

# THE VOICE OF THE PACK.

## A Story of the Oregon Mountain Country

"I'm sorry, Dan," she told him. "You tried so hard—"

Just one little sound broke from his throat—a strange, deep gasp that could not be suppressed. Then he caught her hand in his and kissed it—again and again. "Do you think I care about that?" he asked her. "I only wish I could have done more—and what I have done doesn't count. Just as in my fight with Cranston, nothing counts because I didn't win. It's just fate, Snowbird. It's no one's fault, but maybe, in this world, nothing is ever anyone's fault." For in the twilight of those winter woods, in the shadow of death itself, perhaps he was catching glimpsings of eternal truths that are hidden from all but the most far-seeing eyes.

"And this is the end?" she asked him. She spoke very bravely.

"No!" His hand tightened on hers. "No, so long as an ounce of strength remains. To fight—never to give up—may God give me spirit for it till I die."

And this was no idle prayer. His eyes raised to the starry sky as he spoke.

"But, son," Lennox asked him rather quietly, "what can you do? The wolves aren't going to wait a great deal longer, and we can't go on."

"There's one thing more—one more thing to make," Dan answered. "I thought about it at first, but it was too long a chance to try if there was any other way. And I suppose you thought of it too."

"Overlooking Cranston?"

"Of course. And it sounds like a crazy dream. But listen, both of you. If we have got to die, up here in the snow—and it looks like we had—what is the thing you want done worst before we go?"

Lennox's hands clasped, and he leaned forward on the sled. "Pay Cranston!" he said.

"Yes!" Dan's voice rang. "Cranston's never going to be paid unless we do it. There will be no signs of incendiarism at the house, and no proofs. They'll find our bodies in the snow, and we'll just be a mystery, with no one made to pay. The evidence in my pocket will be taken by Cranston, some time this winter. If I don't make him pay, he never will pay. And that's one reason why I'm going to try to carry out this plan I've got."

"The second reason is that it's the one hope we have left. I take it that none of us are deceived on that point. And no man can die tamely—if he is a man—while there's a chance. I mean a young man, like me—not one who is old and tired. It sounds perfectly silly to talk about finding Cranston's winter quarters, and then, with my bare hands, conquering him, taking his food and his blankets and his snowshoes and his rifle, to fight away these wolves, and bringing 'em back here."

"You wouldn't be bareheaded," the girl reminded him. "You could have the pistol."

"He didn't even seem to hear her. I've been thinking about it. It's a long, long chance—much worse than the chance we had of getting out by straight walking. I think we could have made it, if the wolves had kept off and the snowshoes hadn't broken. It would have nearly killed us, but I believe we could have got out. That's why I didn't try this other way first. A man with his bare hands hasn't much of a chance against another with a rifle, and I don't want you to be too hopeful. And of course, the hardest problem is finding his camp."

"But I do feel sure of one thing: that he is back to his old tramping line on the North Fork—somewhere south of here—and his camp is somewhere on the river. I think he would have gone there so that he could cut off any attempt I might make to get through with those letters. My plan is to start back at an angle that will carry me between the North Fork and our old

house. Somewhere in there I'll find his tracks, the tracks he made when he first came over to burn up the house. I suppose he was careful to mix 'em up after once he arrived here, but the first part of the way he likely walked straight toward the house from his camp. Somewhere, if I go that way, I'll cross his trail—with- in 10 miles at least. Then I'll back-track him to his camp."



"Keep the Fire Burning."

"And never come back!" the girl cried.

"Maybe not. But at least everything that can be done will be done. Nothing will be left. No regrets. We will have made the last trial. I'm not going to waste any time, Snowbird. The sooner we get your fire built the better."

"Father and I are to stay here?" "What else can you do?" He went back to his traces and drew the sled 100 yards farther. He didn't seem to see the gaunt wolf that backed off into the shadows as he approached. He refused to notice that the pack seemed to be steadily growing bolder. Human hunters usually had guns that could blast and destroy from a distance; but even an animal intelligence could perceive that these three seemed to be without this means of inflicting death.

A wolf is ever so much more intelligent than a crow—yet a crow shows little fear of an unarmed man and is wholly unapproachable by a boy with a gun. The ugly truth was simply that in their increasing madness and excitement and hunger, they were becoming less and less fearful of those three strange humans with the sled.

It was not a good place for a camp. They worked a long time before they cleared a little patch of ground of its snow mantle. Dan cut a number of saplings—laboriously with his ax—and built a fire with the comparatively dry core of a dead tree. True, it was feeble and flickering, but as good as could be hoped for, considering the difficulties under which he worked.

The dead logs under the snow were soaked with water from the rains and thaws. The green wood that he cut smoked without blazing.

"No more time to be lost," Dan told Snowbird. "It lies in your hands to keep the fire burning. And don't leave the circle of the fire light without that pistol in your hand."

"You don't mean," she asked, unbelieving, "that you are going to go out there to fight Cranston—unarmed?"

"Of course, Snowbird. You must keep the pistol."

"But it means death; that's all it means. What chance would you have against a man with a rifle? And as soon as you get away from this fire, the wolves will tear you to pieces."

"And what would you and your father do, if I took it? You can't build a big enough fire to frighten them. Please don't even talk about this matter, Snowbird. My mind's made up. I think the pack will stay here. They usually—God knows how—know who is helpless and who isn't. Maybe with the gun, you will be able to save your lives."

"What's the chance of that?" "You might—with one cartridge—kill one of the devils; and the others—but you know how they devour their own dead. That might break their famine enough so that they'd hold off until I can get back. That's the prize I'm playing for."

"And what if you don't get back?" He took her hand in one of his, and with the other he caressed, for a single moment, the lovely flesh of her throat. The love he had for her spoke from his eyes—such speech as no human vision could possibly mistake. Both of them were tingling and breathless with a great, sweet wonder.

"Never let those fangs tear that softness, while you live," he told her gently. "Never let that brave old man on the sled go to his death with the pack tearing at him. Cheat 'em, Snowbird! Beat 'em the last minute, if no other way remains! Show 'em who's boss, after all—of all this forest."

"You mean—" Her eyes widened. "I mean that you must only spend one of those three shells in fighting off the wolves. Save that till the moment you need it most. The other two must be saved—for something else."

She nodded, shuddering an instant at a menacing shadow that moved within 60 feet of the fire.

"Then goodbye, Dan!" she told him. And she stretched up her arms. "The thing I said—that day on the hillside—doesn't hold any more."

His own arms encircled her, but he made no effort to claim her lips. Lennox watched them quietly; in this moment of crisis he not even pretending to look away. Dan shook his head to her entreating eyes. "It isn't just a kiss, darling," he told her soberly. "It goes deeper than that. It's a symbol. It was your word, too, and mine; and words can't be broken, things being as they are. Can't I make you understand?"

She nodded. His eyes burned. Perhaps she didn't understand, as far as actual functioning of the brain was concerned. But she reacted up to him, as women—knowing life in the concrete rather than the abstract—have always reached up to men; and she dimly caught the gleam of some eternal principle and right behind his words. "This strong man of the mountains had given his word, had been witness to her own promise to him and to herself, and a law that goes down to the roots of life prevented him from claiming the kiss."

Many times, since the world was new, comfort—happiness—life itself have been contingent on the breaking of a law. Yet in spite of what seemed common sense, even though no punishment would forsooth come if it were broken, the law has been kept. It was this way now. It wouldn't have been a kiss such as boys and girls have always had in the moonlight. It wasn't the symbolic renunciation of the debt that Dan owed Cranston—a debt that in his mind might possibly go unpaid, which no weight of circumstance could make him renounce.

His longing for her lips pulled at the roots of him. But by the laws of his being he couldn't claim them until the debt incurred on the hillside, months ago, had been paid; to take them now meant to dull the fine edge of his resolve to carry the issue through to the end, to dim the star that led him, to weaken him, by bending now, for the test to come. He didn't know why. It had its fount in the deep wells of the spirit. Common sense can't reveal how the holy man keeps strong the spirit by denying the flesh. It goes too deep for that. Dan kept to his concentration.

He did, however, kiss her hands, and he kissed the tears out of her eyes. Then he turned into the darkness and broke through the ring of the wolves.

### CHAPTER III.

Dan Falling was never more thankful for his unerring sense of direction. He struck off at a forty-five-degree angle between their late course and a direct road to the river, and he kept it as if by a surveyor's line. All the old devices of the wilderness—the ridge on a ridge that looked just alike, inclines that to the casual eye looked like downward slopes, streams that vanished beneath the snow, and the snow-mist blowing across the face of the landmarks—could not avail against him.

A half dozen of the wolves followed him at first. But perhaps their fierce eyes marked his long stride and his powerful body, and decided that their better chance was with the helpless man and the girl beside the flickering fire. They turned back, one by one. Dan kept straight on and in two hours crossed Cranston's trail. He didn't doubt but that he would find Cranston in his camp, if he found the camp at all. The man had certainly returned to it immediately after setting fire to the buildings, if for no other reason than for food. It isn't well to be abroad on the wintry mountains without a supply of food; and Cranston would certainly know this fact.

Dan didn't know when a rifle bullet from some camp in the thickets would put an abrupt end to his advance. The brush grew high by the river, the elevation was considerably lower, and there might be one hundred camps out of the sight of the casual wayfarer. If Cranston should see him, mashing across the moonlit snow, it would give him the most savage joy to open fire upon him with his rifle.

Dan's keen eyes searched the thickets, and particularly they watched the sky line for a faint glare that might mean a camp fire. He tried to walk silently. It wasn't an easy thing to do with awkward snowshoes; but the river drowned the little noise that he made. He tried to take advantage of the shelter of the thickets and the trees. Then, at the base of a little ridge, he came to a sudden halt.

He had estimated just right. Not two hundred yards distant, a camp fire flickered and glowed in the shelter of a great log. He saw it, by the most astounding good fortune, through a little rift in the trees. Ten feet on either side, and it was obscured.

He lost no time. He did not know when the wolves about Snowbird's camp would lose the last of their cowardice. Yet he knew he must keep a tight grip on his self-control and not let the necessity of haste overtake him. He crept forward, step by step, placing his snowshoes with consummate care. When he was one hundred yards distant he saw that Cranston's camp was situated beside a little stream that flowed into the river and that—like the mountaineer—he had built a large lean-to reinforced with snowbanks. The fire burned at its opening. Cranston was not in sight; either he was absent from camp or asleep in his lean-to. The latter seemed the more likely.

Dan made a wide detour, coming in about thirty yards behind the construction. Still he moved with incredible caution. Never in his life had he possessed a greater mastery over his own nerves. His heart leaped somewhat fast in his own breast; but this was the only wasted motion. It isn't easy to advance through such thickets without over a step, without the rustle of a branch or the crack of a twig.

Certain of the wild creatures find it easy; but men have forgotten how in too many centuries of the past. It is hardly a human quality, and a spectator would have found a rather ghastly fascination in watching the little motions, the passionless face, the hands that didn't shake at all. But there were no spectators—unless the little band of wolves, stragglers from the pack that had gathered on the hills behind—watched with lighted eyes.

Dan went down at full length upon the snow and softly removed his snowshoes. They would be only an impediment in the close work that was sure to follow. He slid along the snow crust, clear to the mouth of the lean-to. The moonlight poured through and showed the interior with rather remarkable plainness. Cranston was sprawled, half-sitting, half-lying on a tree-rough pallet near the rear wall. There was not the slightest doubt of the man's wakefulness. Dan heard him stir, and once—as if at the memory of his deed of the day before—he cursed in a savage whisper. Although he was facing the opening of the lean-to, he was wholly unaware of Dan's presence. The latter had thrust his head at the side of the opening, and it was in shadow. Cranston seemed to be watching the great, white snow fields that lay in front, and for a moment Dan was at loss to explain this seeming vigil. Then he understood. The white field before him was part of the long ridge that the three of

them would pass on their way to the valleys. Cranston had evidently anticipated that the girl and the man would attempt to march out—even if he hadn't guessed they would try to take the helpless Lennox with them—and he wished to be prepared for emergencies. There might be sport to have with Dan, unarmed as he was. And his eyes were full of strange conjectures in regard to Snowbird. Both would be exhausted now and helpless—

Dan's eyes encompassed the room: the piles of provisions heaped against the wall, the snow shoes beside the pallet, but most of all he wished to locate Cranston's rifle. Success or failure hung on that. He couldn't find it at first. Then he saw the glitter of its barrel in the moonlight—leaning against a grab box possibly six feet from Cranston and 10 from himself.

His heart leaped. The best he had hoped for—for the sake of Snowbird, not himself—was that he would be nearer to the gun than Cranston and would be able to seize it first. But conditions could be greatly worse than they were. If Cranston had actually had the weapon in his hands, the odds of battle would have been frightfully against Dan. It takes a certain length of time to seize, swing, and aim a rifle; and Dan felt that while he was unable to reach it himself, Cranston could not procure it either, without giving Dan an opportunity to leap upon him. In all his dreams, through the months of preparation, he had pictured it thus. It was the test at last.

The gun might be loaded, and still—in these days of safety devices—unready to fire; and the loss of a fraction of a second might enable Cranston to reach his knife. Thus Dan felt justified in ignoring the gun altogether and trusting—as he had most desired—to a battle of hands. And he wanted both hands free when he made his attack.

If Dan had been erect upon his feet, his course would have been an immediate leap on the shoulders of his adversary, running the risk of Cranston reaching his hunting knife in time. But the second that he would require to get to his feet would entirely offset this advantage. Cranston could spring

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power seemed to be holding his wrist and was bending his bone as an Indian bends a bow. Pain lashed through him. And then—this dark-haired man, who had never known the meaning of mercy, opened his lips to scream at this terrible enemy he meant to kill.

But the words wouldn't come. A ghastly weight had come at his throat, and his tortured lungs sobbed for breath. Then, for a long time, there was a curious pounding, lashing sound in the evergreen boughs. It seemed merciless and endless.

But Dan got up at last, in a strange, heavy silence, and swiftly went to work. He took the rifle and filled it with cartridges from Cranston's belt. Then he put the remaining two boxes of shells into his shirt pocket. The supplies of food—the sack of nutritious jerked venison like dried bark, the little package of cheese, the boxes of hard tack and one of the small sacks of prepared flour—he tied, with a single kettle, into his heavy blankets and hung them with the rifle upon his back. Finally he took the pair of snow shoes from the floor. He worked coldly, swiftly, all the time munching at a piece of jerked venison. When he had finished he walked to the door of the lean-to.

It seemed to Dan that Cranston whispered faintly, from his unconsciousness, as he passed; but the victor did not turn to look. The snow shoes crunched away into the darkness. On the hill behind a half dozen wolves—stragglers from the pack—frisked and leaped about in a curious way. A strange smell had reached them on the wind, and when the loud, fearful steps were out of bearing it might pay them to creep down, one by one, and investigate its cause.

The gray circle about the fire was growing impatient. Snowbird waited to the last instant before she admitted this fact. But it is possible only so long to deny the truth of a thing that all the senses verify, and that moment for her was past.

She noticed that when she went to her hands and knees, laboriously to cut a piece of the drier wood from the rain-soaked, rotted snag that was her principal supply of fuel, every wolf would leap forward, only to draw back when she stood straight again. She worked desperately to keep the fire

burning bright. She dared not neglect it for a moment. Except for the single pistol ball that she could afford to expend on the wolves—of the three she had—the fire was her last defense.

But it was a losing fight. The rain-soaked wood smoked without flame, the comparatively dry core with which Dan had started the fire had burned down, and the green wood, lashed with such heart-breaking difficulty from the saplings that Dan had cut, needed the most tireless attention to burn at all.

Her nervous vitality was flowing from her in a frightful stream. Too long she had toiled without food in the constant presence of danger, and she was very near indeed to utter exhaustion. But at the same time she knew she must not faint. That was one thing she could not do—to fall unconscious before the last of her three cartridges was expended in the right way.

Again she went forth to the sapling, and this time it seemed to her that if she simply tossed the ax through the air, she could fell one of the gray crowd. But when she stooped to pick it up—she didn't finish the thought. She turned to coax the fire. And then she leaned sobbing over the sled.

"What's the use?" she cried. "He won't come back. What's the use of fighting any more?"

"There's always use of fighting," her father told her. He seemed to speak with difficulty, and his face looked strange and white. The cold and the exposure were having their effect on his weakened system, and unconsciousness was a near shadow indeed. "But, dearest—if I could only make you do what I want you to—"

"What?"

"You're able to climb a tree, and if you'd take these coats, you wouldn't freeze by morning. If you'd only have the strength—"

"And see you turn to pieces!" "I'm old, dear—and very tired—and I'd crawl away into the shadows, where you couldn't see. There's no use minding words, Snowbird. You're a brave girl—always have been since a little thing, as God is my Judge—and you know we must face the truth. Better one of us die than both. And I promise—I'll never feel their fangs. And I won't take your pistol with me either."

Her thought flashed to the clasp hunting knife that he carried in his pocket. But her eyes lighted, and she bent and kissed him. And the wolves leaped forward even at this.

"We'll stay it out," she told him. "We'll fight it to the last—just as Dan would want us to do. Besides—it would only mean the same fate for me, in a little while. I couldn't cling up there forever—and Dan won't come back."

She was wholly unable to gain on the fire. Only by dint of the most heart-breaking toil was she able to secure any dry fuel for it at all. Every length of wood she cut had to be scraped of bark, and half the time the fire was only a sickly column of white smoke. It became increasingly difficult to swing the ax. The trail was almost at its end.

The after-midnight hours drew one by one across the face of the wilderness, and she thought that the deepening cold presaged dawn. Her fingers were numb.

Once more she went to one of the saplings, but she stumbled and almost went to her face at the first blow. It was the instant that her gray watchers had been waiting for. The wolf that stood nearest leaped—a gray streak out of the shadow—and every wolf in the pack shot forward with a yell. It was a short, expectant cry; but it chopped off short. For with a half-sob, and seemingly without mental process, she aimed her pistol and fired.

A fast-leaping wolf is one of the most difficult pistol targets that can be imagined. It bordered on the miraculous that she did not miss him altogether. Her nerves were torn, their control over her muscles largely gone. Yet the bullet coursed down through the lungs, inflicting a mortal wound.

The wolf had leaped for her throat; but he fell short. She staggered from a blow, and she heard a curious sound in the region of her hip. But she didn't know that the fangs had gone home in her soft flesh. The wolf rolled on the ground; and if her pistol had possessed the shocking power of a rifle, he would have never got up again. As it was, he shrieked once, then sped off in the darkness to die. Five or six of the nearest wolves, catching the smell of his blood, bayed and sped after him.

But the remainder of the great pack—fully 15 of the gray, gaunt creatures—came stealing across the snow toward her. White fangs had gone home; and a new madness was in the air.

Straining into the silence, a perfectly straight line between Cranston's camp and Snowbird's, Dan Falling came mashing across the snow. His sense of direction had never been obliged to stand such a test as this before. Snowbird's fire was a single dot on a vast plateau; yet he had gone straight toward it.

He was risking everything for the sake of speed. He gave no heed to the fallen timber that might have torn the web of his snow shoes to shreds. Because he shut out all thought of it, he had no feeling of fatigue. The fight with Cranston had been a frightful strain on muscle and nerve; but he scarcely remembered it now. His whole purpose was to return to Snowbird before the wolves lost the last of their cowardice.

The jerked venison that he had munched had brought him back much of his strength. He was wholly uncon-

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