

"I am very sorry, but I'm going to bed."

"You'll pack if you know what's good for you. Go to bed, or not, when I get my dogs outside, so help me, onto the sled you go. Mebbe you fooled with me, but I'll just see your bluff and take you in earnest. Hear me?"

He closed on her wrist till it hurt, but on her lips a smile was growing, and she seemed to listen intently to some outside sound. There was a jingle of dog bells, and a man's voice crying "Haw!" as a sled took the turning and drew up at the cabin.

"*Now* will you let me go to bed?"

As Freda spoke she threw open the door. Into the warm room rushed the frost, and on the threshold, garbed in trail-worn furs, knee-deep in the swirling vapor, against a background

of flaming borealis, a woman hesitated. She removed her nose-trap and stood blinking blindly in the white candlelight. Floyd Vanderlip stumbled forward.

"Floyd!" she cried, relieved and glad, and met him with a tired bound.

What could he but kiss the armful of furs? And a pretty armful it was, nestling against him wearily, but happy.

"It was good of you," spoke the armful, "to send Mr. Devereaux with fresh dogs after me, else I would not have been in till to-morrow."

The man looked blankly across at Freda, then the light breaking in upon him, "And wasn't it good of Devereaux to go?"

"Couldn't wait a bit longer, could you, dear?" Flossie snuggled closer.

"Well, I was getting sort of impatient," he confessed glibly, at the same time drawing her up till her feet left the floor, and getting outside the door.

That same night an inexplicable thing happened to the Reverend James Brown, missionary, who lived among the natives several miles down the Yukon and saw to it that the trails they trod led to the white man's paradise. He was roused from his sleep by a strange Indian, who gave into his charge not only the soul but the body of a woman, and having done this drove quickly away. This woman was heavy, and handsome, and angry, and in her wrath unclean words fell from her mouth. This shocked the worthy man, but he was yet young and her presence would have been pernicious (in the simple eyes of his flock), had she not struck out on foot for Dawson with the first gray of dawn.

The shock to Dawson came many days later, when the summer had come and the population honored a certain royal lady at Windsor by lining the Yukon's bank and watching Sitka Charley rise up with flashing paddle and drive the first canoe across the line. On this day of the races, Mrs. Eppingwell, who had learned and unlearned numerous things, saw Freda for the first time since the night of the ball. "Publicly, mind you," as Mrs. McFee expressed it, "without regard or respect for the morals of the community," she went up to the dancer and held out her hand. At first, it is remembered by those who saw, the girl shrank back, then words passed between the two, and Freda, great Freda, broke down and wept on the shoulder of the captain's wife. It was not given to Dawson to know why Mrs. Eppingwell should crave forgiveness of a Greek dancing girl, but she did it publicly, and it was unseemly.

It were well not to forget Mrs. McFee. She took a cabin passage on the first steamer going out. She also took with her a theory which she had achieved in the silent watches of the long dark nights; and it is her conviction that the Northland is unregenerate because it is so cold there. Fear of hell-fire cannot be bred in an ice-box. This may appear dogmatic, but it is Mrs. McFee's theory.

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