

# POOR MAN'S GOLD

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WNU Service.

## CHAPTER VIII—Continued

It availed nothing. McKenzie Joe was moving forward; Bruce Kenning attempted to run. A drunken miner shoved him back into the open. Then Joe shouted:

"You double-crossing hound!"

With a lunge, he shot forward. Wildly Bruce Kenning struck out and then, with a cry, strove to dodge him. It was impossible; McKenzie Joe had caught him, one huge arm around his neck, blocking off all resistance save short arm blows, which struck the prospector's huge chest and iron-muscled torso with no more result than if they had been pounding against the trunk of a giant fir. Suddenly the geologist was spun about, impelled by the force of McKenzie Joe's giant muscles. Jack Hammond, now literally throwing celebrants out of his way as he fought to get to his partner, saw the face of the man, green-gray with horror. Then McKenzie Joe began to beat at Kenning's features—almost instantly they seemed to become mis-shapen, swollen, spurting red from a dozen lacerations as the triphammer blows cut deep into his flesh. Bruce Kenning cried out, an agonized appeal.

"Help me! Help me, somebody!"

"Get to him," Hammond shouted. "Haven't you any sense? McKenzie will kill him!"

It awoke the men about him; they stirred; Hammond broke through, plunging forward that he might leap upon his partner's back, and, with a heavy forearm under his chin, pull him backward, momentarily stopping the assault. Then a staggering miner lurched forward.

"Don't jump on a man from behind!" he commanded, attempting to break the younger man's hold. Around the World Annie swept into action.

"Keep out of this!" she shouted and swung a blackjack. The man fell. Instantly a roar sounded from a dozen equally drunken pals; all in an instant, Hammond found himself surrounded by milling forms and the wildly flailing fist of a free-for-all fight.

Desperately Jack held his grasp on his struggling partner. With a feeling of great relief, he saw the half-conscious Kenning slip from the loosening hold of the prospector and, buffeted by the fighters about him, stagger into the mass of tangled forms.

Shortly afterward, Hammond felt a terrific wrench as McKenzie Joe exerted his full strength and broke free. After that, the room became a vague conglomeration of noise and conflict, above which Annie's shrill voice sounded again and again as, her bunting costume torn, her tricorne a wreck and her yellow hair streaming, she swung her blackjack and gave blasphemous comments for quiet. Finally the turmoil calmed. The orchestra started again, blaring its loudest. Hammond disentangled himself from the grasp of a 200-pound Swede and looked about him for his partner. McKenzie Joe had disappeared.

Jack Hammond went forth into the bush to search for him, although he knew it was useless. Somewhere in this dense forest of stunted spruce and high-flung fir, tangled creepers and matted junipers, McKenzie Joe had gone to his hideout and there was safe. Nevertheless, Hammond kept up the search for the better part of two days. At least here he had freedom from the barbs of Kay Joyce.

The story of the fight at Whoopee had swept Lake Sapphire like a hard wind. Beyond that, Bruce Kennings's swollen eyes, his lacerated cheeks and bruised lips had told their story all too plainly to Kay. Now, all her pent-up dislike for McKenzie Joe had surged to the surface. For the first time Jack Hammond found solace away from her. He had found it impossible to answer amicably her vilifications of McKenzie Joe. To Jack's view-

point, Joe's attack had been the result of brooding, resentful distrust born of no foundations, it is true, but certainly not deserving of the murderous instincts which Kay had attributed to him. The defense, however, and met only a multi-sided barrage, both from the girl and the geologist.

Now, at last, there was a truce. It was the morning of the third day; Jack and the girl stood together near his cabin. Kay had sought him out excitedly, her left hand extended, and in its palm a dozen or more particles of thin gold, the result, she said somewhat jerkily, of the last clean-up. Hammond bent to examine them, only as quickly to turn. Out of a corner of his eye he had caught sight of an approaching figure. It was McKenzie Joe. Gaunt, gray-featured, but sober, he was approaching from Loon creek. Silently they watched him come nearer; finally Jack said, in a voice tensely laconic:

"Hello, Joe."

"Hello," he said briefly and looked at Kay. "Waiting to tell me what you think of me, eh?"

Kay Joyce whitened. She said nothing. Hammond attempted to cover the situation with a laugh.

"No. Of course not. She's just had a clean-up down at her claim. She's gotten into pay dirt."

"So?" The older man strode abruptly forward and stared into her cupped hand. "Washed that out of the gravel, eh?"

"Yes." She bit out the word. McKenzie Joe fixed her with his blood-shot eyes.

"The hell you did!" he snapped. "That's sniper gold."

Kay flung her hand angrily downward, scattering the gold in deep



"You Double-Crossing Hound."

grass. Her blue eyes gleamed with rage.

"It isn't enough that you should jump on Bruce. Now you include me!"

"I ain't jumping on you," said Joe. "I'm just telling Jack that gold never came from your claim!"

"Watch what you're saying!" Jack exclaimed.

McKenzie Joe eyed him.

"Pick up that gold if you can find it," he answered coldly. "You'll find it's flat, with old scratches on it—scraped out from ledge riffles in the main body of the stream. It never came from gravel."

"Then I was lying?" asked Kay. She swept her glance suddenly to include another figure; Jeanne Towers had rounded the side of the cabin. Kay glared at her then turned back to McKenzie Joe. "Answer me, was I lying?"

"Yes, you were lying," Joe answered quietly.

"Joe! Take that back!"

"Never mind doubling your fists, Jack," the older man said. "I could kill you the best day you ever lived. But I wouldn't. And I'm going—gettin' out of here."

"One of us has got to go."

"Sure," the older man said. "I thought that all out—over there in the bush. But before I go, here's something for you. That gold find's a come-on—"

"You've said enough, Joe."

"Sure. I know it. But remember—you dangle just a little hay in front of a horse to make him follow you into a corral. You're bein' led into something."

Jack Hammond lunged angrily toward his partner, only to be confronted by Jeanne Towers, a queer, desperate expression in her face. Kay Joyce merely stood still, her lips livid, her eyes strangely narrowed. The Northern girl braced herself.

"Get hold of yourself, Jack," she commanded.

Slowly, Jack Hammond moved back. There was a long silence. Then the younger man asked:

"Well, Joe, do I buy you out—or do you take my share?"

"He can't have your share!" Kay snapped. "He's got to go."

McKenzie Joe looked about him. Uneasily he wiped a shaking hand across his lips.

"I guess the young lady answered for me," he said. Jack stamped into the cabin, to return almost as quickly. He held in his arms four heavy moosehide pouches, lumpy with gold nuggets.

"It's everything I've got," he said shortly. "Sign up and get out."

Jeanne Towers straightened.

"Jack!" she cried. "You fool—you fool!" Then with a half sob, she whirled and ran back to her cabin.

## CHAPTER IX

More than two months had passed since that morning when Jack had walked drearily back from the lake, gaunt with the weight of strange, foreboding sadness. Once the heat of their quarrel had begun to cool, memory had, to a degree, at least, brought about a truce in the bitterness between McKenzie Joe and himself. The signing over of the necessary papers which had put Jack in possession of all the claims had been done in silence, it is true, but not taciturnity.

"Write to me sometime, Joe?" Jack had asked as the older man took his departure.

"Sure—I'll be glad to do that, Jack. If there's anything to write about. And say—"

"Yes?"

"Don't hold it against Jeanne for what she said. Me'n' Jeanne have always thought a lot of each other. It was kind of natural that she'd take up for me."

"Of course, Joe."

The older man had looked far down the lake, glassy smooth, and with drifting, imaginary islands floating in mirage.

"For that matter, she's always thought an awful lot of you. A lot more'n she did of me."

"I know it, Joe."

The older man had looked at him keenly, his eyes sparkling, as if he were about to say that this was just the trouble, that Jack didn't know it. But he only replied:

"Well, I guess I'd better be gettin' on—better be takin' advantage of this calm. Old Sapphire gets pretty nasty sometimes."

"Yes—it does, Joe." Impetuously he had put forth his hand. "Shake with me, Joe?"

The prospector had shifted his canoe paddle suddenly and turned to his former partner. Then had come silence, except for the faint grind of callus against callus, the jerky intake of heightened breath. There had been no other sound; only the swish of Joe's moccasins as he had centered his weight in

the canoe, and the soft dip of his paddle. After a long time, the ripples had rolled smoothly into glassiness again; and Joe was only a tiny silhouette rounding a faraway bend.

So now, two months had gone by. It was early September, with the nights beginning to be sharp with frost, the foliage of poplar splashing the deeper green, heavier growths with floods of gold, the grizzly wandering the berry patches on the rock slides, and night coming out of the hills more quickly and for longer duration. Yet time had only brought Jack the deeper conviction that McKenzie Joe had been wrong in his suspicions.

He was frenzied these days for gold. Early morning found him at his placer workings on Loon Creek, with an extra man engaged to help his two other employees with the grueling work of raising the gravel from the pit which ran down to the bedrock gravels, and himself laboring hour after hour to shovel the piled-up earth into the ceaseless flow of water of the sluice boxes. There was something in his efforts which amounted almost to desperation; big work was going on above, where he and Kenning were testing out the geologist's theories, and men must be paid, especially up here, north of '58, where labor brought a dollar an hour. Jack and Bruce Kenning were partners now.

Only two things could break the continuity of Hammond's labors—a trip to the upper workings or the announcement of a clean-up from Kay's claim. She had just called to him that the flow of the sluices had been halted.

Jack Hammond dropped his shovel and went upstream. Kay appeared excited as usual, herself taking a pan and filling it with a part of the scrapings. Hammond bent beside her at the stream, where, dipping water, she began the work of reducing the conglomerated residue of the riffles to tangible loss or gain. There beside her, as the pan slowly twisted and dipped and raised and circled, it came to Jack that Kay had learned much of mining in the short time she had been here. Now she spoke casually of pockets and faults, of pay gravel and sedimentation—suddenly he halted. The pan had been cleared, the girl had given an exclamation and was bending over it, pointing by a nod to a nubbin of gold which lay there.

"It's a knock-out," Hammond exclaimed, picking out the serrated piece of mineral. Then, as though the better to appraise its worth, he reached into a pocket for his prospector's magnifying glass.

Beside him, Kay talked on of her hopes. She couldn't understand, she said, why this claim didn't pan out more values. Day after day, the output seemed the same—enough for expenses, enough to keep the cottage going and to pay Mrs. Carewe, the woman of all work—but little more. Hammond hardly heard her. Again he was confirming what he had confirmed every day since McKenzie Joe had pulled out—the fact this was true nugget gold and that there was not the slightest indication of sniper material.

That had been a serious charge. It had meant that Kay was pretending to find gold when such had not been the case. Why she should do this, Joe Britten had not fully explained. He had only insisted that the tiny flakes and nuggets were "sniper gold," gleaned by scraping along the flat, ledgelike rocks of the true current of Loon Creek, where, acting in the same manner as the riffles of a flume, these ledges had picked up stray bits of new metal, washed down from the hills by spring freshets. The old prospector had insisted that they were not true nuggets, that the force of water, driving them between thin ledges of stone, had to a degree flattened them and so marked them that the eyes of his deep experience could identify them, thus making it impossible for them to have come from Kay's gravel bar claim. Hammond himself had not been given a chance to look; Kay, in her anger, had thrown them away.

But here was no doubt that Kay's acquisition was true gravel gold.

The same had been true on two-score other surreptitious investigations. It was as though Jack Hammond had put Joe Britten on trial, and day after day was repeatedly proving him guilty.

"Pretty good nugget," he said at last. "It must be about a penny-weight."

"All of which helps," the girl answered, with a casual shrug of her shoulders. "Maybe I'll get down to real money some day—you never can tell."

"Nobody can, with gold mining," Hammond answered. After a time he returned to his own labors, again feverish, again driving in his intensity. He knew that this claim of



"Pretty Good Nugget," He Said at Last.

his was beginning to weaken; the nuggets were not as large or as frequent as when he and Joe first had slashed into it. Doggedly he told himself that it could not, must not, flash out. There must be money to keep that work going above, and he knew that Kenning could not furnish it. In truth, Kenning was providing little in the form of funds; they had thrown their holdings into one pot, share for share. But the cash to keep development going must come from Hammond. Kenning made up for his lack of it by his advice.

Late afternoon arrived. Abstractedly, as he worked, Hammond became aware that there was a great deal of loud conversation of a joyous type from upstream, where Olson seemed to find a new pocket only that he might dig into another. Several of the more successful placer miners from more distant claims were there, poking about. Mrs. Joyce also was present; for that matter, it was seldom that Hammond looked toward Olson's claim without finding her somewhere in the picture.

It was not a new strike, he knew that—there was no shouting and running about, no concerted movement of curious miners from other diggings. After a time Jack forgot the matter. Then the work day ended and his men made the clean-up. Hammond pouched the nuggets therefrom, walked a bit with Kay on the trail to the cottage, and finally cut away from her that he might lead upstream and find Kenning at the new development—some dozen shafts, driving deep into the earth upon a broad front, far from the last test pit which McKenzie Joe had dug, over against the slope, in the forest. This was abandoned now and covered with logs. Jack had not been near it since the day McKenzie Joe went away. At last, sighting Kenning on the flat, he shouted:

"Anything good today?" The geologist shook his head. Then as Hammond approached: "Can't expect much yet. We're still twenty or twenty-five feet above where the stuff ought to be." Hammond laughed.

"It's got to turn out."

(TO BE CONTINUED)