

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 Katmal 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



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TOGETHER THEY ASCENDED THE BANK AND SURVEYED THE SUBURROUNDINGS.

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 Balt, who knows more about the business than any four people in Kalvik. He discovered the Kalvik river, built the first cannery here and was its foreman until he quarreled with Marsh. Balt 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 George Balt; no man dares to give him a bed; no cannery will let him work. He has to take a dory to Dutch Harbor to get food. He doesn't dare leave the country and abandon the meager thousands he has invested in buildings, and every summer when the run starts he comes across the marshes and slinks about the Kalvik thickets like a wraith, watching from afar just in order to be near it all. He stands alone and forsaken, harking to the clank of machinery, every bolt of which he placed, watching his enemies enrich themselves from that gleaming silver army, which he considers his very own. He is shunned like a leper. Some time I believe he will kill Marsh."

"Hm-m! One seems to be forever crossing the trail of this Marsh," said Boyd, who had listened intently.

"The man who beats Marsh will have done something." She paused, then said deliberately, "And I believe you are the one to do it."

They had reached their destination—the mouth of a deep creek, up which Cherry turned her dogs. Emerson leaped from the sled and, running forward, seized the leader, guiding it into a clump of spruce, among the boles of which he tangled the harness, for this team was like a pack of wolves, ravenous for travel and intolerant of the leash.

Together they ascended the bank and surveyed the surroundings, Cherry expatiating upon every feature with the fervor of a land agent bent on weaving his spell about a prospective buyer. And in truth she had chosen well, for the conditions seemed ideal.

"I've watched you, and I know you are down on your luck for some reason," the girl said. "You've been mis-cast somehow, and you've had the heart taken out of you, but I'm sure it's in you to succeed, for you're young and intelligent, cool and determined. I am giving you this chance to play the biggest game of your life and erase in eight short months every trace of failure. I'm not doing it altogether unselfishly, for I believe you've been sent to Kalvik to work out your own salvation and mine and that of poor George Balt, whom you've never seen. You're going to do this thing, and you're going to make it win."

Emerson reached out impulsively and caught her tiny, mittened hand. His eyes were shining; his face had lost the settled look of dejection and was all aglow with a new dawn of hope. Even his shoulders were lifted and thrown back as if from some sudden access of vigor that lightened his burden.

"You're right," he said firmly. "We'll send for Balt tonight."

In the days that followed Cherry was at Boyd's elbow constantly, aiding him at every turn in his zeal to acquire a knowledge of the cannery system. The odd conviction grew upon her that she was working against time, that there was a limit to his period of action, for she seemed obsessed by an ever growing passion to accomplish some end within a given time and had no thought for anything beyond the engrossing issue into which he had plunged. She was dumfounded by his sudden transformation and delighted at first, but later, when she saw that he regarded her only as a means to an end, his cool assumption of leadership piqued her and she felt hurt.

Constantine had been sent for Balt with instructions to keep on until he found the fisherman even if the quest carried him over the range. During the days of impatient waiting they occupied their time largely in reconnoitering the nearest cannery, permission to go over which Cherry had secured from the watchman, who was indebted to her. The man was timid at first, but Emerson won him over, then proceeded to pump him dry of information, as he had done with his boss.

Fraser looked on in bewilderment at the change in Emerson.

"What have you done to 'Frozen Annie?'" he asked Cherry on one occasion. "You must have fed him a speed ball, for I never saw a guy gear up so fast. Why, he was the darndest crape hanger I ever met till you got him gingered up. He didn't have no more spirit than a sick kitten."

Fraser then eyed the girl keenly.

"This is a lonely place for a woman like you," he said, "and our mutual friend ain't altogether unattractive, eh?"

Cherry's cheeks flamed, but her tone was icy. "This is entirely a business matter."

"Hm-m! I ain't never heard you touted none as a business woman," said the adventurer.

"Have you ever heard me?"—the color faded from the girl's face, and it was a trifle drawn—discussed in any way?"

"You know, Emerson makes me uncomfortable sometimes, he is so d—d moral." Fraser replied indirectly. "He won't stand for anything off color. He's a real square guy, he is, the kind you read about."

"You didn't answer my question," insisted Cherry.

Again Fraser evaded the issue. "Now, if this Marsh is going after you in earnest 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 dumpling, and it's more than an eye-shoot 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. Balt refused rest or nourishment until he

had learned why Cherry had sent for him. As briefly as possible she outlined the situation. Nord 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 fisherman'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 Balt.

"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 knew you would," flashed Cherry. "And if we don't beat Willis Marsh, by glory, I'll kill him!" Balt 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 Balt was the most reckless man on the Bering coast. Emerson's next words added to her alarm:

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

"Katmal!" she broke in sharply. "You said you were going by the Hlamma route." She turned on Balt angrily. "You know better than to suggest such a thing."

"I didn't suggest it," said Balt. "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 Balt."

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 mid-sight blizzard to see my chance for a fortune licked up by flames, while the hiss of the water from the firemen's hoses 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 died 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 shrank from me, for miners and salers 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 distance. "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 Katmal 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 propinquity 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 goodbys 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

"GOODBY! 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, before she could divine his purpose, kissed her.

"Goodby," 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, and then she breathed deeply and turned

to the house, oblivious to Constantine and the young squaw, who held the sick baby up for her inspection.

The hazards of winter travel in the north are manifold; 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 Balt, 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 gauzy streamers that floated like vapor from the highest pinnacles. "That's snow, dry snow, and it shows that the wind is blowing up there. We dassen't tackle it."

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

"Exactly."
"Why, 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!" Balt 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, unpack 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 Balt, 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 smote them. Before they were well aware of the ominous significance of these signs the storm was upon them, sweeping through the chute 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.

farther, and Balt, 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 Balt 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 Balt'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 Katmal 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—er—let's wait till the next trip," offered the fisherman.

Emerson shook his head. "She may not be back here for eight weeks. No! We're done for."

Balt 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 rotund 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 Kadiak 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, Petellu 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 sailboat 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."

Emerson stared hopelessly at the fire.

The disheartened man started at this juncture as if a sudden thought had pelled him and followed Balt out into the cold. He turned down the bank to the creek, however, and made a careful examination of all the canoes that went with the village. Fifteen minutes later he had searched out the

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