

THE MERCURY

A Yukon Tale

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"You go to thunder, Cayley," he bellowed.

EMIL HANSARD halted in the snow on the line of Claim Twenty-two on Gold Run Creek and shook his fist in the face of the fat, well-dressed man whom he had backed up from his dump to that line.

"You go to thunder, Cayley," he bellowed. "Don't talk previous location to me. I staked this. Staked it first. Savvy? And I know you. You're one of them bloody capitalists as is hand in glove with the Yukon Government. You got a stand-in, and you think you'll come it over me and sneak away what I've slaved for all these years. Yes, and suffered for. You know my woman's dead. You know that well enough. She ought to been taken Outside long ago, but I hadn't the stake to do it. Country killed her, like it'll kill them all if they stay. But I ain't going to let it kill the little girl," jerking a thumb backward in the direction of the cabin. "We go Outside in the spring with the clean-up from Twenty-two. Understand, Mr. Cayley? Now turn your back and pike hard for Dominion Creek."

"All right," returned Cayley, stiffly. He waved an otter-gauntleted hand for emphasis. "All right, Hansard. I'll go. But mind I'm coming back again."

"Don't do it," Hansard advised. "I got a Winchester up there on the windlass platform, and I can sure shoot as far as I can see."

Abruptly the two men whirled and parted. The contrast between them was startling. Symbols of two different ages they seemed, the modern and the primitive. For Cayley was trim in black broadcloth, fur-lined greatcoat, felt boots, and overshoes, while Hansard bulked huge in a hooded parka that reached to his knees, German socks, and moccasins.

Cayley went on down Gold Run Creek towards its confluence with Dominion. Hansard trudged back to his work, the three feet of packed snow on the ground crunching crisply under his moccasins. It was a mild day for the Yukon, not more than twelve below, and Hansard threw back the hood of his parka. The exertion of forcibly backing Cayley off the claim had warmed him somewhat. Of course it was Hansard's claim by rights. There was no doubt of that. But there had been trickery, as was common in the land. An official had been passed something, and when, after waiting thirty hours in the line at the Dawson City recording office, and moving up step by step, Hansard had at last reached the wicket and thought to file, he was told Twenty-two was already filed.

For any claim on Gold Run was a claim to covet. The creek was the Eldorado of the Indian River division. Unlike other creeks beyond the Dome, there was no uncertainty anywhere about it. Also, unlike the other creeks, it did not rise in the famous Dome, but along the stretch between Sulphur and Dominion Creeks in a spur of the Dome which projected far to form part of the divide that sloped to Indian River. From there it ran twelve miles through true gold country and entered Dominion at Two Hundred and Twenty-seven below Lower Discovery.

Such a location Hansard swore he would not

lose. Protests at Dawson availed nothing. So Hansard in a mighty wrath took the law in his own hands, ran up a log cabin on the claim, established the little Bernice and himself in it, and commenced to sink a shaft.

THEREUPON Cayley had stepped in—and been backed off. Hansard chuckled at the recollection of that process as he turned the corner of his cabin on the way to the shaft.

"What are you laughing at, pap?"

The door was open, and Bernice was looking out, an elf of a girl, eight or nine years old, straight as a young spruce, and with the black of the spruce in her hair and eyes.

"Pap, what's tickling you?" she demanded.

"That man." Her father grinned and pointed to the black speck on the snow away down Gold Run.

"What'd he want, pap?"

"Our claim, kiddie. But he ain't getting it. Run inside, now. I must work hard all the time, you know. There's a big dump to get out this winter if we're going to clean up and hit the States this spring."

Bernice sprang off the step, seized her father's hands, put a small toe on each of his great shoe-packs, and leaning back, danced thus, up and down, to the spring of his arms.

"Goody," she cried. "Goody-good! I wish it was spring now, pap. Will I have dolls and dresses and go to school every day?"

"Yes, kiddie, yes. You'll have all that and lots more. Everything your mother didn't live to have."

She stopped her dance. Her eyes grew wistful and a little moist.

"I wish—mother—"

"Hush, hush, child," interrupted Hansard, hastily.

"There," petting her head, "run away in and let me go or I won't finish hoisting the ground my fires thawed last night."

He landed her in the middle of the cabin floor with a skilful swing, smiled on her though there was a pang at heart, and closed the door.

The men of the Klondike had discovered the art of burning to bedrock. It was Hansard's custom at nights to build a fire of dry spruce, well banked with green wood, in the bottom of the shaft. This burned slowly all night and thawed the frozen muck to a depth of four feet, which four feet, with the help of a man at the windlass, he hoisted out next day. That afternoon, while the winter sun rose up for a half hour above the southern horizon and dropped again in nearly the same spot, he finished the day's allotment. Then he built another fire for the next day.

Hansard did not think Cayley would return. But right there he made a mistake. Cayley, armed with two documents, an injunction restraining Hansard from working Twenty-two and an order of eviction of Hansard from the same, did return in the small hours of a morning. Cayley took possession. Hansard's Winchester was no good. For Cayley had three Mounted Police of B Division to back him.

Hansard's cabin was pried loose from its frozen site and shifted on the snow off Claim Twenty-two onto the edge of the bench ground. Hansard's primitive windlass plant was packed after him, and in its place Cayley had installed a

huge self-dumping bucket that took the stuff at the shaft bottom and deposited it on the crest of the dump without the touch of human hand. Also Cayley introduced a big boiler and steam points to thaw the bedrock gravels. He did not do these things in person. He never came to Twenty-two on Gold Run. His foreman managed everything. Being a heavy Klondike operator, Cayley explained that he himself had other properties to look after. But the truth of it was that he feared to come. He feared Hansard's Winchester. The cabin on the edge of the bench ground was altogether too close to the workings, and Hansard continually haunted it.

"What are you waiting for?" old-timers asked him.

"The value of my claim," he told them.

"Huh! Damages? Going to law, eh? That's bad business, Emil. They lawed you outen the ground. They'll law you off the earth. Don't touch it. Come away over on Sulphur Creek."

But Hansard stayed, stayed till even the little girl began to wonder.

"Ain't it time to be going to the Outside, pap?" she would ask.

"No, Bernice," he would answer, "not till we get our clean-up."

"Do we take it then? I thought they thieved our claim, pap. Will they give us the gold when they get her gathered?"

"I hope so, kiddie. In fact I'm plumb sure of it. You just wait a little."

So the child waited in the squat cabin below the snow-wrapped bluffs. After, Gold Run Valley stretched like a white blanket marked in strange dark patterns by the undertakings of men. Beyond rose the stark divides of many creeks with ridges jutting up above them, and mountain peaks, clear-cut as cameos, sheering straight to the clouds. The mild spell was past. For days at a stretch the thermometer hovered around sixty below. Hansard and Bernice kept to the cabin. The days grew very short. In January the sun failed to rise at all. The northland's long night came down on Gold Run. Through that period of gloom, broken only by the crimson aurora flaming across the snows, they waited still. Hansard made one midwinter trip to Dawson for supplies. While there he went into a drug shop and bought some pounds of mercury, all they had in stock.

"What's the matter?" the surprised clerk asked. "All the thermometers on Gold Run busted by the cold?"

"Rifle," Hansard enlightened him. "My barrel's leaded bad. Mercury cleans her great."

THE sun came back, and winter wore on to spring. The dump of Twenty-two grew large. A time of thaws set in, the hill-water brimmed the creeks, and the ice-run went out on the Yukon. Cayley's foreman built great sluice-boxes, turned the water through them, and set men to shovel in the dump. The order from Cayley was to make one big clean-up of the dump stuff. Then they could go ahead and with the self-dumping bucket feed the rest of the gravel from the bottom of the shaft right into the sluice-boxes.

For the best part of a week they shoveled in. The water whirled away the light muck, while the heavy gold



Slipped like a shadow down Gold Run and into the waiting canoe.