

GOLD BOUND

A STORY OF ALASKAN GOLD COUNTRY

CHAPTER I.

When he stood at last upon the beach at Nome, Rupert Duane drew a long breath of relief. The pounding surf of the open roadstead lay between him and the steamer on which he had traveled north from Seattle. As he gazed across the two seething, tumbling miles of icy water, he marveled that the landing had been accomplished without a ducking and with so few bruises.

With fellow passengers, he had left the steamer in a dory, been hauled upon a tug, thence shifted to a flat-bottomed barge. When this had been floated as far inshore as possible, the long arm of a great crane had reached out a cage to them. Into this he and his fellows had been crowded like cattle. Then had come the hair-raising moments of their hoisting over the boiling surf, and their final planting on a crude wharf.

He was in Alaska at last! And for what? Gold, he hoped, for the spell of the elusive yellow metal was very strong upon him. Adventure he was certain to have, and its thrill was necessary to his being. Suffering was possible; yes, probable—even the gnawing of hunger, the sting of the Arctic winter, which would soon be upon them; the multiplied dangers of the tundra.

He shrugged his broad shoulders, for the prospect held nothing new. All his grown-up life he had faced danger; now there was but a difference in sinister shapes. He swept off his felt hat, and ran the fingers of his free hand through his luxuriant growth of black hair which was tinged at the sides with premature gray. The salt wind blowing straight from Bering Sea had an invigorating tang, and his lungs drank their fill.

The sound of angry voices at the head of the wharf caused him to turn. A small, stout man, with arms akimbo and short legs firmly spread, seemed to be holding off a crowd of a dozen or more, several of whom were women. Duane retraced his steps.

"I tell you, I'm going to get aboard," shouted one. "How do I know she won't be the last boat down this season? If the skipper gets a scare of ice, he won't wait for passengers. It's happened before."

"Forget it!" snarled the stout man, whom Duane now saw wore a uniform.

"I wrote the old woman I'd be home for Christmas—home with the yellow bacon, and I'm dinged if I'm going to take chances," continued the angry miner. His foot was pressed upon a chest which looked as though it might hold treasure.

"Christmas?" mocked he who blocked the way. "You'd think Christmas was next Tuesday, the way you're all acting, instead of being more than two months away. Hold your horses."

"But why can't we get out to the steamer, Mr. Wharfman?" pleaded one of the women. "It would be awful to be left. I've promised my kids I'd bring them a real Santa from Nome, and I've made the stuff to do it with. I wouldn't disappoint them for anything."

"Plenty of time, madam," replied the harassed official. "Look along the beach; there isn't a sign of ice yet."

"She can freeze solid in a night, this sea," declared a determined voice in the crowd. "I'm going out to the Senator on the next boat if I have to fight my way."

At the moment the wharf manager caught sight of the first officer of the steamer, who had just come ashore. "Stroll over here, mate," he called, "and tell this homesick bunch that the Senator won't slip off and leave them."

The officer was not unwilling. Quietly he explained that down passengers would be taken on as soon as the up passengers and freight were landed. He assured them there wasn't a chance of their being left. The sight of him on shore in uniform was perhaps more reassuring than his words. At all events the crowd, still grumbling, turned back into the camp.

"That's the fourth bunch I've sent off to-day," said the wharfman to Duane, whom he recognized as one of those just landed. "It beats the Dutch the way this country works on people. They stampede up here, and then, when they get a few ounces to the good, they break their necks getting away. And Christmas! That causes half the trouble. You'd think the only reason some of them had for going home was to play St. Nick to them they'd get behind. What's Christmas, anyhow? For a real holiday give me Thanksgiving and the big dinner."

Duane could not forbear a smile at this explanation of preference which might have been forecasted by the wharfman's rotund figure. He asked himself the other's question—what was Christmas, anyhow? He was not so old that he could not remember how it once had been to him. The satisfaction in the thought that one's holiday would be saddened if he was self-marooned in the frozen North. Yet he could sympathize with those who

were so anxious to get home in time. Fortunate souls to have homes to go to!

He expressed something of this to the official, but found him determined to be unsympathetic.

"Where you going to put up, stranger?" was the query with which the stout man changed the subject.

"I'm open to suggestion," said Duane.

"I can recommend the Gold Digger for a square meal and clean sheets, if you pay the added freight. It's on the up side of the street, and half-way down. You can't miss it."

The direction was clearer than it seemed on first hearing, for Nome was a camp of a single business street a mile and a half of two and three story frame buildings, showing about as much alignment as though they had been thrown upon the beach by a tidal wave. Quite naturally the up side of the street was that which possessed back doors opening upon the tundra, that marvellous plain of spongy desolation that carries so many pay streaks of gold.

Duane recalled that the Gold Digger had been mentioned as a "likely stopping place" by acquaintances he had chanced to make upon the steamer. After arranging with the owner of the dog-team express to look after his baggage when it was finally set ashore, he started for the hotel.

No one would have taken him for a cheechako as he swung along the thoroughfare whose footing was as insecure as the direction was irregular. The usual earmarks of the tenderfoot were wanting. The ridges in his brown corduroys were worn smooth in places. The laced boots into which the trousers were tucked carried many signs of the trail. He did not seem to be hurrying, nor yet curious about his surroundings. The blare of music which burst from each of the many saloons along the zig-zag way seemed to strike no jarring note upon his ears. The picturesque Eskimo, in their reindeer parkas and mukluks, seemed accepted by him as though a part of a commonplace picture. Even the eternal tangle of dogs did not disturb him.

Strange as Duane actually was to the Alaskan gold town, he could never look nor act the tenderfoot in any camp of the outlands, no matter what its geography might be. From the Black Hills to southern Mexico, from South Africa to Nevada, he had followed the lure of gold. He was at home wherever his boots carried him and always looked the part.

Proof of this fact was apparent when he turned in at the crude sign of the hostelry which was to house him until he determined on his first move in the new country. As was the rule in the camp upon the golden sands, the bar-room had the place of honor and easy access to the street. But he had no questioning glance for the man in flannel shirt who presided behind the high counter. Nor did any of the hangers-on seek the privilege of joining him in a drink, as they would have done had he been an obvious cheechako. Even the croupier of the wheel of chance, although his table was deserted, did not ask him to try his luck, evidently recognizing in him a man who knew his own mind, and would pick his own game. Perhaps a small white scar, shaped like a cross, which stood out on his chin, aided the impression.

The office—too bare a room to be called a lobby by any one but the prejudiced proprietor—lay behind the saloon. It was lighted from one side, which also held a door distinguished by the invitation—"Ladies enter here." The loungers who were there to peddle worthless claims to the unwary gave the newcomer one glance, and resumed their smoke-punctuated discussion. Crossing the room to the "desk," a shelf of unfinished lumber, the stranger engrossed the blank book that served as a register: "Rupert Duane, Anywhere, U.S.A."

"Welcome, friend. I'm the proprietor of the Digger." The drawl, which denoted a transplanted Georgian or Alabamian, was more cheerful than the thin, saffron visage of the man who gave vent to it. "Room or bunk?"

"Room," Duane replied, without hesitation. "How much?"

"Four dollars per, with sheets thrown in. You grub where you like."

"As my baggage is still on the steamer, I'll pay in advance for a couple of days," said Duane, taking out a bill case and seeking a bank note.

The saffron-hued one gave him a shrewd glance, then gestured generously. "Pay when you go, Mr. —" he paused to glance at the improvised register—"Mr. Rupert Duane. That reminds me; we're holding a letter for you."

The new guest gave a slight start as the proprietor of the Gold Digger turned to ease of cubby-holes which hung from the wall. From one of the compartments he took a missive incased in one of the heavy, waterproof envelopes in common use in the North country.

(Continued in next issue.)

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