POOR MAN'S GOLD

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WNU Service.

CHAPTER I

—I—

Jack Hammond reflected, as he walked up from the wharf, that rain was Prince Rupert's most bountiful crop.

He made the climb from the water front and cut across the little terraced park, where totem poles stood gleaming with moisture and grotesquely lonely. Everything dripped in Prince Rupert this morning, even the discolored, stuffed Kadiak bear in front of Al Monson's trading store. At last Hammond halted abruptly, looking over the wooden fence of a back yard. Howls and whines had centered his attention.

"What are you trying to do with that dog?" he asked. A man halted in his efforts to kick a harnessed mongrel into progress along a muddy space before a makeshift sleigh, weighted with stones.

"Going to make a sled dog out of him."

"That bozo? He hasn't got the weight for it."

"Oh, he's pretty strong." The man grinned. "Say, they'll be buying anything where this dog's going!"

"Where's that?"

The pseudo - trainer jerked his head toward the white pinnacles of distant mountains.

"Over the hills there in B. C.," the man said, "up the Caribou river, somewhere around the valley of the Stikine. Haven't you heard about it?"

Hammond's features had become strangely grim.

"What's going on?"

"Where've you been that you haven't read the papers?"

"On the Aleutian, coming up from Vancouver."

The dog trainer stared.

"The ship that got in this morning?" he asked. "And you didn't know about it? Then you must have been deaf, dumb and blind. There were plenty of others who came on that boat—just because of it."

'Because of what?" Jack Hammond's hands, where they gripped the fence, were strangely discolored.

"Well, if you ain't kidding—the gold rush. Two fellows found placer gold up there. A couple of guys named McKenzie Joe Britten and his partner, Jack Hammond."

"Oh, I see," said Hammond jerkil.

"Yeh." The volunteer trainer rubbed casually at the loose fur of his dog. "Guess they'd figured to keep it quiet, all for themselves, you know. But this Hammond goes down to Seattle to see some old girl he'd been stuck on ever since he was a kid. Then he got on a big bust and spilled everything. It's been in all the papers, I guess. Quite a romance."

"Yes, quite," said Hammond thinly. "So everybody's figuring on going up there, eh?"

"Everybody and his brother. That's why I thought I'd train this dog."

"That dog can't make the grade in the Stikine country. Zero's a hot day around there this time of year. No chest. Thin legs. A light coat from being around this coast country. No hair on his feet—he'd last about two days on the trail."

"That ain't my worry. Let the fellow who buys him lose sleep over that." He gave the dog a kick, shouting: "Mush! Mush on, there!"

The dog's howls remained in Jack Hammond's ears as he walked slowly up the street. So this was a gold rush — this an echo of the broken laughter and excited jabberings of himself and McKenzie Joe Britten, one day last autumn, up there in the far-away Stikine country. Then their discovery of placer or nugget gold, poor man's gold, as it is so often called, had brought great visions. Here was new money, waiting to be washed from the gravel of a river, and of value the minute it was found; no need for great shafts and expensive machinery to extract this wealth.

There had been big talk that day —of what new gold meant to a waiting world, the happiness it would bring, the accomplishments. There had been no thought of the greed, the suffering, the jealousies and hatred which must inevitably follow.

He passed Al Monson's trading store and Ben Deacon's. Both were jammed with purchasers; many had the white faces of persons who knew nothing of wind or pelting ice particles, the whip of a blizzard or the blaze of sun on ice. Hammond tried to tell himself that it was none of his business. He entered the hotel.

"Joe here?" he asked the clerk.

"McKenzie Joe? No, he pulled out yesterday morning, all in a rush."

"Down North?"

"Didn't say. Must have. Got out on a work train. Left a note for you though, Mr. Hammond."

Jack unfolded the scrawled letter that had been left by his bearded partner. It was brusque and jerkily frank.

"Well, I figured you might play the fool if you ever got to Seattle and met that girl, but I never thought you'd spill the beans like you did. Why didn't you wait until you hit the bush again before you got drunk? There'll be a thousand fools up in the Stikine country before break-up. I'm hitting out of here with short supplies to get in there and protect our interests before the rush starts. See our lawyer and be sure our claims and leases are in good shape. Then come on with supplies as quick as you can."

Hammond turned to the waiting boy beside him and ordered his bags taken to his room. Then he headed for the door; again on the street, he started toward a three-story building a few blocks away.

His course was a broken one. Townspeople he knew halted him to question the accuracy of newspaper stories which Jack Hammond had not seen. His evasiveness only nettled them.

"What if you haven't seen the newspapers?" they asked. "You made the discovery. The Vancouver papers have been full of it. You know all about it—what's the use of trying to keep it a secret?"

Soon a crowd had gathered about him. Hammond fenced frantically.

A big man, with a faint break of accent in his voice, poked a hard-skinned, hewed-out face close to to that of Hammond.

"My name's Olson," he announced. "I've got a map here—suppose you point out the place to us."

Hammond pulled at his breath.

"Maybe I'd better," he agreed. Then, as Olson poked the map before him, "Didn't I see you on the boat from Vancouver?"

"Yah, you saw me," said Olson. "And a lot of others."

"Why didn't you come to me then? I could have explained all this to you—maybe you wouldn't have been so anxious about getting off here."

"You got off, didn't you?" asked the man with the pack on his back.

"That was enough for me," came another voice. Then a short man, red-faced, and with an excitable manner, edged forward.

"How about me? I saw the story in a Winnipeg paper and took a plane for Jasper Park. Then caught the train up here."

"Yeh, and I came from Prince George," cut in another member of the crowd. "I thought we'd go in from Alaska—around Wrangell."

"Look here," asked Olson, "you didn't try to throw us off the trail, getting off here, at Prince Rupert?"

Hammond spread his hands in a gesture of disgust, and for a moment silenced them.

"How in the world could I try to throw you off, when I didn't even know you were on my trail? None of you came near me on the boat."

"Yah," laughed Olson, "how could we? You were in your cabin most of the time. Getting over that head you must have had when you got aboard down at Seattle. Some time you had down there, yah?"

Hammond straightened. He raised a work-thickened hand and, removing his hat, allowed the cooling rain to fall for a moment on his dark, tousled hair. He regarded the crowd which hemmed him in with a look almost of pity in his dark eyes.

"Listen, fellows," he began, "you don't know what you're getting into by trying to beat that country."

"But the map shows that it's just back of Wrangell." Olson insisted.

"To hell with the map!" Hammond broke forth angrily. "Certainly it's back of Wrangell. Maybe seventy-five miles, a hundred, I don't know."

"Just below the Stikine river, against the Alaskan border," supplemented the red-faced man from Winnipeg. "The newspaper said so."

"I suppose that makes it a fact," Hammond answered sarcastically.

"Then why don't you go on to Winnipeg. "The newspaper said river?"

"You can't go up the Stikine this time of year," an outsider argued. "Might as well try to walk on icicles."

"Will you let me explain the setup?" Hammond insisted. "If you go in by way of the Stikine, you've got to make nearly 200 miles and double back. You can't turn off — that river runs through canyons almost to Telegraph creek—'way past the discovery. It's next to impossible to cover the Stikine route on the ice—"

"Boats make that river in the summer time," someone insisted.

"Certainly; paddle wheelers. But this isn't summer. The spring break-up in that country isn't due for months. Think that over."

Then Jack Hammond stood silent, listening to the jangle of words about him. Men were arguing about whether or not the newspaper was correct, as if any inaccuracy were a personal affront. All in an instant, the thought of gold had torn reason to shreds. Then Olson caught him by the arm and shot the question:

"Yah! If you can't go in by way of Wrangell, how do you go in?"

"By Fourcross, if you want to be a fool and try it."

"What's so tough about that?"

"The weather," Jack insisted. "You don't get any warm winds from the Japanese current, once you're over the Coastal range. It's 35 and 40 below, all the way to the Stikine."

"I know that," said Olson laconically.

"But why fight the bush for 200 miles with dog team when in a few months, there'll be airplanes, or easy travel along the river and mountain trails—"

"Yah," said Olson, "and find all the claims gone."

"Or you've gobbled up the whole country through a set of dummies," the red-faced man added.

"You can figure that out for yourself," Hammond answered abruptly, and shouldering through the crowd, again moved up the street, leaving the throng muttering behind him. But again, a block farther on, his progress was halted. This time it was a woman.

"Well, Prospector," she asked. "Can't you say hello?"

Hammond looked up into the features of a wrinkled person, valiantly battling her age with thick foundation cream, high rouge, mascaraed eyes and a heavily lip-sticked mouth. Yet it was a sprightly face, blue eyes set in crows'-feet of humor and experience; lips which life had hardened without leaving them grim.

"Well, Annie!" he exclaimed. "How are you?"

"About the same as the last time I saw you—when we made the rush together into Rouyn, in Quebec."

"That's right. Glad to see you again, Annie."

"Thanks. That goes double, Prospector."

Silence followed. For an instant Jack Hammond felt annoyed at this interruption. Then he dismissed her; it was only Around the World Annie, who had made every Canadian gold rush of the last twenty years. Around the World Annie, with her lore of frontier knowledge, her inevitable thickness of paint and mascara and garish clothes, her log cabin at the edge of camp with its dance hall, illicit drinks, it screaming phonograph—

"Living here, are you, Annie?" Hammond asked at last. Around the World Annie straightened. An effulgent woman, with what might be called an old-fashioned figure, she groomed a loose fold of dress, and raised a diamond-fingered hand to restrain a whisp of bleached hair, wilting with the dampness of the incessant rain. Then, with a jerk of her head, she indicated a group of dance hall girls who stood in a nearby doorway, as though they had been herded, all of them overdressed.

"Listen, Prospector," she asked, "would I be chaperoning that gang of girls if I was living here in Prince Rupert?"

"But where are you headed for?"

She grinned, the wrinkles therefrom creating deep creases in her face enamel.

"I'm going where you're going, Sweetheart."

Hammond sighed.

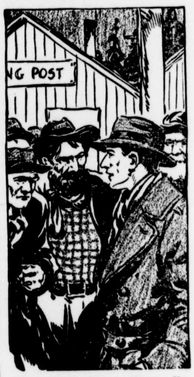
"I suppose you were on this morning's boat too."

"Got on at Vancouver."

Hammond pursed his lips. He was becoming more philosophical.

"I guess I missed a lot on that boat."

"Oh, you'll catch up with it all." She leaned closer. "Just tell me this much. You're going on, on tomorrow morning's train, aren't you?"



"You Didn't Try to Throw Us Off the Trail?"

For the first time that morning, Jack Hammond truly smiled.

"Yes, Annie," he said. "You might as well pass the word along. I guess the secret's out."

"You're right it's out!" agreed Annie. She patted him on the shoulder. "Well, I'll be seeing you." Then with a grandiloquent wave, she summoned her followers from the doorway.

Hammond walked on, to the sting of fine rain against his face. The smile had vanished, gloominess had taken its place. Everything had looked so different down there in Seattle, with Kay in his arms, and the secret that he had promised his partner to treasure flooding over liquor-loosened lips.

Kay—the thought of her electrified him. His brain suddenly shimmered with a thousand disconnected but glorious memories; blurs and figures from which only one emerged clearly. It was that of Kay Joyce, golden-haired Kay, with her blue eyes hypnotizing him, her soft body against his as they danced, or floating far away as all the world became vague and dreamlike. Kay tight in his arms until he could see only the curve of her forehead and the uplift of her eyelashes. Or leaning on her elbows beside him, her hands crossed under her chin, her tantalizing lips curved in a challenging smile. Then the soft touch of her thigh against his as the music started anew and they rose to the call of the dance floor.

He stumbled and brought himself up short, suddenly realizing that Seattle was far away. This was Prince Rupert, bleak in the grip of a winter rain, yet burning with the gold fever. He went on toward a building he sought. At last he reached it.

(TO BE CONTINUED)

GOLD!!!

Men go hungry . . . men die . . . men surrender happiness to satisfy their lust for yellow metal! Up beyond the last outpost of northern British Columbia lies a desolate lake, once the site of feverish activity as civilization struck northward in pursuit of wealth. Learn the story behind this ghost town . . . read "Poor Man's Gold," a chronicle of the search for love and riches starting in today's issue. Carefully written, authentic in its representation of life among the surging streams and treacherous mountains, "Poor Man's Gold" comes from the popular pen of America's foremost outdoor writer—

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