

SLUMBERING GOLD

by Aubrey Boyd

AUTOCASTER SERV.

Fourteenth Installment

"What did you hear, Bud?" Speed spoke low to prevent his voice from carrying to Pete, indoors. It was before dawn of the second morning.

Maitland told him. "Do you reckon we're both hearin' things?" Speed muttered. "It listened to me more like a louder sound way off. An echo of gunfire. Or else froze trees snapping in the thaw."

Motionless, they listened again. The silence of the shadowed chasm mocked them.

Speed stirred abruptly. "You stay here, Bud, and watch with Pete. I may be gone awhile, but keep that cliff covered with the rifle. I'll call you when I come back round it."

Speed's reconnaissance took him over a wider range than he had expected. When he paused, half-way down a lofty slope, it was to survey a long and unobstructed view of white headlands, shining in the dawn. In the center of one of the ravines, about two miles away, a pair of dark moving specks came into view. They were men; one of them carried what might be a rifle.

Very slowly, so as not to betray himself by a quick movement, he sank in the snow. The advantage of view down on them from above.

They were too far to be recognized as anything but men, but the image of Fallon had somehow leaped into his mind's eye at the first dim glimpse of them.

He lay along the base of a boulder, raising his head just high enough to bring the figures into view. He fired the gun once, at random in their direction, and immediately covered it to prevent even a wisp of smoke from showing.

They kept moving for an interval before the sound reached their ears. They stopped, as he had expected. But instead of looking up in his general direction, they turned to stare the other way.

Yet, in spite of the advantage this gave him for observation, some vague and nameless instinct made him sink back out of sight between the boulder and snow trough. This wary sense did not leave him; but after lying hidden some thirty seconds, he looked over the rim again. Strange to say, the two figures had vanished.

Slowly he rose into clear view by the boulder, to tempt them to declare themselves with a bullet.

The shot that did come was an utter and confounding surprise. The roar of it burst in his ears from directly behind him! He dropped back instantly into his shelter. The bullet had flattened against the inner side of the boulder right next to his arm, in the

"I get a Lift with a CAMEL!"



same flash of time as the gun's roar. This marksman was not more than a hundred yards away! Nothing showed behind him, either. He waited for a gun muzzle to show; for some tremor, however slight, in the snow above. Why didn't the fellow shoot? His ear, close to the snow, detected the crunch of running feet, receding from him.

He jumped up and ran to the near-by point from which the shot had seemed to come. There he found a hollow in the snow where the sniper had lain concealed, and the marks of his feet leading up from below to this depression, and running away from it. The fugitive was headed for the cabin and had left a moccasin track!

There was a spreading dark pink stain in the snow where he had hidden, and a blood trail all along his course!

A wild scramble along canyon brinks and ledgers brought him to the head of the jackpine gulch, and the absence of a blood trace in it assured him that he had arrived in time.

Maitland stood waiting with the carbine and with Pete close by. He motioned them to back in close to the cliff, in silence. They had caught the alarm of the shots, but had no notion of what was about to happen.

After a still wait, a voice spoke abruptly from around the cliff and close at hand—a husky, broken voice. "Don't shoot," it said weakly. "It's your game. I'm out of shells."

Along the cliff wall and into view, covered by Speed's guns, a fur-clad and moccasin-clad figure groped its way, twisted with agony. Maitland recognized at a glance the man who had held them up at their winter camp.

He held a revolver in his right hand. The other hand clutched at his side, and dripped blood. When he raised his head and looked at them, his eyes changed strangely from the look of a fighting animal brought to bay, to an expression of wild astonishment.

"Pete!" he murmured, almost under his breath. "How did they find this?"

"They found your lead dog on the lakes," said Pete. "It brought us here."

The deepening wonder in his face was a thing to see. "The dog!" he muttered huskily. There was a choking in his throat like a chuckle—it became a desperate, blood-chilling, mortally exhausted laugh. "We've won now, kid!" he chortled in a hard elation. "Beat the game with—a damn—Siwash!"

When they would have caught him, he waved them off again. "Get this—Pete," he mumbled thickly. "Somethin' else—I've got to tell ye, kid. And I will. But—give me time—but first—get this. The gold is—." He lost his voice and found it by sheer force of will—"I saw it—just now. Two men—in the—gulch. In bright snow—." His voice ebbed from him. His disclosed and racked face turned gray with a deathly pallor of weakness and stupefaction at the failure of his tongue and his brain to answer his will. "The gold—!"

With an agonized, astonished curse at his defeat, he slumped, held rigid an instant against the wall, and then with a slow, lurching slide, sank down.

Speed, who had taken a step to break his fall, caught him, and leaned over the still body.

"He told the truth about his last shell," Speed mused aloud. "He was tryin' to reach the cabin and his shells for a last stand. But he saw our marks in the gulch. Who did he think I was at first? And where did he get that wound?"

"The two men in the gulch he spoke of—." said Maitland.

"It's what I was wonderin'. I saw them, too. About four miles off, from here. He must have dodged 'em. But they'll pick up his blood trail. In half an hour from now, they'll—"

Here Speed unaccountably broke off short, spun about with a gun drawn, and in a flash had leaped round the narrow cliff ledge out of Maitland's sight.

"Hands up!" he shouted, "or I blast you into the canyon. Throw that gun down!"

A man with his arms raised came around the cliff ledge by which Dalton had approached so short a time before. Maitland

was too confounded to utter a word. He wore the uniform of the Mounted Police.

There are no braver men than the Canadian Northwest Mounted, but they are neither immortal nor impervious to the menace of two .45 six-shooters at blank range.

Speed emptied the mountry's holster and kicked the gun behind him into the snow.

"This only makes it worse for you, said the officer. 'I demand that you and your partner surrender to arrest.'"

Here was just the vicious turn of fate that Speed had feared, with an extra twist to make it worse. After evading the suspicion of Cathcart, who had mistaken Dalton for a Siwash, were they now, by a climax of irony, to be charged with the murder of Dalton himself?

"This looks compromisin', I'll concede," he said. "But you boys is on the wrong track. While you're stalkin' us, the real game is likely beatin' to cover. There's two more men in these mountains, and they're worth trailin'."

"Where did you see them?" the officer asked, without belief.

Speed pointed his gun. "Four miles that way."

"You saw me and an officer who trailed with me, perhaps, though we didn't come from that direction. You've got our distance and bearings twisted. If you have a hope of setting us on a false trail, you can drop it. The game's up for both of you. Should you refuse to return our guns and have heard the warrant, you'll be hunted down to a finish."

Speed picked up the police revolvers, emptied the mand threw them into the chasm. "It's a difference of opinion that makes gambelin'," he said. "Get me two lengths of rawhide, Bud."

The request brought Maitland out of a trance. "Don't do it, Speed," he said quickly. "Let the Law straighten this out. Investigations will clear us of what they suspect."

You've got delusions about the Law, Bud. I can't argue with you. I ain't got no words but a low-down gambler's lingo, and it don't just fit with what I'm tryin' to show. But I've got a hunch, and I'm askin' you now, if ever you trusted a pardner's word, to take mine when I say you ain't fixed to deal with the Law. Later maybe—not now."

Maitland was moved by the appeal, but not by its logic. His eyes were wet when he spoke. "We've reached that junction, Speed, you once talked of. God knows I'll never have a truer partner. You know that if this charge were made against you alone, and there was no other way out than the one you say, I'd travel any road to help you. But to escape by using force against the police isn't just a crime that would outlaw us for life; it's a needless crime. We'd be giving them the real case against us that they haven't got. That isn't all. We couldn't take Pete over that route, and I can't leave her to face this alone."

Pete would have spoken, but Speed's brooding look at her checked the words. "How do you figure it?"

"I don't know," said Pete, unhappily. "I feel that Bud's right though when he says you'd give the Law a case."

"You're an ornery young pair of cubs," Speed muttered. "... Reckon you can't help it, comin' from where you do. Now it's the same junction, turned backwards, and I can be just as damned ornery."

He pressed back the gun hammers, tensely watched by the police officer who had followed his argument with a fateful interest. Speed's eyes, however, strayed to a long pendent spruce cone on a tree

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near the ledge. Without aiming, he fired. The cone fell, clipped from the branch, and before it reached the snow, four quick bullets had broken it to fragments. The remaining shells blazed at these pieces as they spun down the slope.

The outlaw waited, listening, till the last echo died out of the canyon. Slowly then, he looked at the guns, and rubbed a spot from one of the clean blue barrels. They were still smoking when he handed them to the police officer.

"Well, go ahead and read your warrant about our supposed shooting of this man," said Speed, indicating Dalton's body.

"We have a warrant for your arrest," said the mountry, "but not for killing that man. Since you've surrendered, I want you to understand that we don't railroad men, or even arrest them, on merely presumptive charges. We had a brush with this fugitive—." nodding toward Dalton, "down the creek. It's

more than possible he was wounded by one of our guns. The inquest will show. My warrant is to arrest you and your partner for the murder of a Siwash on Lake LeBarge, on or about the twentieth of last November. The native's body was disposed of through a hole in the ice, and has been recovered since the thaw."

Speed's eyes sought those of his partner and Pete, who looked dumbfounded.

"Your own warrant?" he demanded.

"Mine would be sufficient. This one happens to be signed by Cathcart of the Mounted Police."

"Well, I'm a son of a—!" Speed mumbled to the hollow chasm with a note of doom.

At the same moment, a clatter in the jackpine gulch—swung their attention to that quarter. In these echoing surprises they had completely forgotten Rusty. Now a slinking wolfish head nosed round

the cliff and cowered back at sight of the fallen body. From behind the cliff, the strident, excited, harshly familiar voice of Corporal Cathcart twanged like an untuned banjo: "Get this malamute, Burke. It's the 'wolf' that gave us the blood trail. The Siwash's lead dog!"

It did not take the Mounties long to get things in shape for the trip down to headquarters. Pete was delegated to serve breakfast while the officers disposed of Dalton's body in a crude grave near the mountain hideout. At last they started, Speed, closely guarded, gave them no cause for concern. He was meeting the law unafraid.

continued next week.

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