

The Voice of the Pack

A Story of the Oregon Mountain Country



Though the fear was mostly gone. the cougar retained enough of that caution that most wild animals exhibit when hunting a new game so that he didn't attempt to strike Snowbird down at once. But as the chase went on, his passion grew upon him. Ever he crept nearer. And at last he sprang full into the thickets beside

At that instant she had shot for the first time. Because the light had left his eyes before she could find aim, both shots had been clean misses. And terrible as the reports were, he was too engrossed in the chase to be frightened away by mere sound. This was the cry the man-pack always made-these sudden, startling sounds in the silence. But he felt no pain. He crouched a moment, shivering. Then he bounded on again.

The third shot was a miss too: in fact, there had been no chance for a hit. A sound in the darkness is as unreliable a target as can possibly be Imagined. And it didn't frighten him as much as the others. He walted, crouching, and the girl started on.

She was making other sounds nowqueer, whimpering sounds not greatly different from the bleat that the fawn utters when it dies. It was a fearsound, and if there is one emotion with which the wild beests are acquainted in all its phases, it is fear, She was afraid of him, then, and that meant he need no longer be in the least afraid of her. His skin began to twitch all over with that terrible madness and passion of the flesh-hunters.

This game was like the deer, and the thing to do was lie in wait. There was only one trail. He wasn't afraid of losing her in the darkness. She was neither fleet like the deer nor courageous like Woof the bear. He had only to wait and leap from the darkness when she passed.

When Dan Failing, riding like mad over the mountain trail, heard the third shot from Snowbird's pistol, he felt that one of the debts he owed had come due at last. He seemed to know, as the darkness pressed around him, that he was to be tried in the fire. And the horse staggered beneath him as he tried to hasten.

He showed no mercy to his mount Horse-flesh isn't made for carrying a heavy man over such a trail as this, and she was red-nostriled and lathered before half a mile had been covered. He made her leap up the rocks, and on fairly level stretches he loosed the reins and lashed her into a gallop, Only a mountain horse could have stood that test. He gave no thought to his own safety. His courage was at the test, and no risk of his own life must interfere with his attempt to save Snowbird from the danger that threatened her. He didn't know when the horse would fall with him and precipitate him down a precipice, and he was perfectly aware that to crash into a low-hanging limb of one of the great trees beside the trail would probably crush his skull. But he took the chance. And before the ride was done he found himself pleading with the horse, even as he lashed her sides with his whip.

The lesser forest creatures sprang from his trail; and cace the mare leaped high to miss a dark shadow that crossed in front. As she caught her stride. Dan heard a squeal and a rattle of quills that identified the creature as a porcupine.

By now he had passed the first of the worst grades, coming out upon a long, easy slope of open forest. Again he urged his horse, leaving to her keen senses alone the chosing of the path between the great tree trunks.

Then he heard Snowbird fire for the fourth time; and he knew that he had almost overtaken her. The report seemed to smash the air. And he lashed his horse into the fastest run she knew-a wild, sobbing figure in the darkness.

"She's only got one shot more." he sald. He knew how many bullets her pistol carried; and the danger-whatever it was-must be just at hand. Underbrush cracked beneath him. And then the horse drew up with a jerk that almost hurled him from the sad-

He lashed at her in vain. She was not afraid in the darkness and the rocks of the trail, but some Terror in the woods in front had in an instant broken his control over her. She reared, snorting; then danced in an impotent circle. Meanwhile, precious seconds were fleeing.

He understood now. The horse stood still, shivering beneath him, but would not advance a step. The sflence deepened. Somewhere in the darkness before him a great cougar was waiting by the trail, and Snowbird, hoping for the moment that it had given up the chase, was hastening through the shadows squarely into its ambush.

Whisperfoot crouched lower: and again his long serpent of a tail began the little vertical motion that always precedes his leap. He had not forgotten the wild rapture of that moment be bad inadvertently sprung on Landy Hildreth-or how, after his terror had died, he had come creeping back. He hunted his own way, waiting on the trail; and his madness was at its height. He was not just Whisperfoot the coward, that runs at the shadow of a tall form in the thickets. The consummation was complete, and that single experience of a month before had made of him a hunter of men.

His muscles set for the leap. So intent was be that his keen senses didn't detect the fact that there was a curious echo to the girl's footsteps. Dan Failing had slipped down from his terrified horse and was running up the trail behind her, praying that he could be in time.

Snowbird heard the pat, pat of

ope that ald had come to her. She had thought of Dan as on the faraway marshes; and her father, the only other living occupant of this part of the Divide, might even now be lying dead in his house. In her terror, she had lost all power of interpretation of events. The sound might be the cougar's mate, or even the wolf pack, jealous of his game. Sobbing, she hurried on into Whisperfoot's am-

Then she heard a voice, and it seemed to be calling to her. "Snowbird-I'm coming, Snowbird," a man's strong voice was shouting. She whirled with sob of thankfulness.

At that instant the cougar sprang. Terrified though she was, Snowbird's reflexes had kept sure and true. Even as the great cat leaped, a long, Ithe shadow out of the shadow, her finger pressed back against the trigger of her pistol. She had been carrying her gun in front of her, and she fired it, this last time, with no conscious effort. It was just a last instinctive effort to defend berself.

One other element affected the issue. She had whirled to answer Dan's But she had still been in range. The only effect was to lessen, in some degree, the accuracy of the spring. The but even if it had reached its heart. the momentum of the attack was too great to be completely overcome. Snowbird only knew that some vast, resistless power had struck her, and that the darkness seemed to roar and explode about her.

Hurled to her face in the trail, she did not see the cougar sprawl on the earth beside her. The flame in the lantern aimost flicked out as it fell from her hand, then flashed up and down, from the deepest gloom to a vivid glare with something of the effect of lightning flickering in the sky. Nor did she hear the first frenzied thrashing of the wounded animal. Kindly unconsciousness had fallen, obscuring this and also the sight of the great cat, in the agony of its wound. creeping with broken shoulder and bared claws across the pine needles toward her defenseless body.

But the terrible fangs were never to know her white flesh. Some one had come between. There was no chance to shoot: Whisperfoot and the girl were too near together for that. But one course remained; and there was not even time to count the cost In this most terrible moment of Dan Falling's life, there was not even an instant's hesitation. He did not know that Whisperfoot was wounded. He saw the beast creeping forward in the weird dancing light of the fallen lantern, and he only knew that his flesh, not hers, must resist its rending talons. Nothing else mattered. No oth-

er consideration could come between. It was the test; and Dan's instincts prompted coolly and well. He leaped with all his strength. The cougar bounded into his arms, not upon the prone body of the girl. And she opened her eyes to hear a curious thrash-



A Strange, Grim Battle,

ing in the pine needles, a strange grim battle that, as the lantern flashed out, was hidden in the darkness

And that battle, in the far reaches of the Divide, passed into a legend. It was the tale of how Dan Failing, his gun knocked from his hands as he met the cougar's leap, with his own unaided arms kept the life-giving breath from the animal's lungs and killed him in the pipe needles. Claw and fang and the frenzy of death could not matter at all.

Thus Falling established before all men his right to the name he bore. And thus he paid one of his debtslife for a life, as the code of the forest has always decreed-and in the fire of danger and pain his metal was tried and proven.

> **BOOK THREE** The Payment.

The Lennox home, in the wilderness of the Umpqua Divide, looked rather like an emergency hospital for the first few days after Dan's fight with Whisperfoot. Its old sounds of laughter and talk were almost entirely lacking. Two injured men and a girl recovering

CHAPTER I.

toward cheer.

But the natural sturdiness of all three quickly came to their aid. Of course Lennox had been severely injured by the falling log, and many weeks would pass before he would be able to walk again. He could sit up for short periods, however; had the partial use of one arm; and could pro--at a snail's pace through the rooms in a rude wheel chair that Bill's ingenuity had contrived. The great livid scratches that Dan bore on his body quickly began to heal; and before a week was done he began to venture forth on the hills again. Snowbird had remained in bed for three days; then she had hopped out one bright afternoon, swearing never to go back into it again. Evidently the crisp, fall air of the mountains had been a nerve tonic for them all.

Of course there had been medical attention. A doctor and a nurse had motored up the day after the accident; the physician had set the bones and departed, and the nurse remained for a week, to see the grizzled mountaineer well on the way of convalescence, cry just as the cougar left the ground. But it was an anxious wait, and Lennox's car was kept constantly in readiness to speed her away in case the snows should start. At last she had bullet caught the beast in mid-air; left him in Snowbird's hands, and Bill had driven her back to the settlements in his father's car. The die was now cast as to whether or not Dan and the remainder of the family should winter in the mountain. The snow clouds deepened every day, the frost was ever heavier in the dawns, and the road would surely remain open only a few days more,

Once more the three seemingly had the Divide all to themselves. Bert Cranston had evidently deserted his cabin and was working a trap-line on the Umpqua side. The rangers left little station, all danger of fire past, and went down to their offices in the federal building of one of the little cities below. Because he was worse than useless in the deep snows that were sure to come, one of the ranch hands that had driven up with Bill rode away to the valleys the last of the live stock-the horse that Dan had ridden to Snowbird's defense.

Nothing had been heard of Landy Hildreth, who used to live on the trail to the marsh, and both Lennox and his daughter wondered why. There were also certain officials who had begun to be curious. As yet, Dan had told no one of the grim find he had made on his return from hunting. And he would have found it an extremely difficult fact to explain. It all went back to those inner

springs of motive that few men can see clearly enough within themselves to recognize. Even the first day, when he lay burning from his wounds, he worked out his own explanation in re- he found it; and he knew it by the gard to the murder mystery. He hadn't the slightest doubt but that half buried in the wet leaves, Cranston had killed Hildreth to prevent his testimony from reaching the courts below. Of course, any other member of the arson ring of hillmen might have been the murderer; vet Dan was inclined to believe that Cransten, the leader of the gang, usually preferred to do such dangerous work as this bimself. If it were true; somewhere on that tree-clad ridge clues would be left. Moreover, it was wholly possible that the written testimony Hildreth must have gathered had never been found or destroyed. Dan didn't want the aid of the courts to find these clues. He wanted to work out the case himself. It resolved itself into a simple matter of vengeance: Dan had his debt to pay, and he wanted to bring Cranston to ruin by his own hand alone.

Wille it was true that he took rather more than the casual interest that most citizens feel in the destruction of the forest by wanton fire, and had an actual sense of duty to do all that he could to stop the activities of the arson ring, his motives, stripped and bare, were really not utilitarian. He had no particular interest in Hildreth's case. He remembered him simply as one of Cranston's disreputable gang, a peacher and a fire bug him-When all is said and done, it remained really a personal issue between Dan and Cranston. And personal issues are frowned upon by law and society. Civilization has toiled up from the darkness in a great measure to get away from them. But human nature remains distressingly the same, and Dan's desire to pay his debt was a distinctly human emotion, Some time a breed will live upon the earth that can get clear away from personal vengeance-from that age-cid code of the bills that demands a blow for a blow and a life for a life-but the time is not yet. And after all, by all the standards of men as men, not as read in idealistic philosophies. Daw's debt was entirely real. By the light held high by his ancestors, he

coald not turn his other cheek. Just as soon as he was able he went back to the scene of the murder. He didn't know when the snow would come to cover what evidence there was. It threatened every hour. Every wind promined it. The air was sharp and cold, and no drop of rain could fall through it without crystallizing into snow. The deer had all gone and the burrowing people had sought their holes. The bees worked no more in the winter flowers. Of all the greater forest creatures only the wolves and the bear remainedthe former because their fear of men would not permit them to go down to the lower hills, and the latter because of his knowledge that when food became scarce he could always burrow in the snow. No bear goes into hibernation from choice. Wisc old bachelor, he much prefers to keep just as late hours as he can-as long prison; with the aid of the empty shell

ets remain open. The cougars had all gone down with the deer, the migratory birds had departed, and even the squirrels were in hiding.

The scene didn't offer much in the way of clues. Of the body itself only a white heap of bones remained, for many and terrible had been the agents at work upon them. The clothes, howpel himself-after the first few weeks ever, particularly the coat, were practically intact. Gripping himself, Dan thrust his fingers into its pockets, then into the pockets of the shirt and trousers. All paper that would in any way serve to identify the murdered man, or tell what his purpose had been in journeying down the frail the night of the murder had been removed. Only one explanation presented itself. Cranston had come before him and searched the body himself.

Dan looked about for tracks, and he was considerably surprised to find the blurred, indistinct imprint of a shoe other than his own. He hadn't the least hope that the tracks themselves would offer a clue to a detective. They were too dim for that. The surprising fact was that since the murder had been committed immediately before the fall rains, the water had not completely washed them out. The only possibility remaining was that Cranston had returned to the body after the week's rainfall. The track had been dimmed by the lighter rains that had fallen since,

But yet it was entirely to be expected that the examination of the body would be an afterthought on Cranston's part. Possibly at first his only thought was to kill and, following the prompting that has sent so many murderers to the gallows, he had afterward returned to the scene of the crime to destroy any clues he might have left and to search the body for any evidence against the arson ring.

Dan's next thought was to follow along the trail and find Cranston's ambush. Of course it would be in the direction of the settlement from the body, as the bullet had entered from the front, He found it hard to believe that Hildreth had fallen in the exact spot where the body lay. Men fourneying at night keep to the trail, and the white heap itself was fully forty feet back from the trail in the thickets. Perhaps Cranston had dragged it there to hide it from the sight of anyone who might pass along the lonely trail again; and ft was a remote possibility that Whisperfoot, coming in the night, had tugged it into the thickets for dreadful purposes of his own. Likely the shot was fired when Hildreth was in an open place on the traff: and Dan searched for the ambush with this conclusion in mind. He walked back, looking for a thicket from which such a spot would be vistble. Something over fifty yards down empty brass rifle cartridge that lay

The shell was of the same as Cranston's rifle. Dan's hand shook as he pat it in his pocket.

Encouraged by this amazing find, he turned up the trail toward Hildreth's cabin. It might be possible, he thought, that Hildreth had left some of his testimony-perhaps such rudely scrawled letters as Cranston had written him-in some forgotten drawer in his hut. It was but a short walk for Dan's hardened legs, and he made it before midafternoon,

The search itself was whelly without result. But because he had time to think as he climbed the ridge, because as he strode along beneath that wintry sky he had a chance to consider every detail of the case, he was able to start out on a new tack when, just before sunset, he returned to the body. This new train of thought had as its basis that Cranston's shot had not been deadly at once; that, wounded, Hildreth had himself crawled into the thickets where Whisperfoot had found him. And that meant that he had to enlarge his search for such documents as Hildreth had carried to include all the territory between the trail and the location of the body.

It was possibly a distance of forty feet, and getting down on his hands and knees. Dan looked for any break in the shrubbery that would indicate the path that the wounded Hildreth had taken. And it was ten minutes well rewarded, as far as clearing up certain details of the crime. His senses had been trained and sharpened by his months in the wilderness, and he was able to back-track the wounded man from the skeleton clear to the clearing on the trail where he had first fallen. But as no clues presented themselves, he started to turn

He walked twelve feet, then turned back. Out of the corner of his eye it seemed to aim that he had caught a flash of white, near the end of a great. dead log beside the path that the wounded Hildreth had taken. For a moment he searched in vain. Evidently a yellow leaf had deceived him. Once more he retraced his steps, trying to find the position from which his eye had caught the glimpse of white. Then he dived straight for the rotten

end of the log. Into a little bollow in the bark, on the underside of the log, some hand bad thrust a small roll of papers. They were rain-seaked now, and the ink had dimmed and blotted; but Dan realized their significance. They were the complete evidence that Hildreth had accumulated against the arson ring-letters that had passed back and forth between himself and Crapston. a threat of murder from the former if Hildreth turned state's evidence, and a signed statement of the arsen activitles of the ring by Hildreth himself. They were not only enough to break up the ring and send its members to

Bert Cranston of murder.

For a long time he stood with the shadows of the pines lengthening about him, his gray eyes in curious shadow. For the moment a glimpse was given him into the deep wells of the human soul; and understanding came to him. Was there no balm for hatred even in the moment of death? Were men unable to forget the themes and motives of their lives, even when the shadows closed down upon them? Hildreth had known what hand had struck him down. And even on the



Some Hand Had Thrust a Small Roll of Paper.

frontier of death, his first thought was to hide his evidence where Cranston could not find it when he searched the body, but where later it might be on yours?" he mumbled, looking down. found by the detectives that were sure to come. It was the old creed of a life for a life. He wanted his evidence to be preserved-not that right should be wronged, but so that Cranston would be prosecuted and convicted and made to suffer. His hatred of Cranston that had made him turn state's evidence in the first place had been carried with him down into

As Dan stood wondering, he thought he heard a twig crack on the trail behind him, and he wondered what forest creature was still lingering on the ridges at the eve of the snows.

The snow began to fall in earnest at midnight-great, white flakes that almost in an instant covered th It was the real beginning of winter, and all living creatures knew it. The wolf pack sang to it from the ridgea wild and plaintive song that made Bert Cranston, sleeping in a lean-to on the Empqua side of the Divide. swear and mutter in his sleep. But he didn't really waken until Jim Gibbs, one of his gang, returned from his secret mission.

They wasted no words. Bert flung aside the blankets, lighted a candle and placed it out of the reach of the night wind. His face looked swarthy and deep-lined in its light.

you find?'

"Nothin'," Jim Gibbs answered gutturally. "If you ask me what I found out, I might have somethin' to answer.

"Then-" and Bert, after the manner of his kind, breathed an oath-"What did you find out?" His tone, except for an added note

of savagery, remained the same. Yet his heart was thumping a great deal louder than he liked to have it. Realizing that the snows were at hand, he had sent Gibbs for a last search of the body, to find and recover the evidence that Hildreth had against him and which had not been re ealed either on Hildreth's person or in his cabin. He had become increasingly apprehensive about those letters he had written Hildreth, and certain other documents that had been in his possession. He didn't understand why they hada't turned up. And now the snows had started, and Jim Gibbs had returned empty-handed, but evidently not empty-minded.

"I've found that the body's been uncovered-and men are already searchin' for elues. And moreover-I think they've found them." He paused, weighing the effect of his words. His eyes glittered with cunning. Rat that he was he was wondering whether the time had arrived to leave the ship. He had no intention of continuing to give his services to a man with a ropenoose closing about him. And Cranston, knowing this fact, hated him as he bated the buzzard that would claim him in the end, and tried to hide his apprehension.

"Go on. Blat it out," Cranston ordered. "Or else go away and let me

It was a bluff; but it worked. If Gibbs had gone without speaking, nex's. He's a lunger." Cranston would have known no sleep that night. But the man became more fawning.

"I'm tellin' you, fast as I can," he went on, almost whining. "I went to the cabin, just as you said. But'l didn't get a chance to search it-" "Why not?" Cranston thundered.

His voice re-echoed among the snowwet pines. "Pil tell you why! Because some

one else-evidently a cop-was already searchin' it. Both of us know

feet; but at first she did not dare to from a nervous collapse do not tend as the eating places in the berry thick- and other circumstantial evidence, there's nothin' there, anyway. We've a while he went away-but I didn't turn back yet. That wouldn't be Jim Gibbs. I shadowed him, just as you'd want me to. And he went straight

back to the body." "Yes?" Cranston had hard work curbing his impatience. Again Gibbs' eyes were full of ominous specula-

tions.

"He stopped at the body, and it was plain he'd been there before. He went crawling through the thickets, lookin' for clues. He done what you and me never thought to do-lookin' all the way between the trail and the body. He'd already found the brass shell you told me to get. At least, it wasn't there when I looked, after he'd gone. You should've thought of it before. But he found somethin' else a whole lot more important-a roll of papers that Hildreth had chucked into an old pine stump when he was dyin'. It was your fault, Cranston, for not gettin' them that night. This detective stood and read 'em on the trail. And you know-just as well as I do-what they were."

"D-n you, I went back the next morning, as soon as I could see. And the mountain lion had already been there. I went back lots of times since. And that shell ain't nothing-but all the time I supposed I put it in my pocket. You know how it is-a fellow throws his empty shell out by habit." Gibbs' eyes grew more intent. What

was this thing? Cranston's tone, instead of commanding, was almost pleading. But the leader caught himself at once.

"I don't see why I need to explain any of that to you. What I want to know is this: why you didn't shoot and get those papers away from him?" For an instant their eyes battled.

But Gibbs had never the strength of his leader. If he had, it would have been asserted long since. He sucked in his breath, and his gaze fell away. It rested on Cranston's rifle, that in some manner had been pulled up across his knees. And at once he was cowed. He was never so fast with a gun as Cranston. "Blood on my hands, eh-same as

"What do you think I want, a rope around my neck? These hills are big, but the arm of the law has reached up before, and it might again. You might as well know first as last I'm not goin' to do any killin's to cover up your "That comes of not going myself.

You fool-if he gets that evidence K. of P. down to the courts you're broken the Hall. same as me." "But I wouldn't get more'n a year

or so, at most-and that's a heap dif-

"Well?" he demanded. "What did

You Just Lacked the Guts to Pull the Trigger."

ferent from the gallows. I did aim at

"But you just lacked the guts to pull the trigger!"

"I did, and I ain't ashamed of it. But besides-the snows are here now, and he won't be able to even get word to the valleys for six months. If you want him killed so bad, do it your-

This was a thought indeed. On the other hand, another murder might not be necessary. Months would pass before the road would be opened, and in the meantime Cranston would have a thousand chances to steal back the accusing letters. He didn't believe for an instant that the man Gibbs had seen was a detective. He had kept too close watch over the roads for

"A tall chap, in outing clothes dark-haired and clean-shaven?" "Yes?"

"Wears a tan hat?" "That's the man '

"I know him-and I wish you'd punctured him. That's Failing-the tenderfoot that's been staying at Len-

"He didn't look like no lunger to

"But no matter about that-it's just as I thought. And I'll get 'em backmark my little words."

In the meantime the best thing to do was to move at once to his winner trapping grounds-a certain neglected region on the lower levels of the North Fork. If at any time within the next few weeks, Dan should attempt to carry word down to the settlements, would be certain to pass

Continued Next Week

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