

POOR MAN'S GOLD

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WNU Service.

CHAPTER IX—Continued

"Well, Jeanne," came slowly, "I guess you're right. McKenzie Joe knew what he was doing, after all." There was a desperate quietness to his tone; the world was swimming. This puzzling find could mean many things.

Of only one was Jack certain—that he had signed away valuable rights. He hoped that was all—this action was not beyond recall; it was the pounding of suspicion that hurt, suspicion which could point in only one direction.

"Before I do or say anything," he muttered. "I've got to see Bruce Kenning."

Jeanne Towers looked up. A change had come over the girl, a queer, awakening sort of metamorphosis. She seemed stalwart, determined, as though doubts and fears which long had harassed her had disappeared. There was crispness in her voice, almost command.

"I'll go with you, Jack," she said. "I think you should see several persons. Kay Joyce, for instance."

CHAPTER X

They reached the top of the hill and followed its crest to Kenning's cabin. He was not there. At last they turned away, Jeanne in the lead, heading for Kay Joyce's cottage. Jack Hammond acquiesced; horrible thoughts were running through his brain; he could not trust them away.

"Kay!" he called at the edge of the veranda. "Kay! Come out here."

The door flew open and Kay came bubbling forth. Her expression changed at the sight of Jeanne, and Jack Hammond, grimly silent, beside her.

"Kay!" he demanded. "Where's Bruce Kenning?"

"Isn't he in his cabin?" Then, "What's come over you—so excited—"

"You've a good idea of what's come over him!" Jeanne interjected coldly. Kay shot her a glance of unconcealed enmity.

"So?" she asked and dismissed her for the man. "Jack, whatever is all this about? Is something terribly wrong?"

"Terribly. That's why I've got to find Bruce Kenning."

"He wants to tell him," Jeanne added, "that he's found out how you two have been tricking him." Kay Joyce advanced sharply.

"What do you mean?"

Curiously, Hammond found himself hurrying to Jeanne's defense. It amazed him as much as it amazed Kay Joyce, now staring from one to the other.

"She means," he snapped, "that someone's been working McKenzie Joe's old claim."

"Suppose someone has?" She stamped a foot. "I can't help it if people go wandering around other people's claims. Just why you should come storming up to me about it—"

"I'm not storming. And I'm not making accusations. But Kenning got me to deed that property over to him this afternoon—"

She gestured futilely.

"A lot of nonsense about some worthless old hole in the ground—"

"Strange," interjected Jeanne. "Kenning knew it wasn't worthless. Kay blazed with anger."

"Am I talking to you, Jack? Or to this little tramp?"

"Kay! Don't say that!" Jack was half up the steps. She turned defiantly from him; suddenly Hammond realized that her indignation had been too carefully timed, her amazement unreal.

"So the pot calls the kettle black?" asked Jeanne, with tense calmness.

Hammond turned amazedly.

"You've no cause to say that!"

"No? Ask Miss Joyce how many nights a week she spends in Bruce

Kenning's cabin. In Bruce Kenning's bed!"

For the first time in his life, Jack heard Kay stammer. Then she began to rage, her clenched hands extended. But Jeanne Towers cut in with:

"Shall I give you the hours, days and dates? And perhaps you sneak out at nights just for the exercise? In your pajamas?"

"Jack!" Kay tried appeal. "Are you going to believe this wretched little liar? If you only knew—"

"He knows," Jeanne cut in, "if you're referring to my life with Lew Snade."

"Kay," the man interrupted dazedly, "has all this been just a game with you?" He was groping, like a man staggering to his feet after unconsciousness. "You've been just playing me—you never intended to marry me? Just holding me at arm's length—"

"Men are easier to handle that way," Jeanne supplied.

"You should know!" Kay was pacing. Her eyes glared; her usually smooth hair was in disarray.

"I couldn't help watching you." Anger conquered Kay completely.

"Think what you please, both of you!" she exploded. "If her word means so much to you—go ahead—only don't come to me with it!" A queer laugh passed over her thin drawn lips. "Thank God for one thing. I won't have you pawing me any more—that's a consolation."

"Kay!"

"Don't speak to me!" she shot at him. "You've got your own information bureau beside you—talk to her!"

"And you know it's the right information," Jeanne insisted.

"You've cooked it up—every word of it."

"Then why do you admit it?" The Northern girl advanced a step toward the veranda. "Call out Mrs. Carewe. She's tired of her job; she won't be afraid to answer questions. She'll tell you how many times she's seen you go over to Bruce Kenning's—nights when she couldn't sleep and watched you—"

"Oh, the cook's word."

"A good woman's word! If she had only come to me before McKenzie Joe left, Kenning never would have gotten his hands on that property!"

Kay straightened. White-featured, her hands half extended as though they longed to claw the brown eyes of the woman who accused her, she stood a moment transfixed with anger.

"But he's got it!" she snapped at last. "And what are you going to do about it?"

She whirled. The door slammed. Jack and Jeanne stood alone in the deepening night.

"I'm going to find Bruce Kenning," he said abruptly. "This time I'd better see him alone."

She begged him to wait for morning; Jack countered with hastily framed excuses. At last he was alone, moving through the shadows toward McKenzie Joe's test shaft, progressing more by instinct than by direction.

Mentality had concentrated upon a sequence of events which now were becoming horribly, truthfully clear. McKenzie Joe had been right after all—from the very beginning!

Now the episode of the sniper gold was explained and the reason that he never again had found such nuggets at Kay's claim. He knew now that her placer workings had been worthless and that they had been salted with metal from Kenning's workings up the creek. It was her alibi, her excuse to thwart any plea that Jack might make to give up this quixotic idea, to marry him now, and forget pride and foolish inhibitions. To cover also the matter of money, explain the payment of workmen—Jack knew now who had paid them, Bruce Kenning. To make Jack believe that she was a trifle nearer him, and thus, fevered by her approach,

make him the more insensible to trickery.

But McKenzie Joe had labeled the first nuggets sniper gold, which could not possibly have come from her claim. The mistake had not been made again; the gold with which that gravel had been salted thereafter had been the sort of gold that would come from gravel, nothing else.

On went the reconstruction—the well-planted fable about the English syndicate, the plausibility and sense of honesty established by the failure of the main line of test pits, the surprise of finding gold where no one, even Bruce Kenning, had expected it, thus absolutely precluding the possibility of gold-bearing sands in the territory where McKenzie Joe had put his faith.

It was easy to reconstruct the rest of the picture. They had played on Joe's taciturnity and his dislike for them. Kenning evidently



"Don't Hurt Me," He Begged. "I'm Not Kenning."

knew his breed, quick disgust, the desire to pull out and go on, once relations had become intolerable. So McKenzie Joe had gone. And Bruce Kenning had continued, surreptitiously, to dig where McKenzie Joe had dug; mining and geological experience had told him that McKenzie was right. Then, with the river bed discovered, a quantity of screened gravel had been taken to the worthless test pit on the bench land and dumped there. No wonder the bottom of the pan, when Jack had washed that sample, had been covered with gold. And now the real discovery was in the hands of Bruce Kenning. Jack Hammond had signed it over that afternoon. He knew that already the transfer had been recorded.

Suddenly Hammond crouched, alive to his surroundings. He was within fifty yards of McKenzie Joe's workings. A faint sound, borne by the brisk wind, carried the rasping of the old ladder as someone began an ascent of the shaft. A shadowy, burdened figure appeared. Hammond called Bruce Kenning's name. With that, the figure reached the surface, threw the heavy sack of gravel from his shoulders, strove to run, stumbled, then turned, weakly suppliant.

"Don't hurt me," he begged. "I'm not Kenning."

Hammond caught him, lifting him clear of the ground. For an instant, he held the man shaking in his powerful grasp. Then, with a half fling, he gave him freedom.

"I told you never to cross that Alaskan line!" he growled. It was Lew Snade, almost groveling as he strove to back away, to reach a distance from which he could run for safety. But Hammond moved

with him, pace for pace. "Hear me? I told you not to cross that line!"

"But I haven't been bothering Jeanne. Honest to God, I haven't. She doesn't even know I'm in the country."

"What are you doing in this test pit?"

"Just getting out a little gravel."

"To make cement with, I suppose. How long have you worked here?"

He tried to frame a lie, but he was too frightened.

"Since a night or two after your partner left."

"And you work for Bruce Kenning, don't you?" The big hands caught again at the shoulders of the trembling man. "Don't lie—you work for Bruce Kenning."

"Yeh—I worked for him."

"You helped him salt that shaft over on the bench land too, didn't you?"

"I don't know what he did with the gravel I took over there."

"But you did carry gravel for him."

"I've been working for him, ain't I?"

"Where's Kenning now?"

Lew Snade looked up.

"Ain't he at his house?"

"You know he's not there."

"But I don't. Honest to God, I don't. He said he was going to be there."

Hammond threw the man aside and turned again for the hill. A light was burning in Kay's cottage; he could see her shadow as she passed a window. But strangely, the sight of her held no poignancy for him; instead, there was something of the same disgust which he felt for Lew Snade. Then he went on to the Kenning cabin. It was dark and no one answered his knock. Loosening the leather latch, he walked within, stumbling about the two rooms. Kenning was not there. At last the lights of Whoopee lured him.

He did not find the man. Gamekeepers merely stared at his question or said they hadn't seen him. Hammond took it for what it was worth; a good gamester leaves the giving of information to the proprietor. Dulled by mental fatigue, Hammond at last approached the bar. Then Around the World Annie strolled through a doorway and edged beside him, an elbow on the mahogany, a well-shod foot on the brass rail.

"Well, Prospector," she queried, "celebrating?"

"If you want to call it that. I'm looking for Bruce Kenning."

"If you find him, tell me," came caustically. "I'm still wondering if that guy pulled a fast one on me."

"Was he here tonight?"

"Was he here?" asked Around the World Annie. "He came in like a fire alarm. That guy's nuts on roulette. He couldn't get to the table fast enough. Had a lot of gold on him. Making bets like a crazy man."

"Who won?"

Around the World Annie pressed her lips.

"Am I running a charity bazaar?" she queried. Answering her own question, "Come to think of it, I guess I am. He didn't make a good bet all night. Then he began getting chips on tick. Say," she exclaimed, "he was into me for ten thousand berries of borrowed money before I could tell him I didn't lend to gamblers. I'm givin' you the facts. Fine chance I've got to get it back."

"Oh, he can pay it. He's got the money."

"Yeh?" Annie became more heartened. "You know, I've been wonderin' if it wasn't a gag. This little rat of a Lew Snade comes in just when we're arguing—"

"I thought he worked for you."

"Snade? He did. Until I fired him for stealing. Tonight, he was all excited. He rushed up to Kenning and whispered something, and Kenning started to beat it. But I wouldn't let him go, not without some security on that loan. That's when he pulled the fast one. He yelled for a pen and signed his name for me and passed over the damned thing and said he'd be back tomorrow morning to make it

good—square up. And I was sap enough to let him leave!"

"Passed over what?"

"A check or a note or something. Got it upstairs in the cash box; probably isn't worth the paper it's written on," Annie sighed. "Oh, well, I ain't really out any dough. He owes me ten thousand bucks, but it was for chips that are all back in the racks now, seein' he lost as fast as he borrowed."

Hammond changed the subject.

"You don't happen to know where this Lew Snade lives?"

Around the World Annie screwed up her enameled face.

"Well, now, let's see if I can tell you how to get there. Know that trail that leads off to the left after you're well along toward Sapphire—?"

A half hour later, Jack Hammond crept slowly forward toward the little cabin set deep in the forest. For a moment, he left the trail, in hiding, yet watchful. The door had opened, revealing Lew Snade, who paused to say something to a remaining occupant, then hurried out along the trail; Hammond could have touched him as he passed. Jack waited long minutes after that. Then he moved slowly, carefully, through the tangled underbrush until he could look into the candle-lit cabin. A glance assured him; he ran for the door.

A kick and it flew open. Across the room, white-faced, hastily pulling a chair before him, as if for defense, was Bruce Kenning.

There was a moment of glowering survey. Neither spoke; there was no sound, in fact, save the queer, blastlike sounds of heavy breathing. Then Jack Hammond started forward.

Suddenly he dodged. A queer cry had come from Kenning's throat, as though restraint had broken under the pressure of tensility. His hands had tightened about the back of the chair; suddenly he raised it and threw it with all his strength. Hammond moved only enough to allow it to go harmlessly past, clattering against the opposite wall. Kenning grimaced, his lips pulling back from parted teeth.

"Well, say something!" he broke forth. "Staring at me like that—"

The answer was only a low rumble of hate. Kenning turned dazedly, as if seeking escape. But Jack Hammond was between him and the door, still coming forward slowly, as if he took joy in this creeping approach.

Yet, he knew he was not going into an easy battle. They were matched men, in height, weight and agility. One was fired with revenge, the other burned with desperation. Foot by foot, Hammond went on. Then suddenly, they met in slugging combat.

There was little science. What boxing ability they might have possessed had been overwhelmed by rage; now Hammond bored in with a series of straight-arm punches which drove his antagonist, gasping, to the wall. But there, Bruce Kenning took new strength. Now it was he who, laying himself wide open to the thudding thrusts of his enemy's fists, swung blow after blow against Hammond's face and head.

Suddenly Hammond began to use strategy, staggering, pretending to sag at the knees. Kenning shouted and rushed him.

Instantly, Hammond leaped aside and thrusting forth a leg, tripped the other man off balance. Then the prospector was on him, catching him with one arm about his neck, and sending his free fist against Kenning's face with a crashing force which seemed to drive his knuckles into his wrist bones. Kenning winced. He cried out. Hammond, gasping for breath, allowed a grunt of triumph to pass his lips. This was joy—to hear an evidence of pain and suffering. Desperately the geologist strove to turn in the other man's grasp; slowly he began to succeed. Now, in better position for defense, he began a counter-attack upon Hammond's midriff; the prospector retaliated by driving blow after blow against the other man's face until his hands were slimy.

(TO BE CONTINUED)