

# The Silver Horde

Rex Beach

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THE SILVER HORDE

BY REX BEACH

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GOING SOME

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[Illustration: THE GIRL STOOD BAREHEADED UNDER THE WINTRY SKY]

## THE SILVER HORDE

### CHAPTER I

#### WHEREIN A SPIRITLESS MAN AND A ROGUE APPEAR

The trail to Kalvik leads down from the northward mountains over the tundra which flanks the tide flats, then creeps out upon the salt ice of the river and across to the village. It boasts no travel in summer, but by winter an occasional toil-worn traveller may be seen issuing forth from the Great Country beyond, bound for the open water; while once in thirty days the mail-team whirls out of the forest to the south, pauses one night to leave word of the world, and then is swallowed up in the silent hills. Kalvik, to be sure, is not much of a place, being hidden away from the main-travelled routes to the interior and wholly unknown except to those interested in the fisheries.

A Greek church, a Russian school with a cassocked priest presiding, and, about a hundred houses, beside the cannery buildings, make up the village. At first glance these canneries might convey the impression of a considerable city, for there are ten plants, in all, scattered along several miles of the river-bank; but in winter they stand empty and still, their great roofs drummed upon by the fierce Arctic storms, their high stacks pointing skyward like long, frozen fingers black with frost. There are the natives, of course, but they do not count, concealed as they are in burrows. No one knows their number, not even the priest who gathers toll from them.

Early one December afternoon there entered upon this trail from the

timberless hills far away to the northward a weary team of six dogs, driven by two men. It had been snowing since dawn, and the dim sled-tracks were hidden beneath a six-inch fluff which rendered progress difficult and called the whip into cruel service. A gray smother sifted down sluggishly, shutting out hill and horizon, blending sky and landscape into a blurred monotone, playing strange pranks with the eye that grew tired trying to pierce it.

The travellers had been plodding sullenly, hour after hour, dispirited by the weight of the storm, which bore them down like some impalpable, resistless burden. There was no reality in earth, air, or sky. Their vision was rested by no spot of color save themselves, apparently swimming through an endless, formless atmosphere of gray.

"Fingerless" Fraser broke trail, but to Boyd Emerson, who drove, he seemed to be a sort of dancing doll, bobbing and swaying grotesquely, as if suspended by invisible wires. At times, it seemed to the driver's whimsical fancy as if each of them trod a measure in the centre of a colorless universe, something after the fashion of goldfish floating in a globe.

Fraser pulled up without warning and instantly the dogs stopped, straightway beginning to soothe their trail-worn pads and to strip the ice-pellets from between their toes. But the "wheelers" were too tired to make the effort, so Emerson went forward and performed the task for them, while Fraser floundered back and sank to a sitting posture on the sled.

"Whew!" he exclaimed, "this is sure tough. If I don't see a tree or something with enough color to bust this monotony I'll go dotty."

"Another day like this and we'd both be snow-blind," observed Emerson grimly, as he bent to his task. "But it can't be far to the river now."

"This fall has covered the trail till I have to feel it out with my feet," grumbled Fraser. "When I step off to one side I go in up to my hips. It's like walking a plank a foot deep in feathers, and I feel like I was a mile above the earth in a heavy fog." After a moment he continued: "Speaking of feathers, how'd you like to have a fried chicken \_a la\_ Maryland?"

"Shut up!" said the man at the dogs, crossly.

"Well, it don't do any harm to think about it," growled Fraser, good-naturedly. He felt out a pipe from his pocket and endeavored unsuccessfully to blow through it, then complained:

"The damn thing is froze. It seems like a man can't practice no vices whatever in this country. I'm glad I'm getting out of it."

"So am I," agreed the younger man. Having completed his task, he came back to the sled and seated himself beside the other.

"As I was saying a mile back yonder," Fraser resumed, "whatever made you snatch me away from them blue-coated minions of the law, I don't know. You says it's for company, to be sure, but we visit with one another about like two deaf-mutes. Why did you do it, Bo?"

"Well, you talk enough for both of us."

"Yes, but that ain't no reason why you should lay yourself liable to the

'square-toes.' You ain't the kind to take a chance just because you're lonesome."

"I picked you up because of your moth-eaten morals, I dare say. I was tired of myself, and you interested me. Besides," Emerson added, reflectively, "I have no particular cause to love the law, either."

"That's how I sized it," said Fraser, wagging his head with animation, "I knew you'd had some kind of a run-in. What was it? This is low down, see, and confidential, as between two crooks. I'll never snitch."

"Hold on there! I'm not a crook. I'm not sufficiently ingenious to be a member of your honorable profession."

"Well, I guess my profession is as honorable as most. I've tried all of them, and they're all alike. It's simply a question of how the other fellow will separate easiest." He stopped and tightened his snow-shoe thong, then rising, gazed curiously at the listless countenance of his travelling companion, feeling anew the curiosity that had fretted him for the past three weeks; finally he observed, with a trace of impatience:

"Well, if you ain't one of us, you'd ought to be. You've got the best poker face I ever see; it's as blind as a plastered wall. You ain't had a real expression on it since you hauled me off that ice-floe in Norton Sound."

He swung ahead of the dogs; they rose reluctantly, and with a crack of the whip the little caravan crawled noiselessly into the gray twilight.

An hour later they dropped from the plain, down through a gutter-like gully to the river, where they found a trail, glass-hard beneath its downy covering. A cold breath sucked up from the sea; ahead they saw the ragged ice up-ended by the tide, but their course was well marked now, so they swung themselves upon the sled, while the dogs shook off their lethargy and broke into their pattering, tireless wolf-trot.

At length they came to a point where the trail divided, one branch leading off at right angles from the shore and penetrating the hummocks that marked the tide limit. Evidently it led to the village which they knew lay somewhere on the farther side, hidden by a mile or more of sifting snow, so they altered their course and bore out upon the river.

The going here was so rough that both men leaped from their seats and ran beside the sled, one at the front, the other guiding it from the rear. Up and down over the ridges the trail led, winding through the frozen inequalities, the dogs never breaking their tireless trot. They mounted a swelling ridge and rushed down to the level river ice beyond, but as they did so they felt their footing sag beneath them, heard a shivering creak on every side, and, before they could do more than cry out warningly, saw water rising about the sled-runners. The momentum of the heavy sledge, together with the speed of the racing dogs, forced them out upon the treacherous ice before they could check their speed. Emerson shouted, the dogs leaped, but with a crash the ice gave way, and for a moment the water closed over him.

Clinging to the sled to save himself, his weight slowed it down, and the dogs stopped. "Fingerless" Fraser broke through in turn, gasping as the icy water rose to his armpits. Slowly at first the sled sank, till it floated half submerged, and this spot which a moment before had seemed so

safe and solid became now a churning tangle of broken fragments, men and dogs struggling in a liquid that seemed dark as syrup contrasted with the surrounding whiteness. The lead animals, under whose feet the ice was still firm, turned inquiringly, then settled on their haunches with lolling tongues. The pair next ahead of the sledge paddled frantically, straining to reach the solid sheet beyond, but were held back by their harness. Emerson used the sled for a footing and endeavored to gain the ice at one side, but it broke beneath him and he lunged in up to his shoulders. Again he tried, but again the ice broke under his hand, more easily now.

Fraser struggled to get out in the opposite direction, each man aiming to secure an independent footing, but their efforts only enlarged the pool. The chill went through them like thin blades, and they chattered gaspingly, fighting with desperation, while the wheel dogs, involved in the harness, began to whine and cough, at which Emerson shouted:

"Cut the team loose, quick!" But the other spat out a mouthful of salt water and spluttered:

"I--I can't swim!"

Whereupon the first speaker half swam half dragged himself through the slush and broken debris to the forward end of the sled, and seeking out the sheath-knife from beneath his parka, cut the harness of the two distressed animals. Once free, they scrambled to safety, shook themselves, and rolled in the dry snow.

Emerson next attempted to lift the nose of the sled up on the ice, shouting at the remainder of the team to pull, but they only wagged their tails and whined excitedly at this unusual form of entertainment. Each time he tried to lift the sled he crashed through fresh ice, finally bearing the next pair of dogs with him, and then the two animals in the lead. All of them became hopelessly entangled.

He could have won his way back to the permanent ice as Fraser was doing, but there was no way of getting his team there and he would not sacrifice those dumb brutes now growing frantic. One of them pawed the sheath-knife from his hand. He had become almost numb with cold and despair when he heard the jingle of many small bells, and a sharp command uttered in a new voice.

Out of the snow fog from the direction in which they were headed broke a team running full and free. At a word they veered to the right and came to a pause, avoiding the danger-spot. Even from his hasty glance Emerson marvelled at the outfit, having never seen the like in all his travels through the North, for each animal of the twelve stood hip-high to a tall man, and they were like wolves of one pack, gray and gaunt and wicked. The basket-sled behind them was long and light, and of a design that was new to him, while the furs in it were of white fox.

The figure wrapped up in them spoke again sharply, whereupon a tall Indian runner left the team and headed swiftly for the scene of the accident. As he approached, Emerson noted the fellow's flowing parka of ground-squirrel skins, from which a score of fluffy tails fell free, and he saw that this was no Indian, but a half-breed of peculiar coppery lightness. The man ran forward till he neared the edge of the opening where the tide had caused the floes to separate and the cold had not had time as yet to heal it; then flattening his body to its full length on the ice, he crawled out

cautiously and seized the lead dog. Carefully he wormed his way backward to security, then leaned his weight upon the tugline.

It had been a ticklish operation, requiring nice skill and dexterity, but now that his footing was sure the runner exerted his whole strength, and as the dogs scratched and tore for firm foothold, the sled came crunching closer and closer through the half-inch skin of ice. Then he reached down and dragged Emerson out, dripping and nerveless from his immersion. Together they rescued the outfit.

The person in the sledge had watched them silently, but now spoke in a strange patois, and the breed gave voice to her words, for it was a woman.

"One mile you go--white man house. Go quick--you freeze." He pointed back whence the two men had come, indicating the other branch of the trail.

Fraser had emerged meanwhile and circled the water-hole, but even this brief exposure to the open air had served to harden his wet garments into a crackling armor. With rattling teeth, he asked:

"Ain't you got no dry clothes? Our stuff is soaked."

Again the Indian translated some words from the girl.

"No! You hurry and no stop here. We go quick over yonder. No can stop at all."

He hurried back to his mistress, cried once to the pack of gray dogs, "Oonah!" and they were off as if in chase. They left the trail and circled toward the shore, the driver standing erect upon the heels of the runners, guiding his team with wide-flung gestures and sharp cries, the rush of air fluttering the many squirrel-tails of his parka like fairy streamers.

As they dashed past, both white men had one fleeting glimpse of a woman's face beneath a furred hood, and then it was gone. For a moment they stood and stared after the fast-dwindling team, while the breath of the Arctic sea stiffened their garments and froze their boot-soles to the ice.

"Did you see?" Fraser ejaculated. "Good Lord, it's a \_woman!\_ A \_blonde\_ woman!"

Emerson stirred himself. "Nonsense! She must be a breed," said he.

"Breeds don't have yellow hair!" declared the other.

Swiftly they bent in the free dogs and lashed the team to a run. They felt the chill of death in their bones, and instead of riding they ran with the sled till their blood beat painfully. Their outer coverings were like shells, their underclothes were soaked, and although their going was difficult and clumsy, they dared not stop, for this is the extremest peril of the North.

Ten minutes later they swung over the river-bank and into the midst of great rambling frame buildings, seen dimly through the falling snow. Their trail led them to a high-banked cabin, from the stovepipe of which they saw heat-waves pouring. The dogs broke into cry, and were answered by many others conjured from their hiding-places. Both men were greatly distressed by now, and could handle themselves only with difficulty. Another mile would have meant disaster.



"Rout out the owner and tell him we're wet," said Emerson; "I'll free the dogs."

As Fraser disappeared, the young man ran forward to slip the harness from his animals, but found it frozen into their fur, the knots and buckles transformed into unmanageable lumps of ice, so he wrenched the camp axe from the sled and cut the thongs, then hacked loose the stiff sled-lashings, seized the sodden sleeping-bags, and made for the house. A traveller's first concern is for his dogs, then for his bedding.

Before he could reach the cabin the door opened and Fraser appeared, a strange, dazed look on his face. He was followed by a large man of coarse and sullen countenance, who paused on the threshold.

"Don't bother with the rest of the stuff," Emerson chattered.

"It's no use," Fraser replied; "we can't go in."

The former paused, forgetting the cold in his amazement.

"What's wrong? Somebody sick?"

"I don't know what's the matter. This man just says 'nix,' that's all."

The fellow, evidently a watchman, nodded his head, and growled, "Yaas! Ay got no room."

"But you don't understand," said Emerson. "We're wet. We broke through the ice. Never mind the room, we'll get along somehow." He advanced with the tight-rolled sleeping-bags under his arm, but the man stood immovable, blocking the entrance.

"You can't come in har! You find anoder house t'ree mile fuder."

The traveller, however, paid no heed to these words, but pushed forward, shifting the bundle to his shoulder and holding it so that it was thrust into the Swede's face. Involuntarily the watchman drew back, whereupon the unwelcome visitor crowded past, jostling his inhospitable host roughly, laughing the while, although in his laughter there rang a dangerous metallic note. Emerson's quick action gained him entrance and Fraser followed behind into the living-room, where a flat-nosed squaw withdrew before them. The young man flung down his burden, and addressed her peremptorily.

"Punch up that fire, and get us something to eat, quick!" Turning to the owner of the house, who lumbered in after them, he disregarded the fellow's scowl, and said:

"Why, you've got lots of room, old man! We'll pay our way. Now get some more firewood, will you? I'm chilled to the bone. That's a good fellow." His forceful heartiness forbade dispute, and the man obeyed, sourly.

The two new-comers stripped off their outer clothing, and in a trice the small room became littered and hung with steaming garments. They took possession of the house, and ordered the Swede and his squaw about with firm good nature, until the couple slunk into an inner room and began to talk in low tones.

Fraser had been watching the fellow, and now remarked to his companion:

"Say, what ails that ginney?"

The assumption of good-nature fell away from Boyd Emerson as he replied:

"I never knew anybody to refuse shelter to freezing men before. There's something back of this--he's got some reason for his refusal. I don't want any trouble, but--"

The inner door opened, and the watchman reappeared. Evidently his sluggish resolution had finally set itself.

"You can't stop har!" he said. "Ay got orders."

Emerson was at the fire, busy rubbing the cramps from his arms, and did not answer. When Fraser likewise ignored the Swede, he repeated his command, louder this time.

"Get out of may house, quick!"

Both men kept their backs turned and continued to ignore him, at which the fellow advanced heavily, and threatened them in a big, raucous voice, trembling with rage:

"By Yingo, Ay trow you out!"

He stooped and gathered up the garments nearest him, then stepped toward the outer door; but before he could make good his threat, Emerson whirled like a cat, his deep-set eyes dark with sudden fury, and seized his host by the nape of the neck. He jerked him back so roughly that the wet clothes flapped to the floor in four directions, whereat the Scandinavian let forth a bellow; but Emerson struck him heavily on the jaw with his open hand, then hurled him backward into the room so violently that he reeled, and his legs colliding with a bench, he fell against the wall. Before he could recover, his assailant stepped in between his wide-flung hands and throttled him, beating his head violently against the logs. The fellow undertook to grapple with him, at which Emerson wrenched himself free, and, stepping back, spoke in a quivering voice which Fraser had never heard before:

"I'm just playing with you now--I don't want to hurt you."

"Get out of my house! Ay got orders!" cried the watchman wildly, and made for him again. It was evident that the man was not lacking in stupid courage, but Emerson, driven to it, stepped aside, and swung heavily. The squaw in the doorway screamed, and the Swede fell full length. Again Boyd was upon him, the restraint of the past long weeks now unbridled, his temper unchecked. He dragged his victim through the store-room, grinding his face into the floor at every effort to rise. He forced him to his own door-sill, jerked the door open, and kicked him out into the snow; then barred the entrance, and returned to the warmth of the logs, his face convulsed and his lips working.

"Fingerless" Fraser gazed at him queerly, as if at some utterly strange phenomenon, then drawled, with a sly chuckle:

"Well, well, you're bloody gentle, I must say. I didn't think it was in you."

When the other vouchsafed no answer, he took his pipe from a pocket of his steaming mackinaw, and filled it from a tobacco-box on the window-sill; then, leaning back in his chair, he propped his feet up on the table and sighed luxuriously, as he murmured:

"These scenes of violence just upset me something dreadful!"

## CHAPTER II

### IN WHICH THEY BREAK BREAD WITH A LONELY WOMAN

It was perhaps two hours later that Fraser went to the window for the twentieth time, and, breathing against the pane, cleared a peep-hole, announcing:

"He's gone!"

Emerson, absorbed in a book, made no answer. After his encounter with the householder he had said little, and upon finding this coverless, brown-stained volume--a tattered copy of Don Quixote--he had relapsed into utter silence.

"I say, he's gone!" reiterated the man at the window.

Still no reply was forthcoming, and, seating himself near the stove, Fraser spread his hands before him in the shape of a book, and began whimsically, in a dry monotone, as if reading to himself:

"At which startling news, Mr. Emerson, with his customary vivacity, smiled engagingly, and answered back:

"Why do you reckon he has departed, Mr. Fraser?"

"Because he's lost his voice cussing us," I replied, graciously.

"Oh no!" exclaimed the genial Mr. Emerson, more for the sake of

conversation than argument; 'he has got cold feet!' Evidently unwilling to let the conversation lag, the garrulous Mr. Emerson continued, 'It's a dark night without, and I fear some mischief is afoot.'

"Yes; but what of yonder beautchous gel?" said I, at which he burst into wild laughter."

Emerson laid down his book.

"What are you muttering about?" he asked.

"I merely remarked that our scandalized Scandalusian has got tired of singin' Won't You Open that Door and Let Me In? and has ducked."

"Where has he gone?"

"I ain't no mind-reader; maybe he's loped off to Seattle after a policeman and a writ of ne plus ultra. Maybe he has gone after a clump of his countrymen--this is herding-season for Swedes."

Without answering, Emerson rose, and, going to the inner door, called through to the squaw:

"Get us a cup of coffee."

"Coffee!" interjected Fraser; "why not have a real feed? I'm hungry enough to eat anything except salt-risin' bread and Roquefort cheese."

"No," said the other; "I don't want to cause any more trouble than necessary."

"Well, there's a lot of grub in the cache. Let's load up the sled."

"I'm hardly a thief."

"Oh, but--"

"No!"

"Fingerless" Fraser fell back into sour silence.

When the slatternly woman had slunk forth and was busied at the stove, Emerson observed, musingly:

"I wonder what possessed that fellow to act as he did."

"He said he had orders," Fraser offered. "If I had a warm cabin, a lot of grub--and a squaw--I'd like to see somebody give me orders."

Their clothing was dry now, and they proceeded to dress leisurely. As Emerson roped up the sleeping-bags, Fraser suddenly suspended operations on his attire, and asked, querulously:

"What's the matter? We ain't goin' to move, are we?"

"Yes. We'll make for one of the other canneries," answered Emerson, without looking up.

"But I've got sore feet," complained the adventurer.

"What! again?" Emerson laughed skeptically. "Better walk on your hands for a while."

"And it's getting dark, too."

"Never mind. It can't be far. Come now."

He urged the fellow as he had repeatedly urged him before, for Fraser seemed to have the blood of a tramp in his veins; then he tried to question the woman, but she maintained a frightened silence. When they had finished their coffee, Emerson laid two silver dollars on the table, and they left the house to search out the river-trail again.

The early darkness, hastened by the storm, was upon them when they crept up the opposite bank an hour later, and through the gloom beheld a group of great shadowy buildings. Approaching the solitary gleam of light shining from the window of the watchman's house, they applied to him for shelter.

"We are just off a long trip, and our dogs are played out," Emerson explained. "We'll pay well for a place to rest."

"You can't stop here," said the fellow, gruffly.

"Why not?"

"I've got no room."

"Is there a road-house near by?"

"I don't know."

"You'd better find out mighty quick," retorted the young man, with rising temper at the other's discourtesy.

"Try the next place below," said the watchman, hurriedly, slamming the door in their faces and bolting it. Once secure behind his barricade, he added: "If he won't let you in, maybe the priest can take care of you at the Mission."

"This here town of Kalvik is certainly overjoyed at our arrival," said Fraser, "ain't it?"

But his irate companion made no comment, whereat, sensing the anger behind his silence, the speaker, for once, failed to extemporize an answer to his own remark.

At the next stop they encountered the same gruff show of inhospitality, and all they could elicit from the shock-headed proprietor was another direction, in broken English, to try the Russian priest.

"I'll make one more try," said Emerson, between his teeth, gratingly, as they swung out into the darkness a second time. "If that doesn't succeed, then I'll take possession again. I won't be passed on all night this way."

"The 'buck' will certainly show us to the straw," said "Fingerless" Fraser.

"The what?"

"The 'buck'--the sky-dog--oh, the priest!"

But when, a mile farther on, they drew up before a white pile surmounted by a dimly discerned Greek cross, no sign of life was to be seen, and their signals awakened no response.

"Gone!--and they knew it."

The vicious manner in which Emerson handled his whip as he said the words betrayed his state of mind. Three weeks of unvarying hardship and toilsome travel had worn out both men, and rendered them well-nigh desperate. Hence they wasted no words when, for the fourth time, their eyes caught the

welcome sight of a shining radiance in the gloom of the gathering night. The trail-weary team stopped of its own accord.

"Unhitch!" ordered Emerson, doggedly, as he began to untie the ropes of the sled. He shouldered the sleeping-bags, and made toward the light that filtered through the crusted windows, followed by Fraser similarly burdened. But as they approached they saw at once that this was no cannery; it looked more like a road-house or trading-post, for the structure was low and it was built of logs. Behind and connected with it by a covered hall or passageway crouched another squat building of the same character, its roof piled thick with a mass of snow, its windows glowing. Those warm squares of light, set into the black walls and overhung by white-burdened eaves, gave the place the appearance of a Christmas-card, it was so snug and cozy. Even the glitter was there, caused by the rays refracted from the facets of the myriad frost-crystals.

They mounted the steps of the nigh building, and, without knocking, flung the door open, entered, then tossed their bundles to the floor. With a sharp exclamation at this unceremonious intrusion, an Indian woman, whom they had surprised, dropped her task and regarded them, round-eyed.

"We're all right this time," observed Emerson, as he swept the place with his eyes. "It's a store." Then to the woman he said, briefly: "We want a bed and something to eat."

On every side the walls were shelved with merchandise, while the counter carried a supply of clothing, skins, and what not; a cylindrical stove in the centre of the room emanated a hot, red glow.

"This looks like the Waldorf to me," said "Fingerless" Fraser, starting to remove his parka, the fox fringe on the hood of which was white from his breath.

"What you want?" demanded the squaw, coming forward.

Boyd, likewise divesting himself of his furs, noticed that she was little more than a girl--a native, undoubtedly; but she was neatly dressed, her skin was light, and her hair twisted into a smooth black knot at the back of her head.

"Food! Sleep!" he replied to her question.

"You can't stop here," the girl asserted, firmly.

"Oh yes, we can," said Emerson. "You have plenty of room, and there's lots of food"--he indicated the shelves of canned goods.

The squaw, without moving, raised her voice and called: "Constantine! Constantine!"

A door in the farther shadows opened, and the tall figure of a man emerged, advancing swiftly, his soft soles noiseless beneath him.

"Well, well! It's old Squirrel-Tail," cried Fraser. "Good-evening, Constantine."

It was the copper-hued native who had rescued them from the river earlier in the day; but although he must have recognized them, his demeanor had no welcome in it. The Indian girl broke into a torrent of excited volubility,

unintelligible to the white men.

"You no stop here," said Constantine, finally; and, making toward the outer door, he flung it open, pointing out into the night.

"We've come a long way, and we're tired," Emerson argued, pacifically. "We'll pay you well."

Constantine only replied with added firmness, "No," to which the other retorted with a flash of rising anger, "\_Yes!\_"

He faced the Indian with his back to the stove, his voice taking on a determined note. "We won't leave here until we are ready. We're tired, and we're going to stay here--do you understand? Now tell your 'klootch' to get us some supper. Quick!"

The breed's face blazed. Without closing the door, he moved directly upon the interloper, his design recognizable in his threatening attitude; but before he could put his plan into execution, a soft voice from the rear of the room halted him.

"Constantine," it said.

The travellers whirled to see, standing out in relief against the darkness of the passage whence the Indian had just come a few seconds before, the golden-haired girl of the storm, to whom they had been indebted for their rescue. She advanced, smiling pleasantly, enjoying their surprise.

"What is the trouble?"

"These men no stop here!" cried Constantine violently. "You speak! I make them go."

"I--I--beg pardon," began Emerson. "We didn't intend to take forcible possession, but we're played out--we've been denied shelter everywhere--we felt desperate--"

"You tried the canneries above?" interrupted the girl.

"Yes."

"And they referred you to the priest? Quite so." She laughed softly, her voice a mellow contralto. "The Father has been gone for a month; he wouldn't have let you in if he'd been there."

She addressed the Indian girl in Aleut and signalled to Constantine, at which the two natives retired--Constantine reluctantly, like a watch-dog whose suspicions are not fully allayed.

"We're glad of an opportunity to thank you for your timely service this afternoon," said Emerson. "Had we known you lived here, we certainly should not have intruded in this manner." He found himself growing hotly uncomfortable as he began to realize the nature of his position, but the young woman spared him further apologies by answering, carelessly:

"Oh, that was nothing. I've been expecting you hourly. You see, Constantine's little brother has the measles, and I had to get to him before the natives could give the poor little fellow a Russian bath and then stand him out in the snow. They have only one treatment for all

diseases. That's why I didn't stop and give you more explicit directions this morning."

"If your--er--father--" The girl shook her head.

"Then your husband--I should like to arrange with him to hire lodgings for a few days. The matter of money--"

Again she came to his rescue.

"I am the man of the house. I'm boss here. This splendor is all mine." She waved a slender white hand majestically at the rough surroundings, laughing in a way that put Boyd Emerson more at his ease. "You are quite welcome to stay as long as you wish. Constantine objects to my hospitality, and treats all strangers alike, fearing they may be Company men. When you didn't arrive at dark, I thought perhaps he was right this time, and that you had been taken in by one of the watchmen."

"We threw a Swede out on his neck," declared Fraser, swelling with conscious importance, "and I guess he's 'crabbed' us with the other squareheads."

"Oh, no! They have instructions not to harbor any travellers. It's as much as his job is worth for any of them to entertain you. Now, won't you make yourselves at home while Constantine attends to your dogs? Dinner will soon be ready, and I hope you will do me the honor of dining with me," she finished, with a graciousness that threw Emerson into fresh confusion.

He murmured "Gladly," and then lost himself in wonder at this well-gowned girl living amid such surroundings. Undeniably pretty, graceful in her movements, bearing herself with certainty and poise--who was she? Where did she come from? And what in the world was she doing here?

He became aware that "Fingerless" Fraser was making the introductions. "This is Mr. Emerson; my name is French. I'm one of the Virginia Frenches, you know; perhaps you have heard of them. No? Well, they're the real thing."

The girl bowed, but Emerson forestalled her acknowledgment by breaking in roughly, with a threatening scowl at the adventurer:

"His name isn't French at all, Madam; it's Fraser--'Fingerless' Fraser. He's an utterly worthless rogue, and absolutely unreliable so far as I can learn. I picked him up on the ice in Norton Sound, with a marshal at his heels."

"That marshal wasn't after me," stoutly denied Fraser, quite unabashed. "Why, he's a friend of mine--we're regular chums--everybody knows that. He wanted to give me some papers to take outside, that's all."

Boyd shrugged his shoulders indifferently:

"Warrants!"

"Not at all! Not at all!" airily.

Their hostess, greatly amused at this remarkable turn of the ceremony, prevented any further argument by saying:



"Well, French or Fraser, whichever it is, you are both welcome. However, I should prefer to think of you as a runaway rather than as an intimate friend of the marshal at Nome; I happen to know him."

"Well, we ain't what you'd exactly call pals," Fraser hastily disclaimed. "I just sort of bow to him"--he gave an imitation of a slight, indifferent headshake--"that way!"

"I see," commented their hostess, quizzically; then recalling herself, she continued: "I should have made myself known before; I am Miss Malotte."

"Ch--" began the crook, then shut his lips abruptly, darting a shrewd glance at the girl. Emerson saw their eyes meet, and fancied that the woman's smile sat a trifle unnaturally on her lips, while the delicate coloring of her face changed imperceptibly. As the fellow mumbled some acknowledgment, she turned to the younger man, inquiring impersonally:

"I suppose you are bound for the States?"

"Yes; we intend to catch the mail-boat at Katmai. I am taking Fraser along for company; it's hard travelling alone in a strange country. He's a nuisance, but he's rather amusing at times."

"I certainly am," agreed that cheerful person, now fully at his ease. "I've a bad memory for names!"--he looked queerly at his hostess--"but I'm very amusing, very!"

"Not 'very,'" corrected Emerson.

Then they talked of the trail, the possibilities of securing supplies, and of hiring a guide. By-and-by the girl rose, and after showing them to a room, she excused herself on the score of having to see to the dinner. When she had withdrawn, "Fingerless" Fraser pursed his thin lips into a noiseless whistle, then observed:

"Well, I'll--be--cussed!"

"Who is she?" asked Emerson, in a low, eager tone. "Do you know?"

"You heard, didn't you? She's Miss Malotte, and she's certainly some considerable lady."

The same look that Emerson had noted when their hostess introduced herself to them flitted again into the crook's unsteady eyes.

"Yes, but who is she? What does this mean?" Emerson pointed to the provisions and fittings about them. "What is she doing here alone?"

"Maybe you'd better ask her yourself," said Fraser.

For the first time in their brief acquaintance, Emerson detected a strange note in the rogue's voice, but it was too slight to provoke reply, so he brushed it aside and prepared himself for dinner.

The Indian girl summoned them, and they followed her through the long passageway into the other house, where, to their utter astonishment, they seemed to step out of the frontier and into the heart of civilization. They found a tiny dining-room, perfectly appointed, in the centre of which, wonder of wonders, was a round table gleaming like a deep mahogany

pool, upon the surface of which floated gauzy hand-worked napery, glinting silver, and sparkling crystal, the dark polish of the wood reflecting the light from shaded candles. It held a delicately figured service of blue and gold, while the selection of thin-stemmed glasses all in rows indicated the character of the entertainment that awaited them. The men's eyes were too busy with the unaccustomed sight to note details carefully, but they felt soft carpet beneath their feet and observed that the walls were smooth and harmoniously papered.

When one has lived long in the rough where things come with the husk on, he fancies himself weaned away from the dainty, the beautiful, and the artistic; after years of a skillet-and-sheath-knife existence he grows to feel a scorn for the finer, softer, inconsequent trifles of the past, only to find, of a sudden, that, unknown to him perhaps, his soul has been hungering for them all the while. The feel of cool linen comes like the caress of a forgotten sweetheart, the tinkle of glass and silver are so many chiming fairy bells inviting him back into the foretime days. And so these two unkempt men, toughened and browned to the texture of leather by wind and snow, brought by trail and campfire to disregard ceremony and look upon mealtime as an unsatisfying, irksome period, stood speechless, affording the girl the feminine pleasure of enjoying their discomfiture.

"This is m--marvelous," murmured Emerson, suddenly conscious of his rough clothing, his fur boots, and his hands cracked by frost. "I'm afraid we're not in keeping."

"Indeed you are," said the girl, "and I am delighted to have somebody to talk to. It's very lonesome here, month after month."

"This is certainly a swell tepee," Fraser remarked, staring about in open admiration. "How did you do it?"

"I brought my things with me from Nome."

"Nome!" ejaculated Emerson, quickly.

"Yes."

"Why, I've been in Nome ever since the camp was discovered. It's strange we never met."

"I didn't stay there very long. I went back to Dawson."

Again he fancied the girl's eyes held a vague challenge, but he could not be sure; for she seated him, and then gave some instructions to the Aleut girl, who had entered noiselessly. It was the strangest meal Boyd Emerson had ever eaten, for here, in a forgotten corner of an unknown land, hidden behind high-banked log walls, he partook of a perfect dinner, well served, and presided over by a gracious, richly gowned young woman who talked interestingly on many subjects. For a second time he lost himself in a maze of conjecture. Who was she? What was her mission here? Why was she alone? But not for long; he was too heavily burdened by the responsibility and care of his own affairs to waste much time by the way on those of other people; and becoming absorbed in his own thoughts, he grew more silent as the signs of refinement and civilization about him revived memories long stifled. Fraser, on the contrary, warmed by the wine, blossomed like the rose, and talked garrulously, recounting marvellous stories, as improbable as they were egotistical. He monopolized his hostess' attention, the while his companion became more preoccupied, more

self-contained, almost sullen.

This was not the effect for which the girl had striven; her younger guest's taciturnity, which grew as the dinner progressed, piqued her, so at the first opportunity she bent her efforts toward rallying him. He answered politely, but she was powerless to shake off his mood. It was not abashment, as she realized when, from the corner of her eye, she observed him covertly stroke the linen and finger the silver as if to renew a sense of touch long unused. Being unaccustomed to any sort of indifference in men, his spiritless demeanor put her on her mettle, yet all to no avail; she could not find a seam in that mask of listless abstraction. At last he spoke of his own accord:

"You said those watchmen have instructions not to harbor travellers. Why is that?"

"It is the policy of the Companies. They are afraid somebody will discover gold around here."

"Yes?"

"You see, this is the greatest salmon river in the world; the 'run' is tremendous, and seems to be unending; hence the cannery people wish to keep it all to themselves."

"I don't quite understand--"

"It is simple enough. Kalvik is so isolated and the fishing season is so short that the Companies have to send their crews in from the States and take them out again every summer. Now, if gold were discovered hereabouts, the fishermen would all quit and follow the 'strike,' which would mean the ruin of the year's catch and the loss of many hundreds of thousands of dollars, for there is no way of importing new help during the short summer months. Why, this village would become a city in no time if such a thing were to happen; the whole region would fill up with miners, and not only would labor conditions be entirely upset for years, but the eyes of the world, being turned this way, other people might go into the fishing business and create a competition which would both influence prices, and deplete the supply of fish in the Kalvik River. So you see there are many reasons why this region is forbidden to miners."

"I see."

"You couldn't buy a pound of food nor get a night's lodging here for a king's ransom. The watchmen's jobs depend upon their unbroken bond of inhospitality, and the Indians dare not sell you anything, not even a dogfish, under penalty of starvation, for they are dependent upon the Companies' stores."

"So that is why you have established a trading-post of your own?"

"Oh dear, no. This isn't a store. This food is for my men."

"Your men?"

"Yes, I have a crew out in the hills on a grub-stake. This is our cache. While they prospect for gold, I stand guard over the provisions."

Fraser chuckled softly. "Then you are bucking the Salmon Trust?"

"After a fashion, yes. I knew this country had never been gone over, so I staked six men, chartered a schooner, and came down here from Nome in the early spring. We stood off the watchmen, and when the supply-ships arrived, we had these houses completed, and my men were out in the hills where it was hard to follow them. I stayed behind, and stood the brunt of things."

"But surely they didn't undertake to injure you?" said Emerson, now thoroughly interested in this extraordinary young woman.

"Oh, didn't they!" she answered, with a peculiar laugh. "You don't appreciate the character of these people. When a man fights for money, just plain, sordid money, he loses all sense of honor, chivalry, and decency, he employs any means that come handy. There is no real code of financial morality, and the battle for dollars is the bitterest of all contests. Of course, being a woman, they couldn't very well attack me personally, but they tried everything except physical violence, and I don't know how long they will refrain from that. These plants are owned separately, but they operate under an agreement, with one man at the head. His name is Marsh--Willis Marsh, and, of course, he's not my friend."

"Sort of 'United we stand, divided we fall.'"

"Exactly. That spreads the responsibility, and seems to leave nobody guilty for their evil deeds. The first thing they did was to sink my schooner--in the morning you will see her spars sticking up through the ice out in front there. One of their tugs 'accidentally' ran her down, although she was at anchor fully three hundred feet inside the channel line. Then Marsh actually had the effrontery to come here personally and demand damages for the injury to his towboat, claiming there were no lights on the schooner."

Cherry Malotte's eyes grew dark with indignation as she continued: "Nobody thinks of hanging lanterns to little crafts like her at anchor under such conditions. Having allowed me to taste his power, that man first threatened me covertly, and then proceeded to persecute me in a more open manner. When I still remained obdurate, he--he"--she paused. "You may have heard of it. He killed one of my men."

"Impossible!" ejaculated Boyd.

"Oh, but it isn't impossible. Anything is possible with unscrupulous men where there is no law; they halt at nothing when in chase of money. They are different from women in that. I never heard of a woman doing murder for money."

"Was it really murder?"

"Judge for yourself. My man came down for supplies, and they got him drunk--he was a drinking man--then they stabbed him. They said a Chinaman did it in a brawl, but Willis Marsh was to blame. They brought the poor fellow here, and laid him on my steps, as if I had been the cause of it. Oh, it was horrible, horrible!" Her eyes suddenly dimmed over and her white hands clenched.

"And you still stuck to your post?" said Emerson, curiously.

"Certainly! This adventure means a great deal to me, and, besides, \_I

will not be beaten\_"--the stem of the glass with which she had been toying snapped suddenly--"at anything."

She appeared, all in a breath, to have become prematurely hard and worldly, after the fashion of those who have subsisted by their wits. To Emerson she seemed to have grown at least ten years older. Yet it was unbelievable that this slip of a woman should be possessed of the determination, the courage, and the administrative ability to conduct so desperate an enterprise. He could understand the feminine rashness that might have led her to embark upon it in the first place, but to continue in the face of such opposition--why, that was a man's work and required a man's powers, and yet she was utterly unmasculine. Indeed, it seemed to him that he had never met a more womanly woman. Everything about her was distinctly feminine.

"Fortunately, the fishing season is short," she added, while a pucker of perplexity came between her dainty brows; "but I don't know what will happen next summer."

"I'd like to meet this Marsh-hen party," observed Fraser, his usually colorless eyes a bright sea-green.

"Do you fear further--er--violence?" asked Emerson.

Cherry shrugged her rounded shoulders. "I anticipate it, but I don't fear it. I have Constantine to protect me, and you will admit he is a capable bodyguard." She smiled slightly, recalling the scene she had interrupted before dinner. "Then, too, Chakawana, his sister, is just as devoted. Rather a musical name, don't you think so, Chakawana? It means 'The Snowbird' in Aleut, but when she's aroused she's more like a hawk. It's the Russian in her, I dare say."

The girl became conscious that her guests were studying her with undisguised amazement now, and therefore arose, saying, "You may smoke in the other room if you wish."

Lost in wonder at this unconventional creature, and dazed by the strangeness of the whole affair, Emerson gained his feet and followed her, with "Fingerless" Fraser at his heels.

### CHAPTER III

#### IN WHICH CHERRY MALOTTE DISPLAYS A TEMPER

The unsuspected luxury of the dining-room, and the excellence of the dinner itself had in a measure prepared Emerson for what he found in the living-room. One thing only staggered him--a piano. The bear-skins on the floor, the big, sleepy chairs, the reading-table littered with magazines, the shelves of books, even the basket of fancy-work--all these he could accept without further parleying; but a piano! in Kalvik! Observing his look, the girl said:

"I am dreadfully extravagant, am I not? But I love it, and I have so little to do. I read and play and drive my dog-team--that's about all."

"And rescue drowning men in time for dinner," added Boyd Emerson, not knowing whether he liked this young woman or not. He knew this north country from bitter experience, knew that none but the strong can survive, and recognizing himself as a failure, her calm assurance and self-certainty offended him vaguely. It seemed as if she were succeeding where he had failed, which rather jarred his sense of the fitness of things. Then, too, conventionality is a very agreeable social bond, the true value of which is not often recognized until it is found missing, and this girl was anything but conventional.

Again he withdrew into that silent mood from which no effort on the part of his hostess could arouse him, and it soon became apparent from the listless hang of his hands and the distant light in his eyes that he had even become unconscious of her presence in the room. Observing the cause of her impatience, Fraser interrupted his interminable monologue to say, without change of intonation:

"Don't get sore on him; he's that way half the time. I rode herd one night on a feller that was going to hang for murder at dawn, and he set just like that for hours." She raised her brows inquiringly, at which he continued: "But you can't always tell; when my brother got married he acted the same way."

After an hour, during which Emerson barely spoke, she tired of the other man's anecdotes, which had long ceased to be amusing, and, going to the piano, shuffled the sheet music idly, inquiring:

"Do you care for music?" Her remark was aimed at Emerson, but the other answered:

"I'm a nut on it."

She ignored the speaker, and cast another question over her shoulder:

"What kind do you prefer?" Again the adventurer outran his companion to the reply:

"My favorite hymn is the Maple Leaf Rag. Let her go, professor."

Cherry settled herself obligingly and played ragtime, although she fancied that Emerson stirred uneasily as if the musical interruption disturbed him; but when she swung about on her seat at the conclusion, he was still lax and indifferent.

"That certainly has some class to it," "Fingerless" Fraser said, admiringly. "Just go through the reperchure from soda to hock, will you? I'm certainly fond of that coon clatter." And realizing that his pleasure was genuine, she played on and on for him, to the muffled thump of his feet, now and then feeding her curiosity with a stolen glance at the other. She was in the midst of some syncopated measure when Boyd spoke abruptly: "Please play something."

She understood what he meant and began really to play, realizing very soon that at least one of her guests knew and loved music. Under her deft fingers the instrument became a medium for musical speech. Gay roundelays, swift, passionate Hungarian dances, bold Wagnerian strains followed in

quick succession, and the more utter her abandon the more certainly she felt the younger man respond.

Strange to say, the warped soul of "Fingerless" Fraser likewise felt the spell of real music, and he stilled his loose-hinged tongue. By-and-by she began to sing, more for her own amusement than for theirs, and after awhile her fingers strayed upon the sweet chords of Bartlett's *"A Dream"*, a half-forgotten thing, the tenderness of which had lived with her from girlhood. She heard Emerson rise, then knew he was standing at her shoulder. Could he sing, she wondered, as he began to take up the words of the song? Then her dream-filled eyes widened as she listened to his voice breathing life into the beautiful words. He sang with the ease and flexibility of an artist, his powerful baritone blending perfectly with her contralto.

For the first time she felt the man's personality, his magnetism, as if he had dropped his cloak and stood at her side in his true semblance. As they finished the song she wheeled abruptly, her face flushed, her ripe lips smiling, her eyes moist, and looked up to find him marvelously transformed. His even teeth gleamed forth from a brown face that had become the mirror of a soul as spirited as her own, for the blending of their voices had brought them into a similar harmony of understanding.

"Oh, *thank you*," she breathed.

"Thank *you*," he said. "I--I--that's the first time in ages that I've had the heart to sing. I was hungry for music, I was starving for it. I've sat in my cabin at night longing for it until my soul fairly ached with the silence. I've frozen beneath the Northern Lights straining my ears for the melody that ought to go with them--they must have an accompaniment somewhere, don't you think so?"

"Yes, yes," she breathed.

"They *must* have; they are too gloriously, terribly beautiful to be silent. I've stood in the whispering spruce groves and tried to sing contentment back into my heart, but I couldn't do it. This is the first real taste I've had in three years. Three years!"

He was talking rapidly, his blue eyes dancing. Cherry remembered thinking at dinner that those eyes were of too light and hard a blue for tenderness. She now observed that they were singularly deep and passionate.

"Why, I've gone about with a comb and a piece of tissue-paper at my lips like any kid. I once made a banjo out of a cigar-box and bale wire, and while I was in the Kougarok I walked ten miles to hear a nigger play a harmonica. I did all sorts of things to coax music into this country, but it is silent and unresponsive, absolutely dead and discordant." He made a gesture which in a woman would have ended in a shudder.

He took a seat near the girl, and continued to talk feverishly, unable to give voice to his thoughts rapidly enough. His reserve vanished, his silence gave way to a confidential warmth which suffused his listener and drew her to him. The overpowering force of his strong nature swept her out of herself, while her ready sympathy took fire and caught at his half-expressed ideas and stumbling words, stimulating him with her warm understanding. Her quick wit rallied him and awoke echoes of his past youth, until they began to laugh and jest with the *camaraderie* of

boy and girl. With their better acquaintance her assumption of masculinity fell from her, and she became the "womanly woman"--dainty, vivacious, captivating.

Fraser, whom both had forgotten, looked on at first in gaping, silent awe, staring and blinking at his travelling companion, who had undergone such a metamorphosis. But restraint and silence were impossible to him for long, and in time he ambled clumsily into the conversation. It jarred, of course, but he could not be ignored, and gradually he claimed more and more of the talk until the young couple yielded to the monologue, smiling at each other in mutual understanding.

Emerson listened tolerantly, idly running through the magazines at his hand, his hostess watching him covertly, albeit her ears were drummed by the other's monotone. How much better this mood became the young man! Suddenly the smile of amusement that lurked about his lip corners and gave him a pleasing look hardened in a queer fashion--he started, then stared at one of the pages while the color died out of his brown cheeks. Cherry saw the hand that held the magazine tremble. He looked up at her, and, disregarding Fraser, broke in, harshly:

"Have you read this magazine?"

"Not entirely. It came in the last mail."

"I'd like to take one page out of it," he said. "May I?"

"Why, certainly," she replied. "You may have the whole thing if you like." He produced a knife, and with one quick stroke cut a single leaf out of the magazine, which he folded and thrust into the breast of his coat.

"Thank you," he muttered; then fell to staring ahead of him, again heedless of his surroundings. This abrupt relapse into his former state of sullen and defiant silence tantalized the girl to the verge of anger, especially now that she had seen something of his true self. She was painfully conscious of a sense of betrayal at having yielded so easily to his pleasant mood, only to be shut out on an instant's whim, while a girlish curiosity to know the cause of the change overpowered her. He offered no explanation, however, and took no further part in the conversation until, noting the lateness of the hour, he rose and thanked her for her hospitality in the same deadly indifferent manner.

"The music was a great treat," he said, looking beyond her and holding aloof--"a very great treat. I enjoyed it immensely. Good-night."

Cherry Malotte had experienced a new sensation, and she didn't like it. She vowed angrily that she disliked men who looked past her; indeed, she could not recall any other who had ever done so. Her chief concern had always been to check their ardor. She resolved viciously that before she was through with this young man he would make her a less listless adieu. She assured herself that he was a selfish, sullen boor, who needed to be taught a lesson in manners for his own good if for nothing else; that a woman's curiosity had ought to do with her exasperation she would have denied. She abhorred curiosity. As a matter of fact, she told herself that he did not interest her in the least, except as a discourteous fellow who ought to be shocked into a consciousness of his bad manners, and therefore the moment the two men were well out of the room she darted to the table, snatched up the magazine, and skimmed through it feverishly. Ah! here was the place!



A woman's face with some meaningless name beneath filled each page. Along the top ran the heading, "Famous American Beauties." So it was a woman! She skipped backward and forward among the pages for further possible enlightenment, but there was no article accompanying the pictures. It was merely an illustrated section devoted to the photographs of prominent actresses and society women, most of whom she had never heard of, though here and there she saw a name that was familiar. In the centre was that tantalizingly clean-cut edge which had subtracted a face from the gallery --a face which she wanted very much to see. She paused and racked her brain, her brows furrowed with the effort at recollection, but she had only glanced at the pages when the magazine came, and had paid no attention to this part of it. Her anger at her failure to recall this particular face aroused her to the fact that she was acting very foolishly, at which she laughed aloud.

"Well, what of it?" she demanded of the empty room. "He's in love with some society ninny, and I don't care what she looks like." She shrugged her shoulders carelessly; then, in a sudden access of fury, she flung the mutilated magazine viciously into a far corner of the room.

The travellers slept late on the following morning, for the weariness of weeks was upon them, and the little bunk-room they occupied adjoined the main building and was dark. When they came forth they found Chakawana in the store, and a few moments later were called to breakfast.

"Where is your mistress?" inquired Boyd.

"She go see my sick broder," said the Indian girl, recalling Cherry's mention of the child ill with measles. "She all the time give medicine to Aleut babies," Chakawana continued. "All the time give, give, give something. Indian people love her."

"She's sort of a Lady Bountiful to these bums," remarked Fraser.

"Does she let them trade in yonder?" Boyd asked, indicating the store.

"Oh yes! Everything cheap to Indian people. Indian got no money, all the same." Then, as if realizing that her hasty tongue had betrayed some secret of moment, the Aleut girl paused, and, eying them sharply, demanded, "What for you ask?"

"No reason in particular."

"What for you ask?" she insisted. "Maybe you b'long Company, eh?" Emerson laughed, but she was not to be put off easily, and, with characteristic guile, announced boldly: "I lie to you. She no trade with Aleut people. No; Chakawana lie!"

"She's afraid we'll tell this fellow Marsh," Fraser remarked to Emerson; then, as if that name had some powerful effect upon their informant, Chakawana advanced to the table, and, leaning over it, said:

"You know Willis Marsh?" Her pretty wooden face held a mingled expression of fear, malice, and curiosity.

"Ouch!" said Fraser, shoving back from his plate. "Don't look at me like that before I've had my coffee."

"Maybe you know him in San Francisco, eh?"

"No, no! We never heard of him until last night."

"I guess you lie!" She smiled at them wheedlingly, but Boyd reassured her.

"No! We don't know him at all."

"Then what for you speak his name?"

"Miss Malotte told us about him at dinner."

"Oh!"

"By-the-way, what kind of a looking feller is he?" asked Fraser.

"He's fine, han'some man," said Chakawana. "Nice fat man. Him got hair like--like fire."

"He's fat and red-headed, eh? He must be a picture."

"Yes," agreed the girl, rather vaguely.

"Is he married?"

"I don't know. Maybe he lie. Maybe he got woman."

"The masculine sex seems to stand like a band of horse-thieves with this dame," Fraser remarked to his companion. "She thinks we're all liars."

After a moment, Chakawana continued, "Where you go now?"

"To the States; to the 'outside,'" Boyd answered.

"Then you see Willis Marsh, sure thing. He lives there. Maybe you speak, eh?"

"Well, Mr. Marsh may be a big fellow around Kalvik, but I don't think he occupies so much space in the United States that we will meet him," laughed Emerson; but even yet the girl seemed unconvinced, and went on rather fearfully: "Maybe you see him all the same."

"Perhaps. What then?"

"You speak my name?"

"Why, no, certainly not."

"If I see him, I'll give him your love," offered "Fingerless" Fraser, banteringly; but Chakawana's light-hued cheeks blanched perceptibly, and she cried, quickly:

"No! No! Willis Marsh bad, bad man. You no speak, please! Chakawana poor Aleut girl. Please?"

Her alarm was so genuine that they reassured her; and having completed their meal, they rose and left the room. Outside, Fraser said: "This cannery guy has certainly buffaloed these savages. He must be a slave-driver." Then as they filled their pipes, he added: "She was plumb scared

to death of him, wasn't she?"

"Think so?" listlessly.

"Sure. Didn't she show it?"

"Um-m, I suppose so."

They were still talking when they heard the jingle of many bells, then a sharp command from Constantine, and the next instant the door burst open to admit Cherry, who came with a rush of youth and health as fresh as the bracing air that followed her. The cold had reddened her cheeks and quickened her eyes; she was the very embodiment of the day itself, radiantly bright and tinglingly alive.

"Good-morning, gentlemen!" she cried, removing the white fur hood which gave a setting to her sparkling eyes and teeth. "Oh, but it's a glorious morning! If you want to feel your blood leap and your lungs tingle, just let Constantine take you for a spin behind that team. We did the five miles from the village in seventeen minutes."

"And how is your measley patient?" asked Fraser.

"He's doing well, thank you." She stepped to the door to admit Chakawana, who had evidently hurried around from the other house, and now came in, bareheaded and heedless of the cold, bearing a bundle clasped to her breast. "I brought the little fellow home with me. See!"

The Indian girl bore her burden to the stove, where she knelt to lift the covering from the child's face.

"Hey there! Look out!" ejaculated Fraser, retreating in alarm. "I never had no measles." But Chakawana went on cuddling the infant in a motherly fashion while Cherry reassured her guests.

"Is that an Indian child?" asked Emerson, curiously, noting the little fellow's flushed fair skin. The kneeling girl turned upward a pair of tearful, defiant eyes, answering quickly:

"Yes, him Aleut baby."

"Him our little broder," came the deep voice of Constantine, who had entered unnoticed; and a moment later, in obedience to an order from Cherry, they bore their charge to their own quarters at the rear.

## CHAPTER IV

### IN WHICH SHE GIVES HEART TO A HOPELESS MAN

"I dare say Kalvik is rather lively during the summer season," Emerson remarked to Cherry, later in the day.

"Yes; the ships arrive in May, and the fish begin to run in July. After that nobody sleeps."

She had come upon him staring dispiritedly at the fire, and his dejection softened her and drew out her womanly sympathy. She had renewed her efforts to cheer him up, seeking to stir him out of the gloom that imprisoned him. With the healthy optimism and exuberance of her normal youth she could not but deplore the mischance that had changed him into the sullen, silent brute he seemed.

"It must be rather interesting," he observed, indifferently.

"It is more than that; it is inspiring. Why, the story of the salmon is an epic in itself. You know they live a cycle of four years, no more, always returning to the waters of their nativity to die; and I have heard it said that during one of those four years they disappear, no one knows where, reappearing out of the mysterious depths of the sea as if at a signal. They come by the legion, in countless scores of thousands; and when once they have tasted the waters of their birth they never touch food again, never cease their onward rush until they become bruised and battered wrecks, drifting down from the spawning-beds. When the call of nature is answered and the spawn is laid they die. They never seek the salt sea again, but carpet the rivers with their bones. When they feel the homing impulse they come from the remotest depths, heading unerringly for the particular parent stream whence they originated. If sand-bars should block their course in dry seasons or obstacles intercept them, they will hurl themselves out of the water in an endeavor to get across. They may disregard a thousand rivers, one by one; but when they finally taste the sweet currents which flow from their birthplaces their whole nature changes, and even their physical features alter: they grow thin, and the head takes on the sinister curve of the preying bird."

"I had no idea they acted that way," said Boyd. "You paint a vivid picture."

"That's because they interest me. As a matter of fact, these fisheries are more fascinating than any place I've ever seen. Why, you just ought to witness the 'run.' These empty waters become suddenly crowded, and the fish come in a great silver horde, which races up, up, up toward death and obliteration. They come with the violence of a summer storm; like a prodigious gleaming army they swarm and bend forward, eager, undeviating, one-purposed. It's quite impossible to describe it--this great silver horde. They are entirely defenceless, of course, and almost every living thing preys upon them. The birds congregate in millions, the four-footed beasts come down from the hills, the Apaches of the sea harry them in dense droves, and even man appears from distant coasts to take his toll; but still they press bravely on. The clank of machinery makes the hills rumble, the hiss of steam and the sighs of the soldering-furnaces are like the complaint of some giant overgorging himself. The river swarms with the fleets of fish-boats, which skim outward with the dawn to flit homeward again at twilight and settle like a vast brood of white-winged gulls. Men let the hours go by unheeded, and forget to sleep."

"What sort of men do they hire?"

"Chinese, Japs, and Italians, mainly. It's like a foreign country here, only there are no women. The bunk-rooms are filled with opium fumes and noisy with clacking tongues. On one side of the village streets the Orientals burn incense to their Joss, across the way the Latins worship

the Virgin. They work side by side all day until they are ready to drop, then mass in the street and knife each other over their rival gods."

"How long does it all last?"

"Only about six weeks; then the furnace fires die out, the ships are loaded, the men go to sleep, and the breezes waft them out into the August haze, after which Kalvik sags back into its ten months' coma, becoming, as you see it now, a dead, deserted village, shunned by man."

"Jove! you have a graphic tongue," said Boyd, appreciatively. "But I don't see how those huge plants can pay for their upkeep with such a short run."

"Well, they do; and, what's more, they pay tremendously; sometimes a hundred per cent. a year or more."

"Impossible!" Emerson was now thoroughly aroused, and Cherry continued:

"Two years ago a ship sailed into port in early May loaded with an army of men, with machinery, lumber, coal, and so forth. They landed, built the plant, and had it ready to operate by the time the run started. They made their catch, and sailed away again in August with enough salmon in the hold to pay twice over for the whole thing. Willis Marsh did even better than that the year before, but of course the price of fish was high then. Next season will be another big year."

"How is that?"

"Every fourth season the run is large; nobody knows why. Every time there is a Presidential election the fish are shy and very scarce; that lifts prices. Every year in which a President of the United States is inaugurated they are plentiful."

Boyd laughed. "The Alaska salmon takes more interest in politics than I do. I wonder if he is a Republican or a Democrat?"

"Inasmuch as he is a red salmon, I dare say you'd call him a Socialist," laughed Cherry.

Emerson rose, and began to pace back and forth. "And you mean to say the history of the other canneries is the same?"

"Certainly."

"I had no idea there were such profits in the fisheries up here."

"Nobody knows it outside of those interested. The Kalvik River is the most wonderful salmon river in the world, for it has never failed once; that's why the Companies guard it so jealously; that's why they denied you shelter. You see, it is set away off here in one corner of Behring Sea without means of communication or access, and they intend to keep it so."

It was evident that the young man was vitally interested now. Was it the prospective vision of almighty dollars that was needed to release the hidden spring that had baffled the girl? With this clue in mind, she watched him closely and fed his eagerness.

"These figures you mention are on record?" he inquired.

"I believe they are available."

"What does it cost to install and operate a cannery for the first season?"

"About two hundred thousand dollars, I am told. But I believe one can mortgage his catch or borrow money on it from the banks, and so not have to carry the full burden."

The man stared at his companion with unseeing eyes for a moment, then asked: "What's to prevent me from going into the business?"

"Several things. Have you the money?"

"Possibly. What else?"

"A site."

"That ought to be easy."

Cherry laughed. "On the contrary, a suitable cannery site is very hard to get, because there are natural conditions necessary, fresh flowing water for one; and, furthermore, because the companies have taken them all up."

"Ah! I see." The light died out of Emerson's eyes, the eagerness left his voice. He flung himself dejectedly into a chair by the fire, moodily watching the flames licking the burning logs. All at once he gripped the arms of his chair, and muttered through set jaws: "God, I'd like to take one more chance!" The girl darted a swift look at him, 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."

He nodded agreement. "There's no use taking chances. I'm in no hurry. I wish there was some way of repaying you for your kindness. We were pretty nearly played out when we got here."

"Oh, I'm quite selfish," she disclaimed. "If you endured a few months of this monotony, you'd understand."

During the rest of that day Boyd was conscious several times of being regarded with scrutinizing eyes by Cherry. At dinner, and afterward in the living-room while Fraser talked, he surprised the same questioning look on her face. Again she played for him, but he refused to sing, maintaining an unbroken taciturnity. After they retired she sat long alone, her brows furrowed as if wrestling with some knotty problem. "I wonder if he would do it!" she said, at last. "I wonder if he could do it!" She rose, and began to pace the floor; then added, as if in desperation: "Well, I must do something, for this can't last. Who knows--perhaps this is my chance; perhaps he has been sent."

There are times when momentous decisions are influenced by the most trivial circumstances; times when affairs of the greatest importance are made or marred by the lift of an eyebrow or the tone of a voice; times when life-long associations are severed and new ties contracted purely upon intuition, and this woman felt instinctively that such an hour had now struck for her. It was late before she finally came to peace with the conflict in her mind and lay herself down to rest.

On the following morning she 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. Half an hour later he wrapped her up in the sledge-robe and took station at the rear, whip in hand. Constantine freed the leader, and they went off at a mad run, whisking out from the buildings and swooping down the steep bank to the main-travelled trail. When they had gained the level and the dogs were straightened into their gait, they skimmed over the snow with the flight of a bird.

"That's a wonderful team you have," Boyd observed, as he glanced over the double row of undulating gray backs and waving plume-like tails.

"The best in the country," she smiled back at him. "They are good for a hundred miles a day."

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. He watched her in silence; but when he forebore to question her, she turned, exposing a rounded, ravishing cheek, glowing against the white fur of her hood.

"Have you no curiosity, sir?"

"None! Nothing but satisfaction," he observed.

It was his first attempt at gallantry, and she flashed him a bright, approving glance. Then, as if suddenly checked by second thought, she frowned slightly and turned away. She had mapped out a course of action during the night in which it was her purpose to use this man if he proved amenable, but the success of her plan would depend largely on a continuance of their present friendly relations. In order, therefore, to forestall any possible change of base, she began to unfold her scheme in a business-like tone:

"Yesterday you seemed to be taken by the fishing business."

"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 have hung on to it."

"Is that where we are going?"

"Yes. You seemed eager yesterday to get in on a new chance, so I am taking you out to look over the ground."

"What's the use? I can't buy your site."

"Nobody asked you to," she smiled. "I wouldn't sell it to you if you had 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--two hundred thousand dollars, you said?"

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

"I might. I have some wealthy friends," he said, cautiously. "But I am not sure."

"At least you can try? That's all anybody can do."

"But I don't know anything about the business. I couldn't make it succeed."

"I've thought of all that, and there's a way to make success certain. I believe you have executive ability and can handle 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's been a fisherman all his life. He discovered the Kalvik River, built the first cannery here, and was its foreman until he quarrelled with Marsh, who proceeded to discipline him. 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. That suited Marsh exactly; he broke George in a year, absolutely ruined him, utterly wiped him out, just as he intends to wipe out insignificant me! Thinking to bide his time and recoup his fallen 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, so they disciplined him some more. He's been starving now for two years. Marsh and his companions rule this region just as the Hudson's Bay Company used to govern its concessions: by controlling the natives and preventing independent white men from gaining a foothold.

"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 meagre thousands he has invested in buildings, so he has stayed on living off the country like a Siwash. He's a simple, big-hearted sort of fellow, but his life is centred in this business; it's all he knows. He considers himself the father of this section; and when he sees others rounding up the task that he began, it breaks his poor heart. Why, 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 the 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. No man is allowed to speak to him or render him any sort of fellowship, and it has made the man half mad, it has turned him into a vengeful, hate-filled fanatic, living only for retaliation. 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.

"Yes. His aim is to gain control of this whole region, and if you decide to go into the enterprise you must expect to find him the most unscrupulous and vindictive enemy ever man had; make no mistake about that. It's only fair to warn you that this will be no child's play; but, on the other hand, the man who beats Marsh will have done something." She paused as if weighing her next words, then said, deliberately: "And I believe you are the one to do it."

But Emerson was not concerned about his destiny just then, nor for the dangerous enmity of Marsh. He was following another train of thought.

"And so Balt knows this business from the inside out?" he said.

"Thoroughly; every dip, angle, and spur of it, so to speak. He's practical and he's honest, in addition to which his trap-site is the key to the whole situation. You see, the salmon run in regular definite courses, year after year, just as if they were following a beaten track. At certain places these courses come close to the shore where conditions make it possible to drive piling and build traps which intercept them by the million. One trap will do the work of an army of fishermen with nets in deep water. It is to get this property for himself that Marsh has persecuted George so unflinchingly."

"Would he join us in such an enterprise, with five chances to one against success?"

"Would he!" Cherry laughed. "Wait and see."

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.

"It all sounds wonderfully attractive and feasible," said Boyd, at last; "but we must weigh the overwhelming odds against success. First, of course, is the question of capital. I have a little property of my own which I can convert. But two hundred thousand dollars! That's a tremendous sum to raise, even for a fellow with a circle of wealthy friends. Second, there's the question of time. It's now early December, and I'd have to be back here by the first of May. Third, could I run the plant and make it succeed? It must be a wonderfully technical business, and I am utterly ignorant of every phase of it. Then, too, there are a thousand other difficulties, such as getting machinery out here in time, hiring Chinese

labor, chartering a ship, placing the output--"

"George Balt has done all that many times, and knows everything about it," Cherry interrupted, with decision. "Every difficulty can be met when the time comes. What other people have done, you ought to be able to do."

But he was not to be won by flattery. Youth that he was, he already knew the vanity of human hopes, and it was his nature to look at all sides of a question before answering it finally.

"The slightest error of judgment would mean failure and ruin," he reflected, "for this country isn't like any other. It is cut off from the rest of the world, and there's no time to go back and pick up."

"The odds are great, of course," she acquiesced, "but the winnings are in proportion. It isn't casino, by any means. This is worth while. Every man who has done anything in this world believes in a goddess of luck, and it's the element of chance that makes life worth living."

"That's all right in theory," he answered her, somewhat cynically, "but in practice you'll find that luck is largely the result of previous judgment. For every obstacle I have mentioned, a thousand unsuspected difficulties will arise, any one of which--" The girl interrupted him sharply for a second time, looking him squarely in the eyes, her own flushed face alight with determination.

"There's only one person in the whole world who can defeat you, and that person is yourself; and no man can finish a task before he begins it. We'll grant there's a chance for failure--a million chances; but don't try to count them. Count the chances for success. Don't be faint-hearted, for there's no such thing as fear. It doesn't exist. It's merely an absence of courage, just as indecision is merely a lack of decision. I never saw anything yet of which I was afraid--and you're a man. The deity of success is a woman, and she insists on being won, not courted. You've got to seize her and bear her off, instead of standing under her window with a mandolin. You need to be rough and masterful with her. Nobody ever reasoned himself out of a street fight. He had to act. If a man thinks over a proposition long enough it will whip him, no matter how simple it is. It's the lightning flash that guides a man. You must lay your course in the blue dazzle, then follow it in the dark; and when you come to the end, it always lightens again. Don't stand still, staring through the gloom, and then try to walk while the lightning lasts, because you won't get anywhere."

Her words were charged with an electric force that communicated itself to the young man and galvanized him into action. He would have spoken, but she stayed him, and went on:

"Wait; I'm not through yet. I've watched you, and I know you are down on your luck for some reason. You've been miscast 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 to-night."

## CHAPTER V

### IN WHICH A COMPACT IS FORMED

Now that he had committed himself to action, Boyd Emerson became a different being. He was no longer the dispirited cynic of yesterday, but an eager, voluble optimist athirst for knowledge and afire with impatience. On the homeward drive he had bombarded Cherry with a running fusillade of questions, so that by the time they had arrived at her house she was mentally and physically fatigued. He seemed insatiable, drawing from her every atom of information she possessed, and although he was still hard, incisive, and aloof, it was in quite a different way. The intensity of his concentration had gathered all feeling into one definite passion, and had sucked him dry of ordinary emotions.

In the days that followed she was at his 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 he was working against time, that there was a limit to his period of action, for he 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 reconnoitring 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 hostess. He covered the plant like a ferret; he showed such powers of adaptability and assimilation as to excite the girl's wonder; his grasp of detail was instant; his retentive faculty tenacious; he never seemed to rest.

"Why, you already know more about a cannery than a superintendent does," she remarked, after nearly a week of this. "I believe you could build one yourself."

He smiled. "I'm an engineer by education, and this is really in my line. It's the other part that has me guessing."

"Balt can handle that."

"But why doesn't he come?" he questioned, crossly. A score of times he had voiced his impatience, and Cherry was hard pushed to soothe him.

Nor was she the only one to note the change in him; Fraser followed him about and looked on in bewilderment.

"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. Of course, he ain't what you'd call genial and expansive yet, but he's developed a remarkable burst of speed, and seems downright hopeful at times."

"Hopeful of what?"

"Ah! that's where I wander; he's a puzzle to me. Hopeful of making money, I suppose."

"That isn't it. I can see he doesn't care for the money itself," the girl declared, emphatically. She would have liked to ask Fraser if he knew anything about the mysterious beauty of the magazine, but refrained.

"I don't think so, either," said the man. "He acts more like somebody was going to ring the gong on him if this fish thing don't let him out. It seems to be a case bet with him."

"It's a case bet with me, too," said the girl. "My men are ready to quit, and--well, Willis Marsh will see that I am financially ruined!"

"Oho! So this is your only 'out,'" grinned "Fingerless" Fraser. "Now, I had a different idea as to why you got Emerson started." He was observing her shrewdly.

"What idea, pray?"

"Well, talking straight and side-stepping subterfuge, this is a lonely place for a woman like you, and our mutual friend ain't altogether unattractive."

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 damn 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 here till 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 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, in a tone that closed the conversation.

Late one stormy night--Constantine had been gone a week--the two men whom they were expecting blew in through the blinding smother, half frozen and well-nigh exhausted, with the marks of hard travel showing in their sunken cheeks and in the bleeding pads of their dog-team. But although a hundred miles of impassable trails lay behind them, Balt refused rest or nourishment until he had learned why Cherry had sent for him.

"What's wrong?" he demanded of her, staring with suspicious eyes at the strangers.

As briefly as possible she outlined the situation the while Boyd Emerson took his measure, for no person quite like this fisherman had ever crossed the miner's path. He saw a huge, barrel-chested creature whose tremendous muscles bulged beneath his nondescript garments, whose red, upstanding bristle 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 jaw was long, and the seams from nostril and lip, half hidden behind a stiff stubble, gave it the set of granite. His hands were gnarled and cracked from an age-long immersion in brine, his voice was hoarse with the echo of drumming ratlines. He might have lived forty, sixty years, but every year had been given to the sea, for its breath was in his lungs, its foaming violence was in his blood.

As the significance of Cherry's words sank into his mind, the signs of an unholy joy overspread the fisherman's visage; his thick lips writhed into an evil grin, and his hairy paws continued to open and close hungrily.

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

"I do."

"Can you fight?"

"Yes."

"Will you do what I tell you, or have you got a lot of sick notions?"

"No," the young man declared, stoutly, "I have no scruples; but I won't do what you or anybody else tells me. I'll do what I please. I intend to run this enterprise absolutely, and run it my way."

"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 time wondering how far I'll go. What I want to know is if you will join my enterprise."

The giant uttered a mirthless chuckle. "I'll give my life to it."

"I knew you would," flashed Cherry, her eyes beaming.

"And if we don't beat Willis Marsh, by God, I'll kill him!" Balt shouted, fully capable of carrying out his threat, for his bloodshot eyes were lit with bitter hatred and the memory of his wrongs was like gall in his

mouth. Turning to the girl, he said:

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

He ripped the ragged parka from his back and flung it in a sodden heap beside the stove; then strode after her, with the others following.

She seated him at her table and spread food before him--great quantities of food, which he devoured ravenously, humped over in his seat like a bear, his jaw hanging close to his plate. His appetite was as ungoverned as his temper; he did not taste his meal nor note its character, but demolished whatever fell first to his hand, staring curiously up from under his thatched brows at Emerson, now and then grunting some interruption to the other's rapid talk. Of Cherry and of "Fingerless" Fraser, who regarded him with awe, he took not the slightest heed. He gorged himself with sufficient provender for four people; then observing that the board was empty, swept the crumbs and remnants from his lips, and rose, saying:

"Now, let's go out by the stove. I've been cold for three days."

Cherry left the two of them there, and long after she had gone to bed she heard the murmur of their voices.

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

"To-morrow?" she echoed, blankly.

"To-morrow?" likewise questioned Fraser, in alarm. "Oh, say! You can't do that. My feet are too sore to travel. I've certainly got a bad pair of 'dogs.'"

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

Cherry turned to the fisherman. "You can't get ready so soon, George."

"I'm ready now," answered the big fellow.

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 Behring coast. She cast a frightened glance at Emerson, but none of the men noticed it. Even if they had observed the light that had come into those clear eyes, they would not have known it for the dawn of a new love any more than she herself realized what her reasonless fears betokened. She had little time to ponder, however, for 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 Iliamna route."

"The other is shorter."

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'm for the long, safe proposition every time," Fraser announced, as if settling the matter definitely, languidly filling his pipe.

Boyd's voice broke in curtly upon his reverie. "You're not going with us."

"The hell I ain't!" exploded the other. "Why not?"

"There won't be room. You understand--it's hard travelling with three."

"Oh, see here, now, pal! You promised to take me to the States," the adventurer demurred. "You wouldn't slough me at this gravel-pit, after you \_promised?"\_ He was visibly alarmed.

"Very well," said Emerson, resignedly, "If you feel that way about it, come along; but I won't take you east of Seattle."

"Seattle ain't so bad," Fraser replied. "I guess I can pick up a pinch of change there, all right. But Kalvik--Wow!"

"Why do you have to go so soon?" Cherry asked Emerson, when the two others had left them.

"Because every day counts."

"But why the Katmai route? It's the stormy season, and you may have to wait two weeks for the mail-boat after you reach the coast."

"Yes; but, on the other hand, if we should miss it by one day, it would mean a month's delay. She ought to be due in about ten days, so we can't take any chances."

"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. "That's only another reason for you to continue, however. Why have you suddenly weakened?"

"Because I see you don't realize what you are going into," she said, desperately. "Because you don't appreciate the character of the men you will clash with. There is actual physical peril attached to this undertaking, and Marsh won't hesitate to--to do anything under the sun to balk you. It isn't worth while risking your life for a few dollars."

"Oh, isn't it!" Emerson laughed a trifle harshly. "My dear girl, you don't know what I am willing to risk for those 'few dollars'; you don't know what success means to me. Why, if I don't make this thing win, I'll be perfectly willing to let Marsh wreak his vengeance upon me--I might even help him."

"Oh no!"

"You may rest assured of one thing: if he is unscrupulous, so shall I be. If he undertakes to check me, I'll--well, I'll fight fire with fire."

His face was not pleasant to look at now, and the girl felt an access of that vague alarm which had been troubling her of late. She saw again that old light of sullen desperation in the man's eye, and marked with it a new, dogged, dangerous gleam as of one possessed, which proclaimed his extreme necessity.

"But what has occurred to make you change your mind?" he asked, causing the faintest flush to rise in her cheeks.

"A few days ago you were a stranger, now you are a friend," she replied, 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."

"Balt 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 didn't crave the pleasure of earning it nor the thrill of finding it; I just wanted the thing itself, and came up here because I thought the opportunities were greater here than elsewhere. I'd have gone to the Sahara or into Thibet just as willingly. I left behind a good many things to which I had been raised, and forsook opportunities which to most fellows of my age would seem golden; but I did it eagerly, because I had only three years of grace and knew I must win in that time. Well, I went at it. No chance was too desperate, no peril was too great, no hardship too intense for me. I bent every effort to my task, until mind and body became sleepless, unresting implements for the working out of my purpose. I lost all sensibility to effort, to fatigue, to physical suffering; I forgot all things in the world except my one idea. I focussed 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. Month after month, year by year, it rose with me at dawn and lay down by me at night. Misfortune beleaguered me and dogged my heels, until it became a thing of amusement to every one except myself. To me 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 particular locality before, it pinched out. I tried again and again and again, and finally found another mine, only to be robbed of it by the Canadian laws in such a manner that there wasn't the faintest hope of my recovering the property. Men told me about opportunities they couldn't avail themselves of, and, although I did what they themselves would have done, these chances proved to be ghastly jokes. 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 bed-rock swept clean by that unseen hand which I always felt but could never avoid. I leased proven properties, only to find that the pay ceased without reason. I did this so frequently that owners began to refuse me and came to consider me a thing of evil omen. Once a broken snow-shoe 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 outdinned his voice. Six hours later Topkuk was history. You've seen stampedes--you understand.

"My name became a by-word and caused people to laugh, though they shrank 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.

"Three years isn't very long as you measure time, but the death-watch drags, and the priest's prayers are an eternity when the hangman waits outside. But the time came and passed at length, and I saw my beautiful breathing dream become a rotting corpse. Still, I struggled along, until one day something snapped and I gave up--for all time. I realized, as you said, that I was 'miscast,' that I had never been of this land, so I was headed for home. Home!" Emerson smiled bitterly. "The word doesn't mean anything to me now, but anyhow I was headed for God's country, an utter failure, in a worse plight than when I came here, when you put this last chance in front of me. It may be another *\_ignis fatuus\_*, such as the others I have pursued, for I have been chasing rainbows now for three years, and I suppose I shall go on chasing them; but as long as there is a chance left, I can't quit--I *\_can't\_*. And something tells me that I have left that ill-omened thing behind at last, and I am going to win!"

Cherry had listened eagerly to this bitter tirade, and was deeply touched by the pathos of the youth's sense of failure. His poignant pessimism, however, only seemed to throw into relief the stubborn fixedness of his dominant purpose. The moving cause of it all, whatever it was--and it

could only be a woman--aroused a burning curiosity in her, and she said:

"But you're too late. 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." He turned his eyes directly upon her, and concluded, in a matter-of-fact tone: "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 VI

### WHEREIN BOREAS TAKES A HAND

All that day the men busied themselves in preparation for the start. Balt was ferociously exultant, Emerson was boiling with impatience, while Fraser, whose calm nothing disturbed, slept most of the time, observing that this was his last good bed for a while, and therefore he wished to make it work.

Beneath her quiet cheerfulness, Cherry nursed a forlorn heart; for when these men were gone she would be left alone and friendless again, buried in the heart of an inaccessible wilderness, given over to her fears and the intrigues of her enemies. She had eyes mainly for Emerson, and although in her glance there was good-fellowship, in her heart was hot resentment--first at him because he had awakened in her the warm interest she felt for him, and, second, at herself for harboring any such interest. Why should this self-centred youth, wrapped up in his own affairs to her own utter exclusion, give her cause to worry? Why should she allow him to step into her quiet life and upset her well-ordered existence?

"How do you like him?" she asked Balt, once.

"He's my style, all right," said the big man. "He's desp'rate, and he'll fight; that's what I want--somebody that won't blench at anything when the time comes." He ground his teeth, and his red eyes flamed, reflecting the sense of injury that seared his brain. "What he don't know about the business, I do, and we'll make it win. But, say, ain't he awful at asking questions? My head aches and my back is lame from answering him. Seems like he remembers it all, too."

Goaded by the wrong he had suffered, and almost maniacal in his eagerness for the coming struggle, the giant's frenzy told Cherry that the fight would be an unrelenting one, and again a vague tremor of regret at having drawn this youth into the affair crept over her and sharpened the growing pain at her heart.

During the evening Emerson left the two other men in the store, and, seeking her out in the little parlor, asked her to play for him. She consented gladly, and, as on their first evening together, he sang with her. 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. This had been the only companionship with her own kind she had enjoyed for months, and with his melting mood came a softening of her own nature, in which she appeared before him gracious and irresistible. Banteringly, and rising out of his elation, he tried to please her, and, in the same spirit that calls the bird to its mate, she responded. 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. When he said good-night it was with a wholly new conception of his hostess, and of her power to charm as well as manage men and affairs; but he could well have dispensed with an uncomfortable feeling that came over him as he reviewed the events of the evening over a last pipe, that he had been playing with fire. 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 good-byes 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 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.

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

The others had not observed his leave-taking, and now cried a final farewell; 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 sick 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. This range forms a giant, ice-armored tusk thrust out to the westward and curved like the horn of an African rhino, its tip pointed eight hundred miles toward the Asiatic coast, its soaring peaks veiled in perpetual mist and volcanic fumes, its slopes agleam with lonely ice-fields. It is a saw-toothed ridge, for the most part narrow, unbroken, and cruel, and the rival winter gales roar over it in a never-ceasing war. On the north lies the Forgotten Land, to the south are the tempered reaches of the Pacific. In summer the stern sweep of rock and tundra is soaked with weeping rains, and given over to the herding caribou or the great grass-eating bear; but when from the polar regions the white hand of winter stretches forth, the grieving seas lift

themselves, the rain turns to bitter, hail-burdened hurricanes that charge and retreat in a death-dealing conflict, sheathing the barrier anew, and confounding the hearts of men on land and sea. The coast is unlighted and badly mapped, hence the shore is a graveyard for ships, while through the guts, which at intervals penetrate the range, the blizzards screech until travellers burrow into drifts to avoid their fury or lie out in stiff sleeping-bags exposed to their anger. It is a region of sudden storms, a battle-ground of the elements, which have swept it naked of cover in ages past, and it is peopled scantily by handfuls of coughing natives, whose igloos are hidden in hollows or chained to the ground with cables and ship's gear.

It was thither the travellers were bound, headed toward Katmai Pass, which is no more than a gap between peaks, through which the hibernal gales suck and swirl. This pass is even balder than the surrounding barrens, for it forms a funnel at each end, confining the winds and affording them freer course. Notwithstanding the fact that it had an appalling death-list and was religiously shunned, Emerson would hearken to no argument for a safer route, insisting that they could spare no time for detours. Nothing dampened his spirits, no hardship daunted him; he was tireless, ferocious in his haste.

A week of hard travel found them 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 to-day. 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 dassent 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 to-morrow."

"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."

Still unconvinced, and surly at the delay, Emerson resigned himself, while Balt saw to their sled, tended the dogs, and made final preparations.

"Fingerless" Fraser lay flat on his back and nursed a pair of swollen tendons that had been galled by his snowshoe thongs, reviling at the fortune that had cast him into such inhospitable surroundings, heaping anathemas upon the head of him who had invented snowshoes, complaining of everything in general, from the indigestible quality of baking-powder bread to the odor of the guide who crouched stolidly beside the stove, feeding it with green willows and twisted withes.

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. These labors, besides being intensely fatiguing, delayed them considerably, added to which the higher altitudes were covered with a soft eider-down that reached nearly to their knees and shoved ahead of the sled in great masses. Thus they dragged their burden through instead of over it.

By mid-day they had gained the summit, and found themselves in the heart of a huge desolation, hedged in by a chaos of peaks and pinnacles, the snows unbroken by twig or bush, untracked by living sign. Here and there the dark face of some white-cowled rock or cliff scowled at them, and although they were drenched with sweat and parched from thirst, nowhere was there the faintest tinkle of running water, while the dry powder under foot scratched their throats like iron filings when they turned to it for relief. All were jaded and silent, save Emerson, who urged them on incessantly.

It was early in the afternoon when the Indian stopped and began testing the air; Balt also seemed suddenly to scent a change in the atmospheric conditions.

"What's wrong now?" Emerson asked, gruffly.

"Feels like wind," answered the big man, with a shake of his head. The native began to chatter excitedly, and as they stood there a chill draught fanned their cheeks. Glancing upward at the hillsides, they saw that the air was now thickened as if by smoke, and, dropping their eyes, they saw the fluff beneath their feet stir lazily. 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. It was Dante's third circle of hell let loose-- Cerberus baying through his wide, threefold throat, and the voices of tormented souls shrilling through the infernal shades. It came from behind them, lifting the fur on the backs of the wolf-dogs and filling it with powder, pelting their hides with sharp particles until they refused to stand before it, and turned and crouched with flattened ears in the shelter of the sled. In an instant the wet faces of the men were dried and their steaming garments hardened to shells, while their blood began to move more sluggishly.

Fraser shouted something, but Emerson's whipping garments drowned the words, and without waiting to ascertain what the adventurer had said the young man ran forward and cut the dogs loose, while Balt and the guide fell to unlashing the sled, the tails of their parkas meanwhile snapping like boat sails, their cap strings streaming. As they freed the last knot the hurricane ripped the edge of the tarpaulin from their clumsy fingers, and, seizing a loosely folded blanket belonging to the native, snatched it away. The fellow clutched wildly at it, but the cloth sailed ahead of the blast as if on wings, then, dropping to the surface of the snow, opened out, whereupon some twisting current bore it aloft again, and it swooped down the hill like a great bat, followed by a wail of despair from the owner. Other loose articles on the top of the load were picked up like chaff--coffee pot, frying pan, and dishes--then hurtled away like charges of canister, rolling, leaping, skipping down into the swale ahead, then up over the next ridge and out of sight. But the men were too fiercely beset by the confusion to notice their loss. There was no question of facing the wind, for it was more cruel than the fierce breath of an open furnace, searing the naked 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.

The contour of the surrounding hills altered, the whole country took on a different aspect, due to the rapid charging of the atmosphere, the limits of vision grew shorter and strangely distorted. Although as yet the snows were barely beginning to move, the men knew they would shortly be forced to grope their way through dense clouds that would blot out every landmark, and the touch of which would be like the stroke of a red-hot rasp.

Balt 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 were 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 bared 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. At one place they followed a hog-back, where the rocks came to a sharp ridge

like the summit of a roof, this they bestrode, inching along a foot at a time, wearing through the palms of their mittens and chafing their garments. No cloth could withstand the roughened surfaces, and in time the bare flesh of their hands became exposed, but there was little sensation, and no time for rest or means of relief. Soon they began to leave blood stains behind them.

All four men were old in the ways of the North, and, knowing their present extremity, they steeled themselves to suffering, but their tortures were intense, not the least of which was thirst. Exhaustion comes quickly under such conditions.

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 inanition, so it was not surprising that as the long afternoon dragged to a close the Aleut guide began to weaken. He paused with more frequency, and it required more effort to start him; he fell oftener and rose with more difficulty, but the others were dependent upon his knowledge of the trail, and could not take the lead.

Darkness found them staggering on, supporting him wherever possible. At length he became unable to guide them 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.

At one time he begged them to leave him, and both Balt and "Fingerless" Fraser agreed, but Emerson would have none of it.

"He'll die, anyhow," argued the fisherman.

"He's as good as dead now," supplemented Fraser, "and we may be ten miles from timber."

"I made him come, and I'll take him through," said Emerson, stubbornly; and so they crawled their weary way, sore beset with their dragging burden. Slow at best, their advance now became snail-like, for darkness had fallen, and threatened to blot them out. It betrayed them down declivities, up and out of which they had to dig their way. In such descents they were forced to let go the helpless man, whose body rolled ahead of them like a boneless sack; but these very mishaps helped to keep the spark of life in him, for at every disheartening pause the others rubbed and pounded him, though they knew that their efforts were hopeless, and would have been better spent upon themselves.

Fraser, never a strong man, gave out in time, and it looked as if he might overtax the powers of the other two, but Balt's strength was that of a bull, while Emerson subsisted on his nerve, fairly consuming his soul.

They grew faint and sick, and knew themselves to be badly frozen; but their leader spurred them on, draining himself in the effort. For the first time Emerson realized that the adventurer had been a drag on him ever since their meeting.

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-insensible 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 tree-tops 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.

They walked Fraser around the fire all night, threshing his tortured body and fighting off their own deadly weariness, meanwhile absorbing the insufficient heat of the flames.

When daylight came they tried hard to lash the corpse into a spruce-top, but their strength was unequal to the task, and they were forced to leave the body to the mercy of the wolves as they turned their faces expectantly down the valley toward the village.

The day was well spent when they struggled into Katmai and plodded up to a half-rotted log store, the roof of which was protected from the winter gales by two anchor chains passed over the ridge and made fast to posts well buried in the ground. A globular, quarter-breed Russian trader, with eyes so crossed that he could distinguish nothing at a yard's distance, took them in and administered to their most crying needs, then dispatched an outfit for the guide's body.

The initial stage of the journey, Emerson realized with thanksgiving, was over. As soon as he was able to talk he inquired straightway 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?"

"No; she won't stop here coming back. Her contract don't call for it."

"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! Instead of losing the accursed thing that had hung over him these past three years, it had



merely redoubled its hold; that mocking power had held the bait of Tantalus before his eyes, only to hurl him back into hopeless despair; for, figuring with the utmost nicety, he had reckoned that there was just time to execute his mission, and even a month's delay would mean certain failure. He turned hopelessly toward his two companions, but Fraser had relapsed into a state of coma, while Big George was asleep beside the stove.

For a long time he stood silent and musing, while the fat storekeeper regarded him stupidly; then he fumbled with clumsy fingers at his breast, and produced the folded page of a magazine. He held it for a time without opening it; then crushed it slowly in his fist, and flung the crumpled ball into the open coals.

He sighed heavily, and turned upon the trader a frost-blackened countenance, out of which all the light had gone.

"Give us beds," he said; "we want to sleep."

## CHAPTER VII

### AND NEPTUNE TAKES ANOTHER

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. But he was too tired to sleep. His nerves had been filed to such a fine edge that slumber became a process which required long hours of coaxing, during which he tossed restlessly, a prey to those hideous nightmares that lurk on the border-land of dreams. His distorted imagination flung him again and again into the agonizing maelstrom of the last thirty-six hours, and in his waking moments the gaunt spectre of failure haunted him. This was no new apparition, but never before had it appeared so horrible as now. He was too worn out to rave, his strength was spent, and his mind wandered hither and thither like a rudderless ship. So he lay staring into the dark with dull, tragic eyes, utterly inert, his body racked by a thousand pains.

Nor did "Fingerless" Fraser meet with better fortune. He found little rest or sleep, and burdened the night with his groanings. His condition called for the frequent attendance of the trader, who ministered to his needs with the ease and certainty of long practice, rousing him now and then to give him nourishment, and redressing his frozen members when necessary. As for Balt, he slept like an Eskimo dog, wrapped in the senseless trance of complete physical relaxation. Being a creature of no imagination, he had taxed nothing beyond his body, which was capable of tremendous resistance, wherefore he escaped the nerve-racking torment and mental distress of the others.

As warmth and repose gradually adjusted the balance between mind and body,

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. Emerson's first inquiry was for the body of the guide.

"They brought him in this morning," answered the fisherman. "He's in cold storage at the church. When the priest comes over next month they'll bury him."

"He was a right nice feller," said Fraser, "but I'm glad I ain't in his mukluks. If you two hadn't stuck to me--well, him and me would have done a brother act at this church festival."

"How are your frost-bites?" Emerson asked, seating himself with painful care.

"Fine--all but the bum hook." He held up his crippled hand, which was well bandaged. "However, I guess I can save my gun-finger, so all is not lost."

"Have you heard about the mail-boat?"

"No."

"We've missed her."

"What d'you mean?" demanded Big George, blankly.

"I mean that the 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.

"I'll tell you what we'll do!" he cried, with a heavy attempt at meeting the problem. "We'll put off the scheme for a year. We'll take plenty of time, and open up a year from next spring."

"No," said Emerson, with a dejected shake of the head. "If I can't put it through on the flash, I can't do it at all. My time is up. I'm down and out. All our pretty plans have gone to smash. You'd better go back to Kalvik, George."

At this suggestion, Balt rose ponderously and began to rave. To see his vengeance slip from his grasp enraged him. He cursed shockingly, clinching his great fists above his head, and grinding forth imprecations which caused Fraser to quail and cry out aghast:

"Hey, you! Quit that! D'you want to hang a Jonah onto us?"

But the fisherman only goaded himself into a greater passion, during which Petellin, the storekeeper, entered, and forthwith began to cross himself devoutly. Observing this fervent pantomime, Balt turned upon the trader and directed his outburst at him:

"Where in hell is this steamer?"

"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 Kodiak Island," Big George answered; then turned again to vent his spleen on the trader.

"What right have them steamboat people got to cut out this place for an empty cannery? Why, there ain't nobody at Uyak. It's more of that damned Company business. They own this whole country, and run it to suit themselves."

"She ain't my boat," said Petellin. "You'd ought to have got here a few days sooner."

"My God! I'm sorry we waited at the Pass," said Emerson. "The weather couldn't have been any worse that first day than it was when we came across."

Detecting in this remark a criticism of his caution, Big George turned about and faced the speaker; but as he met Emerson's eye he checked the explosion, and, seizing his cap, bolted out into the cold to walk off his mad rage.

"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--Shelikof Straits."

"What of that! We can hire a sail-boat, and--"

"I ain't got any sail-boat. 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."

Emerson sank back into his chair, and stared hopelessly at the fire.

"Better have some breakfast," the trader continued; but the other only shook his head. And after a farewell squint of curiosity, the fat man rolled out again in pursuit of his duties.

"I've heard tell of these Shelikof Straits," Fraser remarked. "I bunked with a bear-hunter from Kodiak once, and he said they was certainly some hell in winter." When Emerson made no reply, the fellow's colorless eyes settled upon him with a trace of solicitude, and he resumed: "I'm doggone sorry you lost out, pal, but mebber something'll turn up yet." Then, seeing that the young man was deaf to his condolence, he muttered: "So, you've got 'em again, eh? Um!" As usual on such occasions, he fell into his old habit of reading aloud, as it were, an imaginary scene to himself:

"Yes, I've got 'em again," says Mr. Emerson, always eager to give entertainment with the English language. "I am indeed blue this afternoon. Won't you talk to me? I feel that the sound of a dear friend's voice will drive dull care away."

"Gladly," says I; "I am a silent man by birth and training, and my thoughts is jewels, but for you, I'll scatter them at large, and you can take your pick. Now, this salmon business ain't what it's cracked up to be, after all. It's a smelly proposition, no matter how you take it, and a fisherman ain't much better than a Reub; ask any wise guy. I'd rather see you in some profesh that don't stink so, like selling scented soap. There was a feller at Dyea who done well at it. What think you?"

"It's a dark night without," says Mr. Emerson, "and I fear some mischief is afoot!"

"But what of yonder beauteous--"

Unheeding this chatter, the disheartened man got up at this juncture, as if a sudden thought impelled 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 disgruntled fisherman, and cried, excitedly:

"I've got it! We'll catch that boat yet!"

"How?" growled the big man, sourly.

"There's a large open skin-boat, an oomiak, down on the beach. We'll hire a crew of Indians to put us across to Uyak."

"Can't be done," said Big George, still gruffly. "It's the wrong season. You know the Shelikof Straits is a bad place even for steamships at this time of year. They're like that Pass up yonder, only worse."

"But it's only fifty miles across."

"Fifty miles of that kind of water in an open canoe may be just as bad as five hundred--unless you're lucky. And I ain't noticed anything so damned lucky about us."

"Well, it's that or nothing. It's our only chance. Are you game?"

"Come on," cried Big George, "let's find Petellin!"

When that worthy heard their desire, he uttered a shriek of denial.

"In summer, yes, but now--you can't do it. It has been tried too often. The Straits is always rough, and the weather is too cold to sit all day in

an oomiak, you'd freeze."

"We'll chance it."

"No, \_no\_, NO! If it comes on to storm, you'll go to sea. The tides are strong; you can't see your course, and--"

"We'll use a compass. Now, you get me enough men to handle that oomiak, that's a good fellow. I'll attend to the rest."

"But they won't go," declared the little fat man. "They know what it means. Why--"

"Call them in. I'll do the talking." And accordingly the storekeeper went in search of the village chief, shaking his head and muttering at the madness of these people.

"Fingerless" Fraser, noticing the change in Balt and Emerson when they re-entered the store, questioned them as to what had happened; and in reply to his inquiry, Big George said:

"We're going to tackle the Straits in a small boat."

"What! Not on your life! Why, that's the craziest stunt I ever heard of. Don't you know--"

"Yes, we know," Emerson shut him up, brusquely. "You don't have to go with us."

"Well, I should say not. Hunh! Do I look like I'd do a thing like that? If I do, it's because I'm sick. I just got this far by a gnat's eyelash, and hereinafter I take the best of it every time."

"You can wait for the mail-boat."

"I certainly can, and, what's more, I will. And I'll register myself, too. There ain't goin' to be any accidents to me whatever."

Although the two men were pleased at the remote chance of catching the steamer, their ardor received a serious set-back when the trader came in with the head man of the village and a handful of hunters, for Emerson found that money was quite powerless to tempt them. Using the Russian as interpreter, he coaxed and wheedled, increasing his offer out of all proportion to the exigencies of the occasion; and still finding them obdurate, in despair he piled every coin he owned upon the counter. But the men only shook their heads and palavered among themselves.

"They say it's too cold," translated Petellin. "They will freeze, and money is no good to dead men." Another native spoke: "'It is very stormy this month,' they say. 'The waves would sink an open boat.'"

"Then they can put us across in bidarkas," insisted Emerson, who had noted the presence of several of these smaller crafts, which are nothing more than long walrus-hide canoes completely decked over, save for tiny cockpits wherein the paddlers sit. "They don't have to come back that way; they can wait at Uyak for the next trip of the steamer. Why, I'm offering them more pay than they can make in ten years."

"Better get them to do it," urged Big George. "You'll get the coin all

back from them; they'll have to trade here." But Petellin's arguments were as ineffective as Emerson's, and after an hour's futile haggling the natives were about to leave when Emerson said:

"Ask them what they'll take to sell me a bidarka."

"One hundred dollars," Petellin told him, after an instant's parley.

Emerson turned to George. "Will you tackle it alone with me?"

The fisherman hesitated. "Two of us couldn't make it. Get a third man, and I'll go you." Accordingly Emerson resumed the subject with the Indians, but now their answer was short and decisive. Not one of them would venture forth unless accompanied by one of his own kind, in whose endurance and skill with a paddle he had confidence. It seemed as if fate had laid one final insurmountable obstacle in the path of the two white men, when "Fingerless" Fraser, who had been a silent witness of the whole scene, spoke up, in his voice a bitter complaint:

"Well, that puts it up to me, I suppose. I'm always the fall guy, damn it!"

"\_You!\_ You go!" cried Emerson, astounded beyond measure at this offer, and still doubting. The fellow had so consistently shirked every hardship, and so systematically refused every hazard, no matter how slight!

"Well, I don't \_want\_ to," Fraser flared up, "you can just lay a bet on that. But these Siwashes won't stand the gaff, they're too wise; so I've \_got\_ to, ain't I?" He glared belligerently from one to the other.

"Can you handle a boat?" demanded Big George.

"Can I handle a--Hunh!" sniffed the fellow. "Say, just because you've got corns on your palms as big as pancakes, you needn't think you're the only human that ever pulled an oar. I was the first man through Miles Canon. During the big rush in '98 I ran the rapids for a living. I got fifty dollars a trip, and it only took me three minutes by the watch. That was the only easy money I ever picked up. Why, them tenderfeet used to cry like babies when they got a peek at them rapids. Can I handle a b----Yes, and I wish I was back there right now instead of hitched up with a pair of yaps that don't know when they're well off."

"But, look here, Fraser," Emerson spoke up, "I don't think you are strong enough for this trip. It may take us forty-eight hours of constant paddling against wind and tide to make Uyak. George and I are fit enough, but you know you aren't--"

"Fingerless" Fraser turned violently upon the speaker.

"Now, for Heaven's sake, cut that out, will you? Just because you happened to give me a little lift on this cussed Katmai Pass, I s'pose you'll never get done throwing it up to me. My feet were sore; that's why I petered out. If it hadn't been for my bum 'dogs' I'd have walked both of you down; but they were sore. Can't you understand? \_My feet were sore.\_"

He was whining now, and this unexpected angle of the man's disposition completely confused the others and left them rather at a loss what to say.

But before they could make any comment, he rose stiffly and blazed forth:

"But I won't start to-day. I hurt too much, and my mits is froze. If you want to wait till I'm healed up so I can die in comfort, why, go ahead and buy that fool-killer boat, and we'll all commit suicide together." He stumped indignantly out of the room, his friends too greatly dumfounded even to smile.

For the next two days the men rested, replenishing their strength; but Fraser developed a wolfish temper which turned him into a veritable chestnut burr. There was no handling him. His scars were not deep nor his hurts serious, however, so by the afternoon of the second day he announced, with surly distemper, that he would be ready to leave on the following morning, and the others accordingly made preparation for an early start. They selected the most seaworthy canoe, which at best was a treacherous craft, and stocked it well with water, cooked food, and stimulants.

Since their arrival at Katmai the weather had continued calm; and although the view they had through the frowning headlands showed the Straits black and angry, they prayed that the wind would hold off for another twenty-four hours. Again Petellin importuned them to forego this journey, and again they turned deaf ears to his entreaties and retired early, to awaken with the rickety log store straining at its cables under the force of a blizzard that had blotted out the mountains and was rousing the sea to fury. Fraser openly rejoiced, and Balt's heavy brows, which had carried a weight of trouble, cleared; but Emerson was plunged into as black a mood as that of the storm which had swallowed up the landscape. For three days the tempest held them prisoners, then died as suddenly as it had arisen; but the surf continued to thunder upon the beach for many hours, while Emerson looked on with hopeless, sullen eyes. When at last they did set out--a week, to a day, from their arrival at Katmai--it was to find such a heavy sea running outside the capes that they had hard shift to make it back to the village, drenched, dispirited, and well-nigh dead from the cold and fatigue. Although Fraser had fully recovered from his collapse, he nevertheless complained upon every occasion, and whined loudly at every ache. He voiced his tortures eloquently, and bewailed the fate that had brought his fortunes to such an ebb, burdening the air so heavily with his complaints that Big George broke out, in exasperation:

"Shut up! You don't have to go with us! I'd rather tackle it alone than listen to you!"

"That's right," agreed Emerson, whose patience was also worn out by the rogue's unceasing jeremiad. "We'll try it without him to-morrow."

"Oh, you will, will you?" snorted Fraser, indignantly. "So, after me getting well on purpose to make this trip, you want to dump me here with this fat man. I'll stand as much as anybody, but I won't stand for no deal like that. No, sir! You said I could go, and I'm going. Why, I'd rather drown than stick in this burgh with that greasy Russian porpoise. Gee! this is a shine village."

"Then take your medicine like a man, and quit kicking."

"If you prefer to swallow your groans, you do it. I like to make a fuss when I suffer. I enjoy it more that way."

Again Petellin called them at daylight, and they were off; this time with

better success, for the waves had abated sufficiently for them to venture beyond the partial shelter of the bay. All three knew the desperate chance they were taking, and they spoke little as they made their way out into the Straits. Their craft was strange to them, and the positions they were forced to occupy soon brought on cramped muscles. The bidarka is a frail, narrow framework over which is stretched walrus skin, and it is so fashioned that the crew sits, one behind the other, in circular openings with legs straight out in front. To keep themselves dry each man had donned a native water garment--a loose, hooded shirt manufactured from the bladders of seals. These shirts--or kamlikas, as they are called--are provided with draw-strings at wrists, face, and bottom, so that when the skirt is stretched over the rim of the cockpit and corded tight, it renders the canoe well-nigh waterproof, even though the decks are awash.

The whole contrivance is peculiarly aboriginal and unsuited to the uses of white men; and, while unusually seaworthy, the bidarka requires more skill in the handling than does a Canadian birch bark, hence the wits of the three travellers were taxed to the utmost.

Out across the lonesome waste they journeyed, steadily creeping farther from the village, which of a sudden seemed a very safe and desirable place, with its snug store, its blazing fires, and its warm beds. The sea tossed them like a cork, coating their paddles and the decks of the canoe with ice, which they were at great pains to break off. It wet them in spite of their precautions, and its salt breath searched out their marrow, regardless of their unceasing labors; and these labors were in truth unceasing, for fifty miles of open water lay before them; fifty miles, which meant twelve hours of steady paddling. Gradually, imperceptibly, the mountain shores behind them shrank down upon the gray horizon. It seemed that for once the weather was going to be kind to them, and their spirits rose in consequence. They ate frequently, food being the great fuel of the North, and midday found them well out upon the heaving bosom of the Straits with the Kodiak shores plainly visible. Then, as if tired of toying with them, the wind rose. It did not blow up a gale--merely a frigid breath that cut them like steel and halted their progress. Had it sprung from the north it would have wafted them on their way, but it drew in from the Pacific, straight into their teeth, forcing them to redouble their exertions. It was not of sufficient violence to overcome their efforts, but it held them back and stirred up a nasty cross sea into which the canoe plunged and wallowed. In the hope that it would die down with the darkness, the boatmen held on their course, and night closed over them still paddling silently.

It was nearly noon on the following day when the watchman at the Uyak cannery beheld a native canoe creeping slowly up the bay, and was astonished to find it manned by three white men in the last stages of exhaustion--so stiff and cramped and numb that he was forced to help them from their places when at last they effected a landing. One of them, in fact, was unconscious and had to be carried to the house, which did not surprise the watchman when he learned whence they had come. He did marvel, however, that another of the travellers should begin to cry weakly when told that the mail boat had sailed for Kodiak the previous evening. He gave them stimulants, then prepared hot food for them, for both Bait and Emerson were like sleep-walkers; and Fraser, when he was restored to consciousness, was too weak to stand.

"Too bad you didn't get in last night," said the care-taker, sympathetically. "She won't be back now for a month or more."



"How long will she lie in Kodiak?" Big George asked.

"The captain told me he was going to spend Christmas there. Lefs see--to-day is the 22nd--she'll pull out for Juneau on the morning

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