

The Silver Horde

By REX BEACH

Author of "The Spoilers" and "The Farmer"

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SYNOPSIS OF PRECEDING CHAPTERS.

Boyd Emerson and "Fingerless" Fraser enter Kalvik, Alaska, and meet a young white woman, Cherry Malotte, who shelters them. Cherry describes the salmon fisheries and Marsh, the unscrupulous head of the Kalvik canneries. Cherry owns a cannery site. Emerson, George Balt and she go into partnership. Emerson describes his failure to "make good" in Alaska. Emerson kisses Cherry goodbye. Balt, Fraser and Emerson nearly lose their lives in Katmai pass and miss the steamer at Katmai on their way out to get supplies. After dreadful privations they catch the boat at Kadiak and are soon en route for Chicago. Emerson seeks Miss Mildred Wayland. She and Emerson are engaged. Her father, Wayne Wayland, is a millionaire. Alton Clyde offers \$10,000 toward the cannery. Balt and Emerson meet Marsh in Chicago. Marsh is a suitor for Mildred's hand. Marsh tells Mildred about Cherry Malotte. He and Wayne Wayland plan a cannery trust. Mildred learns that Emerson and Cherry are partners. Banker Hilliard, Seattle, refuses to lend Emerson \$100,000. Cherry, who has arrived in Seattle, accepts a dinner invitation from Hilliard. Cherry discovers that Emerson is to marry Mildred. Marsh causes annoying delays for Emerson's party. Tacoma refuses Emerson a loan. Clyde suggests that Cherry can get the loan from Hilliard. Emerson estranges Cherry by criticizing her friendly relations with Hilliard. Cherry sees Hilliard, who unexpectedly furnishes the money. Marsh causes a strike, delaying the loading of Emerson's machinery. Balt's fishermen fight the strikers. Fraser shoots a striker and impersonates Emerson, for whom a warrant is issued. Emerson escapes to Talvik. Talvik fishermen, Fraser is released and rejoins Emerson. Emerson's machinery is tampered with. Marsh builds a trap to prevent salmon from reaching Emerson's cannery site. He is mysteriously stabbed. Emerson is accused. Baldwin begins their run, but Marsh hires Emerson's fishermen. Clyde threatens to sell his stock. Fraser is noncommittal to Emerson concerning Cherry's early life. Balt threatens to kill Marsh. Cherry gets a crew of Indians to help Emerson pack his salmon catch. Emerson suspects Constantine, Cherry's Indian servant, of attempting to kill Marsh. Cherry tells Emerson Mildred doesn't love him if she will not help him.

"It seems that you wanted to pose as a hero before her and employed us to build up your triumph. Well, I am glad you failed; I'm glad Willis Marsh showed you how very helpless you are. Let her come to your rescue now. I'm through. Do you understand? I'm through!"

Emerson gazed at her in astonishment, the outburst had been so unexpected, but he realized that he owed her too much to take offense.

"Miss Wayland will take no hand in my affairs. I doubt if she will even realize what this trouble is all about," he said, a trifle stiffly. "I suppose I did want to play the hero, and I dare say I did use you and the others, but you know that all the time."

"Why won't she help you?" queried Cherry. "Doesn't she care enough about you? Doesn't she know enough to understand your plight?"

"Yes, but this is my fight, and I've got to make good without her assistance. She isn't the sort to marry a failure, and she has left me to make my own way. Besides, she would not dare go contrary to her father's wishes even if she desired. That is part of her education. Oh, Wayne Wayland's opposition isn't all I have had to overcome. I have had to show his daughter that I am one of her own kind, for she hates weakness."

"And you think that woman loves you! Why, she isn't a woman at all. She doesn't know what love means. When a woman loves, do you imagine she cares for money or fame or success? If I cared for a man do you think I'd stop to ask my father if I might marry him or wait for my lover to prove himself worthy of me? do you think I'd send him through the hell you have suffered to try his metal?" She laughed outright. "Why, I'd become what he was, and I'd fight with him. I'd give him all I had—money, position, friends, influence. If my people objected I'd tell them to go hang. I'd give them up and join him. I'd use every dollar, every wife and feminine device that I possessed, in his service. When a woman loves she doesn't care what the world says. The man may be a weakling or worse, but he is still her lover, and she will go to him."

The words had come tumbling forth until Cherry was forced to pause for breath.

"You don't understand," said Boyd. "You are primitive; you have lived in the open. She is exactly your opposite. Conservatism is bred in her, and she can't help her nature. It was hard even for me to understand at first, but when I saw her life, when I saw how she had been reared from childhood, I understood perfectly. I would not have her other than she is. It is enough for me to know that in her own way she cares for me."

Cherry tossed her head in derision. "For my part I prefer red blood to sap, and when I love I want to know it. I don't want to have it proved to me like a problem in geometry. I want to love and hate and do wild, impulsive things against my own judgment."

"Have you ever loved in that way?" he inquired abruptly.

"Yes," she answered without hesitation, looking him squarely in the eye with an expression he could not fathom. "Thank heaven, I'm not the artificial kind! As you say, I'm primitive. I have lived!" Her crimson lips curled scornfully.

"I didn't expect you to understand her," he said. "But she loves me. And I—well, she is my religion. A man must have some God. He can't worship his own image."

Cherry Malotte turned slowly to the landing place and made her way into the launch. All the way back she kept silence, and Boyd, confused by her attack upon the citadel of his faith and strangely sore at heart, made no effort at speech.

"Fingerless" Fraser met him at the water's edge.

"Where in the devil have you been?" he cried breathlessly.

"At the Indian village after help. Why?"

"Big George is in more trouble. He sent for help two hours ago. I was just going to 'beat it' down there."

"What's up?"

"There's six of your men in the bunk house all beat up. They don't look like they'd fish any more for awhile. Marsh's men threw their salmon overboard, and they had another fight. Things are getting warm."

"We can't allow ourselves to be driven from the banks," said Boyd quickly. "I'll get the shoremen together right away. Find Alton and bring him along. We'll need every man we can get."

"Nothing doing with that party. He's quit like a house cat and gone to bed."

"Very well; he's no good anyhow. He's better out of the way."

He hurried through the building, now silent and half deserted, gathering a crew; then, leaving only the orientals and the watchman to guard the plant, he loaded his men into the boats and set out.

All that afternoon and on through the long, murky hours of the night the battle raged on the lower reaches of the Kalvik. Boat crews clashed; half clad men cursed each other and fought with naked fists, with oars and clubs, and when these failed they drove at one another with wicked one tined fish "pues." All night the hordes of salmon swarmed upward toward the fatal waters of their birth, through sagging nets that were torn and slit, beneath keels that rocked to the impact of struggling, heedless bodies.

CHAPTER XVII.

As the sun slanted up between the southward hills out from the gossamer haze that lay like filmy forest smoke above the ocean came a snow white yacht.

To Boyd Emerson she seemed like an angel of mercy, and he stood forth upon the deck of his launch searching her hungrily for the sight of a woman's figure. When he had first seen the ship rounding the point he had uttered a cry, then fallen silent watching her as she drew near, heedless of his surroundings. His heart was leaping; his breath was choking him. It seemed as if he must shout Mildred's name aloud and stretch his arms out to her. Of course she would see him as the Grande Dame passed. She would be looking for him, he knew. She would be standing there, wet with the dew, searching with all her eyes. Doubtless she had waited patiently at her post from the instant land came into sight. Seized by a sudden panic lest she pass him unnoticed, he ordered his launch near the yacht's course. His eyes roved over the craft, but all he saw were a uniformed officer upon the bridge and the bronzed faces of the watch staring over the rail. He saw close drawn curtains over the cabin windows, indicating that the passengers were still asleep. Then as he stood there heavy hearted, drooping with fatigue, his wet body chilled by the morning's breath, the Grande Dame glided past, and he found the shell beneath his feet rocking to her wake.

George Balt balled him and brought his own launch alongside.

"What craft is that?" he inquired.

"She is the company's yacht with the N. A. P. A. officers aboard."

"Some of our boys is hurt pretty bad," he observed. "I've told them to take in their nets and go back to the plant."

"We all need breakfast."

"I don't want nothing. I'm going over to the trap."

Emerson shrugged his shoulders listlessly; he was very tired. "What is the use? It won't pay us to lift it."

"I've watched that point of land for five years, and I never seen fish act this way before," Balt growled stubbornly. "If they don't strike in today we better close down. Marsh's men cut half our nets and crippled more than half our crew last night." He began to rumble curses. "Say, we made a mistake the other day, didn't we? We'd ought to have put that fellar away. It ain't too late yet."

"Wait, Wayne Wayland is aboard that yacht. I know him. He's a hard man, and I've heard strange stories about him, but I don't believe he knows all that Marsh has been doing. I'm going to see him and tell him everything."

"'R'pose he turns you down?"

"Then there will be time enough to consider what you suggest. I don't like to think about it."

"You don't have to," said Balt, lowering his voice so that the helmsman could not hear. "I've been thinking it over all night, and I looks like I'd ought to do it myself. Marsh is coming to me anyhow, and I'm older than you be. It ain't right for a young feller like you to take a chance. If they get me you can run the business alone."

Boyd laid his hand on his companion's shoulder.

"No," he said. "Perhaps I wouldn't stick at murder—I don't know. But I won't profit by another man's crime, and if it comes to that I'll take my share of the risk and the guilt. Whatever you do, I stand with you. But we'll hope for better things. It's no easy thing for me to go to Mr. Wayland asking a favor. You see, his daughter is—well, I—I want to see her very badly."

Balt eyed him shrewdly.

"I see! And that makes it dead wrong for you to take a hand. If it's necessary to get Marsh I'll do it alone. With him out of the way I think you can make a go of it. He's like a rat—somebody's got to stomp on him. Now I'm off for the trap. Let me know what the old man says."

Boyd returned to the cannery with the old mood of self disgust and bitterness heavy upon him. He realized that George's offer to commit murder had not shocked him as much as upon his first mention. He knew that he had thought of shedding human blood with as little compunction as if the intended victim had been some noxious animal. He felt, indeed, that if his love for Mildred made him a criminal she, too, would be soiled by his dishonor, and for her sake he shrank from the idea of violence, yet he lacked the energy at that time to put it from him.

Well, he would go to her father, humble himself and beg for protection. If he failed then Marsh must look out for himself. He could not find it in his heart to spare his enemy.

At the plant he found Alton Clyde tremendously excited at the arrival of the yacht and eager to visit his friends. He sent him to the launch and after a hasty breakfast joined him.

On their way out Boyd felt a return of that misgiving which had mastered him on his first meeting with Mildred in Chicago. For the second time he was bringing her failure instead of the promised victory.

Willis Marsh was ahead of him, standing with Mr. Wayland at the rail. Some one else was with them. Boyd's heart leaped wildly as he recognized her. He would have known that slim figure anywhere. And Mildred saw him, too, pointing him out to her companions.

With knees shaking under him he came stumbling up the landing ladder, a tall, gaunt figure of a man in rough clothing and boots stained with the sea salt. He looked older by five years than when the girl had last seen him. His cheeks were hollowed and his lips cracked by the wind, but his eyes were aflame with the old light. His smile was for her alone.

He never remembered the spoken greetings nor the looks the others gave him, for her soft, cool hands lay in his hand, feverish palms, and she was smiling up at him.

Alton Clyde was at his heels, and he felt Mildred disengage her hand. He tore his eyes away from her face long enough to nod at Marsh, who gave him a menacing look, then turned to Wayne Wayland. The old man was saying something, and Boyd answered him unintelligibly, after which he took Mildred's hands once more with such an air of unconscious proprietorship that Willis Marsh grew pale to the lips and turned his back. Other people whom Boyd had not noticed until now came down the deck—men and women with fieldglasses and cameras swung over their shoulders. He found that he was being introduced to them by Mildred, whose voice betrayed no tremor and whose manners were as collected as if this were her own drawing room and the man at her side a casual acquaintance. The strangers mingled with the little group, leveled their glasses and made senseless remarks after the manner of tourists the world over. Boyd gathered somehow that they were officers of the trust or heavy stockholders and their wives. He led Mildred to a deck chair and seated himself beside her.

"At last!" he breathed. "You are here, Mildred. You really came, after all!"

"Yes, Boyd."

"And are you glad?"

"Indeed I am. The trip has been wonderful."

"It doesn't seem possible. I can't believe that this is really you—that I am not dreaming, as usual."

"And you? How have you been?"

"I've been well—I guess I have. I haven't had time to think of myself. Oh, my lady!" His voice broke with tenderness, and he laid his hand gently upon hers.

She withdrew it quickly.

"Not here! Remember where we are. You are not looking well, Boyd. I don't know that I ever saw you look so bad. Perhaps it is your clothes."

(To be continued.)

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