

THE VOICE OF THE PACK

By Edison T. Marshall, of Medford, Or.

A Story of Oregon by an Oregon Boy

SYNOPSIS

PROLOGUE.

In the little town of Glitchopolis small Dan Felling dreams boyish dreams, tinged with melancholy over his supposed physical weakness. There, years later, he meets Destiny.

BOOK I—REPATRIATION.

CHAPTER I.—Warned by his physician that he has not more than six months to live, Felling sits despondently on a park bench, wondering where he should spend those six months. A friendly squirrel practically decides the matter for him. His blood is pioneer blood, and he decides to end his days in the forests of Oregon. Memories of his grandfather and a deep love for all things of the wild help him in reaching a decision.

It was rather characteristic of the mountain men—that the grandson of Dan Felling could not possibly pay board. But Steele knew the ways of cities and of men, and he only smiled.

"He won't come, then," he explained. "Anyway, have that out with him at the end of his stay. He wants fishing, and you've got that in the North fork. Moreover, you're a thousand miles back—"

"Only one hundred, if you must know. But Steele—do you suppose he's the man his grandfather was before him—that all the Fallings have been since the first days of the Oregon trail? If he is—well, my hat's off to him before he steps off the train."

The mountaineer's bronzed face was earnest and intent in the bright lights of the club. Steele thought he had known his breed. Now he began to have doubts of his own knowledge. "He won't be, don't count on it," he said humbly. "The Fallings have done much for this region, and I'm glad enough to do a little to pay it back, but don't count much on this eastern boy. He's lived in cities; besides, he's a sick man. He said so in his wire. You ought to know it before you take him in."

The bronzed face changed; possibly a shadow of disappointment came to his eyes. "You're right, of course," Lennox repeated. "Yes—it's true that if he's been like the other Fallings, he'd never have been that. Why, Steele, you couldn't have given that old man a cold if you'd tied him in the Rogue river overnight. Of course you couldn't count on the line keeping up forever. But I'll take him, for the memory of his grandfather."

"You're not afraid?"

"Afraid, no. He can't infect those few strapping children of mine. Snowbird weighs one hundred and twenty pounds and is hard as steel. Nigger knew a sick day in her life. And you know Bill, of course."

Yes, Steele knew Bill. Bill weighed two hundred pounds, and he would choose the biggest of the steers he drove down to the lower levels in the winter and, twisting its horns, would make it lay over on its side. Besides, both of the men assumed that Dan must be only in the first stages of his malady.

And even as the men talked, the train that bore Dan Felling to the home of his ancestors was entering for the first time the dark forests of pine and fir that make the eternal background of the Northwest. He was wholly unable to understand the strange feeling of familiarity that he had with them, and when he saw old Silas Lennox waiting patiently beside the station, he felt he had known them always, and that he must never go out of the range of them again.

Dan didn't see his host at first. For the first instant he was entirely engrossed by a surging sense of disappointment—a feeling that he had been tricked and had only come to another city after all. He got down onto the gravel of the station yard, and out on the gray street pavement he heard the clang of a trolley car. Many automobiles were parked just beside the station, some of them foreign cars of expensive makes, such as he supposed would be wholly unknown on the frontier. A man in golf clothes brushed his shoulder.

Dan looked up to the hills, and he felt better. He couldn't see them plainly. The faint smoke of a distant forest fire half obscured them. Yet he saw fold on fold of ridges of a rather peculiar blue in color, and even his untrained eyes could see that they were clothed in forests of evergreen. Over the heads of the great hills Dan could see a few great peaks; McLaughlin, even and regular as a painted mountain; Wagner, with queer white gashes where the snow still lay in its ravines, and to the southeast the misty range of snow-covered hills that were the Slickneys. He felt decidedly better. And when he saw old Silas Lennox waiting patiently beside the station, he felt he had come to the right place.

It would be interesting to explain why Dan at once recognized the older man for the breed he was. Silas Lennox was not dressed in a way that would distinguish him. It was true that he wore a flannel shirt, riding trousers and rather heavy, leather boots. But sportsmen all over the face of the earth wear this costume at sundry times. Mountain men have a peculiar stride by which experienced persons can occasionally recognize them; but Silas Lennox was standing still when Dan got his first glimpse of him. The one quality itself into a simple matter of the things that could be read in Lennox's face.

Dan disbelieved wholly in a book that told how to read characters at sight. Yet at the first glance of the lean, bronzed face his heart gave a curious little bound. A pair of gray eyes met his—two fine black points in a rather hard gray iris. They didn't look past him, or at either side of him, or at his chin or his forehead. They

looked right at his own eyes. The skin around the eyes was burned brown by the sun, and the flesh was so lean that the cheekbones showed plainly. The mouth was straight; but yet it was neither savage nor cruel. It was simply determined.

Lennox came up with a light, silent tread and extended his hand. "You're Dan Felling's grandson, aren't you?" he asked. "I'm Silas Lennox, who used to know him when he lived on the Divide. You are coming to spend the summer and fall on my ranch."

The immediate result of these words, besides relief, was to set Dan wondering how the old mountaineer had recognized him. He wondered if he had any physical resemblance to his grandfather. But this hope was shot to earth at once. His telegram had explained about his malady, and of course the mountaineer had picked him out simply because he had the mark of the disease on his face. As he shook hands, he tried his best to read the mountaineer's expression. It was all too plain: an undeniable look of disappointment.

The truth was that even in spite of all the Chamber of Commerce had told him, Lennox had still hoped to find some image of the older Dan Felling in the face and body of his grandson. Because of the thick glasses, Lennox could not see the young man's eyes; but he didn't think it likely they were at all like the eyes with which the older Felling saw his way through the wilderness at night.



"You're Dan Felling's Grandson, Aren't You?"

Of course he was tall, just as the famous frontiersman had been, but while the elder weighed one hundred and ninety pounds, bone and muscle, this man did not touch one hundred and thirty. Evidently the years had brought degeneracy to the Felling clan. Lennox was desolated by the thought.

He helped Dan with his bag to a little wily automobile that waited beside the station. They got into the two front seats, and a moment later were starting up the long, curved road that led to the Divide.

During the hour that they were crossing over the foothills, on the way to the big timber, Silas Lennox talked a great deal about the frontiersman that had been Dan's grandfather. A mountain man does not use profane oaths. He talks very simply and very straight, and often there are long silences between his sentences. Yet he conveys his ideas with entire clearness.

Dan realized at once that if he could be, in Lennox's eyes, one-fifth of the man his grandfather had been, he would never have to fear again the look of disappointment with which his host had greeted him at the station. But instead of reaching that high place, he had only—death. He knew what his destiny was in these quiet hills. And it was true that he began to have secret regrets that he had come. But it wasn't that he was disappointed in the land that was opening up before him. It fulfilled every promise. His sole reason for regrets lay in the fact that now the whole mountain world would know of the decay that had come upon his people. Perhaps it would have been better to have left them to their traditions.

He had never dreamed that the fame of his grandfather had spread so far. For the first ten miles Dan listened to stories—legends of a cold nerve that simply could not be shaken; of a powerful, tireless physique; of moral and physical strength that was seemingly without limit. Then, as the foothills began to give way to the deeper forests fell upon the narrow, brown road, there began to be long gaps in the talk. And soon they rode in utter silence, evidently both of them absorbed in their own thoughts.

Dan did not feel oppressed at all. He merely seemed to fall into the spirit of the woods, and no words came to his lips. Every mile was an added delight to him. Not even when he had brought a brighter sparkle to his eyes. He had begun to experience a vague sort of excitement, an emotion that was almost kin to exultation, over the constant stir and movement of the forest life. Once, as they stopped the car to refill the radiator from a mountain stream, Lennox looked at him with sudden curiosity. "You are getting a thrill out of this, aren't you?" he asked wonder-

ingly. It was a curious tone. Perhaps it was a hopeful tone, too. He spoke as if he hardly understood.

"A thrill!" Dan echoed. He spoke as a man speaks in the presence of some great wonder. "Good heavens, I never saw anything like it in my life."

"In this very stream," the mountaineer told him joyously, "you may occasionally catch trout that weigh three pounds."

But as he got back into the car the look of interest died out of Lennox's eyes. Of course any man would be somewhat excited by his first glimpse of the wilderness. It was not that he had inherited any of the traits of his grandfather. It was absurd to hope that he had. And he would soon get tired of the silences and want to go back to his cities. He told his thought—that it would all soon grow old to him; and Dan turned almost in anger. "You don't know," he said, "I didn't know myself, how I would feel about it. I'm never going to leave the hills again."

"You don't mean that?"

"But I do." He tried to speak further, but he coughed instead. "But I wouldn't if I wanted to. That cough tells you why, I guess."

"You mean to say—" Silas Lennox turned in amazement. "You mean that you're—a yesser? That you've given up hope of recovering?"

"That's the impression I meant to convey. I've got a little over four months—though I don't see that I'm any weaker than I was when the doctor said I had six months. Those four will take me all through the fall and the early winter. And I hope you won't feel that you've been imposed upon—to have a dying man on your hands."

"It isn't that," Silas Lennox threw his car into gear and started up the long grade. And he drove clear to the top of it and into another gear before he spoke again. Then he pointed to what looked to Dan like a brown streak that melted into the thick brush. "That was a deer," he said slowly. "Just a glimpse, but your grandfather could have got him between the eyes. Most like as not, though, he'd have let him go. He never killed except when he needed meat. But that—as you say—ain't the impression I'm trying to convey."

He seemed to be groping for words. "What is it, Mr. Lennox?" Dan asked.

"Instead of being sorry, I'm mighty glad you've come," Lennox told him. "It's not that I expect you to be like your grandfather. You haven't had his chance. But it's always the way of true men, the world over, to come back to their own kind to die. That deer we just saw—his young people, and so are all these ranchers that grab their lives out of the forests—they are your people, too. And you couldn't have pleased the old man's old friends any better, or done more for his memory, than to come back to his own land for your last days."

The words were strange, yet Dan intuitively understood. It was as if a prodigal son had returned at last, and although his birthright was squandered and he came only to die, the people of his home would give him kindness and forgiveness, even though they could not give him their respect.

CHAPTER III.

The Lennox home was a typical mountain ranch-house—square, solid, comforting in storm and wind. Bill was out to the gate when the car drove up. He was a son of his father, a strong man in body and personality. He too had heard of the older Felling, and he gazed at his eyes when he saw the stender youth that was his grandson. And he led the way into the white-walled living room.

"You must be chilly and worn out from the long ride," Lennox suggested quietly. He spoke in the tone a strong man invariably uses toward an invalid. Dan felt a curious resentment at the words.

"I'm not cold," he said. "It's hardly dark yet. I'd sooner go outdoors and look around."

The elder man regarded him curiously, perhaps with the faintest glimmer of admiration. "You'd better wait."

"I've certainly tasted it before."

"Well, bet a few dollars that you haven't, if you've lived all your life in the Middle West," Lennox answered. "Maybe you've got what the scientists call an inherited memory of it. It's the kind of meat your grandfather used to live on—venison."

Soon after dinner Lennox led him out of the house for his first glimpse of the hills in the darkness. They walked together out to the gate, across the first of the wide pastures where, at certain seasons, Lennox kept his cattle; and at last they came out upon the tree-covered ridge. The moon was just rising. They could see it casting a curious glint over the very tips of the pines. But it couldn't get down between them. They stood too close, too tall and thick for that. And for a moment, Dan's only sensation was one of silence.

"You have to stand still a moment, to really know anything," Lennox told him. They both stood still. Dan was as motionless as that day in the park—long weeks before, when the squirrel had slipped on his shoulder. The first effect was a sensation that the silence was deepening around them. It wasn't really true. It was simply that he had become aware of the little continuous sounds of which usually he was unconscious, and they tended to accentuate the hush of the night. He knew, just as all mountaineers know,

that the wilderness about him was stirring and pulsing with life. Some of the sounds were quite clear—an occasional stir of a pebble or the crack of a twig, and some, like the faintest twitching of leaves in the brush, not so far distant, could only be guessed at.

"What is making the sounds?" he asked.

He didn't know it, at the time, but Lennox turned quickly toward him. It wasn't that the question had surprised the mountaineer. Rather it was the tone in which Dan had spoken. It was perfectly cool, perfectly self-contained.

"The one right close is a chipmunk. I don't know what the others are; no one ever does know. Perhaps ground squirrels, or rabbits, or birds, and maybe one of those harmless old black bears who is curious about the house. And tell me—can you smell anything?"

"Good Lord, Lennox! I can smell all kinds of things."

"I'm glad. Some men can't. No one can enjoy the woods if he can't smell."

Part of the smells are of flowers, and part of balsam, and God only knows what the others are. They are just the wilderness."

Dan could not only perceive the smells and sounds, but he felt that they were leaving an imprint on the very fiber of his soul. He knew one thing. He knew he could never forget this first introduction to the mountain night. The whole scene moved him in strange, deep ways in which he had never been stirred before; if left him exultant and, in deep wells of his nature far below the usual currents of excitement, a little excited too.

Then both of them were startled out of their reflections by the clear, unmistakable sound of footsteps on the ridge. Both of them turned, and Lennox laughed softly in the darkness. "My daughter," he said, "knows she wouldn't be afraid to come."

Dan could see only Snowbird's outline at first, just her shadow against the moonlit hillside. His glasses were none too good at long range. And possibly, when she came within range, the first thing that he noticed about her was her stride. The girls he knew didn't walk in quite that free, strong way. She took almost a man's step, and yet it was curious that she did not seem ungainly. Dan had a distinct impression that she was floating down to him on the moonlight. She seemed to come with such unutterable smoothness. And then he heard her call lightly through the darkness.

The sound gave him a distinct sense of surprise. Some way, he hadn't associated a voice like this with a mountain girl; he had supposed that there would be so many harshening influences in this wild place. Yet the tone was as clear and full as a trained singer's. It was not a high voice; and yet it seemed simply brimming, as a cup brims with wine, with the rapture of life. It was a self-confident voice too, wholly unaffected and sincere, and wholly without embarrassment.

Then she came close, and Dan saw the moonlight on her face. And so it came about, whether in dreams or wakefulness, he could see nothing else for many hours to come.

The girl who stood in the moonlight had health. She was simply vibrant with health. It brought a light to her eyes, and a color to her cheeks, and life and splendor to her moonlit hair. It brought curves to her body, and strength and firmness to her limbs, and the grace of a deer to her carriage. Whether she had regular features or not Dan would have been unable to state. He didn't even notice. They weren't important when health was present. Yet there was nothing of the course or bold or voluptuous about her. She was just a slender girl, perhaps two or three years of age, and weighing even less than the figure occasionally to be read in the health magazines for girls of her height. And she was fresh and cool beyond all words to tell.

And Dan had no delusions about her attitude toward him. For a long instant she turned her keen, young eyes to his white, thin face; and at once it became abundantly evident that beyond a few girlish speculations she felt no interest in him. After a single moment of rather strained, polite conversation with Dan—just enough to satisfy her idea of the conventions—she began a thrilling girlish tale to her father. And she was still telling it when they reached the house.

Dan held a chair for her in front of the fireplace, and she took it with entire naturalness. He was careful to put it where the firelight was at its height. He wanted to see its effect on the flushed cheeks, the soft dark hair. And then, standing in the shadows, he simply watched her. With the eye of an artist he delighted in her gestures, her rippling enthusiasm, her utter irrepressible girlishness that all of time had not years enough to kill.

Bill stood watching her, his hands deep in his pockets, evidently a companion of the best. Her father gazed at her with amused tolerance, and Dan—he didn't know in just what way he did look at her. And he didn't have time to decide. In less than fifteen minutes, and wholly without warning she sprang up from her chair and started toward the door.

(Continued Next Week)

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