

SLUMBERING GOLD

By Aubrey Boyd

THIRD INSTALLMENT

SYNOPSIS: On the old side-wheeler "George E. Starr," on its way to the Yukon gold fields in the first rush of '97, Speed Malone, experienced gold-camp follower and gambler, and young Ed Maitland, on his first trip, trying to recoup his lost family fortune, struck up a strange friendship. Maitland left Speed playing Solo with two other men and wandered forward to be sharply recalled by the report of a pistol and the news that his partner had been shot and had gone overboard. Ed jumped in after him, without second thought. But the cold waters got him, and in the end it was Speed who did the rescuing, holding Ed's head above water until they were taken aboard a little boat by a French fisherman from Seattle. The big ship went on without them. NOW GO ON WITH THE STORY.

Frenchy raised his eyes, folded his arms, unfolded them and burst into a geyser of language which, if the activity of his arms signified anything, was far from pious.

When the torrent subsided, Speed grinned. He drew from his pocket five double-eagles and dropped them on the table. "There's a hundred dollars belongin' to me and my pardner. Now what does it up and do but gamble this yer hundred?" he stacked the five gold pieces in a neat column—"that you're takin' us north to the camp of Skagway, Alaska."

But the fisherman began another outburst in his native tongue.

With no sign of impatience, the gambler pulled out a short-barreled, triggerless .45 Colt, broke it open, clicked it back and set it on the table.

"I don't savy your lingo, Frenchy," he said equably, "but this baby comprehends ever' knowed dialect and speaks it fluent. I plays her to copper my bet."

The Frenchman's eyes blazed. Lunging sideways he reached for the knife that was stuck in the cabin wall. But before his fingers touched the haft, the gun roared and the knife clattered to the floor. In a curling haze of smoke the fisherman backed to the companion, while Speed carefully examined the bore of his revolver against the light and blew some smoke from it.

"Mebby you can translate that," he suggested. "Reckon the salt water ain't spoiled her accent none."

Though torn by the struggle and perspiring Frenchy made a labored refusal. "Too far," he mumbled. "I lose ze feesh."

Speed began to rake in the scattered coins, leaving out three fives. "All right," he said pleasantly. "There's fifteen, if you land us near a man with a boat who ain't weak in the head and knees both. We'll take some other fisherman to the Yukon. To the golden river"—And he hummed a song which that phrase recalled to him.

"Gold?" echoed Frenchy. "Sticky with it." The gambler detached a damp cigarette paper, and became engrossed in the delicate task of rolling a smoke.

"You goin' there?"

"Goin' there!" Speed had a look of having been asked an outlandish question. "Does the stiff life, Frenchy, pannin' an ounce of sense to the ton, who'd work out a life term for a stake he could dig up in a week? Not even you, if you knowed the layout. Take this range of yours—a tough one to ride, I should reckon, with the storms and fog, broken lines, raw fingers and busted bones. And when you cash in, what's the figure? Frenchy's pickled carcass bobbin' up and down the dirty water of some cove, and the Susette a smashed tubful of mud and seaweed on a stack of rocks." Frenchy nodded sadly.

Speed, who had been watching Frenchy with a speculative eye, gave all the money before him a sudden brusque shove to the center of the table. "It's yours!" he said.

With an impulsive grab, the fisherman clawed it toward him.

The gambler lit his cigarette and spoke to Maitland through a lazy vapor of smoke.

"Unwind the verdict, Judge. Is it legal?"

Maitland had been considering the proposition as it took shape. The chart in the cabin was sketchy, but he had sailed broken coasts before with less to go by. He liked the feel of the boat. Anything seemed better than turning back. The fisherman was being well paid.

"I can't pay my share," he began.

"Sink me, Bud," protested the Westerner, "if you ain't as unexpected as a parson's mule. The money was won on your stake, and half of it's yours. Also you're the deep-sea shark. Boats is a branch of knowledge I'm free of, and I don't figure Frenchy for no oceanic scout. So we'll owe you for getting us there."

The boy pulled on his clothes and went out to look at the Susette. She proved to be a strong, deep-keeled boat with the remains of a cutter's rigging, and a look of having known

better things before Frenchy turned her into a smack.

Having had to overstay several watches, Maitland was glad when he found the open sea at Dixon's Entrance, and was able to shove the tiller into Frenchy's unwilling hands and go below.

He ate a mulligan Speed had compiled from the "tallin's" of the previous meal, and tumbled into the bunk for a sleep. Awakened hours later by a thud of running seas, he had just caught a drowsy glimpse of his dorymate playing solitaire with Frenchy's cards under the swinging cabin lamp, when a sudden lurch sent chair and player sprawling.

"Pitchin' cayuses!" the gambler mumbled ruefully. "Am I goin' to ride this critter before we hit Skagway?"

Mention of Skagway reminded Maitland of a question he had wondered about. "Why do you choose that camp instead of Dyea?" he asked.

The other rearranged his cards with some care. "They's no call for a covered play between you and me, Bud. It don't suit my hand to meet the George E. Starr or her passengers till they have time to forget where they seen me last. There's no wires to beat in the North, and gettin' passed up for drowned is a good alibi."

That Speed had had a serious tangle with the law before boarding the ship Maitland already suspected. He now saw that the security of the strange alibi lay in his own hands. Little as the fact appealed to him, he appreciated the other's confidence that he would not betray it. "I was wondering," he said, "whether the White Pass from Skagway is a better trail."

"It's a horse trail. Where there's horses the pay is better. My special reason for choosin' it—" the Westerner's face hardened a little—"is that a man I'm lookin' for is liable to choose that route. . . . What's your plan in makin' for Dyea?"

"I thought I might get a long-shore job of some kind till I earned an outfit."

"You can do better. If you tied in with a horse outfit on the White Pass, they might pay for help and throw in the grub."

"But tools," Maitland objected.

The gambler's mouth twisted humorously, as he studied a card. "If you mean picks and shovels, Bud, the history of prospectin' learns us they's mighty little satisfaction in a shovel, and none at all in a pick. You can pick them up anywhere off the landscape."

From the chart in the cabin Maitland discovered that they were north of the fifty-fifth latitude and actually in Alaska, though the map did not mark the lower boundary of that long strip of Coastal islands called the "Penhandle."

Through one of these channels Maitland turned a course west of Zarembo Island into a long sea gorge, which proved to be easily navigable, but slow for sailing. When fish had followed fish as an unvaried menu for days, the idea of fish became by degrees more sinister than hunger, even to Frenchy.

The cliff shadows had melted into the glamour and mist of a wider channel when they heard the faint whine of a steamer's siren, passing southward by another course. It sounded queerly, in that solitude, a far echo of the world with which they had lost contact.

Speed wound in his line. "How'd you come to choose this route, Bud?" he asked.

"It isn't a course the steamers would take," Maitland answered after a pause. "I thought, if the George E. Starr were to pass us in the narrows going back, someone might get the idea you weren't drowned."

The reflection of a wave to which they were rising illumined the others face but left his eyes obscured. "That's a long way to go for a stranger," he said.

Maitland shook his head. The word "stranger" hardly applies to a man with whom one has been drowned and brought alive again. "I was thinking as we came up the gulf," he said, rather hesitantly, "of how we started this trip together. It's a fresh start for both of us, in a way. Why couldn't we see it through as partners?"

The gambler twisted the line in his hands. "It says a whole lot to me, Bud. I've always wanted to square you for that lost outfit, and I could steer you some in the gold camps. But as for partners—you don't know who I am."

"Forget about the outfit. And the other trouble too. It's a new deal, isn't it?"

"Meanin'?"

"If you'll agree to respect the law while we're partners, your word's good with me."

pose wasn't likely to forget. The Westerner's reply, however, took an unexpected form.

"Suppose I copped against a forced lay by sayin' I'd pull out and leave you clear if I had to tangle with the law. Would that go?"

He looked up with a misty question in his eyes, and two brown hands locked on the bargain.

From the outer waters of the Lynn Canal, a great marine corridor contracted toward their destination. Vast walls of rock loomed on either side to heights of a thousand feet or more, sheer out of the sea, casting a half-mile shadow into the gulf.

On ledges of these canyon faces spruce and jackpines perched like window shrubs. Above them, in the upper air, snow-covered peaks glistened with a molten splendor, and in the deep, brooding shadows at their base, gigantic boulders

lay sprawling in the seaweed that waved and streamed with the ground swell.

When the Susette traversed the shadow of these ramparts, late one afternoon in August, sunlight was falling in shafts into the fjord, pearling the mists that hung like webs between the canyon heads and dazzling the smoky fall of mountain streams which cascaded into the gloom and rose again as rainbowed spray.

At a bend in the narrowing sea gorge a sudden echo among the shore rocks set the travelers' ears tingling and shortly afterwards they emerged on a dazzling vista of bright water in which a cargo steamer lay at anchor, some two hundred yards from shore.

The landing beach shone gold in the sunlight, shelving steeply down from graveled flats, where a river canyon opened its broad delta on the gulf. Gray tents, scattered along the flats, and the snowy crest of a bald peak, which glittered high above the canyon, marked it as the outlet of the Skagway river and the base camp of the White Pass.

"Landin' noses," said Speed. The heads of the swimming animals

bobbed at several points between the ship and the surf.

As they drew nearer, a gaudy pinto flashed into the air and took water in a smother of diamonds.

The broncho swam off—not toward shore, however, but in blind panic down the gulf.

"Might buy us a feed if we round up this cayuse," Speed suggested. "See if you can turn him, Bud."

Cutting across the runaway's course Maitland skillfully matched the frightened zigzags with which it tried to evade the approaching sail, till they could see its opal-blue eye, flaming with terror. As the boat came close, a rope sang from the Westerner's hand, neatly ringing the pinto's head. To avoid dragging its nose under water, Speed played out his line. The Susette luffed but was a little heavy for such delicate handling, and a few inches late in bringing to. Rather than release the line, Speed jumped in after it.

CONTINUED NEXT WEEK

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While Others Come For Love!
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Directed by Louis King



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