

Poor Man's Gold

By Courtney Ryley Cooper

ILLUSTRATED BY HARRY MORSE MEYERS

The Story Thus Far:

JACK HAMMOND and his partner, Mackenzie Joe Britten, find gold near Sapphire Lake, in northwestern Canada. Within a few weeks, following a mad rush, a log-cabin camp springs up, and a heterogeneous collection of adventurers sets to work—with Around-the-World Annie and her girl entertainers on hand to sound the gayer note.

Among the new arrivals are two attractive girls: Kay Joyce, Hammond's fiancée, who, accompanied by her mother and Bruce Kenning, an experienced geologist, has flown up in Timmy Moon's airplane; and Jeanne Towers, who, almost penniless and obviously most unhappy, opens a grocery store, after being "staked" by Hammond.

No sooner has Kay arrived than she informs Hammond that, although she and her mother have lost all their money, she does not intend to marry him until a claim

which he has filed for her has made her financially independent. And presently she convinces him that Mackenzie Joe (one of the cleverest of prospectors) is digging for gold at the wrong spot, and that Kenning would be a far more suitable partner.

Whereupon, following a quarrel, in the course of which Mackenzie Joe makes some scathing remarks concerning Kay and Kenning, the Britten-Hammond alliance is terminated, Hammond buying Mackenzie Joe's claims, and Mackenzie Joe going away.

Hammond and Kenning then form a partnership; and Kenning immediately inveigles Hammond into deeding him the "worthless" claim which Mackenzie Joe had been working, with high hopes of making a rich strike.

Meanwhile, Jeanne Towers has been having trouble—due to the arrival of one Lew Snade, a conscienceless wastrel who (as

she confesses to Hammond) had eloped with her, a few years before, robbed her and deserted her.

A few days later, Hammond makes a shocking discovery. Kay Joyce and Kenning are in love with each other. Gold, found by Kenning, has been taken from the claim which Mackenzie Joe had worked—the claim which Kenning now owns—and planted in a distant spot. Convinced that he has been victimized, Hammond confronts Kenning with the evidence. A fight ensues, in Snade's cabin. It ends when Snade knocks Hammond unconscious.

Leaving Hammond in the log cabin, which they set on fire, Snade and Kenning slip away. But Hammond recovers, makes his escape, saves Snade's life in the forest fire which is now raging and makes a full report to Sergeant Terry, of the Mounted Police.

Conclusion

THERE had been something humbly sublime about Jeanne. Jack found himself wondering what Kay would have done under such circumstances, the vilification she would have heaped on Snade, the questions as to what would become of her. All in a night, Jack Hammond had gained perspective. It was as though his subconscious brain had been gathering evidence for months that it might await the proper moment to lay a convincing case before his conscious mentality. Now it had been done, and all that was left was the hurt of it, and his shame for himself. Suddenly, however, he put his thoughts aside.

Lew Snade had been loaded. A canoe awaited the sergeant to ferry him the short distance to the airplane. He was snapping final instructions.

"I'm going to leave you in charge," he said. "Hear that, you men? Hammond here is in command of fighting this fire until I get back. And Jeanne Towers better be responsible for the women."

"Yes, sir."

"And if Bruce Kenning shows up anywhere, take charge of him. That's all—I'll be back as soon as I can make it."

Hammond raised a hand in half salute. Timmy Moon slowly turned his plane, taxied a short distance, headed the ship into the wind and took off, a great, carmine bird in the glow of the flames. For a moment the motor's roar sounded sharply over the valley, only to fade swiftly against the booming of the approaching fire.

Hammond went on, hurrying for Jeanne's store, to find her there, loading what food her shelves possessed into the

arms of waiting miners. He delivered Terry's orders. Then:

"Don't get excited and leave your money to burn up in the store."

She managed to smile.

"Oh, I've got it."

"Good." He sent a miner to start the canoes to Whoopee. Then to Jeanne: "Tell the women they'll probably have to mix with the girls from Around-the-World Annie's when they get on the rafts."

Jeanne handed a sack of dried potatoes to a waiting miner.

"Yes, I'll tell them. They've got enough sense to understand."

"And send someone for Kay Joyce—to be sure she gets out of her cottage."

The girl looked up.

"I've already done it," she answered. Hammond turned away. It was like Jeanne Towers, to think first of the woman who had reviled her. Just as she had been able, with a pat of her hand, to forgive every blow which Lew Snade had dealt her.

A score of miners awaited him as he came down the narrow street.

"Ready for orders," said one of them. Hammond replied quickly: "We've got to hit for Loon Creek. And start back-firing."

He led the way out of town and up the stream, dropping a man at each interval of three or four hundred feet, at last to present a line nearly a mile long, waiting for the signal. Hammond gave it, with a shout that was picked up by the nearest man, sent onward, to be echoed and re-echoed. Makeshift torches blazed, faintly yellow in the brighter glare. Flames leaped to life. Then, with a steadily strengthening crackle, the marsh grass began to burn,



"I'm going to leave you in charge," he said. "Hear that, you men? Hammond here is in command until I get back"



ALAMY
MORSE
MEYERS

while the workers under Hammond followed it slowly, to reignite it at spots, and to be ready, once they reached the forest, to apply even more fire if, for any reason, the sweep of this onslaught did not take root there. It was the only chance the town had for salvation—to send a fire against the wind and into the forest, that flame might meet flame and thus constrict its area of destruction.

It was slow, choking work. The wind from the main fire was desert hot now. Hammond and his men breathed with difficulty. They worked with wet bandannas wrapped around their faces to shield their nostrils; the bite of smoke and burning pitch cut through nevertheless. Coughing, gasping for clean air, they went on. Then, as they slowly made their desperate way along the hot, blackened marsh wastes toward the forest proper, a worker straightened suddenly, shouting:

"Somebody's out there in the grass!"

Hammond followed the direction in which the miner had pointed. Deep in the marsh weeds a man had risen, and was looking about him in bewildered terror. The light of the forest fire blazed higher, flashing against the heavy layers of smoke and glancing downward through the haze. Hammond's eyes centered. Smoked out from his hiding place, even as a dozen forms of animal life were being smoked out, Bruce Kenning stood out there in a yellow, inflammable sea, a transfixion of fear.

"Come this way!" Hammond shouted. "You've got a bare chance! Put your coat over your head and make a run for it!"

For a moment, the man seemed about to obey. He even moved a few feet toward the advancing line of marsh fire, now throwing a ten-foot wall of flame upward as it crackled along its line of defense toward the forest. Then suddenly he changed his mind; he whirled, and made for the smoky outlines of the deeper timber.

"H'E'LL never get through there!" a workman called. "Afraid not," the prospector answered. "Unless he knows a way to circle the main fire. There's still a half mile or so of bush that isn't burning—he might make the lake."

"Not if it's any hotter in there than it is here." The workman rubbed at smarting eyes.

They were beginning to approach the end of endurance; at last they were forced to turn back. The heat had become that of a superheated oven. Men were staggering, clawing at their throats. Nevertheless, they retreated with hope; the grass fire had reached the forest; a tree had blazed up with a booming explosion, the fire spreading to other trees about it.

But the hope faded. Even before they had reached the town again, embers were falling. The wind had height-

ened, blowing the smoke clouds over the huddled little settlement, like great billows of black-red fog. The forms of men now were only faintly visible as they worked at the burying of stores, or strove to lug down to the lake the possessions they deemed most valuable, their dogs snarling and fighting about them. Then a cry came, high-pitched, frantic.

"Help me, somebody! Help me with my cabin. It's caught fire!"

The effort was useless. In another ten minutes a dozen structures were blazing.

"Get to the lake!" shouted Hammond. "The town's done for!"

He was among the last to go. Up on the hill, the cottage which he had built for Kay was a mass of crawling flame. Farther on, Bruce Kenning's cabin stood outlined, its roof already caving. His own cabin was red with destruction.

Thus he watched his past, its hopes, its dreams, its agonizing disappointments, die the touch of an all-consuming torch. At last, he turned away, and joined the rush of refugees down to the lake.

ALL that night the airplanes roared above Sapphire Lake—the ships which had left with the beginning of the fire, to seek pumps and tanks and dynamite, the ships summoned by Sergeant Terry, the ships of the Forestry Division. They drummed and zoomed and snarled like the air force of some hidden army, working high in the clouds, where no one might see. They came closer, they faded away, circling, shooting off at tangents, then returning, to fade far down the lake and drop to the surface as, their surveys made, they returned to a safe region to formulate plans of attack. But to those who once had called Sapphire their home, they were invisible.

Smoke had cut off all vision, save that of near-by objects. The wind had lessened its intensity somewhat, and brought with its abatement only greater suffering to these refugees, dependent upon the lake for their lives.

Deep in the broad waters, the life rafts, huge affairs, each capable of bearing a hundred persons, floated with their clusters of human freight, flat on the soggy logs and covered by equally soggy blankets. There was no air as such, save the thin layer which lay close to the water. Otherwise, all was fetid death; oxygen had been almost eliminated. Resin and wood fumes cut the nostrils, heat and smoke poison loaded the atmosphere to a point of suffocation. The person who would escape death or smoke sickness must lie with nostrils only inches from the lake; a long attempt to breathe the toxic air above meant fatality.

Jack Hammond was not on a raft. He lay on a shallow bar, his eyes closed, his head barely above water. All about

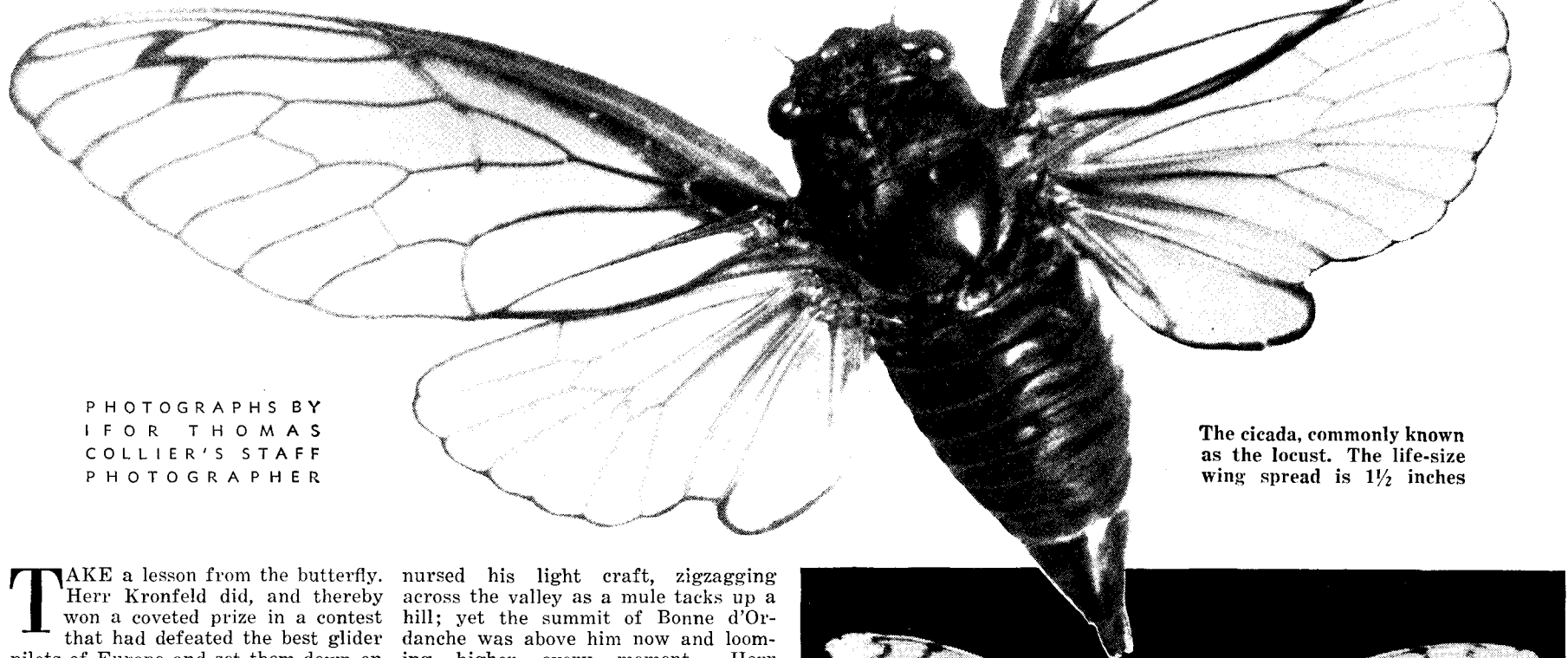
(Continued on page 50)

The Zephyr Murder Case

We shudder occasionally at the remote chance of enemy air raids without paying much attention to a more sinister threat from the skies, the constant and remorseless attack upon us by the world's greatest aviators, the insects. A shift in the prevailing winds might be enough to give them final and complete victory over the human race. Until recently we've been defenseless against this wind-blown death. Now we're mobilizing our troops and appraising the enemy

By W. B. Courtney

PHOTOGRAPHS BY
I FOR THOMAS
COLLIER'S STAFF
PHOTOGRAPHER



The cicada, commonly known as the locust. The life-size wing spread is 1½ inches

TAKE a lesson from the butterfly. Herr Kronfeld did, and thereby won a coveted prize in a contest that had defeated the best glider pilots of Europe and set them down on their belly-skids throughout the lovely Auvergne countryside in France. The match idea was to slide from the mile-high top of the Puy-de-Dôme and coast across the wide valley and hurdle the summit of the Bonne d'Ordanche on t'other side. Not a simple feat, you will agree, when you remember that gliders are the sailboats of aeronautics, with nothing but the pilots' instinct for the wind's will to have and to hold them aloft; and when, further, you recall that the air currents among the basaltic peaks of the great Monts Dore, and over the lush valleys roundabout, are infamous among airmen for their waywardness and cunning.

For the start of such a trial, the choice of Puy-de-Dôme was twice apt; its top is a smooth and treeless field, and thereon, nearly three hundred years ago, Pascal made his first observations of the weight of the atmosphere. Herr Kronfeld, awaiting his turn, saw one after the other of his rivals float off into the sun-laved bowl of Auvergne; only to fail in their high quests for up-currents and scud ignominiously to the bottomlands. Then Herr Kronfeld got his word and sat in the cockpit of his little sailplane and was catapulted, by the elastic rope of the ground crew, from the top of Puy-de-Dôme.

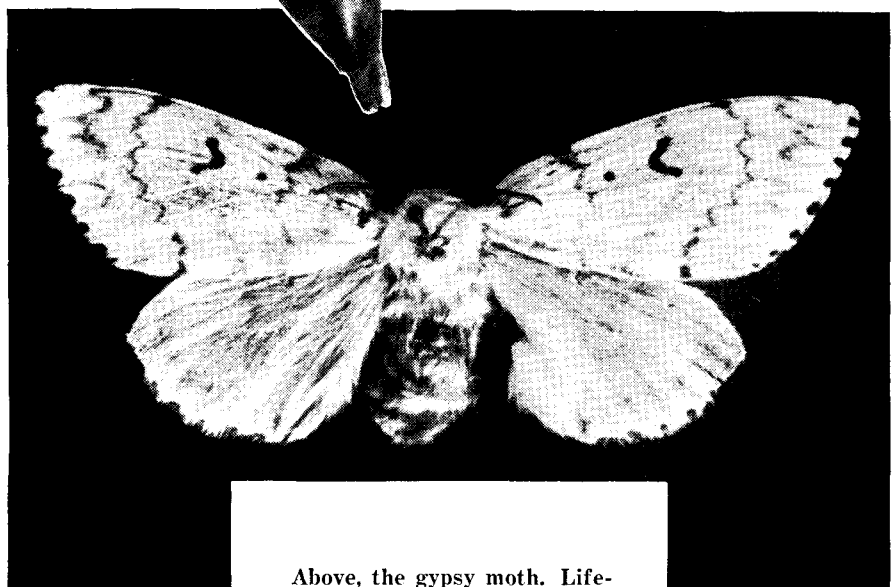
He could see the gliders scattered and pressed to earth far and wide below him, like giant, vari-colored moths abandoned by the wind. The "feel" of the air offered him scant hope that his fate would be more triumphant. He banked and he planed and he spiraled; now hovering in the sparkling air like a dragonfly; now darting ahead like a yellowhammer that has sighted a fly. With consummate patience and skill he

nursed his light craft, zigzagging across the valley as a mule tacks up a hill; yet the summit of Bonne d'Ordanche was above him now and looming higher every moment. Herr Kronfeld resigned himself to defeat and began to look for a bit of clear valley floor upon which to land.

All at once he saw a cloud, a host of golden butterflies, dancing against the dark and shaggy pine forests of the mountainside; fluttering toward the heights. Herr Kronfeld nosed gently among the frail telltales and was, in company with them, wafted up and over the Bonne d'Ordanche. Once on the other side the canny Herr landed and was acclaimed and honored; while his friends of the updraft quivered on their aimless way and passed out of sight—but not out of mind.

Danger in the Skies

For those butterflies, through Herr Kronfeld's profitable and expert observation of their wind riding and his subsequent report of the adventure, furnished important weight to the evidence, lately accumulating in the field books of entomologists, of dangers in the air. It was not so much that the incident emphasized the potentialities for mischief inherent in butterflies—although when in their larval, or caterpillar, stage these sometimes exquisite, always lovely, vagrants of the summer countryside are often responsible for serious crop and garden depredations. The great value of the episode to science was, rather, the proof it added of the alliance between wind and air currents and insects; and its demonstration of the possibilities of raids from the heavens upon us in the ageless war between men and insects to determine which shall inherit the earth—raids, by the way, against which we are virtually defenseless at present.



Above, the gypsy moth. Life-size wing spread, 2 inches. Below, the destructive termite

