

The Voice of the Pack

A Story of the Oregon Mountain Country

Yet if the chance did come, if the house should be left unguarded, it might pay Cranston to make an immediate search. Dan would have no reason for supposing that Cranston suspected his possession of the letters; he would not be particularly watchful, and would probably pigeon-hole them until spring in Lennox's desk.

And the truth was that Cranston had reasoned out the situation almost perfectly. When Dan awakened in the morning, and the snow lay already a foot deep over the wilderness world, he knew that he would have no chance to act upon the Cranston case until the snows melted in the spring. So he pushed all thought of it out of his mind and turned his attention to more pleasant subjects. It was true that he read the documents over twice as he lay in bed. Then he tied them into a neat packet and put them away where they would be quickly available. Then he thrust his head out of the window and let the great snowflakes sift down upon his face. It was winter at last, the season that he loved.

He didn't stir from the house that first day of the storm. Snowbird and he found plenty of pleasant things to do and talk about before the roaring fire that he built in the grate. He was glad of the great pile of wood that

lay outside the door. Then Snowbird led him to the windows, and they watched the white drifts pile up over the low underbrush.

When finally the snowstorm ceased, five days later, the whole face of the wilderness was changed. The buckbrush was mostly covered, the fences were out of sight; the forest seemed a clear, clean sweep of white, broken only by an occasional tall thicket and by the great, snow-covered trees.

When the clouds blew away, and the air grew clear, the temperature began to fall. Dan had no way of knowing how low it went. Thermometers were not considered essential at the Lennox home. But when his eyelids congealed with the frost, and his mittens froze to the logs of firewood that he carried through the door, and the pine trees exploded and cracked in the darkness, he was correct in his belief that it was very, very cold.

But he loved the cold, and the silence and austerity that went with it. The wilderness claimed him as never before. The rugged breed that were his ancestors had struggled through such seasons as this and passed a love of them down through the years to him.

When the ice made a crust over the snow, he learned to walk on snowshoes. At first there were pains

in the feet, but between the fall of fresh snow and the thaws that softened the crust, he slowly mastered the art. Snowbird—and Dan never realized the full significance of her name until he saw her flying with incredible grace over the snow—laughed at him at first and ran him races that would usually end in his falling headfirst into a ten-foot snowbank. She taught him how to ski and more than once she would stop in the middle of an earnest bit of pedagogy to find that he wasn't listening at all. He would seem to be fairly devouring her with his eyes, delighting in the play of soft pinks and reds in her cheeks, and drinking, as a man drinks wine, the amazing charge of light and shadow in her eyes.

She seemed to blossom under his gaze. Not one of those short winter days went by without the discovery of some new trait or little vanity to astonish or delight him—sometimes an unlooked-for tenderness toward the weak, often a sweet, untainted philosophy of life, or perhaps just a lowering of her eyelids in which her eyes would show lustrous through the lashes, or some sweeping, exuberant gesture startlingly graceful.

Lennox awakened one morning with the realization that this was one of the hardest winters of his experience. He began to be very kind of the abundant stores of provisions that overcrowded his pantry—savory hams and bacon, dried venison, sacks of potatoes and evaporated vegetables, and, of course, canned goods past counting. With the high fire roaring in the grate, the season held no ill for them. But sometimes, when the bitter cold came down at twilight, and the moon looked like a thing of ice itself over the snow, he began to wonder how the wild creatures who wintered on the Divide were faring. Of course most of them were gone. Wolf, long since, had grunted and mumbled his way into a winter lair. But the wolves remained, strange gray shadows on the snow, and possibly a few of the harder smaller creatures.

More than once in those long winter nights their talk was chopped off short by the song of the pack on some distant ridge. Sometimes, when the world is old, possibly a man will be born that can continue to talk and keep his mind on his words while the wolf pack sings. But he is certainly an unknown quantity today. The cry sets in vibration curious memory chords, and for a moment the listener sees in his mind's eye his ancient home in an ancient world—Darkness and Fear and Eyes shining about the cave. It carries him back, and he knows the wilderness as it really is; and to have such knowledge dries up all inclination to talk, as a sponge dries water. Of course the picture isn't entirely plain. It is more a thing,

guessed at, a photograph in some dark part of an under-consciousness that has constantly grown more dim as the centuries have passed. Possibly sometime it will fade out altogether; and then a man may continue to discuss the weather while the Song from the ridge shudders in at the windows, but the world will be quite cold by then, and no longer particularly interesting. And possibly even the wolves themselves will then be tamed to play dead and speak pieces—which means the wilderness itself will be tamed. For as long as the wild lasts, the pack will run through it in the winter. They were here in the beginning, and in spite of constant war and constant hatred on the part of men, they will be here in the end. The reason is just that they are the symbol of the wilderness itself, and the idea of it continuing to exist without them is stranger than that of a nation without a flag.

It wasn't quite the same song that Dan had listened to in the first days of fall. It had been triumphant then, and proud with the wilderness pride. Of course it had been sad then, too, but it was more sad now. And it was stranger, too, and crept farther into the souls of its listeners. It was the song of strength that couldn't avail against the snow, possibly of cold and the despair and courage of starvation. These three that heard it were lured to the wilderness; but a moment was always needed after its last note had died to regain their gaiety.

"They're getting lean and they're getting savage," Lennox said one night stretched on his divan before the fireplace. He was still unable to walk; but the fractures were knitting slowly and the doctor had promised that the summer would find him well. "If we had a dog, I wouldn't offer much for his life. One of these days we'll find 'em in a big circle around the house—and then we'll have to open up with the rifles."

But this picture appalled neither of his two young listeners. No wolf pack can stand against three marksmen, armed with rifles and behind oaken walls.

Christmas came and passed, and January brought clear days and an ineffective sun shining on the snow. These were the best days of all. Every afternoon Dan and Snowbird would go out on their skis on snowshoes, unarmed except for the pistol that Snowbird carried in the deep pocket of her mackinaw. "But why not?" Dan replied to Lennox's objection. "She could kill five wolves with five shots, or pretty near it, and you know well enough that that would hold 'em till we got home. They'd stop to eat the five. I have had enough time keeping up with her as it is, without carrying a rifle." And Lennox was content. Dan had told the truth when he said that five deaths or even fewer, would repel the attack of any wolf pack he had ever seen. There was just one troubling thought. He had heard, long ago, and he had forgotten who had told him, that in the most severe winters the wolves gather in particularly large packs; and a quality in the song that they had heard at night seemed to bear it out. The chorus had been exceptionally loud and strong, and he had been unable to pick out individual voices.

The snow was perfect for skiing. Previously their sport had been many times interrupted either by the fall of fresh snow or a thaw that had softened the snow crust; but now every afternoon was too perfect to remain indoors. They shouted and rumped in the silences, and they did not dream but that they had the wilderness all to themselves. The fact that one night Lennox's keen eyes had seen what looked like the glow of a camp fire in the distance didn't affect this belief of theirs at all. It was evidently just the phosphorus glowing in a rotten log from which the winds had blown the snow.

Once or twice they caught glimpses of wild life: once a grouse that had buried in the snow flushed from their path and blew the snow-dust from its wings; and once or twice they saw snowshoe rabbits bounding away on flat feet over the drifts. But just one day they caught sight of a wolf. They were on snowshoes on a particularly brilliant afternoon late in January.

He was a lone male, evidently a straggler from the pack, and he leaped from the top of a tall thicket that had remained above the snow. The man and the girl had entirely different reactions. Dan's first impression was amazement at the animal's condition. It seemed to be in the last stages of starvation; unbelievably gaunt, with ribs bones showing plainly even through the furry hide. Ordinarily the heavily furred animals do not show signs of famine; but even an inexperienced eye could not make a mistake in this case. The eyes were red, and they carried Dan back to his first adventure in the Oregon forest—the day he had shot the mad coyote. Snowbird thought of the beast only as an enemy. The wolves killed her father's stock; they were brigands of the worst order; and she shared the hatred of them that is a common trait of all primitive peoples. Her hand whipped back, seized her pistol, and she fired twice at the fleeing figure.

The second shot was a hit: both of them saw the wolf go to its side, then spring up and race on. Shouting, both of them sped after him.

In a few moments he was out of sight among the distant trees, but they found the blood-trail and munched over the ridge. They expected at any moment to find him lying dead; but the track led them on clear down the next canyon. And now they cared not at all whether they found him: it was simply a tramp in the out-of-doors; and both of them were young with red blood in their veins.

But all at once Dan stopped in his tracks. The girl sped on for six paces before she missed the sound of his snowshoes; then she turned to find him standing, wholly motionless, with eyes fixed upon her.

It startled her, and she didn't know why. A companion abruptly freezing in his path, his muscles inert, and his eyes filling with speculation, is always startling. When this occurs it means simply that a thought so compelling and engrossing that even the half-unconscious physical functions, such as walking, cannot continue, has come into his mind. And it is part of the old creed of self-preservation to dislike greatly to be left out on any such thought as this. If danger is present, the sooner it is identified the better.

"What is it?" she demanded.

He turned to her curiously intent. "How many shells have you in that pistol?"

She took one breath and answered him. "It holds five, and I shot twice. I haven't any others."

"And I don't suppose it ever occurred to you to carry extra ones in your pocket?"

"Father is always telling me to—and several times I have. But I'd shoot them away at target practice and forget to take any more. There was never any danger—except that night with a cougar. I did intend to—but what does it matter now?"

"We're a couple of wise ones, going after that wolf with only three shots to our name. Of course by himself he's harmless—but he's likely enough to lead us straight toward the pack. And Snowbird—I didn't like his looks. He's too gaunt and he's too hungry—and I haven't a bit of doubt he waited in that brush for us to come, intending to attack us—and lost his nerve the last thing. That shows he's desperate. I don't like him, and I wouldn't like his pack. And a whole pack might not lose its nerve."

"Then you think we'd better turn back?"

"Yes, I do, and not come out any more without a whole pocket of shells. I'm going to carry a rifle, too, just as Lennox has always. He's got only a flesh-wound. You saw what you did with two cartridges—got in one flesh-wound. Three of 'em against a pack wouldn't be a great deal of aid. I don't mean to say you can't shoot, but a jumping, lively wolf is worse than a bird in the air. We've gone over three miles; and he's led us ten miles farther—even if he didn't go to the pack. Let's go back."

"If you say so. But I don't think there's the least bit of danger. We can always climb a tree."

"And have 'em make a beautiful circle under it! They've got more patience than we have—and we'd have to come down some time. Your father can't come to our help, you know. It's the sign of the tenderfoot not to think there's any danger—and I'm not going to think that way any more."

They turned back and munched in silence a long time.

"I suppose you'll think I'm a coward," Dan asked her humbly.

"Only prudent, Dan," she answered, smiling. Whether she meant it he did not know. "I'm just beginning to understand that you—living here only a few months—really know and understand all this better than I do." She stretched her arms wide to the wilderness. "I guess it's your instinct."

"And I do understand," he told her earnestly. "I sensed danger back there just as sure as I can see your face. That pack—and it's a big one—is close; and it's terribly hungry. And you know—you can't help but know—that the wolves are not to be trusted in famine times."

"I know it only too well," she said. Then she paused and asked him about a strange grayness, like snow blown by the wind, on the sky over the ridge.

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Bert Cranston waited in a clump of exposed thicket on the hillside until he saw two black dots, that he knew were Dan and Snowbird, leave the Lennox home. He lay very still as they crept up the ridge, noting that except for the pistol that he knew Snowbird always carried, they were unarmed. There was no particular reason why he should be interested in that point. It was just the mountain way always to look for weapons, and it is rather difficult to trace the mental processes behind this impulse. Perhaps it can be laid to the fact that many mountain families are often at feud with one another, and anything in the way of violence may happen before the morning.

The two passed out of his sight, and after a long time he heard the crack of Snowbird's pistol. He guessed that she had either shot at some wild creature, or else was merely at target practice—rather a common proceeding for the two when they were on the hills together. Thus it is to be seen that Cranston knew their habits fairly well. And since he had kept a close watch upon them for several days, this was to be expected.

He had no intention of being interrupted in this work he was about to do. He had planned it all very well. The elder Lennox was still helpless. Cranston had noticed that when Dan and Snowbird went out, they were usually gone from two to four hours; and that gave him plenty of time for his undertaking. The moment had come at last to make a thorough search of Lennox's house for those incriminating documents that Dan had dredged near the body of Lady Hill-dreth.

The only really dangerous part of his undertaking was his approach. If by any chance Lennox were looking out of the window, he might be found waiting with a rifle across his arms. It would be quite like the old mountaineer to have his gun beside him,

and to shoot it quick and exceptionally straight, without asking questions, at any stealing figure in the snow. Yet Cranston felt fairly sure that Lennox was still too helpless to raise a gun to a shooting position.

He had observed that the mountaineer spent his time either on the fireplace divan or on his own bed. Neither of these places was available to the rear windows of the house. So, very wisely, he made his attack from the rear.

He came stealing across the snow—a musher of the first degree. Very silently and swiftly he slipped off his snowshoes at the door. The door itself was unlocked, just as he had supposed. In an instant more he was tiptoeing, a dark, silent figure, through the corridors of the house. He held his rifle ready in his hands.

He peered into Lennox's bedroom first. The room was unoccupied. Then the floor of the corridor creaked beneath his step; and he knew nothing further was to be gained by waiting. If Lennox suspected his presence, he might be waiting with aimed rifle as he opened the door of the living room.

He glided faster. He halted once more—a moment at the living-room door to see if Lennox had been disturbed. He was lying still, however, so Cranston pushed through.

Lennox glanced up from his magazine to find that unmistakable thing, the barrel of a rifle, pointed at his breast. Cranston was one of those rare marksmen who shoot with both eyes open—and that meant that he kept his full visual powers to the last instant before the hammer fell.

"I can't raise my arms," Lennox said simply. "One of 'em won't work



"I Can't Raise My Arms," Lennox Said Simply.

at all—besides, against the doctor's orders."

Cranston stole over toward him, looking closely for weapons. He pulled aside the woolen blanket that Lennox had drawn up over his body, and he pushed his hand into the cushions of the couch. A few deft pats, holding his rifle through the fork of his arm, finger coiled into the trigger guard, assured him that Lennox was not "heeled" at all. Then he laughed and went to work.

"I thought I told you once," Lennox began with perfect coldness, "that the doors of my house were no longer open to you."

"You did say that," was Cranston's guttural reply. "But you see I'm here just the same, don't you? And what are you going to do about it?"

"I probably felt that sooner or later you would come to steal—just as you and your crowd stole the supplies from the forest station last winter—and that probably influenced me to give the orders. I didn't want thieves around my house, and I don't want them now. I don't want coyotes, either."

"And I don't want any such remarks out of you, either," Cranston answered him. "You lie still and shut up, and I suspect that sissy boarder of yours will come back, after he's through embracing your daughter in the snow, and find you in one piece. Otherwise not."

"If I were in one piece," Lennox answered him very quietly, "instead of a bundle of broken bones that can't lift its arms, I'd get up off this couch, unarmed as I am, and stamp on your lying lips."

But Cranston only laughed and tied Lennox's feet with a cord from the window shade.

He went to work very systematically. First he rifled Lennox's desk in the living room. Then he looked on the cupboards and ransacked the drawers. He was taunting and calm at first. But as the moments passed, his passion grew upon him. He no longer smiled. The rodent features became intent; the eyes narrowed to curious, bright slits under the dark lashes. He went to Dan's room, searched his bureau drawer and all the pockets of the clothes hanging in his closet. He upset his trunk and pawed among old letters in the suitcase. Then, stealing like some creature of the wilderness, he came back to the living room.

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