

WINDS OF CHANCE

by Rex Beach

Published by Arrangement with First National Pictures, Inc., and Frank Lloyd Productions, Inc.

CHAPTER XIX

Every new and prosperous mining camp has an Arabian Nights atmosphere, characteristic, peculiar, indescribable. Especially noticeable was this atmosphere in the early Arctic camps, made up as they were of men who knew little about mining, rather less about frontier ways, and next to nothing about the country in which they found themselves. These men had built fabulous hopes, they dwelt in illusion, they put faith in the thinnest of shadings. Now the most practical miner is not a conservative person; he is erratic, credulous and extravagant; restless optimism is at once his blessing and his curse. Nevertheless, the "old-timers" of the Yukon were moderate indeed as compared with the adventurous holiday-seekers who swarmed in upon their tracks. Being more too well balanced themselves, it was only natural that the exuberance of these new arrivals should prove infectious and that a sort of general auto-intoxication should result. That is precisely what happened at Dawson. Men lost all caution, all common sense; they lived in a land of rosy imaginations; hard-bought lessons of experience were forgotten; reality disappeared; fancy took wing and left fact behind; expectations were capitalized and no exaggeration was too wild to challenge acceptance. It became a City of Eriky.

It was all very fine for an ardent youth like Pierce Phillips; it set him alight, stirring a fever in his blood. Having won thus far, he made the natural mistake of believing that the race was his; so he wasted little time in the town, and very soon took to the hills, there to make his fortune and be done with it.

Here came the awakening. Away from the delirium of the camp, in contact with cold reality, he began to learn something of the serious, practical business of gold-mining. Before he had been long on the creeks he found that it was no child's play to wrest treasure from the frozen bosom of a hostile wilderness, and that, no matter how rich or how plentiful the treasure, Mother Earth guarded her secrets jealously. He began to realize that the obstacles he had so blithely overcome in getting to the Klondike were as nothing to those in the way of his further success. One sudden his triumphal progress slowed down and he came to a pause; he began to mark time.

There was work in plenty to be had, but like most of the new comers, he was not satisfied to take fixed wages. They seemed paltry indeed compared with the drunken figures that were on every lip. In the presence of the uncertain he could not content himself with a sure thing. Nevertheless, he was soon forced to the necessity of resorting to it, for through the fog of his misapprehensions, beneath the obscurity of his ignorance, he began to discover the true outline of things and to understand that his ideas were impractical.

To begin with, every foot of ground in the proven districts was taken, and even when he pushed out far afield he found that the whole country was plastered with locations, rivers, creeks and tributaries, benches and hillsides had been staked. For many miles in

every direction blazed trees and pencil notices greeted him—he found them in places where it seemed no foot but his had ever trod. In Dawson the Gold Commissioner's office was besieged by daily crowds of claimants; it would have taken years of work on the part of a hundred thousand men to even prospect the ground already recorded on the books.

Back and forth Phillips came and went, he made trips with pick and hand-axe, he slept out in spruce forests, in prospectors' tents, in new cabins the sweaty green logs of which were still dripping, and when he had finished he was poorer by a good many dollars and richer only in the possession of a few recorder's receipts, the value of which he had already begun to doubt.

Disappointed he was, but not discouraged. It was all too new and exciting for that. Every visit to Bonanza or El Dorado inspired him. It would have inspired a wooden man. For miles those valleys were smoky from the smoldering fire, and their clean white carpets were spotted with piles of raw red dirt. By day they echoed to blows of axes, the crash of falling trees, the plaint of windblown, the shriek of freighters, by night they became vast cauldrons filled with flickering fires; tremendous vats, the vapors from which were illuminated by hideous furnaces. One would have thought that here gold was being made, not sought—that this was a region of volcanic hot springs where every fissure and vent-hole spouted steam. It was a strange, a marvelous sight; it stirred the imagination to know that underneath, locked in the flinty depths of the frozen gravel, was wealth unmeasured and unearned, rich hoards of yellow gold that yesterday were ownerless.

A month of stampeding dulled the green edge of Pierce's enthusiasm, so he took a breathing spell in which to get his bearings.

The Yukon had closed and the human foetus and joltam it had become thicker was getting. Pierce could feel a metamorphic agency at work in the town; already new habits of life were crystallizing among its citizens; and beneath its whirlpool surface new forms were in the making. It alarmed him to realize that as yet his own affairs were in suspense, and he argued, with all the hot impatience of youth, that it was high time he came to rest. Opportunities were on every side of him, but he knew not where or how to lay hold of them to his best advantage. More than ever he felt himself to be the toy of circumstance, more than ever he feared the fallibility of his judgment and the consequences of a mistake. He was in a mood both dissatisfied and resentful when he encountered his two trail friends, Tom Linton and Jerry Quirk. Pierce had seen them last at Linderman, engaged in prosecuting a stamper's divorce; he was surprised to find them reunited.

"I never dreamed you'd get through," he told them when greetings had passed. "Did you come in one boat or in two?"

Jerry grinned. "We sawed up that outfit four times. We'd have split her end to end finally, only we run out of pitch to cork her up."

"That boat was about worn out with our blubberings," Tom declared. "She ain't over half the length she was—all the rest is saw-dust. If the nail-holes in her was laid end to end they'd reach to Forty Mile. We were the last outfit in, as it was, and we'd missed a landing if a feller hadn't run out on the shore and roped us. First town I ever entered on the end of a larlet. Hope I don't leave it the same way."

"Guess who drug us in, Jerry?"

"I've no idea," said Pierce.

"Big Lars Anderson?"

"He's the party. He was just drunk enough to risk breakin' through. When he found who we was, he made us a present of Lawson and all points north, together with the lands, prousses, privileges and byproducts appurtenant thereto. I still got a kind of a hangover headache and have to take soda after my meals."

"Lars was a shepman when we knew him," Tom explained. "Jerry and I partied with him some prominent cow-puncher who had him all decorated up ready to hang, and he hadn't forgotten it. He got everybody full the night we landed, and wound up by buying all the fresh eggs in camp. Forty dozen. We had 'em fried. He's a prince with his money."

"He owns more property than anybody," said Pierce.

"Right! And he gave us a 'tag'."

Phillips' eyes opened. "A tag? On El Dorado?" he queried, in frank amazement.

"No, Hunker. He says it's a good check. We're lookin' for a partner."

"What kind of a partner?"

"It was Linton who answered. 'Well, some nice, easy-going, hard-working young feller. Jerry and I are private old to wind a windlass, but we can work underground where it's warm.'

"Easy-going,' that's the word," Jerry nodded. "Tom and me get along with each other like an order of backstreet cakes, but we're not in our way and we don't want anybody to come between us."

"How would I do?" Pierce inquired, with a smile.

Tom answered promptly. "If your name was put to a vote I know one of us that wouldn't blackball you."

"Sure!" cried his partner. "The ballot-box would look like a settin' of pigeon eggs. Think it over and let us know. We're leavin' tomorrow."

A lease on Hunker Creek sounded good to Phillips. Big Lars Anderson had been one of the first arrivals from Circle City; already he was rated a millionaire, for luck had smiled upon him; his name was one to conjure with. Pierce was about to accept the offer made when Jerry said:

"Who d'you 'spose got the lay below ours? That feller McCaskey and his brother."

"He's an old pal of Anderson's."

"Does Big Lars know he's a thief?"

Jerry shrugged. "Lars ain't the kind that listens to scandal and we ain't the kind that carries it."

Pierce meditated briefly; then he said, slowly, "If your lay turns out good so will McCaskey's." His frown deepened. "Well, if there's a law of compensation, if there's such a thing as retributive justice—you have a bad piece of ground."

"But there ain't any such thing," Tom quickly asserted. "Anyhow, it don't work in mining-camps. If it did the saloons would be reading-rooms and the gamblers would take in washing. Look at the lucky men in this camp—bums, most of 'em. George Caramek was a squaw-man, and he made the strike."

Pierce felt no fear of Joe McCaskey, only dislike and a desire to avoid further contact with him. The prospect of a long winter in close proximity to a proven scoundrel was repugnant. Balanced against this was the magic of Big Lars' name. It was a problem; an indecision rose to trouble him.

"I'll think it over," he said, finally.

Farther down the street Phillips' attention was arrested by an announcement of the opening of the Hialto Saloon and Theater, Miller & Best, proprietors. Challenged by the name of his former employer and drawn by the sounds of merriment from within, Pierce entered. He had seen little of Lars since his arrival; he had all but banished her from his thoughts in fact; but he determined now to look her up.

The Hialto was the newest and the most pretentious of Dawson's amusement palaces. It comprised a drinking-saloon and a spacious gambling-room adjoining. In the rear of the latter was the theater, a huge log annex especially designed as the home of Bacchus and Terpsichore.

The front room was crowded; through an archway leading to the gambling-hall came the noise of many voices, and over all the strains of an orchestra at the rear. Ben Miller, a famous sporting character, was busy weighing gold dust at the massive scales near the door when Pierce entered.

The theater, too, was packed. Here a second bar was doing a big business, and every chair on the floor, every box in the balcony overlooking three sides of it, was occupied. Waiters were serving up and down the wide stairway; the general hub-bub was punctuated by the sound of exploding corks as the Klondike spendthrifts advertised their prosperity with a hilarious contest of prodigality.

All Dawson had turned out for the opening, and Pierce recognized several of the El Dorado kings, among them Big Lars Anderson. These new-born magnates were as thrifless as locusts, and in the midst of their bacchanalian revels Pierce felt very poor, very obscure, very the roisterous spirit of the Northland at full play; it itched the young man intensely to feel that he could afford to part in it. Lars was not long in discovering him. She sped to him with the swiftness of a swallow; breathlessly she inquired:

"Where have you been so long? Why didn't you let me know you were back?"

"I just got in. I've been everywhere," he smiled down at her, and she clutched the lapel of his coat, then drew him out of the crowd. "I dropped in to see how you were getting along."

"Well, what do you think of the place?"

"Why, it looks as if you'd all got rich in a night."

"And you? Have you done anything for yourself?"

Pierce shook his head; in a few



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Of course not, I've something better fixed up for you." Without explaining, she led Pierce to the bar, where Morris was standing.

Best was genuinely glad to see his former employer; he warmly shook Pierce's hand.

"I've got 'em going, haven't I?" he chuckled.

Laure broke out, imperiously: "Loosen up, Morris, and let's all have a drink on the house. You can afford it."

"Sure!" With a happy grin the proprietor ordered a quart bottle of wine.

Says An American Invented First Practical Typewriter

HERKIMER, N. Y. (AP)—An Austrian claims that the typewriter is an Austrian, not an American, invention, which were given concrete form by the recent unveiling of a memorial tablet at Innsbruck, Austria, to Peter Mitterdorfer as the inventor of the typewriter, are challenged by John W. Vrooman, president of the Herkimer County Historical society.

Mr. Vrooman declared that the outstanding and important fact is that Christopher Latham Sholes' machine was the first practical machine made available to the world. The American Sholes' model was patented by the Remington arms factory in 1873.

Vrooman credited Mitterdorfer a bachelor is a man who can't with being one of a long list of individuals who "had been trying to home."

words he recounted his goings and his comings, his efforts and his failures. Lars followed the recital with swift, birdlike nods of understanding; her dark eyes were warm with sympathy.

"You're going at it the wrong way," she asserted when he had finished. "You have brains; make them work. Look at Best, look at Miller, his new partner; they know better than to mine. Mining is a fool's game. Play a sure thing, Pierce. Stay here in town and live like a human being; here's where the money will be made."

"Do you think I want to go floundering over hill and dale like a tumbleweed? I haven't had warm feet in a week and I weep salt tears when I see a bed. But I'm no Croesus; I've got to hustle. I think I've landed something finally." He told of Tom and Jerry's offer, but failed to impress his listener.

"If you go out to Hunker Creek I'll scarcely ever see you," said she. "That's the first objection. I've nearly died these last three weeks. But there are other objections. You couldn't get along with those old men, why, they can't get along with each other! Then there's Joe McCaskey to think of. Why run into trouble?"

"I've thought of all that. But Big Lars is on the crest of his wave; he has the Midas touch; everything he lays his hands on turns to gold. He believes in Hunker."

"You find out if he does," Laure said, quickly. "He's drinking. He'd tell me anything. Wait!" With a flashing smile she was off.

She returned with an air of triumph. "You'll learn to listen to me," she declared. "He says Hunker is low grade. That's why he lets boys on it instead of working it himself. Lars is a fox."

"The best there is in it is wages. Those were his very words. Would you put up with Linton and Quirk and the two McCaskeys for wages?"

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