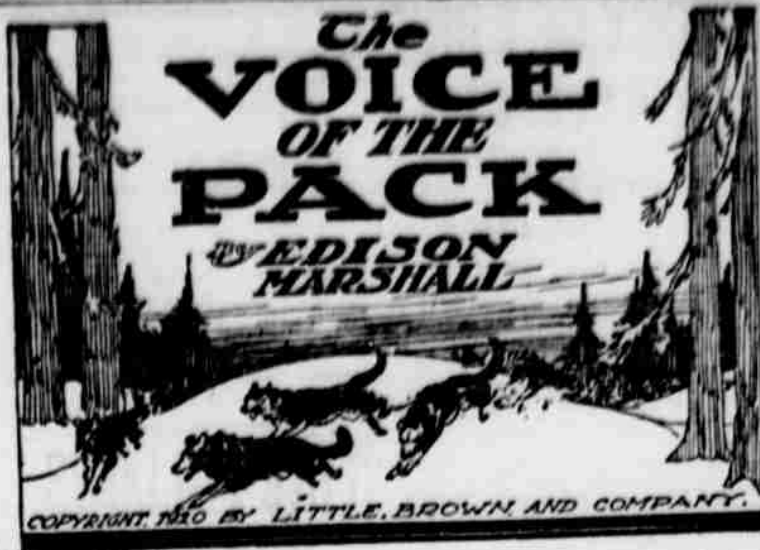




CHAPTER III

Dan Felling was really not badly hurt. The quick, lashing blows had not done more than severely bruise the flesh of his face; and the mists of unconsciousness that had been falling over him were more nearly the result of his own tremendous physical exertion. Now these mists were rising.

"Go—go away," the girl was commanding. "I think you've killed him."

Dan opened his eyes to find her kneeling close beside him, but still covering Cranston with her pistol. Her hand was resting on his bruised cheek. He couldn't have believed that a human face could be as white, while life still remained, as hers was then. All the lovely tints that had been such a delight to him, the play of soft reds and browns, had faded as an after-glow fades on the snow.

Dan's glance moved with hers to Cranston. He was standing easily at a distance of a dozen feet; and except for the faintest tremble all over his body, a muscular reaction from the violence of his passion, he had entirely regained his self-composure. This was quite characteristic of the mountain men. They share with the beasts a passion of living that is wholly unknown on the plains; but yet they have a certain quality of imperturbability known nowhere else. Nor is it limited to the native-born mountaineers. No man who intimately knows a member of that curious, keen-eyed little army of naturalists and big-game hunters who go to the north woods every fall, as regularly and seemingly as inexorably as the waterfowl go in spring, can doubt this fact. They seem to have acquired from the silence and the snows an impregnation of that eternal calm and imperturbability that is the wilderness itself. Cranston wasn't in the least afraid. Fear is usually a matter of uncertainty, and he knew exactly where he stood.

It is extremely doubtful if a plainsman would have possessed this knowledge. But a plainsman has not the knowledge of life itself that the mountaineer has, simply because he does not see it in the raw. And he has not half the intimate knowledge of death, an absolute requisite of self-composure. The mountaineer knows life in its simple phases with little tradition or convention to blur the vision. Death is a very intimate acquaintance that may be met in any snowdrift, on any rocky trail; and these conditions are very deadly to any delusions that he has in regard to himself. He acquires an ability to see just where he stands, and of course that means self-possession. This quality had something to do with the remarkable record that the mountain men, such as that magnificent warrior from Tennessee, made in the late war.

Cranston knew exactly what Snowbird would do. Although of a higher order, she was a mountain creature, even as himself. She meant exactly what she said. If he hadn't climbed from Dan's prone body, she would have shot quickly and very straight. If he tried to attack either of them now, her finger would press back before he could blink an eye, and she wouldn't weep any hysterical tears over his dead body. If he kept his distance, she wouldn't shoot at all. He meant to keep his distance. But he did know that he could insult her without danger to himself. And by now his lips had acquired their old curl of scorn.

"I'll go, Snowbird," he said. "I'll leave you with your assy. But I guess

you saw what I did to him—in two minutes."

"I saw. But you must remember he's sick. Now go."

"If he's sick, let him stay in bed—and have a wet nurse. Maybe you can be that."

The lids drooped halfway over her gray eyes, and the slim finger curled more tightly about the trigger. "Oh, I wish I could shoot you, Bert!" she said. She didn't whisper it, or hiss it, or hurl it, or do any of the things most people are supposed to do in moments of violent emotion. She simply said it, and her meaning was all the clearer.

"But you can't. And I'll pound that milk-sop of yours to a jelly every time I see him. I'd think, Snowbird, that you'd want a man."

He started up the trail; and then she did a strange thing. "He's more of a man than you are, right now, Bert," she told him. "He'll prove it some day." Then her arm went about Dan's neck and lifted his head upon her breast; and in Cranston's plain sight, she bent and kissed him, softly, on the lips.

Cranston's answer was an oath. It dripped from his lips, more poisonous, more malicious than the venom of a snake. His features seemed to tighten, the dark lips drew away from his teeth. No words could have made him such an effective answer as this little action of hers. And as he turned up the trail, he called down to her a name—that most dreadful epithet that foul tongues have always used to women held in greatest scorn.

Dan struggled in her arms. The kiss on his lips, the instant before, had not called him out of his half-consciousness. It had scarcely seemed real, rather just an incident in a blissful dream. But the word called down the trail shot out clear and vivid from the silence, just as a physician's face will often leap from the darkness after the anesthetist. Something infinitely warm and tender was holding him, pressing him back against a holy place that throbbed and gave him life and strength; but he knew that this word had to be answered. And only actions, not other words, could be his payment. All the voices of his body called to him to lie still, but the voices of the spirit, those higher, nobler promptings from which no man, to the glory of the breed from which he sprang, can ever quite escape, were stronger yet. He tugged upward, straining. But he didn't even have the strength to break the hold that the soft arm had about his neck.

"Oh, if I could only pull the trigger!" she was crying. "If I could only kill him!"

"Let me," he pleaded. "Give me the pistol. I'll kill him!"

And he would. There was no flinching in the gray eyes that looked up to her. She leaned forward, as if to put the weapon in his hands, but at once drew it back. And then a single sob caught at her throat. An instant later, they heard Cranston's laughter as he vanished around the turn of the trail.

For long minutes the two of them were still. The girl still held the man's head upon her breast. The pistol had fallen in the pine needles, and her nervous hand plucked strangely at the leaves of a mountain flower. To Dan's eyes, there was something trance-like, a hint of paralysis and insensibility about her posture. He had never seen her eyes like this. The light that he had always beheld in them had vanished. Their utter darkness startled him.

He sat up straight, and her arm that had been about his neck felt at her side. He took her hand firmly in his, and their eyes met.

"We must go home, Snowbird," he told her simply. "I'm not so badly hurt but that I can make it."

She nodded; but otherwise scarcely seemed to hear. Her eyes still flowed with darkness. And then, before his own eyes, their dark pupils began to contract. The hand he held filled and throbbed with life, and the fingers closed around his. She leaned toward him.

"Listen, Dan," she said quickly. "You heard—didn't you—the last thing that he said?"

"I couldn't help but hear, Snowbird."

Her other hand sought for his. "Then if you heard—payment must be made. You see what I mean, Dan. Maybe you can't see, knowing the girls that live on the plains. You were the cause of his saying it, and you must answer."

It seemed to Dan that some stern code of the hills, unwritten except in the hearts of their children, inexorable as night, was speaking through her lips. This was no personal thing. In some dim, half-understood way, it went back to the basic code of life. "People must fight their own fights,"

up here," she told him. "The laws of the courts that the plains people can appeal to are all too far away. There's no one that can do it, except you. Not my father. My father can't fight your battles here, if your honor is going to stand. It's up to you, Dan. You can't pretend that you didn't hear him. Such as you are, weak and sick to be beaten to a pulp in two minutes, you alone will have to make him answer for it. I came to your aid—and now you must come to mine."

Her fingers no longer clasped his. Strength had come back to him, and his fingers closed down until the blood went out of hers, but she was wholly unconscious of the pain. In reality, she was conscious of nothing except the growing flame in his face. It held her eyes in passionate fascination. His pupils were contracting to little bright dots in the gray irises. The jaw was setting, as she had never seen it before.

"Do you think, Snowbird, that you'd even have to ask me?" he demanded. "Don't you think I understand? And it won't be in your defense—only my own duty."

"But he is so strong—and you are so weak—"

"I won't be so weak forever. I never really cared much about living before. I'll try now, and you'll see—oh, Snowbird, wait and trust me: I understand everything. It's my own fight—when you kissed me, and he cried down that word in anger and jealousy, it put the whole thing on me. No one else can make him answer; no one else has the right. It's my honor, no one else's, that stands or falls."

He lifted her hand to his lips and kissed it again and again.

And for the first time he saw the tears gathering in her dark eyes. "But you fought here, didn't you, Dan?" she asked with painful slowness. "You didn't put up your arms—or try to run away? I didn't come till he had you done, so I didn't see." She looked at him as if her whole joy of life hung on his answer.

"Fought! I would have fought till I died! But that isn't enough, Snowbird. It isn't enough just to fight, in a case like this. A man's got to win! I would have died if you hadn't come. And that's another debt that I have to pay—only that debt I owe to you."

She nodded slowly. The lives of the mountain men are not saved by their women without incurring obligation. She attempted no barren details. She made no effort to pretend he had not incurred a tremendous debt when she had come with her pistol. It was an unavoidable fact. A life for a life is the code of the mountains.

"Two things I must do before I can ever dare to die," he told her soberly.

"One of them is to pay you; the other is to pay Cranston for the thing he said. Maybe the chance will never come for the first of the two; only I'll pray that it will. Maybe it would be kinder to you to pray that it wouldn't; yet I pray that it will! Maybe I can pay that debt only by being always ready, always watching for a chance to save you from any danger, always trying to protect you. You didn't come in time to see the fight I made. Besides—I lost, and little else matters. And that debt to you can't be paid until sometime I fight again—for you—and win." He gasped from his weakness, but went on bravely. "I'll never be able to feel at peace, Snowbird, until I'm tested in the fire before your eyes! I want to show you the things Cranston said of me are not true—that my courage will stand the test."

"It wouldn't be the same, perhaps, with an Eastern girl. Other things matter in the valleys. But I see how it is here; that there is only one standard for men and by that standard they rise or fall. Things in the mountains are down to the essentials."

He paused and struggled for strength to continue. "And I know what you said to him," he went on. "Half-unconscious as I was, I remember every word. Each word just seems to burn into me, Snowbird, and I'll make every one of them good. You said I am a better man than he, and sometime it would be proved—and it's the truth! Maybe in a month, maybe in a year, I'm not going to die from this malady of mine now, Snowbird. I've got too much to live for—too many debts to pay. In the end, I'll prove your words to him."

His eyes grew earnest, and the hard fire went out of them. "It's almost as if you were a queen, a real queen of some great kingdom," he told her, tremulous with a great awe that was stealing over him, as a mist steals over water. "And because I had kissed your fingers, for ever and ever I was your subject, living only to fight your fights—maybe with a dream in the end to kiss your fingers again. When you bent and kissed me on that hillside—for him to see—it was the same: that I was sworn to you, and nothing mattered in my life except the service and love I could give you. And it's more than you ever dream, Snowbird. It's all yours, for your battles and your happiness."

The great plains were silent above them, shadowed and dark. Perhaps they were listening to an age-old story, those vows of service and self-gained worth by which the race has struggled upward from the darkness. "But I kissed you—once before," she reminded him. The voice was just a whisper, hardly louder than the stir of the leaves in the wind.

"But that kiss didn't count," he told her. "It wasn't at all the same. I loved you then, I think, but it didn't mean what it did today."

"And what—" she leaned toward him, her eyes full on his, "does it mean now?"

"All that's worth while in life, all that matters when everything is said

that can be said, and all is done that can be done. And it means, please God, when the debts are paid, that I may have such a kiss again."

"Not until then," she told him, whispering.

"Until then, I make oath that I won't even ask it, or receive it if you should give it. It goes too deep, dear—too deep—and it means too much."

This was their part. Not until the debts were paid and her word made good would those lips be his again. There was no need for further words. Both of them knew.

In the skies, the gray clouds were gathering swiftly, as always in the mountains. The raindrops were falling one and one, over the forest. The summer was done, and fall had come in earnest.

The rains fell unceasingly for seven days; not a downpour but a constant drizzle that made the distant ridges smoke. The parched earth seemed to smother its lips, and little rivulets began to fall and tumble over the beds of the dry streams. All danger of forest fire was at once removed, and Snowbird was no longer needed as a lookout on old Bald mountain. She went to her own home, her companion back to the valley; and now that his sister had taken his place as housekeeper, Bill had gone down to the lower foothills with a great part of the live stock. Dan spent these rainy days in toil on the hillside, building himself physically so that he might pay his debts.

(To be Continued)

BOUTS INTERESTING AT K. OF C. SMOKER

Amateur Events and Musical Selections Comprise Program—Ladies' Night Will Be Held Soon.

Members of Bend council, Knights of Columbus, enjoyed another of their series of smokers Thursday at the old Catholic church building, following the regular meeting of the order. Amateur boxing bouts featured the evening's program.

The first event, between Donald Bradbury and Albert Colvert, was declared a draw, as were those between Louis Dornecker and Lewis Davis and Howard Hughes and Doran Allen. Principals in these encounters are members of the newly organized Paul Revere club.

Later came bouts by members of the K. of C., among which were the Dugan brothers in an exhibition match, Ed Brosterhouse and D. Howell, in a three-round draw, and the feature bout of the evening, between Hugh O'Kane and Maurice Cashman, which resulted in a decision for O'Kane at the end of two torrid rounds.

Other members contributing to the entertainment were: A. Gillis, vocal solo, H. McDonald, accompanist; J. T. Gagen, solo, Emil Benz, accompanist; J. C. Hill, recitation; J. J. Powers, recitation and stories; and Hugh O'Kane, stories. Refreshments were served.

Ladies' night will be held next Friday evening.

OFFICERS ELECTED BY NEWSPAPER MEN

Robert W. Sawyer Heads Conference, With Herbert J. Campbell, of Portland, As Vice President.

Officers of the Oregon Newspaper conference, chosen at the session completed last week in Eugene, are as follows: Robert W. Sawyer, Bend Bulletin, president; Herbert J. Campbell, Portland Telegram, vice president; George Turnbull, University of Oregon school of journalism, secretary, Eric W. Allen, University of Oregon school of journalism, chairman of program committee.

The state newspaper conference meets annually in Eugene. Another important organization of newspaper men, the Oregon Editorial association, will hold its next session in Bend, it is generally understood, although the executive committee has not yet made a definite announcement on this point.

BRIDAL PAIR ON NOVEL HONEYMOON

Mr. and Mrs. John A. Dron started a novel honeymoon this afternoon when they left shortly after their marriage on Monday for the intake of the Columbia Southern ditch on Tumalo creek, to spend the remainder of the winter months. Mr. Dron, who was a member of the North unit engineering force, is gathering data for the Bend Water, Light & Power Co. on the flow available for power purposes during the cold season.

Mrs. Dron was formerly Miss Dorothy Cook of Salt Lake City, Utah. The wedding service was solemnized in the presence of Mr. and Mrs. T. H. Foley and Mr. and Mrs. R. W. Sawyer and daughter by Rev. J. Edgar Purdy at the Sawyer home on Drake road.

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AMBULANCE WILL BE USED IN ROAD WORK

A Red Cross ambulance, just received by the Deschutes National forest through the bureau of public

roads, will be converted into a light truck for use in forest road construction and maintenance during the coming season, Supervisor Plumb states.

Put it in The Bulletin.

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