

The Strength of the Pines

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"The Voice of the Pack"

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SYNOPSIS

CHAPTER I.—At the death of his foster father, Bruce Duncan, in an eastern city, receives a mysterious message, sent by a Mrs. Ross, summoning him immediately to southern Oregon—to meet "Linda."

CHAPTER II.—Bruce has vivid but hazy recollections of his childhood in an orphanage, before his adoption by Newton Duncan, with the girl Linda.

CHAPTER III.—At his destination, Linda's end, news that a message had been sent to Bruce is received with marked displeasure by a man introduced to the reader as "Simon."

CHAPTER IV.—Leaving the train, Bruce is astonished at his apparent familiarity with the surroundings, though to his knowledge he has never been there.

CHAPTER V.—Obedient to the message, Bruce makes his way to Martin's crossroads store, for direction as to reaching Mrs. Ross' cabin.

CHAPTER VI.—On the way, "Simon" sternly warns him to give up his quest and return East. Bruce refuses.

CHAPTER VII.—Mrs. Ross, aged and infirm, welcomes him to her cabin, and hastens him on his way—the end of "Pine-Needle Trail."

CHAPTER VIII.—Through a country puzzlingly familiar, Bruce journeys, and finds his childhood playmate, Linda.

CHAPTER IX.—The girl tells him of wrongs committed by an enemy clan on her family, the Rosses. Linda, occupied by the clan, was away from the Rosses, and the family, with the exception of Aunt Elmira (Mrs. Ross) and herself, wiped out by assassination. Bruce's father, Matthew Folger, was one of the victims. His mother had fled with Bruce and Linda. The girl, while small, had been kidnapped from the orphanage and brought to the mountains. Linda's father had died, leaving her to Matthew Folger, but the agreement, which would confer the enemy's claims to the property, had been lost.

CHAPTER X.—Bruce's mountain blood responds to the call of the blood-feud.

CHAPTER XI.—A giant tree, the Sentinel Pine, in front of Linda's cabin, seems to Bruce's excited imagination to be endeavoring to convey a message.

CHAPTER XII.—Bruce sets out in search of a trapper named Hudson, a witness to the agreement between Linda's father and Matthew Folger.

CHAPTER XIII.—A grizzly grizzly, known as the Killer, is the terror of the vicinity, because of his size and ferocity.

CHAPTER XIV.—Dave Turner, sent by Simon, bribes Hudson to swear falsely concerning the agreement, if brought to light, he knowing its whereabouts.

CHAPTER XV.—Hudson and Dave visit the former's traps. A wolf, caught in one, is discovered. The room with dancing shadows, Bruce looked about him. Simon sat beside the fireplace, the lamp at his elbow. As the wick caught, the light brightened and steadied, and Bruce could see plainly. On each side of him, in chairs about the walls, sat Simon's brothers and his blood relations that shared the estate with him. They were huge, gaunt men, most of them dark-bearded and sallow-skinned, and all of them regarded him with the same gaze of speculative interest.

CHAPTER XVI.—Simon, believing Bruce knows where the document is concealed, lays plans to trap him.

CHAPTER XVII.—Dave deceives Linda and Aunt Elmira from their home. The man insults Linda and is struck down by the aged woman. Elmira's son has been murdered by Dave, and at her command, after securely binding the desperate, Linda leaves them alone.

CHAPTER XVIII.—Returning, Bruce finds a note, presumably from Linda, telling him she has been kidnapped by the Turners.

CHAPTER XIX.—Bruce falls into Simon's trap, and is made prisoner.

CHAPTER XX.—Charging Bruce with attempting to reopen the blood-feud, the clan, after a mock trial, decides to leave him, bound in a pasture on the spot where the Killer had slain and half eaten a calf the night before. They look for the return of the grizzly and the probable slaying of Bruce by the animal.

Four minutes later he was within one dozen feet of the designated window. There was a stretch of moonlight between, but he passed it quickly. And now he stood in bold relief against the moonlit house-wall.

He was in perfectly plain sight of any one on the hill behind. Possibly his distant form might have been discerned from the window of one of the lesser houses occupied by Simon's kin. But he was too close to the wall to be visible from the windows of Simon's house, except by a deliberate scrutiny. And the window slipped up noiselessly in his hands.

He was considerably surprised. He had expected this window to be locked. Some way, he felt less hopeful of success. He recalled in his mind the directions that Linda had left, wondering if he had come to the wrong window. But there was no chance of a mistake in this regard; it was the northernmost window in the east wing. However, she had said that she would be confined in an interior room, and possibly the Turners had seen no need of barriers other than its locked door. Probably they had not even anticipated that Bruce would attempt a rescue.

He leaped lightly upward and slipped silently into the room. Except for the moonlight square on the floor it was quite in darkness.

He stood a moment, hardly breathing. But he decided it was not best to strike a match. A match might reveal his presence to some one in an adjoining room. He rested his hand against the wall, then moved slowly around the room. He knew that by this course he would soon encounter the door that led into the interior rooms.

In a moment he found it. He stood waiting. He turned the knob gently; then softly pulled. But the door was locked.

There was no sound now but the loud beating of his own heart. He could no longer hear the voices of the wind outside the open window. He wondered whether, should he hurt all his magnificent strength against the panels, he could break the lock; and if he did so, whether he could escape with the girl before he was shot down. But his hand, wandering over the lock, encountered the key.

It was easy, after all. He turned the key. The door opened beneath his hand.

If there had been a single ray of light under the door or through the keyhole, his course would have been quite different. He would have opened the door suddenly in that case, hoping to take by surprise whoever of the clan were guarding Linda. To open a door slowly into a room full of enemies is only to give them plenty of time to cock their rifles. But in this case the room was in darkness, and all that he need fear was making a sudden sound. The opening slowly widened. Then he slipped through and stood ten breathless seconds in silence.

"Linda," he whispered. He waited a long time for an answer. Then he stole farther into the room.

"Linda," he said again. "It's Bruce. Are you here?"

And in that unfathomable silence he heard a sound—a sound so dim and small that it only reached the frontier of hearing. It was a strange, whispering, eerie sound, and it filled the room like the faintest, almost imperceptible gust of wind. But there was no doubt in its reality. A living creature occupied this place of darkness with him, and was either half-guzzled by a handkerchief over the face or was trying to conceal its presence by muffling its breathing. "Linda," he said again.

There was a strange response to the calling of that name. He heard no whispered answer. Instead, the door he had just passed through shut softly behind him.

For a fleeting instant he hoped that the wind had blown it shut. For it is always the way of youth to hope—as long as any hope is left. His heart leaped and he whirled to face it. Then he heard the unmistakable sound of a bolt being slid into place.

Some little space of time followed in silence. He struggled with growing horror, and time seemed limitless. Then a strong man laughed grimly in the darkness.

CHAPTER XX

As Bruce waited, his eyes slowly became accustomed to the darkness. He began to see the dim outlines of his fellow occupants of the room—fully seven brawny men seated in chairs about the walls. "Let's hear you drop your rifle," one of them said.

Bruce recognized the grim voice as Simon's—heard on one occasion before. He let his rifle fall from his hands. He knew that only death would be the answer to any resistance to these men. Then Simon scratched a match, and without looking at him, bent to touch it to the wick of the lamp.

The tiny flame sputtered and flickered, filling the room with dancing shadows. Bruce looked about him.

Simon sat beside the fireplace, the lamp at his elbow. As the wick caught, the light brightened and steadied, and Bruce could see plainly. On each side of him, in chairs about the walls, sat Simon's brothers and his blood relations that shared the estate with him. They were huge, gaunt men, most of them dark-bearded and sallow-skinned, and all of them regarded him with the same gaze of speculative interest.

Bruce did not flinch before their gaze. He stood erect as he could, instinctively defiant.

"Our guest is rather early," Simon began. "Dave hasn't come yet, and Dave is the principal witness."

A bearded man across the room answered him. "But I guess we ain't goin' to let the prisoner go for lack of evidence."

The circle laughed then—a harsh sound that was not greatly different from the laughter of the coyotes on the sagebrush hills. But they sobered when they saw that Simon hadn't laughed. His dark eyes were glowing.

"You, by no chance, met him on the way home, did you?" he asked.

"I wish I had," Bruce replied. "But I didn't."

"I don't understand your eagerness. You didn't seem overly eager to meet us."

Bruce smiled wryly. These wilderness men regarded him with fresh interest. Somehow, they hadn't counted on his smiling. It was almost as if he were of the wilderness breed himself, instead of the son of cities. "I'm here, am I not?" he said. "It isn't as if you came to my house first."

"Yes, you're here," Simon countered. "And I'm wondering if you remember what I told you just as you left Martin's store that day—that I gave you no more warnings."

"I remember that," Bruce replied. "I saw no reason for listening to you. I don't see any reason now, and I wouldn't if it wasn't for that row of guns."

Simon studied his pale face. "Perhaps you'll be sorry you didn't listen, before this night is over. And there are many hours yet in it. Bruce—you came up here to these mountains to open old wounds."

"Simon, I came up here to right wrongs—and you know it. If old wounds are opened, I can't help it."

"And tonight," Simon went on as if he had not been answered, "you have come unbidden into our house. It would be all the evidence the courts would need. Bruce—that you crept into our house in the dead of night, if anything happened to you here, no word could be raised against us. You were a brave man, Bruce."

"So I can suppose you left the note?"

The circle laughed again, but Simon silenced them with a gesture. "You're very keen," he said.

"Then where is Linda?" Bruce's eyes hardened. "I am more interested in her whereabouts than in this talk with you."

"The last seen of her, she was going up a hill with Dave. When Dave turns up you can ask him."

The bearded man opposite from Simon uttered a short syllable of a laugh. "And it don't look like he's going to return," he said. The knowing look on his face was deeply abhorrent to Bruce. Curiously, Simon's face flushed, and he whirled in his chair.

"Do you mean anything in particular, Old Bill?" he demanded.

"It looks to me like maybe Dave's forgot a lot of things you told him, and he and Linda are havin' a little sparkin' time together out in the brush."

The idea seemed to please the clan. But Simon's eyes glowed, and Bruce himself felt the beginnings of a blind rage that might, unless he held hard upon it, hurl him against their remorseless weapons. "I don't want any more talk out of you, Old Bill," Simon reproved him, "and we've talked enough, anyway." His keen eyes studied Bruce's flushed face. "One of you give our guest a chair and fix him up in it with a thong. We don't want him flyin' off the coop and getting shot until we're done talking to him."

One of the clansmen pushed a chair forward with sudden force, striking Bruce in the knees and almost knocking him over. The circle leered, and he sat down in it with as much ease as possible. Then one of the men looped his arms to the arms of the chair with thongs of buckskin. Another thong was tied about his ankles. Then the clansmen went back to their chairs.

"I really don't see the use of all these dramatics," Bruce said coldly. "And I don't particularly like veiled threats. At present I seem to be in your hands."

"You don't seem to be," Simon answered with reddening eyes. "You are."

"I have no intention of saying I'm sorry I didn't heed the threats you gave me before—and as to those I've heard tonight—they're not going to do you any good, either. It is true that you found me in the house you occupy in the dead of night—but it isn't your house to start with. What a man seizes by murder isn't his."

"What a man holds with a hard fist and his rifle—in these mountains—is his," Simon contradicted him.

"Besides, you got me here with a trick," Bruce went on without heeding him. "So don't pretend that any wickedness you do tonight was justified by my coming. You'll have to answer for it just the same."

Simon leaned forward in his chair. His dark eyes glowed in the lamplight. "I've heard such talk as that before," he said. "I expect your own father talked like that a few times himself."

The words seemed to strike straight home to the gathered Turners. The moment was breathless, weighted with suspense. All of them seemed straining in their chairs.

Bruce's head bowed, but the veins stood out beneath the short hair on his temples, and his lips trembled when he answered. "That was a greater wickedness than anything you can do tonight. And you'll have to answer for it all the more."

He spoke the last sentence with a calm assurance. Though spoken softly.



Simon Stood Up and Bruce Sprang From His Chair Like a Wildcat.

"Everything is Terrible Clear to Us Already," Simon said, "Except Your Sentence."

ly, the words rang clear. But the answer of the evil-hearted man before him was only a laugh.

"And there's one thing more I want to make clear," Bruce went on in the strong voice of a man who had conquered his terror. And it was not because he did not realize his danger. He was in the hands of the Turners, and he knew that Simon had spoken certain words that, if for no other reason than his reputation with his followers, he would have to make good. Bruce knew that no moment of his life was ever fraught with greater peril. But the fact itself that there were no again he paused. Bruce looked up.

"The thing that's lying there is a dead yearling calf, half ate up. It was killed last night by the Killer—the old grizzly that maybe you've heard of before. Some of the boys

doors of escape open to him, and he was face to face with his destiny, steeled him all the more.

The boy that had been awakened in his bed at home by the ring of the phone bell had wholly vanished now. A man of the wild places had come instead, stern and courageous and unflinching.

"Everything is terrible clear to us already," Simon said, "except your sentence."

"I want you to know that I refuse to be impressed with this judicial attitude of you and your blackguard followers," Bruce went on. "This gathering of the group of you doesn't make any evil that you do any less wrong, or the payment you'll have to make any less sure. It lies wholly in your power to kill me while I'm sitting here, and I haven't much hope but that you'll do it. But let me tell you this. A realm of bloodshed and crime can go on only so long. You've been kings up here, and you think the law can't reach you. But it will—believe me, it will."

"And this was the man who was going to renew the blood-feud—already hollering about the law," Simon said to his followers. He turned to Bruce. "It's plain that Dave isn't going to come. I'll have to be the chief witness myself, after all. However, Dave told me all that I needed to know. For the first question I have to ask of you, Folger, is the whereabouts of that agreement between your late lamented father and the late lamented Matthew Ross, according to what the trapper Hudson told you a few days ago."

Bruce was strong enough to laugh in his bonds. "Up to this time I have given you and your murderous crowd credit for at least natural intelligence," he replied, "but I see I was mistaken—or you wouldn't expect an answer to that question."

"Do you mean you don't know its whereabouts?"

"I won't give you the satisfaction of knowing whether I know or not. I just refuse to answer."

"I trust the ropes are tight enough about your wrists."

"Plenty tight, thank you. They are cutting the flesh so it bleeds."

"How would you like them some tighter?"

"Pull them till they cut my arms off, and you won't get a civil answer out of me. In fact—and the man's eyes blazed—"I'm tired of talking to this outlaw crowd. And the sooner you do what you're going to do, the better it will suit me."

"We'll come to that shortly enough. Disregarding that for a moment—we understand that you want to open up the blood-feud again. Is that true?"

Bruce made no answer, only gazed without flinching into his questioner's face.

"That was what my brother Dave led me to understand," Simon went on, "so we've decided to let you have your way. It's open—it's been open since you came here. You disregarded the warning I gave—and men don't disregard my warnings twice. You threatened Dave with your rifle. This is a different land than your rifle used to, Bruce, and we do things our own way. You've hunted for trouble and now you've found it. Your father before you thought he could stand against us—but he's been lying still a long time. The Rosses thought so, too. And it is part of our code never to take back a threat—but always to make it good."

Bruce still sat with lowered head, seemingly not listening. The clansmen gazed at him, and a new, more deadly spirit was in the room. None of them smiled now; the whole circle of faces was dark and intent, their eyes glittered through narrowed lids, their lips set. The air was charged with suspense. The moment of crisis was near.

Sometimes the men glanced at their leader's face, and what they saw there filled them with a grim and terrible eagerness. Simon was beginning to run to form. His dark passions were slowly mastering him. For a moment they all sat as if entranced in a communion of cruelty, and to Bruce they seemed like a colony of spotted rattlesnakes such as sometimes hold their communions of hatred on the sun-blasted cliffs.

All at once Simon laughed—a sharp, hoarse sound that had, in its overtones, a note of madness. Every man in the room started. They seemed to have forgotten Bruce. They looked at their leader with a curious expectancy. They seemed to know that that wild laugh betokened but one thing—the impact of some terrible sort of inspiration.

As they watched, they saw the idea take hold of him. The huge face darkened. His eyes seemed to smolder as he studied his huge hands. "We've decided to be merciful, after all," he said slowly. But neither Bruce nor the clansmen misunderstood him or were deceived. They only knew that these words were simply part of a deadly jest that in a moment all would understand. "Instead of filling you full of thirty-three bullets, as better men than you have been filled and what we ought to do—we're just going to let you lay out all night—in the pasture—with your feet tied and your hands behind your back."

No one relaxed. They listened, staring, for what would follow.

"You may get a bit cold before morning," Simon went on, "but you're warmly dressed, and a little frost won't hurt you. And I've got the place all picked out for you. And we're even going to move something that's laying there so it will be more pleasant."

The blood seemed to dash Bruce; and at first his only realization was that the room suddenly rang with harsh and grating laughter. Then Simon's words broke through it. "Put back

were going to wait in trees tonight by the carcass and shoot the Killer when he comes back after another meal—something that likely won't happen until about midnight if he runs true to form. But it won't be necessary now. We're going to haul the carcass away—down wind where he won't smell it. And we're going to leave you there in its place to explain to him what became of it."

Bruce felt their glowing eyes upon him. Excitation was creeping over the clan; once more their leader had done himself proud. It was such suggestions as this that kept them in awe of him.

And they thought they understood. They supposed that the night would be of the utter depths of terror to the tenderfoot from the cities, that the bear would sniff and wander about him, and perchance the man's hair would be turned quite white by morning. But being mountain men, they thought that the actual danger of attack was not great. They supposed that the inborn fear of men that all animals possess would keep him at a distance. And, if by any unlikely chance the theft of the beef carcass should throw him into such a race that he would charge Bruce, no harm in particular would be done. The man was a Folger, an enemy of the clan, and after once the tailgate ropes were removed, no one would ask questions about the mutilated, broken thing that would be found next morning in the pasture. The story would carry down to the settlements merely as a fresh atrocity of the Killer, the last and greatest of the grizzlies.

But they had no realization of the full dreadfulness of the plan. They hadn't heard the more recent history of the Killer—the facts that Simon had just learned from Dave. Strange and dark conjecturing occupied Simon's mind, and he knew—in a moment's thought—that something more than terror and indignity might be Bruce's fate. But his passion was ripe for what might come. The few significant facts that they did not know were merely that the Killer had already found men out, that he had learned in an instant's meeting with Hudson beside Little river that men were no longer to be feared, and worse, that he was raving and deadly from the pain of the wound that Bruce's bullet had inflicted.

The circle of faces faded out for both of them as the eyes of Bruce and Simon met and clashed and battled in the silent room.

CHAPTER XXI

"If Simon Turner isn't a coward," Bruce said slowly to the clan, "he will give me a chance to fight him now."

The room was wholly silent, and the clan turned expectant eyes to their leader. Simon scowled, but he knew he had to make answer. His eyes crept over Bruce's powerful body. "There is no obligation on my part to answer any challenges by you," he said. "You are a prisoner. But if you think you can sleep better in the pasture because of it, I'll let you have your chance. Take off his ropes."

A knife slashed at his bonds. Simon stood up, and Bruce sprang from his



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chair like a wildcat, aiming his hand-knuckled straight for the leering lips. He made the attack with astonishing swiftness and power, and his intention was to deliver at least one terrific blow before Simon could get his arms up to defend himself. He had given the huge clan leader credit for tremendous physical strength, but he didn't think that the heavy body could move with real agility. But the great muscles seemed to snap into tension, the head ducked to one side, and his own huge fists struck out.

If Bruce's blow had gone straight home where it had been aimed, Simon would have had nothing more to say for a few moments at least. The leap had been powerful and swift yet wholly inaccurate. And the reason was just that his wrists and ankles had been numbed by the tight thongs which they had been confined. Simon met the leap with a short, powerful blow into Bruce's face; and he reeled backward. The arms of the clansmen alone kept him from falling.

The blood seemed to dash Bruce; and at first his only realization was that the room suddenly rang with harsh and grating laughter. Then Simon's words broke through it. "Put back

the things," he ordered, "and go get your horses."

Bruce was dimly aware of the falling of a silence, and then the arms of strong men half carrying him to the door. But he couldn't see plainly at first. He knew that the clan had brought their horses and were waiting for Simon's command. They loosened the ropes from about his ankles, and two of the clansmen swung him on to the back of a horse. Then they passed a rope under the horse's belly and tied his ankles anew.

Simon gave a command, and the strange file started. The night air dispelled the mists in Bruce's brain, and full realization of all things came to him again.

One of the men—he recognized him as Young Bill—led the horse on which he rode. Two of the clansmen rode in front, grim, silent, incredibly tall figures in the moonlight. The remainder rode immediately behind. Simon himself, bowed in his saddle, kept a little to one side. Their shadows were long and grotesque on the soft grass of the meadows, and the only sound was the soft footfall of their mounts.

A full mile distant across the lush fields the cavalcade halted about a grotesque shadow in the grass. Bruce didn't have to look at it twice to know what it was: the half-devoured body of the yearling calf that had been the Killer's prey the night before. From thence on, their operations became as outlandish occurrences in a dream. They seemed to know just what to do. They took him from the saddle and bound his feet again, then laid him in the fragrant grass. They searched his pockets, taking the forged note that had led to his downfall. "It saves me a trip," Simon commented. He saw two of them lift the torn body of the animal on to the back of one of the horses, and he watched dully as the horse plunged and wheeled under the unfamiliar weight.

Simon spoke in the silence, but his words seemed to come from far away. "Quiet that horse or kill him," he said softly. "You can't drag the carcass with your rope—the Killer would trace it if you did and maybe spoil the evening for Bruce."

Strong arms sawed at the bits, and the horse quieted, trembling. For a moment Bruce saw their white moonlit faces as they stared down at him. "What about a gag?" one of the men asked.

"No, let him shout if he likes. There is no one to hear him here."

Then the tall men swung on their horses and headed back across the fields. Bruce watched them dully. Their forms grew constantly more dim, the sense of utter isolation increased. Then he saw the file pause, and it seemed to him that words, too faint for him to understand, reached him across the moonlit spaces. Then one of the party turned off toward the ridge.

He guessed that it was Simon. He thought the man was riding toward Linda's home.

He watched until the shadows had hidden them all. Then, straining upward, he tested his bonds. He tugged with the full strength of his arms, but there was not the play of an inch between his wrists. The Turners had done their work well. Not the slightest chance of escape lay in this quarter.

He wrenched himself to one side, then looked about him. The fields stretched even and distant on one side, but he saw that the dark forest was but fifty yards away on the other. He listened, and the little night sounds reached him clearly. They had been sounds to rejoice in before—impulses to delightful fancies of a fawn stealing through the thickets, or some of the Little People in their scurried, tremulous business of the night hours. But lying helpless at the edge of the forest, they were nothing to rejoice in now. He tried to shut his ears to them.

He rolled again to his back and tried to find peace for his spirit in the stars. There were millions of them. They were larger and more bright than any time he had ever seen them. They stood in their high places, wholly indifferent and impassive to all the strife and confusion of the world below them; and Bruce wished that he could partake of their spirit enough so that he could rise above the fear and bitterness that had begun to oppress him. But only the pines could talk to them. Only the tall trees, stretching upward toward them, could reach into their mysterious calm.

His eyes discerned a thin filament of cloud that had swept up from behind the ridges, and the sight recalled to him the moon position with added force. The moonlight, soft as it was, at least, it would have enabled him to keep watch, and now he dreaded the fall of utter darkness more than he had ever dreaded anything in his life. It was an ancient instinct, coming straight from the young days of the world when nightfall brought the hunting creatures to the mouth of the cave, but he had never really experienced it before.

He watched with growing horror the slow extension of the clouds. Finally the shadow fell around Bruce. For the first time he knew the age-old terror of the darkness. He no longer knew himself as one of a dominant breed, master of all the wild things in the world. He was simply a living creature in a grim and unconquered world, alone and helpless in the terror of the darkness.

The moonlight alternately grew and died as the moon passed in and out of the heavier cloud patches. Winds must have been blowing in the high lanes of the air, but there was no breath of them where Bruce lay. The

problem offered no ray of light. She considered what Bruce's first action would have been, on returning to the house to find her absent. Possibly he had gone in search of her. She turned and went to the door of his bedroom.

forests were silent, and the little rustlings and stirrings that reached him from time to time only seemed to accentuate the quiet.

He speculated on how many hours had passed. He wondered if he could dare to hope that midnight had already gone by and, through some divergence from wilderness customs, the feast. It seemed endless hours since he had re-entered the empty rooms of Linda's home. A wave of hope crept through the whole hydraulic system of his veins. And then, as a sudden sound reached him from the forests at one side, that bright wave of hope turned black, receded and left only despair.

He heard the sound but dimly. In fact, except for his straining with every nerve alert, he might not have heard it at all. Nevertheless, distance large sound to start with. So far had it come that only a scratch on the eardrums was left of it; but there was no chance to misunderstand it. It cracked out to him through the unfeeling silence, and all the elements by which he might recognize it were distinct. It was the noise of a heavy thicket being broken down and parted before an enormous body.

He listened, straining. Then he heard the sound again. Whoever came toward him had passed the heavy brush by now. The sounds that reached him were just faint and intermittent whispers—first of a twig cracking beneath a heavy foot, then the rattle of two pebbles knocked together. Long moments of utter silence would ensue between, in which he could hear the steady drum of his heart in his breast, and the long roll of his blood in his veins.

The limbs of a young fir tree rustled and whispered as something brushed against them. Leaves flicked together, and once a heavy limb popped like a distant small-caliber rifle as a great weight broke it in two. Then, as if the gods of the wilderness were using all their ingenuity to torture him, the silence closed down deeper than ever before.

It lasted so long that he began to hope again. Perhaps the sounds had been made by a deer stealing on its way to feed in the pastures. Yet he knew the step had been too heavy for anything but the largest deer, and their way was to encircle a thicket rather than crash through it. It might have been the step of one of the small, black bears—a harmless and friendly wilderness dweller. Yet the impression lingered and strengthened that only some great hunter, a beast who feared neither other beasts nor men, had been steadily coming toward him through the forest.