

GOLD BOUND

A STORY OF ALASKAN GOLD COUNTRY

(Continued from last week)

Although the sky was overcast, the air was just crisp enough for exhilarating travel, and they made good time from the start. The dogs had enjoyed a week's rest, and having been well fed were eager for the trail. The barren, treeless waste was of itself uninteresting, but the whites of the party were too busy with their thoughts to notice. For a time they mushed ahead in silence, at a speed which made Duane conscious of effort, though Yukona seemed quite undisturbed.

"You won't find a finer team of dogs in all Alaska than that in front," said the girl, when a stretch of heavy going slackened the pace.

With the pride of ownership in her eyes, she told him how she had trained them. Baron, the big leader, was her particular choice, with his ancestry on the paternal side going direct to a Scotch staghound which her father had imported. The rest of him was a mixture of Malamute and wolf, the latter strain thrown in for endurance. He could outrun any two dogs, she declared, and had never been bested in a fight. Three of the others were huskies from the Mackenzie river, and three from the pick of the St. Michael's Malamute pack.

She had brought them up in harness almost from birth, she continued, as she noted his interest. She had hitched them as pups to a stake and taught them to pull away, enlarging the harness as they grew. Recently she had been offered two thousand dollars for the team as it stood, but they were not for sale. Another winter, after she had had a taste of the States, she expected to win the sweepstakes with them in the annual race to St. Michael's.

Like a man in a dream, Rupert trudged along at her side, saying little, but thinking much. The very spirit of the wild outdoors seemed alive in this girl. Had the impelling force behind their mission only been less dangerous, had its finish loomed up before him as less tragic, he would

have been supremely happy. Upon one point his determination became firm—he would not permit her to go into danger, no matter what befell. He would defy all the conspirators the tundra ever bred, himself included, if necessary.

It was noon when Yukona suddenly called a halt with a shout to Ear-Nuk, who promptly threw the sled handles in a way that brought the dogs to their haunches.

"We're halfway," she said to Duane. "It's time we ate something."

"Barkis was never more willing," he returned, with a long breath of relief, for the pace she had set without the slightest sign of fatigue, was beginning to tell upon him. "I started on a cold breakfast in order to spare Host Timmons' curiosity."

When the tarpaulin was stripped from the sledload he had further evidence of this remarkable woman's efficiency. For a compact outfit, he had never seen one more complete. There was a small shelter tent, a sheet-iron stove, a double alcohol burner, frying-pan, coffee-pot, tin kettle, and two rolls of blankets for stable comforts. Of these several articles, for the present stop, she disturbed only the coffee-pot, the frying-pan, and the alcohol burner.

Duane had always prided himself upon his own knowledge of camp cookery, but the brief period in which Yukona Grey prepared their repast surprised even him. She frizzled strips of bacon to a nicety, deftly fried some bread in the drippings, and brewed coffee which, even with tinned cream, surpassed any he had ever tasted. The girl herself and the Eskimo seemed to take the meal for granted, but he was extravagant in honest praise.

"Some day I'll have to cook you a really truly meal, Mr. Duane, and serve it up for folks," she returned with a laugh.

In silence he wondered if that day would ever come. At the moment the prospect seemed so remote that he did not even venture to express the

hope of it. "When we have straightened out all the—kinks at Paint Creek," the girl continued. "But I suppose you're something of a cook yourself, after Nevada and all the other places you've been in."

Duane had filled his pipe, and was on his feet searching his pockets for a match. "Well, I have learned that corn meal fries a lot easier if you boil it first, and a few first principles like that. I can scramble—"

It was not so much the fact that he had broken off in the middle of a speech as the thunderstruck expression that suddenly came into his face that caused Yukona to start up from her seat on the end of the sled. Had a sudden and terrific pain seized him, the look could not have expressed more agony. And it held the surprise of one who has seen an apparition.

"Whatever is the matter?" she cried.

"I've lost—I really believe I've lost that Paint Creek letter." He spoke as though the words pained him.

"Oh, you couldn't have lost it!" cried Yukona. "Don't you remember you showed it to me just before we hit the trail?"

"I do remember, and with equal distinctness I remember putting it back into this pocket."

He held to her inspection the side pocket of his corduroy jacket, already turned inside out.

"It could scarcely have worked out," suggested the girl, but with less assurance. "Look through your other pockets. Perhaps you're mistaken as to where you put it."

Duane searched himself thoroughly, even foolishly, to the tiny pockets of the waistcoat underneath his heavy sweater. The letter was not to be found.

"And it's the only real evidence we have against that choice pair at the creek." He spoke as from a cloud of bewilderment.

"My word will be sufficient with Uncle Ned, so far as they are concerned," said the girl, her white brow crinkled in thought. "What is more important—suppose it falls into the hands of some Paul Pry who doesn't know you, Mr. Duane. It might cause you no end of trouble, the men of the camp are so hot-headed."

"I guess I can take care of myself." He endeavored to make his tone reassuring.

"But I will not have you taking chances," she asserted. "Besides, if

Uncle Ned wants to have the law on Keating and Jensen, he will need that letter. It will be absolute evidence. No one in the world writes just like Jensen. We've got to retrieve that letter!"

"But there is not time," he protested, though with no great warmth. "Forster is due at the ford this afternoon."

She was a moment reaching her next decision, evidently weighing the situation from every viewpoint. "You must go on to the ford," she said finally. "Ear-Nuk knows the trail. I'll take the back track until I find the missing letter. If I have to go the whole way—if you dropped it when you thought you were putting it into your coat pocket. I'll wait until morning, secure up another team and come out to join you."

He expressed the belief that it would be next to impossible for her to pick out the white envelope against the snow. She assured him that her eyes were unusually keen. He saw danger in her setting out alone, without even the dogs.

"I could go it blindfold, if I wasn't seeking something," she assured him, not displeased at his show of concern for her. "I will take one of the rifles; the dog boy shuts his eyes when he pulls a trigger, and couldn't hit the side of a house. You'll only need one weapon, and we'll hope not even that."

There followed several brisk orders to Ear-Nuk, half in English and half in patois, at which the Eskimo moved briskly to the reloading of the sled.

"Don't worry over this mishap," she said to Duane. "The envelope probably worked out of your pocket as we hit the trail. It might have happened to anyone."

"Inexcessably careless," muttered Duane unhappily.

She offered him her bravest smile. "Besides, my careful friend, you're gaining your wish. I won't be in danger at the ford." But the words held not the remotest suggestion of suspicion that he might have lost the letter to bring about his purpose. They were chosen entirely to cheer him up.

She started over the back trail. Baron rose up and looked at her. Then he gave vent to the trail bark of the wilderness, a strident protest at being left behind by the one human in the world to whom he gave willing allegiance.

Yukona turned back and petted his broad, gray wolf head. The ruff

which the dog had raised fell back into its normal state. She pointed out the trail he was to take, and gave him the quiet order to "mush." He looked at her with adoring, intelligent eyes, then snarled his teammates into action.

With a parting handshake, Duane sprang after the Eskimo and the advancing team. Yukona took the back trail, the heavy rifle cradled easily in her arms.

At the top of the first swell in the tundra he turned to look back at her. She seemed to be almost skimming

the trail, so light yet so powerful was her stride.

"Pluckiest — unluckiest — lucky girl!" he exclaimed aloud. "Thank Heaven she's at least out of the mess at the ford."

CHAPTER V.

In all his territorial dominions, Uncle Sam had no peace officer more eternally vigilant than Hector Young, deputy United States marshal, with headquarters at Nome. More than (Continued in next issue.)



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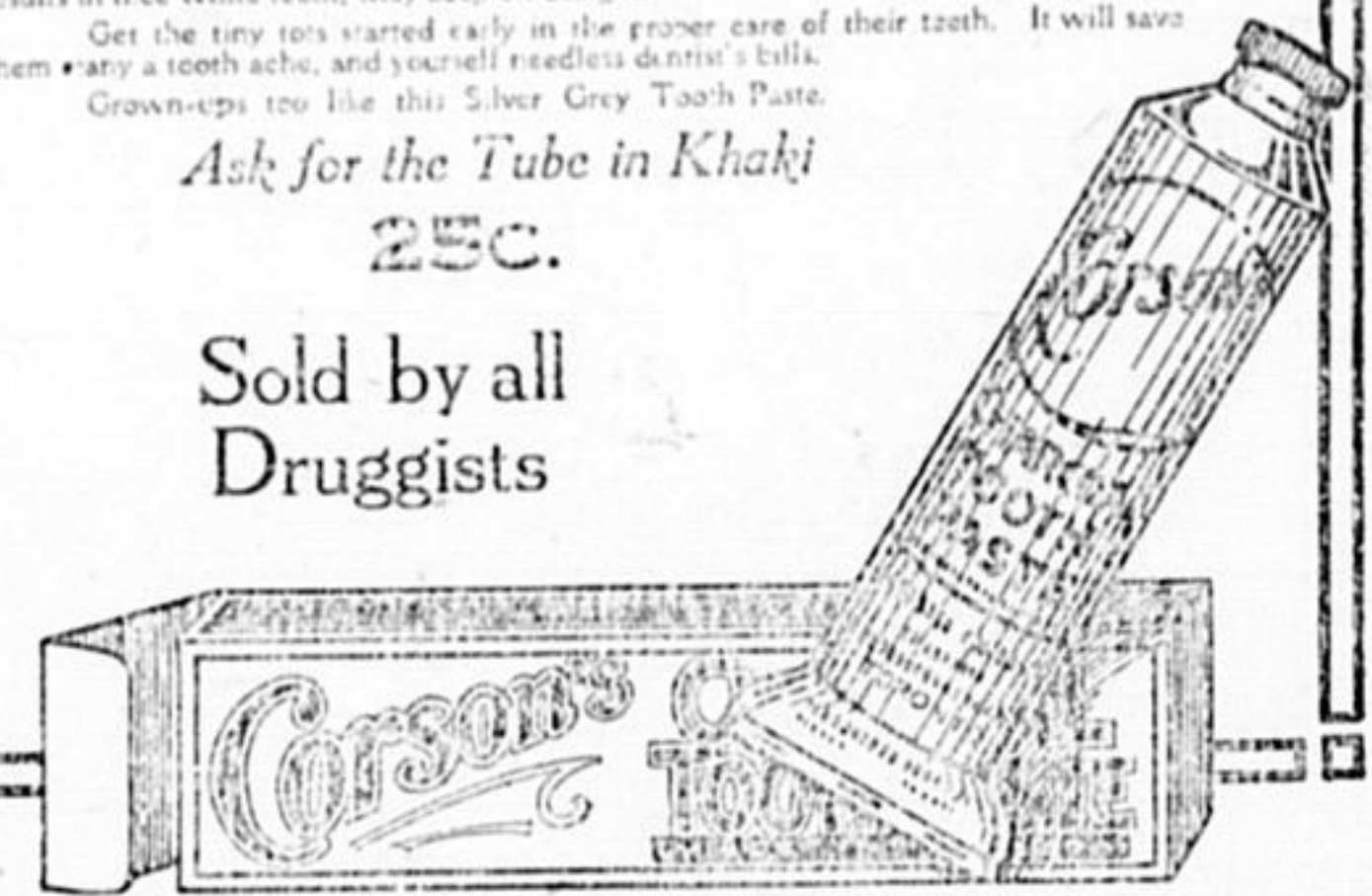
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