

SLUMBERING GOLD

by Aubrey Boyd

AIRCASTER SERIAL

ELEVENTH INSTALLMENT
The golden head stirred at last on the pillow. Long lashes quivered; gray eyes opened and looked dimly around the cabin. Meeting his, they dropped in bewilderment to the bunk.

After an hour or so the pain began to relent.
"I can't ever thank you, Bud," she murmured.

"Forget that and try to sleep. Maybe this will help." He brought a toddy he had been warming.

When a real sleep of exhaustion presently stole over her, he went out to stable the mare.

"I'll have to travel as soon as the storm dies," she said upon waking, hours later.

"But why, Pete. If it's because you need—"

She shook her head in troubled reverse. "I made some money this winter cooking for a rafting outfit on the Teslin. I don't need any."

"Homesick, maybe?" he suggested, "for that warm desert country of yours?"

"It isn't always warm in Nevada, or all desert." Pete smiled a little with an effort to be a brighter guest.

"There's lots of snow," he encouraged her to talk.

"I guess, even if the place you grow up isn't wonderful," Pete mused, "you imagine it's so. Hardly anyone ever came near Bill's ranch, but I used to dream I had a friend out in the hills somewhere. He rode a big bay horse with a cream-colored mane. When the hot wind blew I'd imagine I was holding to the saddle horn and we were leaving a long coil of dust into the blue water of a mirage. I asked Bill about it once and he said I'd been chewing loco weed. There wasn't no such horse in the range. He said the only kin I had was a prospector who'd left Nevada, and he wasn't a man I would want to remember."

The enigmatical figure of the man with the mukluks loomed across Maitland's mind.

"Sometimes, when Bill was drinking, he'd mutter about this prospector—Dalton, he called him. He spoke as if he'd grubstaked him once to be rid of him. They had a jealous quarrel over a woman Bill was married to, I think, and I was mixed in it somehow. He never talked of it when he was sober."

That fragment cast the shadow of a strange triangle, though Pete seemed unaware of anything tragic in its reference to her. After this break-up she had lived alone with the brooding Owens—a secluded life. She did not say what had brought him North at last to join the prospector who had wronged him, nor what her own adventures had been after his death, or why she had recently left the rafters' camp on the Lewes with the intention of going out.

"Did you ever find Dalton?" Maitland asked, after a silence.

"I saw him," Pete said, in an oddly withdrawn tone.

More hesitantly Maitland asked, "Did you remember him?"

"I don't know." Her voice had the same troubled constraint. "In a kind of way."

"This is none of my business, Pete, but why didn't he take you with him?"

Her hand brushed her eyes with a shadowy gesture. "I can't . . . My head's kind of jumbled, Bud."

"Anyway you're safe now, Pete," he said. "By the time you're able to travel, we'll figure something better for you than going out."

The cell of the Skagway jail was a plain thick-studded box, except for a small grilled vent in the seaward wall, and the cot on which Speed was sitting, inwardly raw with chagrin. Outwardly he wore an air of composure for the benefit of the heavily armed guard in the passage, on the other side of the grated cell door.

Being arrested on the charge of having murdered the shell dealer in this camp last fall, was bad enough.

But he had not discerned the real teeth in the trap until Fallon entered the marshal's office, just before he was committed to the cell.

Now when he thought of his dog house wharf, and of Drew waiting team waiting for him by the warehouse at Tagish for the mail and freight he had been trusted to deliver, it was all he could do to refrain from getting up and kicking the wall.

The blizzard had caused a disruption in Drew's mail service at a critical time when the inspector was short of a driver. A sled shipment of gold was to be run to Skagway and a packet of mail brought back, containing a considerable amount of bank currency consigned to Dawson against the gold. Drew's choice of a substitute courier had been good gambling. Speed knew that life had left marks on him legible enough to that veteran judge of men.

On delivering the gold to the wharf agent in Shagway, he had not been able to pick up his sled load immediately for the return trip. A ship lay in the gulf in a twinkling of flossam of shore ice. Her arrival, delayed by the storm, was being celebrated as a harbinger of Spring and spoils. Even the shore crew was drunk, further retarding the loading of her cargo. Meanwhile the mail was brought ashore, and the agent, nervous enough at having custody of the gold, was still more uneasy about the police mail—an oilskin-wrapped and sealed packet of bank notes in easily portable form. His strong-box had been broken recently by thieves, and the packet was presumptively safer in the game pocket of Speed's coat. Facts to be read by the marshal as indicating that Speed had stolen the regular mail runner's orders, had delivered the gold to obtain the mail, and had been prevented from taking the ship only by the longshore tie-up.

The strangely timed event that left him open to capture, occurred during the forced wait. With many hours to kill, he had decided to visit Steiner at what was now Skagway's General store. Money lending was one of his gold mines, and speaking of curious pledges, he mentioned an oddly shaped clover-leaf nugget on which he had loaned something more than its weight to a gambling client. Then the hunt was on.

The client wore a dicer hat and stuttered; was known as "Lefty" and suspected of being a pickpocket—Speed ran the man to earth in a gambling tent, where he cut into the same poker game, and dealing Lefty a hand on which the thief would willingly have bet his shirt, lured the nugget into the game on a raised pot. The shining, foliated piece of gold was weighed on the bar scales and played for twice its gold value.

Speed won it with a straight flush. When Lefty disconsolately quit the table, Speed grilled him about the nugget. Under pressure, the thief maintained the extraordinary story that he had lifted it in Skagway from the pocket of a man now dead—the shell dealer, in fact, whom Speed had shot at the door of The Pack Train saloon.

In order to learn something more about the man with the dicer, Speed had been looking for Rose when the marshal seized him.

That the man he was accused of murdering should be the man who had brought the nugget to Skagway, was an apparently perverse loop of the influence he called luck. Now it lay in the marshal's safe, along with Speed's guns and the mail.

Speed's breath smoked in the old cold cell. They had freed his hands, and had not troubled to remove his gun belt—signs that pointed to brief imprisonment and swift judgment, although this was his second day in the cell.

He did not notice the darkening of the cell, or the wilder music that sounded from the camp during his long abstraction. It was the opening of the street door that made him aware of both. There was a different tread in the passage; different, yet somehow familiar.

"Take it in yourself," the guard growled testily to a shadow by the grating.

The big door was unlocked, and as the figure edged into the somewhat clearer light of the cell, Speed understood why he had been trying to place the footfall in his memory. The man who confronted him was Frenchy, carrying a plate and curving his chest to bring a deputy's badge into more formidable prominence.

Speed bit his cheek as he glanced over the contents of the plate without accepting it.

"Well, you're a nice one, Frenchy," he commented mildly. "So they give you a deputy's star. Looks good on ye, too."

The ex-fisherman squirmed back a little, not quite able to keep a firm front with that even voice in his ears.

"You don't forget, neither, do you Frenchy?" his prisoner acknowledged, eyeing the fish, and then the knife in his belt, on which his free hand had closed. "Are you the marshal's official sticker?"

Narrow black eyes beaded with a rankling heat which only blood could quench, as the cool gray ones of his defenseless prisoner lifted to his face.

The pause grated on the impatient guard at the door. "If that's the best you can do, frog, back out here with them plates before he takes your knife and carves ye."

"Reckon this feller don't know who he's callin', Frenchy," Speed observed, as the fisherman backed an involuntary step or two. "Tell him what you done to Horse McGinnis of Spokane. Tell him you could lick ten half-backed deputies like him with one foot."

An oath from the guard showed that Frenchy's elevation to office was not popular with the marshal's squad. He swung the door, and hooked the fisherman with a boot-toe to speed his exit. In that finely measured instant, Speed jumped for the door.

Speed reached the corridor in a bound. A gun blazed out of the dark tangle but he was already clear of the passageway and gone.

The canvas between the frame and the rafters was dark. Unfortunately or otherwise, Steiner was out. Speed cut a slit in the canvas, and climbing through the aperture, dropped inside.

Though the tent had looked dark from outside, its interior was vaguely illumined by a filtered wavering flow from the kerosene flare in the street it faced on Rummaging uncovered a crowbar of handy size. In a drawer he found a collection of six-shooters, which said little for Steiner's judgment of firearms, but he quickly picked out a .45, loaded it from his own belt and put it in the holster.

Still the object of his search eluded him. He was beginning to think that the Jew had done some empty boasting when his eye fell on a longish box in the far corner, under a shelf. He pulled it out, and

delicately prying it open with the bar, put his fingers inside. With a grunt of relief, he removed the cover and took out two sticks of dynamite.

As he dropped in the snow and paused to listen, his skin prickled with a sense of some lurking presence close by, soundless and unseen. He started swiftly back along his previous trail through the tents, without touching the gun at his belt.

Speed crouched forward tensely, gripping the bar, as a dark shape brushed along the tent wall within a yard of him. In that instant of its disclosure, his hand lunged out and clutched a man by the throat. He raised the pinch bar.

"D-d-don't hit me," he protested in a hoarse whisper. "I's f-f-for ye. I s-seen you prowl into the Jew's t-t-tent to get the d-d-dynamite."

D-d-don't try it! What'd the m-marshal take of y-yourn?"

"My guns and jack—they don't matter. The packet of mail I've got to get."

Lefty caught his arm. "L-leave me case this trick," he whispered huskily. "You wouldn't have a chance in a m-m-million with dynamite. I seen that safe't once when the marshal pinched me, and with a few minutes, I could f-feel the c-combination. It used to be my racket."

"I owe you a hand, and the 'What's in it for you?" m-marshal a bad turn. G-give me the bar," whispered Lefty. "You wait here."

"How—wait here?"

"W-watch for the mob. Whistle if they get too close. But give me all the t-time you can."

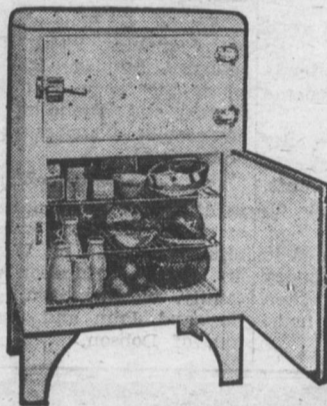
Speed yielded the bar. Lying in

the drift, his gun covered the only door to the jail, so the chance of Lefty's playing him double was slight. Long minutes dragged before a distant tramping began to pound on his sardrums. A shore party had been combing the beach. The empty boats at mooring and the ship in the gulf would naturally suggest that way of escape. As he sprang erect, his sharp whistle pierced the dusk.

(Continued next week)

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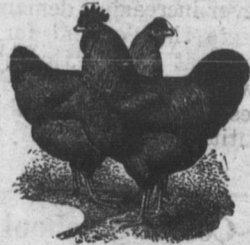
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