

The Silver Horde

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CHAPTER III.

THE girl darted a swift look at Boyd, but he fell to brooding again, evidently insensible to her presence. At length he stirred himself to ask:

"Can I hire a guide hereabout? We'll have to be going on in a day or so."

"Constantine will get you one. I suppose, of course, you will avoid the Katmai pass?"

"Avoid it? Why?"

"It's dangerous, and nobody travels it except in the direst emergency. It's much the shortest route to the coast, but it has a record of some thirty deaths. I should advise you to cross the range farther east, where the divide is lower. The mail boat touches at both places."

On the following morning Cherry told Constantine to hitch up her team and have it waiting when breakfast was finished. Then she turned to Emerson, who came into the room and said quietly:

"I have something to show you if you will take a short ride with me."

The young man, impressed by the gravity of her manner, readily consented. Constantine freed the leader, and they went off at a mad run. They skinned over the snow with the flight of a bird.

The young man gave himself up to the unique and rather delightful experience of being transported through an unknown country to an unknown destination by a charming girl of whom he also knew nothing.

"Yesterday you seemed to be taken by the fishing business," she finally said.

"I certainly was until you told me there were no cannery sites left."

"There is one. When I came here a year ago the whole river was open, so on an outside chance I located a site, the best one available. When Willis Marsh learned of it he took up all of the remaining places, and, although at the time I had no idea what I was going to do with my property, I hung on to it."

"I can't buy your site."

"Nobody asked you to," she smiled.

"I wouldn't sell it to you if you had

earned this summer why don't you let me stick around until spring and look-out your game? I'll drop a monkey wrench in his gear case or put a spider in his dumping, and it's more than an even shot that if him and I got to know each other right well I'd own his cannery before fall."

"Thank you; I can take care of myself," said the girl.

Late one stormy night—Constantine had been gone a week—the two men whom they were expecting blew in through the blinding smother. Bait, refused rest or nourishment until he had learned why Cherry had sent for him. As briefly as possible she outlined the situation. Boyd Emerson saw a huge, barrel chested creature whose tremendous muscles bulged beneath his nondescript garments, whose red, upstanding bristles of hair topped a leather countenance from which gleamed a pair of the most violent eyes Emerson had ever beheld, the dominant expression of which was rage. His voice was hoarse with the echo of drumming rattles. He might have lived forty, sixty years, but every year had been given to the sea; its foaming violence was in his blood.

As the significance of Cherry's words sank into his mind the signs of an un-



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"I'll give my life to it."

holy joy overspread the fishermen's visage, and his hairy paws continued to open and close hungrily.

"Do you mean business?" he bellowed at Emerson. "Can you fight?"

"Yes."

"This gang won't stop at anything," warned Bait.

"Neither will I," affirmed the other, with a scowl and a dangerous down drawing of his lip corners. "I've got to win, so don't waste any time wondering how far I'll go. What I want to know is if you will join my enterprise."

"I'll give my life to it."

"I know you would," flashed Cherry.

"And if we don't beat Willis Marsh, by glory, I'll kill him!" Bait shouted, fully capable of carrying out his threat, for his bloodshot eyes were lit with bitter hatred. Turning to the girl, he said:

"Now give me something to eat. I've been living on dogfish till my belly is full of bones."

Long after Cherry had gone to bed she heard the murmur of their voices.

"It's all arranged," they advised her at the breakfast table. "We leave tomorrow."

"Tomorrow?" she echoed blankly.

"We start in the morning. We have no time to waste."

She felt a sudden dread at her heart. What if they failed and did not return? What if some untoward peril should overtake them on the outward trip? It was a hazardous journey, and George Bait was the most reckless man on the Bering coast. Emerson's next words added to her alarm:

"We'll catch the mail boat at Katmai."

"Katmai!" she broke in sharply.

"You said you were going by the Katmai route." She turned on Bait angrily. "You know better than to suggest such a thing."

"I didn't suggest it," said Bait. "It's Mr. Emerson's own idea, he insists."

"I shall be dreadfully worried until I know you are safely over," said the girl, a new note of wistful tenderness in her voice.

"Nonsense! We've all taken bigger risks before."

"Do you know," she began hesitatingly. "I've been thinking that perhaps you'd better not take up this enterprise after all."

"Why not?" he asked, with an incredulous stare. "I thought you were enthusiastic on the subject."

"I am, I believe in the proposition thoroughly," Cherry limped on, "but—well, I was entirely selfish in getting you started, for it possibly means my own salvation, but—"

"It's my last chance also," Boyd broke in.

"A few days ago you were a stranger; now you are a friend," she said steadily. "One's likes and dislikes grow rapidly when they are not choked by convention. I like you too well to see you do this. You are too good a man, to become the prey of those people. Remember George Bait."

"Bait hasn't started yet. For the first time he is a real menace to Willis Marsh."

"Won't you take my advice and reconsider?" urged the girl.

"Listen," said the young man. "I came to this country with a definite purpose in mind, and I had three years in which to work it out. I needed money—God, how I needed money! They may talk about the emptiness of riches and tell you that men labor not for the 'kill,' but for the pursuit; not for the score, but for the contest. Maybe some of them do, but with me it was gold I needed, gold I had to have, and I didn't care much how I got it so long as I got it honestly. I focused every power upon my desire, but a curse was on me—a curse,

nothing less. At first I took misfortune philosophically, but when it came and slept with me I began to rage at it. It was terrifying because my time was shortening, and the last day of grace was rushing toward me.

"Just to show you what luck I played in, at Dawson I found a prospect that would have made most men rich, and, although such a thing had never happened in that locality before, I pinched out. I tried again and again, and finally found another mine, only to be robbed of it by the Canadian laws in such a manner that there was not the faintest hope of my ever recovering the property. I finally shifted from mining to other ventures, and the town burned. I awoke in a midnight blizzard to see my chance for a fortune licked up by flames, while the hiss of the water from the firemen's hose seemed directed at me, and the voice of the crowd sounded like jeers.

"I was among the first at Nome and staked alongside the discoverers who undertook to put me in right for once; but, although the fellows around me made fortunes in a day, my ground was barren and my bedrock swept clean by that unseen hand which I always felt, but could never avoid. Once a broken snowshoe in a race to the recorder's office lost me a fortune; at another time a corrupt judge plunged me from certainty to despair, and all the while my time was growing shorter and I was growing poorer.

"Two hours after the Topkuk strike was made I drove past the shaft, but the one partner known to me had gone to the cabin to build a fire and the other one lied to me, thinking I was a stranger. I heard afterward that just as I drove away my friend came to the door and called after me, but the day was bitter, and my ears were muffled with fur, while the dry snow beneath the runners shrieked so that it drowned his cries. He chased me for half a mile to make me rich, but the hand of fate lashed my dogs faster and faster, while that hellish screeching outlived his voice. Six hours later Topkuk was history. You've seen stampedes—you understand.

"My name became a byword and caused people to laugh, though they drank from me, for miners and sailors are equally superstitious. No man ever had more opportunities than I, and no man was ever so miserably unfortunate in missing them. In time I became whipped, utterly without hope. Yet almost from habit I fought on and on with my ears deaf to the voices that mocked me.

"And something tells me that I have left that ill omened thing behind at last, and I am going to win!"

"But you're too late," suggested Cherry. "You say your time was up some time ago."

"Perhaps," he returned, staring into the distances. "That's what I was going out to ascertain. I thought I might have a few days of grace allowed me. That's why I can't quit, now that you've set me in motion again, now that you've given me another chance. That's why we leave tomorrow and go by way of the Katmai pass."

CHAPTER IV.

DURING the evening Emerson left the two other men in the store, and, seeking Cherry out in the little parlor, asked her to play for him. Again the blending of their voices brought them closer, his aloofness wore off, and he became an agreeable, accomplished companion whose merry wit and boyish sympathy stirred emotions in the girl that threatened her peace of mind. It was their last hour together before embarking on his perilous journey in search of the golden fleece, and his starved affections clamored for sympathy, while the iron in his blood felt the magnetic proximity of sex. For her part, she lay awake far into the morning hours, now blissfully floating on the current of half formed desires, now vaguely fearing some dread that clutched her.

The goodbyes were brief and commonplace. There was time for nothing more, for the dogs were straining to be off and the December air bit fiercely. But Cherry called Emerson aside and in a rather tremulous voice begged him again to consider well this enterprise before finally committing himself to it. "If this were any other country, if there were any law up here or any certainty of getting a square deal I'd never say a word; I'd urge you to go the limit. But—"

He was about to laugh off her fears, as he had done before, when the plaintive wrinkle between her brows and



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"GOODBYE! THAT'S MY ANSWER!" the forlorn droop of her lips stayed him. Without thought of consequences and prompted largely by his leaping spirits, he stooped and, kissed her could divine his purpose, kissed her

"Goodbye," he laughed, with dancing eyes. "That's my answer!" And the next second he was at the sled. The dogs leaped at his shout, and the cavalcade was in motion.

But the girl stood without sound or gesture, bareheaded under the wintry sky, a startled, wondering light in her eyes which did not fade until the men were lost to view far up the river trail. Then she breathed deeply and turned into the house, oblivious to Constantine and the young squaw, who held the sled baby up for her inspection.

The hazards of winter travel in the north are manifold at best, but the country which Emerson and his companions had to traverse was particularly perilous owing to the fact that their course led them over the backbone of the great Alaskan range, that desolate, skyscraping rampart which interposes itself between the hate of the arctic seas and the tossing wilderness of the north Pacific.

A week of hard travel found the party camped in the last fringe of cottonwood that fronted the glacial slopes, their number augmented now by a native from a Russian village with an unpronounceable name, who, at the price of an extortionate bribe, had agreed to pilot them through. For three days they lay idle, the taut walls of their tent thrumming to an incessant fusillade of ice particles that whirled down ahead of the blast, while Emerson fumed to be gone.

The fourth morning broke still and quiet, but after a careful scrutiny of the peaks the Indian shook his head and spoke to Bait, who nodded in agreement.

"What's the matter?" growled Emerson. "Why don't we get under way?" But the other replied:

"Not today. Them tips are smoking, see!" He indicated certain gully streamers that floated like rapids from the highest pinnacles. "That's snow, dry snow, and it shows that the wind is blowing up there. We darsent tackle it."

"Do you mean we must lie here waiting for an absolutely calm day?"

"Exactly."

"What, it may be a week!"

"It may be two of them; then, again, it may be all right tomorrow."

"Nonsense! That breeze won't hurt anybody."

"Breeze!" Bait laughed. "It's more like a tornado up yonder. No, we've just got to take it easy till the right moment comes and then make a dash. It's thirty miles to the nearest stick of timber, and once you get into the pass you can't stop till you're through."

The next dawn showed the mountain peaks limned like clean cut ivory against the steel blue sky, and as they crept up through the defiles the air was so motionless that the smoke of their pipes hung about their heads, while the creak of their soles upon the dry surface of the snow roused echoes from the walls on either side. At first their progress was rapid, but in time the drifts grew deeper and they came to bluffs where they were forced to notch footholds, unspack their load and relay it to the top, then free the dogs and haul the sled up with a rope hand over hand.

It was early in the afternoon when the Indian stopped and began testing the air.

"Feels like wind," said Bait, with a shake of his head. The native began to chatter excitedly, and as they stood there a chill draft fanned their cheeks. Little wisps of snow vapor began to dance upon the ridges, whisking out of sight as suddenly as they appeared. They became conscious of a sudden fall in the temperature and they knew that the cold of interstellar space dwelt in that ghostly breath which snote them. Before they were well aware of the ominous significance of these signs the storm was upon them, sweeping through the chine wherein they stood with rapidly increasing violence. The terrible unseen hand of the frozen north had unleashed its brood of furies, and the air rang with their hideous cries.

There was no question of facing the wind, for it was more cruel than the fierce breath of an open furnace searing the flesh like a flame.

All the morning the air had hung in perfect poise, but some change of temperature away out over one of the rival oceans had upset the aerostatic balance, and the wind tore through this gap like the torrent below a broken reservoir.

Bait came close to Emerson and bellowed into his ear:

"What shall we do? Roll up in the bedding or run for it?"

"How far is it to timber?"

"Twelve or fifteen miles."

"Let's run for it! We're out of grub, anyhow, and this may last for days."

There was no use of trying to secure additional clothing from the supply in the sled, so they abandoned their outfit and allowed themselves to be driven ahead of the storm, trusting to the native's sense of direction and keeping close together. The dogs were already well drifted over and refused to stir.

Once they had gone a stone's throw from the sled there was no turning back, and although the wind was behind them, progress was difficult, for they came upon chasms which they had to avoid; they crossed slippery slopes where the storm had hared the hard crust and which their feet refused to grip. In such places they had to creep on hands and knees, calling to one another for guidance. They were numbed, blinded, choked by the rage of the blizzard; their faces grew stiff and their lungs froze. At times they fell and were skidded along ahead of the blasts. This forced them to crawl back again, for they dared not lose their course.

Much has been written concerning the red man's physical powers of endurance, but as a rule no Indian is the equal of his white brother, due as

much perhaps to lack of mental force as to generations of insufficient clothing and nutrition, so it was not surprising that as the long afternoon dragged to a close the Aleut guide began to weaken.

Darkness found them staggering on, supporting him wherever possible. At length he became unable to guide them farther, and Bait, who had once made the trip, took his place, while the others dragged the poor creature along at the cost of their precious strength.

They had long since lost all track of time and place, trusting blindly to a downward course. The hurricane still harried them with unabated fury, when all at once they came to another bluff where the ground fell away abruptly. Without waiting to investigate whether the slope terminated in a drift or a precipice, they flung themselves over. Down they floundered, the two half sensible men tangled together as if in a race for total oblivion, only to plunge through a thicket of willow tops that whipped and stung them. On they went, now vastly heartened, over another ridge, down another declivity, and then into a grove of spruce timber, where the air suddenly stilled, and only the treetops told of the rushing wind above.

It was well nigh an hour before Bait and Emerson succeeded in starting a fire, for it was desperate work groping for dry branches, and they themselves were on the verge of collapse before the timid blaze finally showed the two more unfortunate ones huddled together.

Cherry had given Emerson a flask of liquor before starting, and this he now divided between Fraser and the guide, having wisely refused it to them until shelter was secured. Then he melted snow in Bait's tin cup and poured pints of hot water into the pair until the adventurer began to rally, but the Aleut was too far gone, and an hour before the laggard dawn came he died.

The day was well spent when they struggled into Katmai and plodded up to a half rotted log store. A globular quarter breed Russian trader took them in and administered to their most crying needs.

As soon as Emerson was able to talk he inquired concerning the mail boat.

"She called here three days ago, bound west," said the trader.

"That's all right. She'll be back in about a week, eh?"

"She won't stop coming back."

"What?" Emerson felt himself sickening.

"No; she won't call here till next month, and then if it's storming she'll go on to the westward and land on her way back."

"How long will that be?"

"Maybe seven or eight weeks."

In his weakened condition the young man groped for the counter to support himself. So the storm's delay at the foot of the pass had undone him! Fate, in the guise of winter, had unfurled those floating snow banners from the mountain peaks to thwart him once more!

Out of consideration for his companions Emerson did not acquaint them with the evil tidings until the next morning; moreover, he was swallowed up in black despair and had no heart left in him for any further exertion. He had allowed the Russian to show him to a bed, upon which he flung himself, half dressed, while the others followed suit.

Emerson fell into a deep sleep, and it was late in the day when he awoke, every muscle aching, every joint stiff, every step attended with pain. He found his companions up and already breakfasted, Big George none the worse for his ordeal, while Fraser, bandaged and smarting, was his old shrewd self.

"Have you heard about the mail boat?" asked Emerson.

"No."

"We've missed her."

"What do you mean?" demanded Big George blankly.

"I mean that that storm delayed us just long enough to ruin us."

"Why—let's wait till the next trip," offered the fisherman.

Emerson shook his head. "She may not be back here for eight weeks. Not 'We're done for.'"

Bait was like a big boy in distress. His face wrinkled as if he were about to burst into loud lamentations. Then a thought seized him.

"Where in blazes is this steamer?" he cried.

"Out to the westward somewhere."

"Well, she's a mail boat, ain't she? Then why don't she stop here coming back? Answer me."

The round man shrugged his fat shoulders. "She's got to call at Uyak bay going east."

Emerson looked up quickly. "Where is Uyak bay?"

"Over on Kodiak Island."

"When is the boat due at Uyak?" Emerson asked.

"Most any time inside of a week."

"How far is that from here?"

"It ain't so far—only about fifty miles." Then, catching the light that flamed into the miner's eyes, Petellin hastened to observe: "But you can't get there. It's across the straits—Sheikof straits."

"What of that! We can hire a sailboat and—"

"I ain't got any sailboat. I lost my sloop last year hunting sea otter."

"We can hire a small boat of some sort, can't we, and get the natives to put us across? There must be plenty of boats here."

"Nothing but skin boats, kyaks and bidarkas, you know. Anyhow, you couldn't cross at this time of year—It's too stormy. These straits is the worst piece of water on the coast. No; you'll have to wait."

(To be continued.)



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TOGETHER THEY ASCENDED THE BANK AND SURVEYED THE SURROUNDINGS.

the money, but if you will build a cannery on it I'll turn in the ground for an interest."

Emerson meditated a moment then replied, "I can't say yes or no. It's a pretty big proposition—\$200,000, you said?"

"Yes. It's a big opportunity. You can clean up 100 per cent in a year. Do you think you could raise the money to build a plant?"

"I might," he said cautiously.

"At least you can try?"

"But I don't know anything about the business."

"I've thought of all that, and there's a way to make success certain. I believe you have executive ability and can handle these men."

"Oh, yes, I've done that sort of thing." His broad shoulders went up as he drew a long breath. "What's your plan?"

"There's a man down the coast, George Bait, who knows more about the business than any four people in Katmai. He discovered the Katvik site, built the first cannery here and was its fortune until he quarreled with Marsh. Bait isn't the kind of man to be disciplined, so, not having enough money to build a cannery, he took his scanty capital and started a saltery on his own account. Marsh broke George in a year, ruined him, utterly wiped him out, just as he intends to wipe out insignificant me. Thinking to recoup his fortunes, George came back into camp, but he owns a valuable trap site which Marsh and his colleagues want, and before they would give him work they tried to make him assign it to them and contract never to go in business on his own account. Naturally George refused. He's been starving now for two years.

"No man dares to furnish food to