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Title: The Strength of the Pines

Author: Edison Marshall

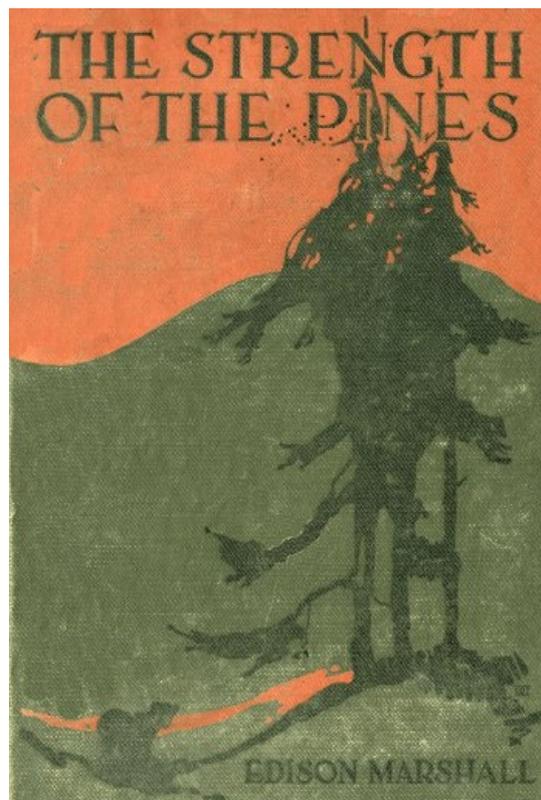
Illustrator: W. Herbert Dunton

Release Date: February 23, 2011 [EBook #35378]

Language: English

*** START OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK THE STRENGTH OF THE PINES ***

E-text prepared by Chris Curnow, Michael, Mary Meehan,
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THE STRENGTH OF THE PINES

BY EDISON MARSHALL

WITH FRONTISPIECE BY
W. HERBERT DUNTON

**BOSTON
LITTLE, BROWN, AND COMPANY
1921**

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Published February, 1921

**THE COLONIAL PRESS
C. H. SIMONDS CO., BOSTON, U. S. A.**

**TO
LILLE BARTOO MARSHALL
DEAR COMRADE AND GUIDE
WHO GAVE ME LIFE**



He marked the little space of gray squarely between the two reddening eyes.

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THE STRENGTH OF THE PINES

BOOK ONE

THE CALL OF THE BLOOD

I

Bruce was awakened by the sharp ring of his telephone bell. He heard its first note; and its jingle seemed to continue endlessly. There was no period of drowsiness between sleep and wakefulness; instantly he was fully aroused, in complete control of all his faculties. And this is not especially common to men bred in the security of civilization. Rather it is a trait of the wild creatures; a little matter that is quite necessary if they care at all about living. A deer, for instance, that cannot leap out of a mid-afternoon nap, soar a fair ten feet in the air, and come down with legs in the right position for running comes to a sad end, rather soon, in a puma's claws. Frontiersmen learn the trait too; but as Bruce was a dweller of cities it seemed somewhat strange in him. The trim, hard muscles were all cocked and primed for anything they should be told to do.

Then he grunted rebelliously and glanced at his watch beneath the pillow. He had gone to bed early; it was just before midnight now. "I wish they'd leave me alone at night, anyway," he muttered, as he slipped on his dressing gown.

He had no doubts whatever concerning the nature of this call. There had been one hundred like it during the previous month. His foster father had recently died, his estate was being settled up, and Bruce had been having a somewhat strenuous time with his creditors. He understood the

man's real financial situation at last; at his death the whole business structure collapsed like the eggshell it was. Bruce had supposed that most of the debts had been paid by now; he wondered, as he fumbled into his bedroom slippers, whether the thousand or so dollars that were left would cover the claim of the man who was now calling him to the telephone. The fact that he was, at last, the penniless "beggar" that Duncan had called him at their first meeting didn't matter one way or another. For some years he had not hoped for help from his foster parent. The collapse of the latter's business had put Bruce out of work, but that was just a detail too. All he wanted now was to get things straightened up and go away—where, he did not know or care.

"This is Mr. Duncan," he said coldly into the transmitter.

When he heard a voice come scratching over the wires, he felt sure that he had guessed right. Quite often his foster father's creditors talked in that same excited, hurried way. It was rather necessary to be hurried and excited if a claim were to be met before the dwindling financial resources were exhausted. But the words themselves, however—as soon as they gave their interpretation in his brain—threw a different light on the matter.

"How do you do, Mr. Duncan," the voice answered. "Pardon me if I got you up. I want to talk to your son, Bruce."

Bruce emitted a little gasp of amazement. Whoever talked at the end of the line obviously didn't know that the elder Duncan was dead. Bruce had a moment of grim humor in which he mused that this voice would have done rather well if it could arouse his foster father to answer it. "The elder Mr. Duncan died last month," he answered simply. There was not the slightest trace of emotion in his tone. No wayfarer on the street could have been, as far as facts went, more of a stranger to him; there was no sense of loss at his death and no cause for pretense now. "This is Bruce speaking."

He heard the other gasp. "Old man, I'm sorry," his contrite voice came. "I didn't know of your loss. This is Barney—Barney Wegan—and I just got in from the West. Haven't had a bit of news for months. Accept my earnest sympathies—"

"Barney! Of course." The delight grew on Bruce's face; for Barney Wegan, a man whom he had met and learned to know on the gym floor of his club, was quite near to being a real friend. "And what's up, Barney?"

The man's voice changed at once—went back to its same urgent, but rather embarrassed tone. "You won't believe me if I tell you, so I won't try to tell you over the 'phone. But I must come up—right away. May I?"

"Of course—"

"I'll jump in my car and be there in a minute."

Bruce hung up, slowly descended to his library, and flashed on the lights.

For the first time he was revealed plainly. His was a familiar type; but at the same time the best type too. He had the face and the body of an athlete, a man who keeps himself fit; and there was nothing mawkish or effeminate about him. His dark hair was clipped close about his temples, and even two hours in bed had not disarranged its careful part. It is true that men did look twice at Bruce's eyes, set in a brown, clean-cut face, never knowing exactly why they did so. They had startling potentialities. They were quite clear now, wide-awake and cool, yet they had a strange depth of expression and shadow that might mean, somewhere beneath the bland and cool exterior, a capacity for great emotions and passions.

He had only a few minutes to wait; then Barney Wegan tapped at his door. This man was bronzed by the sun, never more fit, never straighter and taller and more lithe. He had just come from the far places. The embarrassment that Bruce had detected in his voice was in his face and manner too.

"You'll think I'm crazy, for routing you out at this time of night, Bruce," he began. "And I'm going to get this matter off my chest as soon as possible and let you go to bed. It's all batty, anyway. But I was cautioned by all the devils of the deep to see you—the moment I came here."

"Cigarettes on the smoking-stand," Bruce said steadily. "And tell away."

"But tell me something first. Was Duncan your real father? If he was, I'll know I'm up a wrong tree. I don't mean to be personal—"

"He wasn't. I thought you knew it. My real father is something like you—something of a mystery."

"I won't be a mystery long. He's not, eh—that's what the old hag said. Excuse me, old man, for saying 'hag.' But she was one, if there is any such. Lord knows who she is, or whether or not she's a relation of yours. But I'll begin at the beginning. You know I was way back on the Oregon frontier—back in the Cascades?"

"I didn't know," Bruce replied. "I knew you were somewhere in the wilds. You always are. Go on."

"I was back there fishing for steelhead in a river they call the Rogue. My boy, a steelhead is—but you don't want to hear that. You want to get the story. But a steelhead, you ought to know, is a trout—a fish—and the noblest fish that ever was! Oh, Heavens above! how they can strike! But while way up on the upper waters I heard of a place called Trail's End—a place where wise men

do not go."

"And of course you went."

"Of course. The name sounds silly now, but it won't if you ever go there. There are only a few families, Bruce, miles and miles apart, in the whole region. And it's enormous—no one knows how big. Just ridge on ridge. And I went back to kill a bear."

"But stop!" Bruce commanded. He lighted a cigarette. "I thought you were against killing bears—any except the big boys up North."

"That's just it. I am against killing the little black fellows—they are the only folk with any brains in the woods. But this, Bruce, was a real bear,—a left-over from fifty years ago. There used to be grizzlies through that country, you see, but everybody supposed that the last of them had been shot. But evidently there was one family that still remained—in the farthest recesses of Trail's End—and all at once the biggest, meanest grizzly ever remembered showed up on the cattle ranges of the plateau. With some others, I went to get him. 'The Killer', they call him—and he certainly is death on live stock. I didn't get the bear, but one day my guide stopped at a broken-down old cabin on the hillside for a drink of water. I was four miles away in camp. The guide came back and asked me if I was from this very city.

"I told him yes, and asked him why he wanted to know. He said that this old woman sent word, secretly, to every stranger that ever came to fish or hunt in the region of Trail's End, wanting to know if they came from here. I was the first one that answered 'yes.' And the guide said that she wanted me to come to her cabin and see her.

"I went—and I won't describe to you how she looked. I'll let you see for yourself, if you care to follow out her instructions. And now the strange part comes in. The old witch raised her arm, pointed her cane at me, and asked me if I knew Newton Duncan.

"I told her there might be several Newton Duncans in a city this size. You should have seen the pain grow on her face. 'After so long, after so long!' she cried, in the queerest, sobbing way. She seemed to have waited years to find some one from here, and when I came I didn't know what she wanted. Then she took heart and began again.

"'This Newton Duncan had a son—a foster-son—named Bruce,' she told me. And then I said I knew you.

"You can't imagine the change that came over her. I thought she'd die of heart failure. The whole thing, Bruce—if you must know—gave me the creeps. 'Tell him to come here,' she begged me. 'Don't lose a moment. As soon as you get home, tell him to come here.'

"Of course I asked other questions, but I couldn't get much out of her. One of 'em was why she hadn't written to Duncan. The answer was simple enough—that she didn't know how to write. Those in the mountains that could write wouldn't, or couldn't—she was a trifle vague on that point—dispatch a letter. Something is up."

II

Before the gray of dawn came over the land Bruce Duncan had started westward. He had no self-amazement at the lightning decision. He was only strangely and deeply exultant.

The reasons why went too deep within him to be easily seen. In the first place, it was adventure—and Bruce's life had not been very adventurous heretofore. It was true that he had known triumphs on the athletic fields, and his first days at a great University had been novel and entertaining. But now he was going to the West, to a land he had dreamed about, the land of wide spaces and great opportunities. It was not his first western journey. Often he had gone there as a child—had engaged in furious battles with outlaws and Indians; but those had been adventures of imagination only. This was reality at last. The clicking rails beneath the speeding train left no chance for doubt.

Then there was a sense of immeasurable relief at his sudden and unexpected freedom from the financial problems his father had left. He would have no more consultations with impatient creditors, no more would he strive to gather together the ruins of the business, and attempt to salvage the small remaining fragments of his father's fortune. He was free of it all, at last. He had never known a darker hour—and none of them that this quiet, lonely-spirited man had known had been very bright—than the one he had spent just before going to bed earlier that evening. He had no plans, he didn't know which way to turn. All at once, through the message that Barney had brought him, he had seen a clear trail ahead. It was something to do, something at last that mattered.

Finally there remained the eminent fact that this was an answer to his dream. He was going toward Linda, at last. The girl had been the one living creature in his memory that he had cared for and who cared for him—the one person whose interest in him was real. Men are a gregarious species. The trails are bewildering and steep to one who travels them alone. Linda, the little "spitfire" of his boyhood, had suddenly become the one reality in his world, and as he thought of

her, his memory reviewed the few impressions he had retained of his childhood.

First was the Square House—the orphanage—where the Woman had turned him over to the nurse in charge. Sometimes, when tobacco smoke was heavy upon him, Bruce could catch very dim and fleeting glimpses of the Woman's face. He would bend his mind to it, he would probe and probe, with little, reaching filaments of thought, into the dead years—and then, all at once, the filaments would rush together, catch hold of a fragment of her picture, and like a chain-gang of ants carrying a straw, come lugging it up for him to see. It was only a fleeting glimpse, only the faintest blur in half-tone, and then quite gone. Yet he never gave up trying. He never quit longing for just one second of vivid remembrance. It was one of the few and really great desires that Bruce had in life.

The few times that her memory-picture did come to him, it brought a number of things with it. One of them was a great and overwhelming realization of some terrible tragedy and terror the nature of which he could not even guess. There had been terrible and tragic events—where and how he could not guess—lost in those forgotten days of his babyhood.

"She's been through fire," the nurse told the doctor when he came in and the door had closed behind the Woman. Bruce *did* remember these words, because many years elapsed before he completely puzzled them out. The nurse hadn't meant such fires as swept through the far-spread evergreen forests of the Northwest. It was some other, dread fire that seared the spirit and burned the bloom out of the face and all the gentle lights out of the eyes. It did, however, leave certain lights, but they were such that their remembrance brought no pleasure to Bruce. They were just a wild glare, a fixed, strange brightness as of great fear or insanity.

The Woman had kissed him and gone quickly; and he had been too young to remember if she had carried any sort of bundle close to her breast. Yet, the man considered, there must have been such a bundle—otherwise he couldn't possibly account for Linda. And there were no doubts about her, at all. Her picture was always on the first page of the photograph album of his memory; he had only to turn over one little sheet of years to find her.

Of course he had no memories of her that first day, nor for the first years. But all later memories of the Square House always included her. She must have been nearly four years younger than himself; thus when he was taken to the house she was only an infant. But thereafter, the nurses put them together often; and when Linda was able to talk, she called him something that sounded like Bwovaboo. She called him that so often that for a long time he couldn't be sure that wasn't his real name. Now, in manhood, he interpreted.

"Brother Bruce, of course. Linda was of course a sister."

Linda had been homely; even a small boy could notice that. Besides, Linda was nearly six when Bruce had left for good; and he was then at an age in which impressions begin to be lasting. Her hair was quite blond then, and her features rather irregular. But there had been a light in her eyes! By his word, there had been!

She had been angry at him times in plenty—over some childish game—and he remembered how that light had grown and brightened. She had flung at him too, like a lynx springing from a tree. Bruce paused in his reflections to wonder at himself over the simile—for lynx were no especial acquaintances of his. He knew them only through books, as he knew many other things that stirred his imagination. But he laughed at the memory of her sudden, explosive ferocity,—the way her hands had smacked against his cheeks, and her sharp little nails had scratched him. Curiously, he had never fought back as is the usual thing between small boys and small girls. And it wasn't exactly chivalry either, rather just an inability to feel resentment. Besides, there were always tears and repentance afterward, and certain pettings that he openly scorned and secretly loved.

"I must have been a strange kid!" Bruce thought.

It was true he had; and nothing was stranger than this attitude toward Baby Sister. He was always so gentle with her, but at the same time he contemplated her with a sort of amused tolerance that is to be expected in strong men rather than solemn little boys. "Little Spitfire" he sometimes called her; but no one else could call her anything but Linda. For Bruce had been an able little fighter, even in those days.

There was other evidence of strangeness. He was fond of drawing pictures. This was nothing in itself; many little boys are fond of drawing pictures. Nor were his unusually good. Their strangeness lay in his subjects. He liked to draw animals in particular,—the animals he read about in school and in such books as were brought to him. And sometimes he drew Indians and cowboys. And one day—when he wasn't half watching what he was doing—he drew something quite different.

Perhaps he wouldn't have looked at it twice, if the teacher hadn't stepped up behind him and taken it out of his hands. It was "geography" then, not "drawing", and he should have been "paying attention." And he had every reason to think that the teacher would crumple up his picture and send him to the cloak-room for punishment.

But she did no such thing. It was true that she seized the paper, and her fingers were all set to crumple it. But when her eyes glanced down, her fingers slowly straightened. Then she looked again—carefully.

"What is this, Bruce?" she asked. "What have you been drawing?"

Curiously, she had quite forgotten to scold him for not paying attention. And Bruce, who had drawn the picture with his thoughts far away from his pencil, had to look and see himself. Then he couldn't be sure.

"I—I don't know," the child answered. But the picture was even better than his more conscious drawings, and it did look like something. He looked again, and for an instant let his thoughts go wandering here and there. "Those are trees," he said. A word caught at his throat and he blurted it out. "Pines! Pine trees, growing on a mountain."

Once translated, the picture could hardly be mistaken. There was a range of mountains in the background, and a distinct sky line plumed with pines,—those tall, dark trees that symbolize, above all other trees, the wilderness.

"Not bad for a six-year-old boy," the teacher commented. "But where, Bruce, have you ever seen or heard of such pines?" But Bruce did not know.

Another puzzling adventure that stuck in Bruce's memory had happened only a few months after his arrival at the Square House when a man had taken him home on trial with the idea of adoption. Adoption, little Bruce had gathered, was something like heaven,—a glorious and happy end of all trouble and unpleasantness. Such was the idea he got from the talk of the other Orphans, and even from the grown-ups who conducted the establishment.

All the incidents and details of the excursion with this prospective parent were extremely dim and vague. He did not know to what city he went, nor had he any recollection whatever of the people he met there. But he did remember, with remarkable clearness, the perplexing talk that the man and the superintendent of the Square House had together on his return.

"He won't do," the stranger had said. "I tried him out and he won't fill in in my family. And I've fetched him back."

The superintendent must have looked at the little curly-haired boy with considerable wonder; but he didn't ask questions. There was no particular need of them. The man was quite ready to talk, and the fact that a round-eyed child was listening to him with both ears open, did not deter him a particle.

"I believe in being frank," the man said, "and I tell you there's something vicious in that boy's nature. It came out the very first moment he was in the house, when the Missus was introducing him to my eight-year-old son. 'This is little Turner,' she said—and this boy sprang right at him. I'd never let little Turner learn to fight, and this boy was on top of him and was pounding him with his fists before we could pull him off. Just like a wildcat—screaming and sobbing and trying to get at him again. I didn't understand it at all."

Nor did the superintendent understand; nor—in these later years—Bruce either.

He was quite a big boy, nearly ten, when he finally left the Square House. And there was nothing flickering or dim about the memory of this occasion.

A tall, exceedingly slender man sat beside the window,—a man well dressed but with hard lines about his mouth and hard eyes. Yet the superintendent seemed particularly anxious to please him. "You will like this sturdy fellow," he said, as Bruce was ushered in.

The man's eyes traveled slowly from the child's curly head to his rapidly growing feet; but no gleam of interest came into the thin face. "I suppose he'll do—as good as any. It was the wife's idea, anyway, you know. What about parentage? Anything decent at all?"

The superintendent seemed to wait a long time before answering. Little Bruce, already full of secret conjectures as to his own parentage, thought that some key might be given him at last. "There is nothing that we can tell you, Mr. Duncan," he said at last. "A woman brought him here—with an infant girl—when he was about four. I suppose she was his mother—and she didn't wait to talk to me. The nurse said that she wore outlandish clothes and had plainly had a hard time."

"But she didn't wait—?"

"She dropped her children and fled."

A cold little smile flickered at the man's lips.

"It looks rather damnable," he said significantly. "But I'll take the little beggar—anyway."

And thus Bruce went to the cold fireside of the Duncans—a house in a great and distant city where, in the years that had passed, many things scarcely worth remembering had transpired. It was a gentleman's house—as far as the meaning of the word usually goes—and Bruce had been afforded a gentleman's education. There was also, for a while, a certain amount of rather doubtful prosperity, a woman who died after a few months of casual interest in him, and many, many hours of almost overwhelming loneliness. Also there were many thoughts such as are not especially good for the spirits of growing boys.

There is a certain code in all worlds that most men, sooner or later, find it wisest to adopt. It is simply the code of forgetfulness. The Square House from whence Bruce had come had been a good place to learn this code; and Bruce—child though he was—had carried it with him to the

Duncans'. But there were two things he had been unable to forget. One was the words his foster father had spoken on accepting him,—words that at last he had come to understand.

A normal child, adopted into a good home, would not have likely given a second thought to a dim and problematical disgrace in his unknown and departed family. He would have found his pride in the achievements and standing of his foster parents. But the trouble was that little Bruce had not been adopted into any sort of home, good or bad. The place where the Duncans lived was a house, but under no liberal interpretation of the word could it be called a home. There was nothing homelike in it to little Bruce. It wasn't that there was actual cruelty to contend with. Bruce had never known that. But there was utter indifference which perhaps is worse. And as always, the child filled up the empty space with dreams. He gave all the love and worship that was in him to his own family that he had pictured in imagination. Thus any disgrace that had come upon them went home to him very straight indeed.

The other lasting memory was of Linda. She represented the one living creature in all his assemblage of phantoms—the one person with whom he could claim real kinship. Never a wind blew, never the sun shone but that he missed her, with a terrible, aching longing for which no one has ever been able to find words. He had done a bold thing, after his first few years with the Duncans. He planned it long and carried it out with infinite care as to details. He wrote to Linda, in care of the superintendent of the orphanage.

The answer only deepened the mystery. Linda was missing. Whether she had run away, or whether some one had come by in a closed car and carried her off as she played on the lawns, the superintendent could not tell. They had never been able to trace her. He had been fifteen then, a tall boy with rather unusual muscular development, and the girl was eleven. And in the year nineteen hundred and twenty, ten years after the reply to his letter, Bruce had heard no word from her. A man grown, and his boyish dreams pushed back into the furthest deep recesses of his mind, where they could no longer turn his eyes away from facts, he had given up all hope of ever hearing from her again. "My little sister," he said softly to a memory. Then bitterness—a whole black flood of it—would come upon him. "Good Lord, I don't even know that she *was* my sister." But now he was going to find her and his heart was full of joy and eager anticipation.

III

There had not been time to make inquiry as to the land Bruce was going to. He only knew one thing,—that it was the wilderness. Whether it was a wilderness of desert or of great forest, he did not know. Nor had he the least idea what manner of adventure would be his after he reached the old woman's cabin; and he didn't care. The fact that he had no business plans for the future and no financial resources except a few hundred dollars that he carried in his pocket did not matter one way or another. He was willing to spend all the money he had; after it was gone, he would take up some work in life anew.

He had a moment's wonder at the effect his departure would have upon the financial problem that had been his father's sole legacy to him. He laughed a little as he thought of it. Perhaps a stronger man could have taken hold, could have erected some sort of a structure upon the ruins, and remained to conquer after all. But Bruce had never been particularly adept at business. His temperament did not seem suited to it. But the idea that others also—having no business relations with his father—might be interested in this western journey of his did not even occur to him. He would not be missed at his athletic club. He had scarcely any real friends, and none of his acquaintances kept particularly close track of him.

But the paths men take, seemingly with wholly different aims, crisscross and become intertwined much more than Bruce knew. Even as he lay in his berth, the first sweet drifting of sleep upon him, he was the subject of a discussion in a far-distant mountain home; and sleep would not have fallen so easily and sweetly if he had heard it.

It might have been a different world. Only a glimpse of it, illumined by the moon, could be seen through the soiled and besmirched window pane; but that was enough to tell the story. There were no tall buildings, lighted by a thousand electric lights, such as Bruce could see through the windows of his bedroom at night. The lights that could be discerned in this strange, dark sky were largely unfamiliar to Bruce, because of the smoke-clouds that had always hung above the city where he lived. There were just stars, but there were so many of them that the mind was unable to comprehend their number.

There is a perplexing variation in the appearance of these twinkling spheres. No man who has traveled widely can escape this fact. Likely enough they are the same stars, but they put on different faces. They seem almost insignificant at times,—dull and dim and unreal. It is not this way with the stars that peer down through these high forests. Men cannot walk beneath them and be unaware of them. They are incredibly large and bright and near, and the eyes naturally lift to them. There are nights in plenty, in the wild places, where they seem much more real than the dim, moonlit ridge or even the spark of a trapper's campfire, far away. They grow to be

companions, too, in time. Perhaps after many, many years in the wild a man even attains some understanding of them, learning their infinite beneficence, and finding in them rare comrades in loneliness, and beacons on the dim and intertwining trails.

There was also a moon that cast a little square of light, like a fairy tapestry, on the floor. It was not such a moon as leers down red and strange through the smoke of cities. It was vivid and quite white,—the wilderness moon that times the hunting hours of the forest creatures. But the patch that it cast on the floor was obscured in a moment because the man who had been musing in the big chair beside the empty fireplace had risen and lighted a kerosene lamp.

The light prevented any further scrutiny of the moon and stars. And what remained to look at was not nearly so pleasing to the spirit. It was a great, white-walled room that would have been beautiful had it not been for certain unfortunate attempts to beautify it. The walls, that should have been sweeping and clean, were adorned with gaudily framed pictures which in themselves were dim and drab from many summers' accumulation of dust. There was a stone fireplace, and certain massive, dust-covered chairs grouped about it. But the eyes never would have got to these. They would have been held and fascinated by the face and the form of the man who had just lighted the lamp.

No one could look twice at that massive physique and question its might. He seemed almost gigantic in the yellow lamplight. In reality he stood six feet and almost three inches, and his frame was perfectly in proportion. He moved slowly, lazily, and the thought flashed to some great monster of the forest that could uproot a tree with a blow. The huge muscles rippled and moved under the flannel shirt. The vast hand looked as if it could seize the glass bowl of the lamp and crush it like an eggshell.

The face was huge, big and gaunt of bone; and particularly one would notice the mouth. It would be noticed even before the dark, deep-sunken eyes. It was a bloodhound mouth, the mouth of a man of great and terrible passions, and there was an unmistakable measure of cruelty and savagely about it. But there was strength, too. No eye could doubt that. The jaw muscles looked as powerful as those of a beast of prey. But it was not an ugly face, for all the brutality of the features. It was even handsome in the hard, mountain way. One would notice straight, black hair—the man's age was about thirty-nine—long over rather dark ears, and a great, gnarled throat. The words when he spoke seemed to come from deep within it.

"Come in, Dave," he said.

In this little remark lay something of the man's power. The visitor had come unannounced. His visit had been unexpected. His host had not yet seen his face. Yet the man knew, before the door was opened, who it was that had come.

The reason went back to a certain quickening of the senses that is the peculiar right and property of most men who are really residents of the wilderness. And resident, in this case, does not mean merely one who builds his cabin on the slopes and lives there until he dies. It means a true relationship with the wild, an actual understanding. This man was the son of the wild as much as the wolves that ran in the packs. The wilderness is a fecund parent, producing an astounding variety of types. Some are beautiful, many stronger than iron, but her parentage was never more evident than in the case of this bronze-skinned giant that called out through the open doorway. Among certain other things he had acquired an ability to name and interpret quickly the little sounds of the wilderness night. Soft though it was, he had heard the sound of approaching feet in the pine needles. As surely as he would have recognized the dark face of the man in the doorway, he recognized the sound as Dave's step.

The man came in, and at once an observer would have detected an air of deference in his attitude. Very plainly he had come to see his chief. He was a year or two older than his host, less powerful of physique, and his eyes did not hold quite so straight. There was less savagery but more cunning in his sharp features.

He blurted out his news at once. "Old Elmira has got word down to the settlements at last," he said.

There was no muscular response in the larger man. Dave was plainly disappointed. He wanted his news to cause a stir. It was true, however, that his host slowly raised his eyes. Dave glanced away.

"What do you mean?" the man demanded.

"Mean—I mean just what I said. We should have watched closer. Bill—Young Bill, I mean—saw a city chap just in the act of going in to see her. He had come on to the plateaus with his guide—Wegan was the man's name—and Bill said he stayed a lot longer than he would have if he hadn't taken a message from her. Then Young Bill made some inquiries—innocent as you please—and he found out for sure that this Wegan was from—just the place we don't want him to be from. And he'll carry word sure."

"How long ago was this?"

"Week ago Tuesday."

"And why have you been so long in telling me?"

When Dave's chief asked questions in this tone, answers always came quickly. They rolled so fast from the mouth that they blurred and ran together. "Why, Simon—you ain't been where I could see you. Anyway, there was nothin' we could have done."

"There wasn't, eh? I don't suppose you ever thought that there's yet two months before we can clinch this thing for good, and young Folger might—I say might—have kicking about somewhere in his belongings the very document we've all of us been worrying about for twenty years." Simon cursed—a single, fiery oath. "I don't suppose you could have arranged for this Wegan to have had a hunting accident, could you? Who in the devil would have thought that yelping old hen could have ever done it—would have ever kept at it long enough to reach anybody to carry her message! But as usual, we are yelling before we're hurt. It isn't worth a cussword. Like as not, this Wegan will never take the trouble to hunt him up. And if he does—well, it's nothing to worry about, either. There is one back door that has been opened many times to let his people go through, and it may easily be opened again."

Dave's eyes filled with admiration. Then he turned and gazed out through the window. Against the eastern sky, already wan and pale from the encroaching dawn, the long ridge of a mountain stood in vivid and startling silhouette. The edge of it was curiously jagged with many little upright points.

There was only one person who would have been greatly amazed by that outline of the ridge; and the years and distance had obscured her long ago. This was a teacher at an orphanage in a distant city, who once had taken a crude drawing from the hands of a child. Here was the original at last. It was the same ridge, covered with pines, that little Bruce had drawn.

IV

The train came to a sliding halt at Deer Creek, paused an infinitesimal fraction of a second, and roared on in its ceaseless journey. That infinitesimal fraction was long enough for Bruce, poised on the bottom step of a sleeping car, to swing down on to the gravel right-of-way. His bag, hurled by a sleepy porter, followed him.

He turned first to watch the vanishing tail light, speeding so swiftly into the darkness; and curiously all at once it blinked out. But it was not that the switchmen were neglectful of their duties. In this certain portion of the Cascades the railroad track is constructed something after the manner of a giant screw, coiling like a great serpent up the ridges, and the train had simply vanished around a curve.

Duncan's next impression was one of infinite solitude. He hadn't read any guidebooks about Deer Creek, and he had expected some sort of town. A western mining camp, perhaps, where the windows of a dance hall would gleam through the darkness; or one of those curious little mushroom-growth cities that are to be found all over the West. But at Deer Creek there was one little wooden structure with only three sides,—the opening facing the track. It was evidently the waiting room used by the mountain men as they waited for their local trains.

There were no porters to carry his bag. There were no shouting officials. His only companions were the stars and the moon and, farther up the slope, certain tall trees that tapered to incredible points almost in the region where the stars began. The noise of the train died quickly. It vanished almost as soon as the dot of red that had been its tail light. It was true that he heard a faint pulsing far below him, a sound that was probably the chug of the steam, but it only made an effective background for the silence. It was scarcely more to be heard than the pulse of his own blood; and as he waited even this faded and died away.

The moon cast his shadow on the yellow grass beside the crude station, and a curious flood of sensations—scarcely more tangible than its silver light—came over him. The moment had a quality of enchantment; and why he did not know. His throat suddenly filled, a curious weight and pain came to his eyelids, a quiver stole over his nerves. He stood silent with lifted face,—a strange figure in that mystery of moonlight.

The whole scene, for causes deeper than any words may ever seek and reveal, moved him past any experience in his life. It was wholly new. When he had gone to sleep in his berth, earlier that same night, the train had been passing through a level, fertile valley that might have been one of the river bottoms beyond the Mississippi. When darkness had come down he had been in a great city in the northern part of the State,—a noisy, busy place that was not greatly different from the city whence he had come. But now he seemed in a different world.

Possibly, in the long journey to the West, he had passed through forest before. But some way their appeal had not got to him. He was behind closed windows, his thoughts had been busy with reading and other occupations of travel. There had been no shading off, no gradations; he had come straight from a great seat of civilization to the heart of the wilderness.

He turned about until the wind was in his face. It was full of fragrances,—strange, indescribable smells that seemed to call up a forgotten world. They carried a message to him, but as yet he hadn't made out its meaning. He only knew it was something mysterious and profound: great truths that flickered, like dim lights, in his consciousness, but whose outline he could not quite

discern. They went straight home to him, those night smells from the forest. One of them was a balsam: a fragrance that once experienced lingers ever in the memory and calls men back to it in the end. Those who die in its fragrance, just as those who go to sleep, feel sure of having pleasant dreams. There were other smells too—delicate perfumes from mountain flowers that were deep-hidden in the grass—and many others, the nature of which he could not even guess.

Perhaps there were sounds, but they only seemed part of the silence. The faintest rustle in the world reached him from the forests above of many little winds playing a running game between the trunks, and the stir of the Little People, moving in their midnight occupations. Each of these sounds had its message for Bruce. They all seemed to be trying to tell him something, to make clear some great truth that was dawning in his consciousness.

He was not in the least afraid. He felt at peace as never before. He picked up his bag, and with stealing steps approached the long slope behind. The moon showed him a fallen log, and he found a comfortable seat on the ground beside it, his back against its bark. Then he waited for the dawn to come out.

Not even Bruce knew or understood all the thoughts that came over him in that lonely wait. But he did have a peculiar sense of expectation, a realization that the coming of the dawn would bring him a message clearer than all these messages of fragrance and sound. The moon made wide silver patches between the distant trees; but as yet the forest had not opened its secrets to him. As yet it was but a mystery, a profundity of shadows and enchantment that he did not understand.

The night hours passed. The sense of peace seemed to deepen on the man. He sat relaxed, his brown face grave, his eyes lifted. The stars began to dim and draw back farther into the recesses of the sky. The round outline of the moon seemed less pronounced. And a faint ribbon of light began to grow in the east.

It widened. The light grew. The night wind played one more little game between the tree trunks and slipped away to the Home of Winds that lies somewhere above the mountains. The little night sounds were slowly stilled.

Bruce closed his eyes, not knowing why. His blood was leaping in his veins. An unfamiliar excitement, almost an exultation, had come upon him. He lowered his head nearly to his hands that rested in his lap, then waited a full five minutes more.

Then he opened his eyes. The light had grown around him. His hands were quite plain. Slowly, as a man raises his eyes to a miracle, he lifted his face.

The forest was no longer obscured in darkness. The great trees had emerged, and only the dusk as of twilight was left between. He saw them plainly,—their symmetrical forms, their declining limbs, their tall tops piercing the sky. He saw them as they were,—those ancient, eternal symbols and watchmen of the wilderness. And he knew them at last, acquaintances long forgotten but remembered now.

"The pines!" he cried. He leaped to his feet with flashing eyes. "I have come back to the pines!"

V

The dawn revealed a narrow road along the bank of Deer Creek,—a brown little wanderer which, winding here and there, did not seem to know exactly where it wished to go. It seemed to follow the general direction of the creek bed; it seemed to be a prying, restless little highway, curious about things in general as the wild creatures that sometimes made tracks in its dust, thrusting now into a heavy thicket, now crossing the creek to examine a green and grassy bank on the opposite side, now taking an adventurous tramp about the shoulder of a hill, circling back for a drink in the creek and hurrying on again. It made singular loops; it darted off at a right and left oblique; it made sudden spurts and turns seemingly without reason or sense, and at last it dimmed away into the fading mists of early morning. Bruce didn't know which direction to take, whether up or down the creek.

He gave the problem a moment's thought. "Take the road up the Divide," Barney Wegan had said; and at once Bruce knew that the course lay up the creek, rather than down. A divide means simply the high places between one water-shed and another, and of course Trail's End lay somewhere beyond the source of the stream. The creek itself was apparently a sub-tributary of the Rogue, the great river to the south.

There was something pleasing to his spirit in the sight of the little stream, tumbling and rippling down its rocky bed. He had no vivid memories of seeing many waterways. The river that flowed through the city whence he had come had not been like this at all. It had been a great, slow-moving sheet of water, the banks of which were lined with factories and warehouses. The only lining of the banks of this little stream were white-barked trees, lovely groves with leaves of glossy green. It was a cheery, eager little waterway, and more than once—as he went around a curve in the road—it afforded him glimpses of really striking beauty. Sometimes it was just a shimmer of its waters beneath low-hanging bushes, sometimes a distant cataract, and once or twice a long, still place on which the shadows were still deep.

These sloughs were obviously the result of dams, and at first he could not understand what had been the purpose of dam-building in this lonely region. There seemed to be no factories needing water power, no slow-moving mill wheels. He left the road to investigate. And he chuckled with delight when he knew the truth.

These dams had not been the work of men at all. Rather they were structures laid down by those curious little civil engineers, the beavers. The cottonwood trees had been felled so that the thick branches had lain across the waters, and in their own secret ways the limbs had been matted and caked until no water could pass through. True, the beavers themselves did not emerge for him to converse with. Perhaps they were busy at their under-water occupations, and possibly the trappers who sooner or later penetrate every wilderness had taken them all away. He looked along the bank for further evidence of the beavers' work.

Wonderful as the dams were, he found plenty of evidence that the beavers had not always used to advantage the crafty little brains that nature has given them. They had made plenty of mistakes. But these very blunders gave Bruce enough delight almost to pay for the extra work they had occasioned. After all, he considered, human beings in their works are often just as short-sighted. For instance, he found tall trees lying rotting and out of reach, many feet back from the stream. The beavers had evidently felled them in high water, forgetting that the stream dwindled in summer and the trees would be of no use to them. They had been an industrious colony! He found short poles of cottonwood sharpened at the end, as if the little fur bearers had intended them for braces, but which—through some wilderness tragedy—had never been utilized.

But Bruce was in a mood to be delighted, these early morning hours. He was on the way to Linda; a dream was about to come true. The whole adventure was of the most thrilling and joyous anticipations. He did not feel the load of his heavy suitcase. It was nothing to his magnificent young strength. And all at once he beheld an amazing change in the appearance of the stream.

It had abruptly changed to a stream of melted, shimmering silver. The waters broke on the rocks with opalescent spray; the whole coloring was suggestive of the vivid tints of a Turner landscape. The waters gleamed; they danced and sparkled as they sped about the boulders of the river bed; the leaves shimmered above them. And it was all because the sun had risen at last above the mountain range and was shining down.

At first Bruce could hardly believe that just sunlight could effect such a transformation. For no other reason than that he couldn't resist doing so, he left his bag on the road and crept down to the water's edge.

He stood very still. It seemed to him that some one had told him, far away and long ago, that if he wished to see miracles he had only to stand very still. Not to move a muscle, so that his vivid shadow would not even waver. It is a trait possessed by all men of the wilderness, but it takes time for city men to learn it. He waited a long time. And all at once the shining surface of a deep pool below him broke with a fountain of glittering spray.

Something that was like light itself flung into the air and down again with a splash. Bruce shouted then. He simply couldn't help it. And all the time there was a strange straining and travail in his brain, as if it were trying to give birth to a memory from long ago. He knew now what had made that glittering arc. Such a common thing,—it was singular that it should yield him such delight. It was a trout, leaping for an insect that had fallen on the waters.

It was strange that he had such a sense of familiarity with trout. True, he had heard Barney Wegan tell of them. He had listened to many tales of the way they seized a fly, how the reel would spin, and how they would fight to absolute exhaustion before they would yield to the landing net. "The King among fish," Barney had called them. Yet the tales seemingly had meant little to him then. His interest in them had been superficial only; and they had seemed as distant and remote as the marsupials of Australia. But it wasn't this way now. He had a sense of long and close acquaintance, of an interest such as men have in their own townsmen.

He went on, and the forest world opened before him. Once a flock of grouse—a hen and a dozen half-grown chickens—scurried away through the underbrush at the sound of his step. One instant, and he had a clear view of the entire covey. The next, and they had vanished like so many puffs of smoke. He had a delicious game of hide-and-seek with them through the coverts, but he was out-classed in every particular. He knew that the birds were all within forty feet of him, each of them pressed flat to the brown earth, but in this maze of light and shadow he could not detect their outline. Nature has been kind to the grouse family in the way of protective coloration. He had to give up the search and continue up the creek for further adventure.

Once a pair of mallards winged by on a straight course above his head. Their sudden appearance rather surprised him. These beautiful game birds are usually habitants of the lower lakes and marshes, not rippling mountain streams. He didn't know that a certain number of these winged people nested every year along the Rogue River, far below, and made rapturous excursions up and down its tributaries. Mallards do not have to have aeroplanes to cover distance quickly. They are the very masters of the aerial lanes, and in all probability this pair had come forty miles already that morning. Where they would be at dark no man could guess. Their wings whistled down to him, and it seemed to him that the drake stretched down his bright green head for a better look. Then he spurted ahead, faster than ever.

Once, at a distance, Bruce caught a glimpse of a pair of peculiar, little, sawed-off, plump-breasted ducks that wagged their tails, as if in signals, in a still place above a dam. He made a wide circle,

intending to wheel back to the creekside for a closer inspection of the singular flirtation of those bobbing, fan-like tails. He rather thought he could outwit these little people, at least. But when he turned back to the water's edge they were nowhere to be seen.

If he had had more experience with the creatures of the wild he could have explained this mysterious disappearance. These little ducks—"ruddies" the sportsmen call them—have advantages other than an extra joint in their tails. One of them seems to be a total and unprincipled indifference to the available supply of oxygen. When they wish to go out of sight they simply duck beneath the water and stay apparently as long as they desire. Of course they have to come up some time—but usually it is just the tip of a bill—like the top of a river-bottom weed, thrust above the surface. Bruce gaped in amazement, but he chuckled again when he discovered his birds farther up the creek, just as far distant from him as ever.

The sun rose higher, and he began to feel its power. But it was a kindly heat. The temperature was much higher than was commonly met in the summers of the city, but there was little moisture in the air to make it oppressive. The sweat came out on his bronze face, but he never felt better in his life. There was but one great need, and that was breakfast.

A man of his physique feels hunger quickly. The sensation increased in intensity, and the suitcase grew correspondingly heavy. And all at once he stopped short in the road. The impulse along his nerves to his leg muscles was checked, like an electric current at the closing of a switch, and an instinct of unknown origin struggled for expression within him.

In an instant he had it. He didn't know whence it came. It was nothing he had read or that any one had told him. It seemed to be rather the result of some experience in his own immediate life, an occurrence of so long ago that he had forgotten it. He suddenly knew where he could find his breakfast. There was no need of toiling farther on an empty stomach in this verdant season of the year. He set his suitcase down, and with the confidence of a man who hears the dinner call in his own home, he struck off into the thickets beside the creek bed. Instinct—and really, after all, instinct is nothing but memory—led his steps true.

He glanced here and there, not even wondering at the singular fact that he did not know exactly what manner of food he was seeking. In a moment he came to a growth of thorn-covered bushes, a thicket that only the she-bear knew how to penetrate. But it was enough for Bruce just to stand at its edges. The bushes were bent down with a load of delicious berries.

He wasn't in the least surprised. He had known that he would find them. Always, at this season of the year, the woods were rich with them; one only had to slip quickly through the back door—while the mother's eye was elsewhere—to find enough of them not only to pack the stomach full but to stain and discolor most of the face. It seemed a familiar thing to be plucking the juicy berries and cramming them into his mouth, impervious as the old she-bear to the remonstrance of the thorns. But it seemed to him that he reached them easier than he expected. Either the bushes were not so tall as he remembered them, or—since his first knowledge of them—his own stature had increased.

When he had eaten the last berry he could possibly hold, he went to the creek to drink. He lay down beside a still pool, and the water was cold to his lips. Then he rose at the sound of an approaching motor car behind him.

The driver—evidently a cattleman—stopped his car and looked at Bruce with some curiosity. He marked the perfectly fitting suit of dark flannel, the trim, expensive shoes that were already dust-stained, the silken shirt on which a juicy berry had been crushed. "Howdy," the man said after the western fashion. He was evidently simply feeling companionable and was looking for a moment's chat. It is a desire that often becomes very urgent and most real after enough lonely days in the wilderness.

"How do you do," Bruce replied. "How far to Martin's store?"

The man filled his pipe with great care before he answered. "Jump in the car," he replied at last, "and I'll show you. I'm going up that way myself."

VI

Martin's was a typical little mountain store, containing a small sample of almost everything under the sun and built at the forks in the road. The ranchman let Bruce off at the store; then turned up the right-hand road that led to certain bunch-grass lands to the east. Bruce entered slowly, and the little group of loungers gazed at him with frank curiosity.

Only one of them was of a type sufficiently distinguished so that Bruce's own curiosity was aroused. This was a huge, dark man who stood alone almost at the rear of the building,—a veritable giant with savage, bloodhound lips and deep-sunken eyes. There was a quality in his posture that attracted Bruce's attention at once. No one could look at him and doubt that he was a power in these mountain realms. He seemed perfectly secure in his great strength and wholly cognizant of the hate and fear, and at the same time, the strange sort of admiration with which the others regarded him.

He was dressed much as the other mountain men who had assembled in the store. He wore a flannel shirt over his gorilla chest, and corduroy trousers stuffed into high, many-seamed riding boots. A dark felt hat was crushed on to his huge head. But there was an aloofness about the man; and Bruce realized at once he had taken no part in the friendly gossip that had been interrupted by his entrance.

The dark eyes were full upon Bruce's face. He felt them—just as if they had the power of actual physical impact—the instant that he was inside the door. Nor was it the ordinary look of careless speculation or friendly interest. Mountain men have not been taught it is not good manners to stare, but no traveler who falls swiftly into the spirit of the forest ordinarily resents their open inspection. But this look was different. It was such that no man, to whom self-respect is dear, could possibly disregard. It spoke clearly as words.

Bruce flushed, and his blood made a curious little leap. He slowly turned. His gaze moved until it rested full upon the man's eyes. It seemed to Bruce that the room grew instantly quiet. The merchant no longer tied up his bundles at the counter. The watching mountain men that he beheld out of the corners of his eyes all seemed to be standing in peculiar fixed attitudes, waiting for some sort of explosion. It took all of Bruce's strength to hold that gaze. The moment was charged with a mysterious suspense.

The stranger's face changed too. He did not flush, however. His lips curled ever so slightly, revealing an instant's glimpse of strong, rather well-kept teeth. His eyes were narrowing too; and they seemed to come to life with singular sparkles and glowings between the lids.

"Well?" he suddenly demanded. Every man in the room—except one—started. The one exception was Bruce himself. He was holding hard on his nerve control, and he only continued to stare coldly.

"Are you the merchant?" Bruce asked.

"No, I ain't," the other replied. "You usually look for the merchant behind the counter."

There was no smile on the faces of the waiting mountain men, usually to be expected when one of their number achieves repartee on a tenderfoot. Nevertheless, the tension was broken. Bruce turned to the merchant.

"I would like to have you tell me," he said quite clearly, "the way to Mrs. Ross's cabin."

The merchant seemed to wait a long time before replying. His eye stole to the giant's face, found the lips curled in a smile; then he flushed. "Take the left-hand road," he said with a trace of defiance in his tone. "It soon becomes a trail, but keep right on going up it. At the fork in the trail you'll find her cabin."

"How far is it, please?"

"Two hours' walk; you can make it easy by four o'clock."

"Thank you." His eyes glanced over the stock of goods and he selected a few edibles to give him strength for the walk. "I'll leave my suitcase here if I may," he said, "and will call for it later." He turned to go.

"Wait just a minute," a voice spoke behind him. It was a commanding tone—implying the expectation of obedience. Bruce half turned. "Simon wants to talk to you," the merchant explained.

"I'll walk with you a way and show you the road," Simon continued. The room seemed deathly quiet as the two men went out together.

They walked side by side until a turn of the road took them out of eye-range of the store. "This is the road," Simon said. "All you have to do is follow it. Cabins are not so many that you could mistake it. But the main thing is—whether or not you want to go."

Bruce had no misunderstanding about the man's meaning. It was simply a threat, nothing more nor less.

"I've come a long way to go to that cabin," he replied. "I'm not likely to turn off now."

"There's nothing worth seeing when you get there. Just an old hag—a wrinkled old dame that looks like a witch."

Bruce felt a deep and little understood resentment at the words. Yet since he had as yet established no relations with the woman, he had no grounds for silencing the man. "I'll have to decide that," he replied. "I'm going to see some one else, too."

"Some one named—Linda?"

"Yes. You seem quite interested."

They were standing face to face in the trail. For once Bruce was glad of his unusual height. He did not have to raise his eyes greatly to look squarely into Simon's. Both faces were flushed, both set; and the eyes of the older man brightened slowly.

"I am interested," Simon replied. "You're a tenderfoot. You're fresh from cities. You're going up

there to learn things that won't be any pleasure to you. You're going into the real mountains—a man's land such as never was a place for tenderfeet. A good many things can happen up there. A good many things have happened up there. I warn you—go back!"

Bruce smiled, just the faint flicker of a smile, but Simon's eyes narrowed when he saw it. The dark face lost a little of its insolence. He knew men, this huge son of the wilderness, and he knew that no coward could smile in such a moment as this. He was accustomed to implicit obedience and was not used to seeing men smile when he uttered a threat. "I've come too far to go back," Bruce told him. "Nothing can turn me."

"Men have been turned before, on trails like this," Simon told him. "Don't misunderstand me. I advised you to go back before, and I usually don't take time or trouble to advise any one. Now I *tell* you to go back. This is a man's land, and we don't want any tenderfeet here."

"The trail is open," Bruce returned. It was not his usual manner to speak in quite this way. He seemed at once to have fallen into the vernacular of the wilderness of which symbolic reference has such a part. Strange as the scene was to him, it was in some way familiar too. It was as if this meeting had been ordained long ago; that it was part of an inexorable destiny that the two should be talking together, face to face, on this winding mountain road. Memories—all vague, all unrecognized—thronged through him.

Many times, during the past years, he had wakened from curious dreams that in the light of day he had tried in vain to interpret. He was never able to connect them with any remembered experience. Now it was as if one of these dreams were coming true. There was the same silence about him, the dark forests beyond, the ridges stretching ever. There was some great foe that might any instant overwhelm him.

"I guess you heard me," Simon said; "I told you to go back."

"And I hope you heard me too. I'm going on. I haven't any more time to give you."

"And I'm not going to take any more, either. But let me make one thing plain. No man, told to go back by me, ever has a chance to be told again. This ain't your cities—up here. There ain't any policeman on every corner. The woods are big, and all kinds of things can happen in them—and be swallowed up—as I swallow these leaves in my hand."

His great arm reached out with incredible power and seized a handful of leaves off a near-by shrub. It seemed to Bruce that they crushed like fruit and stained the dark skin.

"What is done up here isn't put in the newspapers down below. We're mountain men; we've lived up here as long as men have lived in the West. We have our own way of doing things, and our own law. Think once more about going back."

"I've already decided. I'm going on."

Once more they stood, eyes meeting eyes on the trail, and Simon's face was darkening with passion. Bruce knew that his hands were clenching, and his own muscles bunched and made ready to resist any kind of attack.

But Simon didn't strike. He laughed instead,—a single deep note of utter and depthless scorn. Then he drew back and let Bruce pass on up the road.

VII

Bruce couldn't mistake the cabin. At the end of the trail he found it,—a little shack of unpainted boards with a single door and a single window.

He stood a moment in the sunlight. His shadow was already long behind him, and the mountains had that curious deep blue of late afternoon. The pine needles were soft under his feet; the later-afternoon silence was over the land. He could not guess what was his destiny behind that rude door. It was a moment long waited; for one of the few times in his life he was trembling with excitement. He felt as if a key, long lost, was turning in the doorway of understanding.

He walked nearer and tapped with his knuckles on the door.

If the forests have one all-pervading quality it is silence. Of course the most silent time is at night, but just before sunset, when most of the forest creatures are in their mid-afternoon sleep, any noise is a rare thing. What sound there is carries far and seems rather out of place. Bruce could picture the whole of the little drama that followed his knock by just the faint sounds—inaudible in a less silent land—that reached him from behind the door. At first it was just a start; then a short exclamation in the hollow, half-whispering voice of old, old age. A moment more of silence—as if a slow-moving, aged brain were trying to conjecture who stood outside—then the creaking of a chair as some one rose. The last sounds were of a strange hobbling toward him,—a rustle of shoes half dragged on the floor and the intermittent tapping of a cane.

The face that showed so dimly in the shadowed room looked just as Bruce had expected,—wrinkled past belief, lean and hawk-nosed from age. The hand that rested on the cane was like a

bird's claw, the skin blue and hard and dry. There were a few strands of hair drawn back over her lean head, but all its color had faded out long ago. She stood bowed over her cane.

Yet in that first instant Bruce had an inexplicable impression of being in the presence of a power. He did not have the wave of pity with which one usually greets the decrepit. And at first he didn't know why. But soon he grew accustomed to the shadows and he could see the woman's eyes. Then he understood.

They were set deep behind grizzled brows, but they glowed like coals. There was no other word. They were not the eyes of one whom time is about to conquer. Her bodily strength was gone; any personal beauty that she might have had was ashes long and long ago, but some great fire burned in her yet. As far as bodily appearance went the grave should have claimed her long since; but a dauntless spirit had sustained her. For, as all men know, the power of the spirit has never yet been measured.

She blinked in the light. "Who is it?" she croaked.

Bruce did not answer. He had not prepared a reply for this question. But it was not needed. The woman leaned forward, and a vivid light began to dawn in her dark, furrowed face.

Even to Bruce, already succumbed to this atmosphere of mystery into which his adventure had led him, that dawning light was the single most startling phenomenon he had ever beheld. It is very easy to imagine a radiance upon the face. But in reality, most all facial expression is simply a change in the contour of lines. But this was not a case of imagination now. The witchlike face seemed to gleam with a white flame. And Bruce knew that his coming was the answer to the prayer of a whole lifetime. It was a thought to sober him. No small passion, no weak desire, no prayer that time or despair could silence could effect such a light as this.

"Bruce," he said simply. It did not even occur to him to use the surname of Duncan. It was a name of a time and sphere already forgotten. "I don't know what my real last name is."

"Bruce—Bruce," the woman whispered. She stretched a palsied hand to him as if it would feel his flesh to reassure her of its reality. The wild light in her eyes pierced him, burning like chemical rays, and a great flood of feeling yet unknown and unrecognized swept over him. He saw her snags of teeth as her dry lips half-opened. He saw the exultation in her wrinkled, lifted face. "Oh, praises to His Everlasting Name!" she cried. "Oh, Glory—Glory to on High!"

And this was not blasphemy. The words came from the heart. No matter how terrible the passion from which they sprang, whether it was such evil as would cast her to hell, such a cry as this could not go unheard. The strength seemed to go out of her as water flows. She rocked on her cane, and Bruce, thinking she was about to fall, seized her shoulders. "At last—at last," she cried. "You've come at last."

She gripped herself, as if trying to find renewed strength. "Go at once," she said, "to the end of the Pine-needle Trail. It leads from behind the cabin."

He tried to emerge from the dreamlike mists that had enveloped him. "How far is it?" he asked her steadily.

"To the end of Pine-needle Trail," she rocked again, clutched for one of his brown hands, and pressed it between hers.

Then she raised it to her dry lips. Bruce could not keep her from it. And after an instant more he did not attempt to draw it from her embrace. In the darkness of that mountain cabin, in the shadow of the eternal pines, he knew that some great drama of human life and love and hatred was behind the action; and he knew with a knowledge unimpeachable that it would be only insolence for him to try further to resist it. Its meaning went too deep for him to see; but it filled him with a great and wondering awe.

Then he turned away, up the Pine-needle Trail. Clear until the deeper forest closed around him her voice still followed him,—a strange croaking in the afternoon silence. "At last," he heard her crying. "At last, at last."

VIII

In almost a moment, Duncan was out of the thickets and into the big timber, for really the first time. In his journey up the mountain road and on the trail that led to the old woman's cabin, he had been many times in the shade of the tall evergreens, but always there had been some little intrusion of civilization, some hint of the works of man that had kept him from the full sense of the majesty of the wild. At first it had been the gleaming railroad tracks, and then a road that had been built with blasting and shovels. To get the full effect of the forest one must be able to behold wide-stretching vistas, and that had been impossible heretofore because of the brush thickets. But this was the virgin forest. As far as he could see there was nothing but the great pines climbing up the long slope of the ridge. He caught glimpses of them in the vales at either side, and their dark tops made a curious background at the very extremity of his vision. They stood straight and aloof, and they were very old.

He fell into their spirit at once. The half-understood emotions that had flooded him in the cabin below died within him. The great calm that is, after all, the all-pervading quality of the big pines came over him. It is always this way. A man knows solitude, his thoughts come clear, superficialities are left behind in the lands of men. Bruce was rather tremulous and exultant as he crept softly up the trail.

It was the last lap of his journey. At the end of the trail he would find—Linda! And it seemed quite fitting that she would be waiting there, where the trail began, in the wildest heart of the pine woods. He was quite himself once more,—carefree, delighting in all the little manifestations of the wild life that began to stir about him.

No experience of his existence had ever yielded the same pleasure as that long walk up the trail. Every curve about the shoulder of a hill, every still glen into which he dipped, every ridge that he surmounted awakened curious memories within him and stirred him in little secret ways under the skin. His delight grew upon him. It was a dream coming true. Always, it seemed to him, he had carried in his mind a picture of this very land, a sort of dream place that was a reality at last. He had known just how it would be. The wind made the same noise in the tree tops that he expected. Yet it was such a little sound that it could never be heard in a city at all. His senses had already been sharpened by the silence and the calm.

He had always known how the pine shadows would fall across the carpet of needles. The trees themselves were the same grave companions that he had expected, but his delight was all the more because of his expectations.

He began to catch glimpses of the smaller forest creatures,—the Little People that are such a delight to all real lovers of the wilderness. Sometimes it was a chipmunk, trusting to his striped skin—blending perfectly with the light and shadow—to keep him out of sight. These are quivering, restless, ever-frightened little folk, and heaven alone knows what damage they may do to the roots of a tree. But Bruce wasn't in the mood to think of forest conservation to-day. He had left a number of his notions in the city where he had acquired them,—and this little, bright-eyed rodent in the tree roots had almost the same right to the forests that he had himself. Before, he had a measure of the same arrogance with which most men—realizing the dominance of their breed—regard the lesser people of the wild; but something of a disastrous nature had happened to it. He spoke gayly to the chipmunk and passed on.

As the trail climbed higher, the sense of wilderness became more pronounced. Even the trees seemed larger and more majestic, and the glimpses of the wild people were more frequent. The birds stopped their rattle-brained conversation and stared at him with frank curiosity. The grouse let him get closer before they took to cover.

Of course the bird life was not nearly so varied as in the pretty groves of the Middle West. Most birds are gentle people, requiring an easy and pleasant environment, and these stern, stark mountains were no place for them. Only the hardier creatures could flourish here. Their songs would have been out of place in the great silences and solemnity of the evergreen forest. This was no land for weaklings. Bruce knew that as well as he knew that his legs were under him. The few birds he saw were mostly of the hardier varieties,—hale-fellows-well-met and cheerful members of the lower strata in bird society. "Good old roughnecks," he said to them, with an intuitive understanding.

That was just the name for them,—a word that is just beginning to appear in dictionaries. They were rough in manner and rough in speech, and they pretended to be rougher than they were. Yet Bruce liked them. He exulted in the easy freedom of their ways. Creatures have to be rough to exist in and love such wilderness as this. Life gets down to a matter of cold metal,—some brass but mostly iron! He rather imagined that they could be fairly capable thieves if occasion arose, making off with the edibles he had bought without a twitch of a feather. They squawked and scolded at him, after their curiosity was satisfied. They said the most shocking things they could think of and seemed to rejoice in it. He didn't know their breeds, yet he felt that they were old friends. They were rather large birds, mostly of the families of jays and magpies.

The hours passed. The trail grew dimmer. Now it was just a brown serpent in the pine needles, coiling this way and that,—but he loved every foot of it. It dipped down to a little stream, of which the blasting sun of summer had made only a succession of shallow pools. Yet the water was cold to his lips. And he knew that little brook trout—waiting until the fall rains should make a torrent of their tiny stream and thus deliver them—were gazing at him while he drank.

The trail followed the creek a distance, and at last he found the spring that was its source. It was only a small spring, lost in a bed of deep, green ferns. He sat down to rest and to eat part of his lunch. The little wind had died, leaving a profound silence.

By a queer pounding of his blood Bruce knew that he was in the high altitudes. He had already come six miles from the cabin. The hour was about six-thirty; in two hours more it would be too dark to make his way at all.

He examined the mud about the spring, and there was plenty of evidence that the forest creatures had passed that way. Here was a little triangle where a buck had stepped, and farther away he found two pairs of deer tracks,—evidently those of a doe with fawn. A wolf had stopped to cool his heated tongue in the waters, possibly in the middle of some terrible hunt in the twilight hours.

There was a curious round track, as if of a giant cat, a little way distant in the brown earth. It told a story plainly. A cougar—one of those great felines that is perhaps better called puma—had had an ambush there a few nights before. Bruce wondered what wilderness tragedy had transpired when the deer came to drink. Then he found another huge abrasion in the mud that puzzled him still more.

At first he couldn't believe that it was a track. The reason was simply that the size of the thing was incredible,—as if some one had laid a flour sack in the mud and taken it up again. He did not think of any of the modern-day forest creatures as being of such proportions. It was very stale and had been almost obliterated by many days of sun. Perhaps he had been mistaken in thinking it an imprint of a living creature. He went to his knees to examine it.

But in one instant he knew that he had not been mistaken. It was a track not greatly different from that of an enormous human foot; and the separate toes were entirely distinct. It was a bear track, of course, but one of such size that the general run of little black bears that inhabited the hills could almost use it for a den of hibernation!

His thought went back to his talk with Barney Wegan; and he remembered that the man had spoken of a great, last grizzly that the mountaineers had named "The Killer." No other animal but the great grizzly bear himself could have made such a track as this. Bruce wondered if the beast had yet been killed.

He got up and went on,—farther toward Trail's End. He walked more swiftly now, for he hoped to reach the end of Pine-needle Trail before nightfall, but he had no intention of halting in case night came upon him before he reached it. He had waited too long already to find Linda.

The land seemed ever more familiar. A high peak thrust a white head above a distant ridge, and it appealed to him almost like the face of an old friend. Sometime—long and long ago—he had gazed often at a white peak of a mountain thrust above a pine-covered ridge.

Another hour ended the day's sunlight. The shadows fell quickly, but it was a long time yet until darkness. He yet might make the trail-end. He gave no thought to fatigue. In the first place, he had stood up remarkably well under the day's tramp for no other reason than that he had always made a point of keeping in the best of physical condition. Besides, there was something more potent than mere physical strength to sustain him now. It was the realization of the nearing end of the trail,—a knowledge of tremendous revelations that would come to him in a few hours more.

Already great truths were taking shape in his brain; he only needed a single sentence of explanation to connect them all together. He began to feel a growing excitement and impatience.

For the first time he began to notice a strange breathlessness in the air. He paused, just for an instant, his face lifted to the wind. He did not realize that all his senses were at razor edge, trying to interpret the messages that the wind brought. He felt that the forest was wakening. A new stir and impulse had come in the growing shadows. All at once he understood. It was the hunting hour.

Yet even this seemed familiar. Always, it seemed to him, he had known this same strange thrill at the fall of darkness, the same sense of deepening mystery. The jays no longer gossiped in the shrubs. They had been silenced by the same awe that had come over Bruce. And now the man began to discern, here and there through the forest, queer rustlings of the foliage that meant the passing through of some of the great beasts of prey.

Once two deer flashed by him,—just a streak that vanished quickly. The dusk deepened. The further trees were dimming. The sky turned green, then gray. The distant mountains were enfolded in gloom. Bruce headed on—faster, up the trail.

The heaviness in his limbs had changed to an actual ache, but he gave no thought to it. He was enthralled by the change that was on the forest,—a whipping-back of a thousand-thousand years to a young and savage world. There was the sense of vast and tragic events all in keeping with the gathering gloom of the forest. He was awed and mystified as never before.

It was quite dark now, and he could barely see the trail. For the first time he began to despair, feeling that another night of overpowering impatience must be spent before he could reach Trail's End. The stars began to push through the darkening sky. Then, fainter than the gleam of a firefly, he saw the faint light of a far distant camp fire.

His heart bounded. He knew what was there. It was the end of the trail at last. And it guided him the rest of the way. When he reached the top of a little rise in the trail, the whole scene was laid out in mystery below him.

The fire had been built at the door of a mountain house,—a log structure of perhaps four rooms. The firelight played in its open doorway. Something beside it caught his attention, and instinctively he followed it with his eyes until it ended in an incredible region of the stars. It was a great pine tree, the largest he had ever seen,—seemingly a great sentinel over all the land.

But the sudden awe that came over him at the sight of it was cut short by the sight of a girl's figure in the firelight. He had an instant's sense that he had come to the wilderness's heart at last, that this tall tree was its symbol, that if he could understand the eternal watch that it kept over this mountain world, he would have an understanding of all things,—but all these thoughts were submerged in the realization that he had come back to Linda at last.

He had known how the mountains would seem. All that he had beheld to-day was just the recurrence of things beheld long ago. Nothing had seemed different from what he had expected; rather he had a sense that a lost world had been returned to him, and it was almost as if he had never been away. But the girl in the firelight did not answer in the least degree the picture he had carried of Linda.

He remembered her as a blond-headed little girl with irregular features and a rather unreasonable allowance of homeliness. All the way he had thought of her as a baby sister,—not as a woman in her flower. For a long second he gazed at her in speechless amazement.

Her hair was no longer blond. Time, it had peculiar red lights when the firelight shone through it; but he knew that by the light of day it would be deep brown. He remembered her as an awkward little thing that was hardly able to keep her feet under her. This tall girl had the wilderness grace,—which is the grace of a deer and only blind eyes cannot see it. He dimly knew that she wore a khaki-colored skirt and a simple blouse of white tied with a blue scarf. Her arms were bare in the fire's gleam. And there was a dark beauty about her face that simply could not be denied.

She came toward him, and her hands were open before her. And her lips trembled. Bruce could see them in the firelight.

It was a strange meeting. The firelight gave it a tone of unreality, and the whole forest world seemed to pause in its whispered business as if to watch. It was as if they had been brought face to face by the mandates of an inexorable destiny.

"So you've come," the girl said. The words were spoken unusually soft, scarcely above a whisper; but they were inexpressibly vivid to Bruce. In his lifetime he had heard many words that were just so many lifeless selections from a dictionary,—flat utterances with no overtones to give them vitality. He had heard voices in plenty that were merely the mechanical result of the vibration of vocal cords. But these words—not for their meaning but because of the quality of the voice that had spoken them—really lived. They told first of a boundless relief and joy at his coming. But more than that, in these deep vibrant tones was the expression of an unquenchable life and spirit. Every fiber of her body lived in the fullest sense; he knew this fact the instant that she spoke.

She smiled at him, ever so quietly. "Bwovaboo," she said, recalling the name by which she called him in her babyhood, "you've come to Linda."

IX

As the fire burned down to coals and the stars wheeled through the sky, Linda told her story. The two of them were seated in the soft grass in front of the cabin, and the moonlight was on Linda's face as she talked. She talked very low at first. Indeed there was no need for loud tones. The whole wilderness world was heavy with silence, and a whisper carried far. Besides, Bruce was just beside her, watching her with narrowed eyes, forgetful of everything except her story.

It was a perfect background for the savage tale that she had to tell. The long shadow of the giant pine tree fell over them. The fire made a little circle of red light, but the darkness ever encroached upon it. Just beyond the moonlight showed them silver-white patches between the trees, across which shadows sometimes wavered from the passing of the wild creatures.

"I've waited a long time to tell you this," she told him. "Of course, when we were babies together in the orphanage, I didn't even know it. It has taken me a long time since to learn all the details; most of them I got from my aunt, old Elmira, whom you talked to on the way out. Part of it I knew by intuition, and a little of it is still doubtful.

"You ought to know first how hard I have tried to reach you. Of course, I didn't try openly except at first—the first years after I came here, and before I was old enough to understand." She spoke the last word with a curious depth of feeling and a perceptible hardness about her lips and eyes. "I remembered just two things. That the man who had adopted you was Newton Duncan; one of the nurses at the asylum told me that. And I remembered the name of the city where he had taken you.

"You must understand the difficulties I worked under. There is no rural free delivery up here, you know, Bruce. Our mail is sent from and delivered to the little post-office at Martin's store—over fifteen miles from here. And some one member of a certain family that lives near here goes down every week to get the mail for the entire district.

"At first—and that was before I really understood—I wrote you many letters and gave them to one of this family to mail for me. I was just a child then, you must know, and I lived in the same house with these people. And queer letters they must have been."

For an instant a smile lingered at her lips, but it seemed to come hard. It was all too plain that she hadn't smiled many times in the past days. But for some unaccountable reason Bruce's heart leaped when he saw it. It had potentialities, that smile. It seemed to light her whole face. He was suddenly exultant at the thought that once he understood everything, he might bring about such changes that he could see it often.

"They were just baby letters from—from Linda-Tinda to Bwovaboo—letters about the deer and the berries and the squirrels—and all the wild things that lived up here."

"Berries!" Bruce cried. "I had some on the way up." His tone wavered, and he seemed to be speaking far away. "I had some once—long ago."

"Yes. You will understand, soon. I didn't understand why you didn't answer my letters. I understand now, though. You never got them."

"No. I never got them. But there are several Duncans in my city. They might have gone astray."

"They went astray—but it was before they ever reached the post-office. They were never mailed, Bruce. I was to know why, later. Even then it was part of the plan that I should never get in communication with you again—that you would be lost to me forever."

"When I got older, I tried other tacks. I wrote to the asylum, enclosing a letter to you. But those letters were not mailed, either."

"Now we can skip a long time. I grew up. I knew everything at last and no longer lived with the family I mentioned before. I came here, to this old house—and made it decent to live in. I cut my own wood for my fuel except when one of the men tried to please me by cutting it for me. I wouldn't use it at first. Oh, Bruce—I wouldn't touch it!"

Her face was no longer lovely. It was drawn with terrible passions. But she quieted at once.

"At last I saw plainly that I was a little fool—that all they would do for me, the better off I was. At first, I almost starved to death because I wouldn't use the food that they sent me. I tried to grub it out of the hills. But I came to it at last. But, Bruce, there were many things I didn't come to. Since I learned the truth, I have never given one of them a smile except in scorn, not a word that wasn't a word of hate."

"You are a city man, Bruce. You are what I read about as a gentleman. You don't know what hate means. It doesn't live in the cities. But it lives up here. Believe me if you ever believed anything—that it lives up here. The most bitter and the blackest hate—from birth until death! It burns out the heart, Bruce. But I don't know that I can make you understand."

She paused, and Bruce looked away into the pine forest. He believed the girl. He knew that this grim land was the home of direct and primitive emotions. Such things as mercy and remorse were out of place in the game trails where the wolf pack hunted the deer.

"When they knew how I hated them," she went on, "they began to watch me. And once they knew that I fully understood the situation, I was no longer allowed to leave this little valley. There are only two trails, Bruce. One goes to Elmira's cabin on the way to the store. The other encircles the mountain. With all their numbers, it was easy to keep watch of those trails. And they told me what they would do if they found me trying to go past."

"You don't mean—they threatened you?"

She threw back her head and laughed, but the sound had no joy in it. "Threatened! If you think threats are common up here, you are a greener tenderfoot than I ever took you for. Bruce, the law up here is the law of force. The strongest wins. The weakest dies. Wait till you see Simon. You'll understand then—and you'll shake in your shoes."

The words grated upon him, yet he didn't resent them. "I've seen Simon," he told her.

She glanced toward him quickly, and it was entirely plain that the quiet tone in his voice had surprised her. Perhaps the faintest flicker of admiration came into her eyes.

"He tried to stop you, did he? Of course he would. And you came anyway. May Heaven bless you for it, Bruce!" She leaned toward him, appealing. "And forgive me what I said."

Bruce stared at her in amazement. He could hardly realize that this was the same voice that had been so torn with passion a moment before. In an instant all her hardness was gone, and the tenderness of a sweet and wholesome nature had taken its place. He felt a curious warmth stealing over him.

"They meant what they said, Bruce. Believe me, if those men can do no other thing, they can keep their word. They didn't just threaten death to me. I could have run the risk of that. Badly as I wanted to make them pay before I died, I would have gladly run that risk."

"You are amazed at the free way I speak of death. The girls you know, in the city, don't even know the word. They don't know what it means. They don't understand the sudden end of the light—the darkness—the cold—the awful fear that it is! It is no companion of theirs, down in the city. Perhaps they see it once in a while—but it isn't in their homes and in the air and on the trails, like it is here. It's a reality here, something to fight against every hour of every day. There are just three things to do in the mountains—to live and love and hate. There's no softness. There's no middle ground." She smiled grimly. "Let them live up here with me—those girls you know—and they'd understand what a reality Death is. They'd know it was something to think about and fight against. Self-preservation is an instinct that can be forgotten when you have a policeman at every corner. But it is ever present here."

"I've lived with death, and I've heard of it, and I've seen it all my life. If there hadn't been any

other way, I would have seen it in the dramas of the wild creatures that go on around me all the time. You'll get down to cases here, Bruce—or else you'll run away. These men said they'd do worse things to me than kill me—and I didn't dare take the risk.

"But once or twice I was able to get word to old Elmira—the only ally I had left. She was of the true breed, Bruce. You'll call her a hag, but she's a woman to be reckoned with. She could hate too—worse than a she-rattlesnake hates the man that killed her mate—and hating is all that's kept her alive. You shrink when I say the word. Maybe you won't shrink when I'm done. Hating is a thing that gentlefolk don't do—but gentlefolk don't live up here. It isn't a land of gentleness. Up here there are just men and women, just male and female.

"This old woman tried to get in communication with every stranger that visited the hills. You see, Bruce, she couldn't write herself. And the one time I managed to get a written message down to her, telling her to give it to the first stranger to mail—one of my enemies got it away from her. I expected to die that night. I wasn't going to be alive when the clan came. The only reason I didn't was because Simon—the greatest of them all and the one I hate the most—kept his clan from coming. He had his own reasons.

"From then on she had to depend on word of mouth. Some of the men promised to send letters to Newton Duncan—but there was more than one Newton Duncan—as you say—and possibly if the letters were sent they went astray. But at last—just a few weeks ago—she found a man that knew you. And it is your story from now on."

They were still a little while. Bruce arose and threw more wood on the fire.

"It's only the beginning," he said.

"And you want me to tell you all?" she asked hesitantly.

"Of course. Why did I come here?"

"You won't believe me when I say that I'm almost sorry I sent for you." She spoke almost breathlessly. "I didn't know that it would be like this. That you would come with a smile on your face and a light in your eyes, looking for happiness. And instead of happiness—to find *all this!*"

She stretched her arms to the forests. Bruce understood her perfectly. She did not mean the woods in the literal sense. She meant the primal emotions that were their spirit.

She went on with lowered tones. "May Heaven forgive me if I have done wrong to bring you here," she told him. "To show you—all that I have to show—you who are a city man and a gentleman. But, Bruce, I couldn't fight alone any more. I had to have help.

"To know the rest, you've got to go back a whole generation. Bruce, have you heard of the terrible blood-feuds that the mountain families sometimes have?"

"Of course. Many times."

"These mountains of Trail's End have been the scene of as deadly a blood-feud as was ever known in the West. And for once, the wrong was all on one side.

"A few miles from here there is a wonderful valley, where a stream flows. There is not much tillable land in these mountains, Bruce, but there, along that little stream, there are almost five sections—three thousand acres—of as rich land as was ever plowed. And Bruce—the home means something in the mountains. It isn't just a place to live in, a place to leave with relief. I've tried to tell you that emotions are simple and direct up here, and love of home is one of them. That tract of land was acquired long ago by a family named Ross, and they got it through some kind of grant. I can't be definite as to the legal aspects of all this story. They don't matter anyway—only the results remain.

"These Ross men were frontiersmen of the first order. They were virtuous men too—trusting every one, and oh! what strength they had! With their own hands they cleared away the forest and put the land into rich pasture and hay and grain. They built a great house for the owner of the land, and lesser houses for his kinsfolk that helped him work it on shares. Then they raised cattle, letting them range on the hills and feeding them in winter. You see, the snow is heavy in winter, and unless the stock are fed many of them die. The Rosses raised great herds of cattle and had flocks of sheep too.

"It was then that dark days began to come. Another family—headed by the father of the man I call Simon—migrated here from the mountain districts of Oklahoma. But they were not so ignorant as many mountain people, and they were *killers*. Perhaps that's a word you don't know. Perhaps you didn't know it existed. A killer is a man that has killed other men. It isn't a hard thing to do at all, Bruce, after you are used to it. These people were used to it. And because they wanted these great lands—my own father's home—they began to kill the Rosses.

"At first they made no war on the Folgers. The Folgers, you must know, were good people too, honest to the last penny. They were connected, by marriage only, to the Ross family. They were on our side clear through. At the beginning of the feud the head of the Folger family was just a young man, newly married. And he had a son after a while.

"The newcomers called it a feud. But it wasn't a feud—it was simply murder. Oh, yes, we killed some of them. Folger and my father and all his kin united against them, making a great clan—but

they were nothing in strength compared to the usurpers. Simon himself was just a boy when it began. But he grew to be the greatest power, the leader of the enemy clan before he was twenty-one.

"You must know, Bruce, that my own father held the land. But he was so generous that his brothers who helped him farm it hardly realized that possession was in his name. And father was a dead shot. It took a long time before they could kill him."

The coldness that had come over her words did not in the least hide her depth of feeling. She gazed moodily into the darkness and spoke almost in a monotone.

"But Simon—just a boy then—and Dave, his brother, and the others of them kept after us like so many wolves. There was no escape. The only thing we could do was to fight back—and that was the way we learned to hate. A man can hate, Bruce, when he is fighting for his home. He can learn it very well when he sees his brother fall dead, or his father—or a stray bullet hit his wife. A woman can learn it too, as old Elmira did, when she finds her son's body in the dead leaves. There was no law here to stop it. The little semblance of law that was in the valleys below regarded it as a blood-feud, and didn't bother itself about it. Besides—at first we were too proud to call for help. And after our numbers were few, the trails were watched—and those who tried to go down into the valleys—never got there.

"One after another the Rosses were killed, and I needn't make it any worse for you than I can help—by telling of each killing. Enough to say that at last no one was left except a few old men whose eyes were too dim to shoot straight, and my own father. And I was a baby then—just born.

"Then one night my father—seeing the fate that was coming down upon him—took the last course to defeat them. Matthew Folger—a connection by marriage—was still alive. Simon's clan hadn't attacked him yet. He had no share in the land, but instead lived in this house I live in now. He had a few cattle and some pasture land farther down the Divide. There had been no purpose in killing him. He hadn't been worth the extra bullet.

"One night my father left me asleep and stole through the forests to talk to him. They made an agreement. I have pieced it out, a little at a time. My father deeded all his land to Folger.

"I can understand now. The enemy clan pretended it was a blood-feud only—and that it was fair war to kill the Rosses. Although my father knew their real aim was to obtain the land, he didn't think they would dare kill Matthew Folger to get it. He knew that he himself would fall, sooner or later, but he thought that to kill Folger would show their cards—and that would be too much, even for Simon's people. But he didn't know. He hadn't foreseen to what lengths they would go."

Bruce leaned forward. "So they killed—Matthew Folger?" he asked.

He didn't know that his face had gone suddenly stark white, and that a curious glitter had come to his eyes. He spoke breathlessly. For the name—Matthew Folger—called up vague memories that seemed to reveal great truths to him. The girl smiled grimly.

"Let me go on. My father deeded Folger the land. The deed was to go on record so that all the world would know that Folger owned it, and if the clan killed him it was plainly for the purposes of greed alone. But there was also a secret agreement—drawn up in black and white and to be kept hidden for twenty-one years. In this agreement, Folger promised to return to me—the only living heir of the Rosses—the lands acquired by the deed. In reality, he was only holding them in trust for me, and was to return them when I was twenty-one. In case of my father's death, Folger was to be my guardian until that time.

"Folger knew the risk he ran, but he was a brave man and he did not care. Besides, he was my father's friend—and friendship goes far in the mountains. And my father was shot down before a week was past.

"The clan had acted quick, you see. When Folger heard of it, before the dawn, he came to my father's house and carried me away. Before another night was done he was killed too."

The perspiration leaped out on Bruce's forehead. The red glow of the fire was in his eyes.

"He fell almost where this fire is built, with a thirty-thirty bullet in his brain. Which one of the clan killed him I do not know—but in all probability it was Simon himself—at that time only eighteen years of age. And Folger's little boy—something past four years old—wandered out in the moonlight to find his father's body."

The girl was speaking slowly now, evidently watching the effect of her words on her listener. He was bent forward, and his breath came in queer, whispering gusts. "Go on!" he ordered savagely. "Tell me the rest. Why do you keep me waiting?"

The girl smiled again,—like a sorceress. "Folger's wife was from the plains' country," she told him slowly. "If she had been of the mountains she might have remained to do some killing on her own account. Like old Elmira herself remained to do—killing on her own account! But she was from cities, just as you are, but she—unlike you—had no mountain blood in her. She wasn't used to death, and perhaps she didn't know how to hate. She only knew how to be afraid.

"They say that she went almost insane at the sight of that strong, brave man of hers lying still in the pine needles. She hadn't even known he was out of the house. He had gone out on some secret business—late at night. She had only one thing left—her baby boy and her little foster-

daughter—little Linda Ross who is before you now. Her only thought was to get those children out of that dreadful land of bloodshed and to hide them so that they could never come back. And she didn't even want them to know their true parentage. She seemed to realize that if they had known, both of them would return some time—to collect their debts. Sooner or later, that boy with the Folger blood in him and that girl with the Ross blood would return, to attempt to regain their ancient holdings, and to make the clan pay!

"All that was left were a few old women with hate in their hearts and a strange tradition to take the place of hope. They said that sometime, if death spared them, they would see Folger's son come back again, and assert his rights. They said that a new champion would arise and right their wrongs. But mostly death didn't spare them. Only old Elmira is left.

"What became of the secret agreement I do not know. I haven't any hope that you do, either. The deed was carried down to the courts by Sharp, one of the witnesses who managed to get past the guard, and put on file soon after it was written. The rest is short. Simon and his clan took up the land, swearing that Matthew Folger had deeded it to them the day he had procured it. They had a deed to show for it—a forgery. And the one thing that they feared, the one weak chain, was that this secret agreement between Folger and my father would be found.

"You see what that would mean. It would show that he had no right to deed away the land, as he was simply holding it in trust for me. Old Elmira explained the matter to me—if I get mixed up on the legal end of it, excuse it. If that document could be found, their forged deed would be obviously invalid. And it angered them that they could not find it.

"Of course they never filed their forged deed—afraid that the forgery would be discovered—but they kept it to show to any one that was interested. But they wanted to make themselves still safer.

"There had been two witnesses to the agreement. One of them, a man named Sharp, died—or was killed—shortly after. The other, an old trapper named Hudson, was indifferent to the whole matter—he was just passing through and was at Folger's house for dinner the night Ross came. He is still living in these mountains, and he might be of value to us yet.

"Of course the clan did not feel at all secure. They suspected the secret agreement had been mailed to some one to take care of, and they were afraid that it would be brought to light when the time was ripe. They knew perfectly that their forged deed would never stand the test, so one of the things to do was to prevent their claim ever being contested. That meant to keep Folger's son in ignorance of the whole matter.

"I hope I can make that clear. The deed from my father to Folger was on record, Folger was dead, and Folger's son would have every right and opportunity to contest the clan's claim to the land. If he could get the matter into court, he would surely win.

"The second thing to do was to win me over. I was just a child, and it looked the easiest course of all. That's why I was stolen from the orphanage by one of Simon's brothers. The idea was simply that when the time came I would marry one of the clan and establish their claim to the land forever.

"Up to a few weeks ago it seemed to me that sooner or later I would win out. Bruce, you can't dream what it meant! I thought that some time I could drive them out and make them pay, a little, for all they have done. But they've tricked me, after all. I thought that I would get word to Folger's son, who by inheritance would have a clear title to the land, and he, with the aid of the courts, could drive these usurpers out. But just recently I've found out that even this chance is all but gone.

"Within a few more weeks, they will have been in possession of the land for a full twenty years. Through some legal twist I don't understand, if a man pays taxes and has undisputed possession of land for that length of time, his title is secure. They failed to win me over, but it looks as if they had won, anyway. The only way that they can be defeated now is for that secret agreement—between my father and Folger—to reappear. And I've long ago given up all hope of that.

"There is no court session between now and October thirtieth—when their twenty years of undisputed possession is culminated. There seems to be no chance to contest them—to make them bring that forged deed into the light before that time. We've lost, after all. And only one thing remains."

He looked up to find her eyes full upon him. He had never seen such eyes. They seemed to have sunk so deep into the flesh about them that only lurid slits remained. It was not that her lids were partly down. Rather it was because the flesh-sacks beneath them had become charged with her pounding blood. The fire's glow was in them and cast a strange glamour upon her face. It only added to the strangeness of the picture that she sat almost limp, rather than leaning forward in appeal. Bruce looked at her in growing awe.

But as the second passed he seemed no longer able to see her plainly. His eyes were misted and blurred, but they were empty of tears as Linda's own. Rather the focal points of his brain had become seared by a mounting flame within himself. The glow of the fire had seemingly spread until it encompassed the whole wilderness world.

"What is the one thing that remains?" he asked her, whispering.

She answered with a strange, terrible coldness of tone. "The blood atonement," she said between back-drawn lips.

X

When the minute hand of the watch in his pocket had made one more circuit, both Bruce and Linda found themselves upon their feet. The tension had broken at last. Her emotion had been curbed too long. It broke from her in a flood.

She seized his hands, and he started at their touch. "Don't you understand?" she cried. "You—you are Folger's son. You are the boy that crept out—under this very tree—to find him dead. All my life Elmira and I have prayed for you to come. And what are you going to do?"

Her face was drawn in the white light of the moon. For an instant he seemed dazed.

"Do?" he repeated. "I don't know what I'm going to do."

"You don't!" she cried, in infinite scorn. "Are you just clay? Aren't you a man? Haven't you got arms to strike with and eyes to see along a rifle barrel? Are you a coward—and a weakling; one of your mother's blood to run away? Haven't you anything to avenge? I thought you were a mountain man—that all your years in cities couldn't take that quality away from you! Haven't you any answer?"

He looked up, a strange light growing on his face. "You mean—killing?"

"What else? To kill—never to stop killing—one after another until they are gone! Till Simon Turner and the whole Turner clan have paid the debts they owe."

Bruce recoiled as if from a blow. "Turner? Did you say Turner?" he asked hoarsely.

"Yes. That's the clan's name. I thought you knew."

There was an instant of strange truce. Both stood motionless. The scene no longer seemed part of the world that men have come to know in these latter years,—a land of cities and homes and peaceful twilights over quiet countrysides. The moon was still strange and white in the sky; the pines stood tall and dark and sad,—eternal emblems of the wilderness. The fire had burned down to a few lurid coals glowing in the gray ashes. No longer were these two children of civilization. Their passion had swept them back into the immeasurable past; they were simply human beings deep in the simplest of human passions. They trembled all over with it.

Bruce understood now his unprovoked attack on the little boy when he had been taken from the orphanage on trial. The boy had been named Turner, and the name had been enough to recall a great and terrible hatred that he had learned in earliest babyhood. The name now recalled it again; the truth stood clear at last. It was the key to all the mystery of his life; it stirred him more than all of Linda's words. In an instant all the tragedy of his babyhood was recalled,—the hushed talk between his parents, the oaths, the flames in their eyes, and finally the body he had found lying so still beneath the pines. It was always the Turners, the dread name that had filled his baby days with horror. He hadn't understood then. It had been blind hatred,—hatred without understanding or self-analysis.

As she watched, his mountain blood mounted to the ascendancy. A strange transformation came over him. The gentleness that he had acquired in his years of city life began to fall away from him. The mountains were claiming him again.

It was not a mental change alone. It was a thing to be seen with the unaided eyes. His hand had swept through his hair, disturbing the part, and now the black locks dropped down on his forehead, almost to his eyes. The whole expression of his face seemed to change. His look of culture dropped from him; his eyes narrowed; he looked grotesquely out of place in his soft, well-tailored clothes.

But he was quite cold now. His passion was submerged under a steel exterior. His voice was cold and hard when he spoke.

"Then you and I are no relation whatever?"

"None."

"But we fight the same fight now."

"Yes. Until we both win—or both die."

Before he could speak again, a strange answer came out of the darkness. "Not two of you," a croaking old voice told them. It rose, shrill and cracked, from the shadows beyond the fire. They turned, and the moonlight showed a bent old figure hobbling toward them.

It was old Elmira, her cane tapping along in front of her; and something that caught the moonlight lay in the hollow of her left arm. Her eyes still glowed under the grizzled brows.

"Not two, but three," she corrected, in the hollow voice of uncounted years. In the magic of the

moonlight it seemed quite fitting to both of them that she should have come. She was one of the triumvirate; they wondered why they had not missed her before. It was farther than she had walked in years, but her spirit had kept her up.

She put the glittering object that she carried into Bruce's hands. It was a rifle—a repeating breechloader of a famous make and a model of thirty years before. It was such a rifle as lives in legend, with sights as fine as a razor edge and an accuracy as great as light itself. Loving hands had polished it and kept it in perfect condition.

"Matthew Folger's rifle," the old woman explained, "for Matthew Folger's son."

And that is how Bruce Folger returned to the land of his birth—as most men do, unless death cheats them first—and how he made a pact to pay old debts of death.

BOOK TWO

THE BLOOD ATONEMENT

XI

"Men own the day, but the night is ours," is an old saying among the wild folk that inhabit the forests of Trail's End. And the saying has really deep significances that can't be discerned at one hearing. Perhaps human beings—their thoughts busy with other things—can never really get them at all. But the mountain lion—purring a sort of queer, singsong lullaby to her wicked-eyed little cubs in the lair—and the gray wolf, running along the ridges in the mystery of the moon—and those lesser hunters, starting with Tuft-ear the lynx and going all the way down to that terrible, white-toothed cutthroat, Little Death the mink—*they* know exactly what the saying means, and they know that it is true. The only one of the larger forest creatures that doesn't know is old Ashur, the black bear (*Ashur* means black in an ancient tongue, just as *Brunn* means brown, and the common Oregon bear is usually decidedly black) and the fact that he doesn't is curious in itself. In most ways Ashur has more intelligence than all the others put together; but he is also the most indifferent. He is not a hunter; and he doesn't care who owns anything as long as there are plenty of bee trees to mop out with his clumsy paw, and plenty of grubs under the rotten logs.

The saying originated long and long ago when the world was quite young. Before that time, likely enough, the beasts owned both the day and the night, and you can imagine them denying man's superiority just as long as possible. But they came to it in the end, and perhaps now they are beginning to be doubtful whether they still hold dominion over the night hours. You can fancy the forest people whispering the saying back and forth, using it as a password when they meet on the trails, and trying their best to believe it. "Man owns the day but the night is ours," the coyotes whisper between sobs. In a world where men have slowly, steadily conquered all the wild creatures, killed them and driven them away, their one consolation lies in the fact that when the dark comes down their old preëminence returns to them.

Of course the saying is ridiculous if applied to cities or perhaps even to the level, cleared lands of the Middle West. The reason is simply that the wild life is practically gone from these places. Perhaps a lowly skunk steals along a hedge on the way to a chicken pen, but he quivers and skulks with fear, and all the arrogance of hunting is as dead in him as his last year's perfume. And perhaps even the little bobwhites, nestling tail to tail, know that it is wholly possible that the farmer's son has marked their roost and will come and pot them while they sleep. But a few places remain in America where the reign of the wild creatures, during the night hours at least, is still supreme. And Trail's End is one of them.

It doesn't lie in the Middle West. It is just about as far west as one can conveniently go, unless he cares to trace the rivers down to their mouths. Neither was it cleared land, nor had its soil ever been turned by a plow. The few clearings that there were—such as the great five sections of the Rosses—were so far apart that a wolf could run all night (and the night-running of a wolf is something not to speak of lightly) without passing one. There is nothing but forest,—forest that stretches without boundaries, forest to which a great mountain is but a single flower in a meadow, forest to make the brain of a timber cruiser reel and stagger from sheer higher mathematics. Perhaps man owns these timber stretches in the daytime. He can go out and cut down the trees, and when they don't choose to fall over on top of him, return safely to his cabin at night. He can venture forth with his rifle and kill Ashur the black bear and Blacktail the deer, and even old Brother Bill, the grand and exalted ruler of the elk lodge. The sound of his feet disturbs the cathedral silence of the tree aisles, and his oaths—when the treacherous trail gives way beneath his feet—carry far through the coverts. But he behaves somewhat differently at night. He doesn't feel nearly so sure of himself. The sound of a puma screaming a few dozen feet away in the shadows is likely enough to cause an unpleasant twitching of the skin of his back. And he feels considerably better if there are four stout walls about him. At nighttime, the wild

creatures come into their own.

Bruce sensed these things as he waited for the day to break. For all the hard exertion of the previous day, he wakened early on the first morning of his return to his father's home. Through the open window he watched the dawn come out. And he fancied how a puma, still hungry, turned to snarl at the spreading light as he crept to his lair.

All over the forest the hunting creatures left their trails and crept into the coverts. Their reign was done until darkness fell again. The night life of the forest was slowly stilled. The daylight creatures—such as the birds—began to waken. Probably they welcomed the sight of day as much as Bruce himself. The man dressed slowly. He wouldn't waken the two women that slept in the next room, he thought. He crept slowly out into the gray dawn.

He made straight for the great pine that stood a short distance from the house. For reasons unknown to him, the pine had come often into his dreams. He had thought that its limbs rubbed together and made words,—but of the words themselves he had hardly caught the meaning. There was some high message in them, however; and the dream had left him with a vague curiosity, an unexplainable desire to see the forest monarch in the daylight.

As he waited, the mist blew off of the land; the gray of twilight was whisked away to a twilightland that is hidden in the heart of the forest. He found to his delight that the tree was even more impressive in the vivid morning light than it had been at night. It was not that the light actually got into it. Its branches were too thick and heavy for that. It still retained its air of eternal secrecy, an impression that it knew great mysteries that a thousand philosophers would give their lives to learn. He was constantly awed by the size of it. He guessed its circumference as about twenty-five feet. The great lower limbs were themselves like massive tree trunks. Its top surpassed by fifty feet any pine in the vicinity.

As he watched, the sun came up, gleaming first on its tall spire. It slowly overtook it. The dusk of its green lightened. Bruce was not a particularly imaginative man; but the impression grew that this towering tree had an answer for some great question in his own heart,—a question that he had never been able to shape into words. He felt that it knew the wholly profound secret of life.

After all, it could not but have such knowledge. It was so incredibly old; it had seen so much. His mind flew back to some of the dramas of human life that had been enacted in its shade, and his imagination could picture many more. His own father had lain here dead, shot down by a murderer concealed in the distant thicket. It had beheld his own wonder when he had found the still form lying in the moonlight; it had seen his mother's grief and terror. Wilderness dramas uncounted had been enacted beneath it. Many times the mountain lion had crept into its dark branches. Many times the bear had grunted beneath it and reached up to write a challenge with his claws in its bark. The eyes of Tuft-ear the lynx had gleamed from its very top, and the old bull-elk had filed off his velvet on the sharp edges of the bark. It had seen savage battles between the denizens of the wood; the deer racing by with the wolf pack in pursuit. For uncounted years it had stood aloft, above all the madness and bloodshed and passion that are the eternal qualities of the wilderness, somber, stately, unutterably aloof.

It had known the snows. When the leaves fell and the wind came out of the north, it would know them again. For the snow falls for a depth of ten feet or more over most of Trail's End. For innumerable winters its limbs had been heaped with the white load, the great branches bending beneath it. The wind made faint sounds through its branches now, but would be wholly silent when the winter snows weighted the limbs. He could picture the great, white giant, silent as death, still keeping its vigil over the snow-swept wilderness.

Bruce felt a growing awe. The great tree seemed so wise, it gave him such a sense of power. The winds had buffeted it in vain. It had endured the terrible cold of winter. Generation after generation of the creatures who moved on the face of the earth had lived their lives beneath it; they had struggled and mated and fought their battles and felt their passions, and finally they had died; and still it endured,—silent, passionless, full of thoughts. Here was real greatness. Not stirring, not struggling, not striving; only standing firm and straight and impassive; not taking part, but only watching, knowing no passion but only strength,—ineffably patient and calm.

But it was sad too. Such knowledge always brings sadness. It had seen too much to be otherwise. The pines are never cheerful trees, like the apple that blossoms in spring, or the elm whose leaves shimmer in the sunlight; and this great monarch of all the pines was sad as great music. In this quality, as well as in its strength, it was the symbol of the wilderness itself. But it was more than that. It was the Great Sentinel, and in its unutterable impassiveness it was the emblem and symbol of even mightier powers. Bruce's full wisdom had not yet come to him, so he couldn't name these powers. He only knew that they lived far and far above the world and, like the tree itself, held aloof from all the passion of Eve and the blood-lust of Cain. Like the pine itself, they were patient, impassive, and infinitely wise.

He felt stilled and calmed himself. Such was its influence. And he turned with a start when he saw Linda in the doorway.

Her face was calm too in the morning light. Her dark eyes were lighted. He felt a curious little glow of delight at the sight of her.

"I've been talking to the pine—all the morning," he told her.

"But it won't talk to you," she answered. "It talks only to the stars."

XII

Bruce and Linda had a long talk while the sun climbed up over the great ridges to the east and old Elmira cooked their breakfast. There was no passion in their words this morning. They had got down to a basis of cold planning.

"Let me refresh my memory about a few of those little things you told me," Bruce requested. "First—on what date does the twenty-year period—of Turners' possession of the land—expire?"

"On the thirtieth of October, of this year."

"Not very long, is it? Now you understand that on that date they will have had twenty years of undisputed possession of the land; they will have paid taxes on it that long; and unless their title is proven false between now and that date, we can't ever drive them out."

"That's just right."

"And the fall term of court doesn't begin until the fifth of the following month."

"Yes, we're beaten. That's all there is to it. Simon told me so the last time he talked to me."

"It would be to his interest to have you think so. But Linda—we mustn't give up yet. We must try as long as one day remains. The law is full of twists; we might find a way to checkmate them, especially if that secret agreement should show up. It isn't just enough—to have vengeance. That wouldn't put the estate back in your hands; they would have won, after all. It seems to me that the first thing to do is to find the trapper, Hudson—the one witness that is still alive. You say he witnessed that secret agreement between your father and mine."

"Yes."

"His testimony would be invaluable to us. He might be able to prove to the court that as my father never owned the land in reality, he couldn't possibly have deeded it to the Turners. Do you know where this Hudson is?"

"I asked old Elmira last night. She thinks she knows. A man told her he had his trap line on the upper Umpqua, and his main headquarters—you know that trappers have a string of camps—was at the mouth of Little River, that flows into the Umpqua. But it is a long way from here."

Bruce was still a moment. "How far?" he asked.

"Two full days' tramp at the least—barring out accidents. But if you think it is best—you can start out to-day."

Bruce was a man who made decisions quickly. He had learned the wisdom of it,—that after all the evidence is gathered on each side, a single second is all the time that is needed for any kind of decision. Beyond that point there is only vacillation. "Then I'll start—right away. Can you tell me how to find the trail?"

"I can only tell you to go straight north. Use your watch as a compass in the daytime and the North Star at night."

"I didn't suppose that it was wisdom to travel at night."

She looked at him in sudden astonishment. "And where did you learn that fact, Bruce?"

The man tried hard to remember. "I don't know. I suppose it was something I heard when I was a baby—in these mountains."

"It is one of the first things a mountaineer has to know—to make camp at nightfall. You would want to, anyway, Bruce. You've got enough real knowledge of the wilderness in you—born in you—to want a camp and a fire at night. Besides, the trails are treacherous."

"Then the thing to do is to get ready at once. And then try to bring Hudson back with me—down to the valley. After we get there we can see what can be done."

Linda smiled rather sadly. "I'm not very hopeful. But he's our last chance—and we might as well make a try. There is no hope that the secret agreement will show up in these few weeks that remain. We'll get your things together at once."

They breakfasted, and after the simple meal was finished, Bruce began to pack for the journey. He was very thankful for the months he had spent in an army camp. He took a few simple supplies of food: a piece of bacon, a little sack of dried venison—that delicious fare that has held so many men up on long journeys—and a compact little sack of prepared flour. There was no space for delicacies in the little pack. Besides, a man forgets about such things on the high trails. Butter, sugar, even that ancient friend coffee had to be left behind. He took one little utensil for cooking—a small skillet—and Linda furnished him with a camp ax and a long-bladed hunting knife. These things (with the exception of the knife and ax) he tied up in one heavy, all-wool

blanket, making a compact pack for carrying on his back.

In his pocket he carried cartridges for the rifle, pipe, tobacco, and matches. Linda took the hobnails out of her own shoes and pounded them into his. For there are certain trails in Trail's End that to the unnailed shoe are quite like the treadmills of ancient days; the foot slips back after every step.

One thing more was needed: tough leggings. The soft flannel trousers had not been tailored for wear in the brush coverts. And there is still another reason why the mountain men want their ankles covered. In portions of Trail's End there are certain rock ledges—gray, strange stone heaps blasted by the summer sun—and some of the paths that Bruce would take crossed over them. These ledges are the home of a certain breed of forest creatures that Bruce did not in the least desire to meet. Unlike many of the wild folk, they are not at all particular about getting out of the way, and they are more than likely to lash up at a traveler's instep. It isn't wise to try to jump out of the way. If a man were practiced at dodging lightning bolts he might do it, but not an ordinary mortal. For that lunging head is one of the swiftest things in the whole swift-moving animal world. And it isn't entirely safe to rely on a warning rattle. Sometimes the old king-snake forgets to give it. These are the poison people—the gray rattlesnakes that gather in mysterious, grim companies on the rocks—and the only safety from them is thick covering to the knees that the fangs cannot penetrate.

But the old woman solved this problem with a deer hide that had been curing for some seasons on the wall behind the house. Her eyes were dimmed with age, her fingers were stiff, but in an astonishingly short period of time she improvised a pair of leathern puttees, fastening with a strap, that answered the purpose beautifully. The two women walked with him, out under the pine.

Bruce shook old Elmira's scrawny hand; then she turned back at once into the house. The man felt singularly grateful. He began to credit the old woman with a great deal of intuition, or else memories from her own girlhood of long and long ago. He *did* want a word alone with this strange girl of the pines. But when Elmira had gone in and the coast was clear, it wouldn't come to his lips.

He felt curious conjecturings and wonderment arising within him. He couldn't have shaped them into words. It was just that the girl's face intrigued him, mystified him, and perhaps moved him a little too. It was a frank, clear, girlish face, wonderfully tender of feature, and at first her eyes held him most of all. They gave an impression of astounding depth. They were quite serious now; and they had a luster such as can be seen on cold spring water over dark moss,—and few other places on earth.

"It seems strange," he said, "to come here only last night—and then to be leaving again."

It seemed to his astonished gaze that her lips trembled ever so slightly. "We have been waiting for each other a long time, Bwovaboo," she replied. She spoke rather low, not looking straight at him. "And I hate to have you go again so soon."

"But I'll be back—in a few days."

"You don't know. No one ever knows when they start out in these mountains. Promise me, Bruce—to keep watch every minute. Remember there's nothing—*nothing*—that Simon won't stoop to do. He's like a wolf. He has no rules of fighting. He'd just as soon strike from ambush. How do I know that you'll ever come back again?"

"But I will." He smiled at her, and his eyes dropped from hers to her lips. His heart seemed to miss a beat. He hadn't noticed these lips in particular before. The mouth was tender and girlish, its sensitiveness scarcely seeming fitting in a child of these wild places. He reached out and took her hand.

"Good-by, Linda," he said, smiling.

She smiled in reply, and her old cheer seemed to return to her. "Good-by, Bwovaboo. Be careful."

"I'll be careful. And this reminds me of something."

"What?"

"That for all the time I've been away—and for all the time I'm going to be away now—I haven't done anything more—well, more intimate—than shake your hand."

Her answer was to pout out her lips in the most natural way in the world. Bruce was usually deliberate in his motions; but all at once his deliberation fell away from him. There seemed to be no interlude of time between one position and another. His arms went about her, and he kissed her gently on the lips.

But it was not at all as they expected. Both had gone into it lightly,—a boy-and-girl caress such as is usually not worth thinking about twice. He had supposed it would be just like the other kisses he had known in his growing-up days: a moment's soft pressure of the lips, a moment's delight, and nothing either to regret or rejoice in. But it was far more than this, after all. Perhaps because they had been too long in one another's thoughts; perhaps—living in a land of hated foes—because Linda had not known many kisses, this little caress beneath the pine went very straight home indeed to them both. They fell apart, both of them suddenly sobered. The girl's eyes were

tender and lustrous, but startled too.

"Good-by, Linda," he told her.

"Good-by—Bwovaboo," she answered. He turned up the trail past the pine.

He did not know that she stood watching him a long time, her hands clasped over her breast.

XIII

Miles farther than Linda's cabin, clear beyond the end of the trail that Duncan took, past even the highest ridge of Trail's End and in the region where the little rivers that run into the Umpqua have their starting place, is a certain land of Used to Be. Such a name as that doesn't make very good sense to a tenderfoot on the first hearing. Perhaps he can never see the real intelligence of it as long as he remains a tenderfoot. Such creatures cannot exist for long in the silences and the endless ridges and the unbeaten trails of this land; they either become woodsmen or have communication with the buzzards.

It isn't a land of the Present Time at all. It is a place that has never grown old. When a man passes the last outpost of civilization, and the shadows of the unbroken woods drop over him, he is likely to forget that the year is nineteen hundred and twenty, and that the day before yesterday he had seen an aeroplane passing over his house. It is true that in this place he sees winged creatures in the air, seeming masters of the aerial tracts, but they are not aeroplanes. Instead they are the buzzards, and they are keeping even a closer watch on him than he is on them. They know that many things may happen whereby they can get acquainted before the morning breaks. The world seems to have kicked off its thousand-thousand years as a warm man at night kicks off covers; and all things are just as they used to be. It is the Young World,—a world of beasts rather than men, a world where the hand of man has not yet been felt.

Of course it won't be that way forever. Sometime the forests will fall. What will become of the beasts that live in them there is no telling; there are not many places left for them to go. But at present it is just as savage, just as primitive and untamed as those ancient forests of the Young World that a man recalls sometimes in dreams.

On this particular early-September day, the age-old drama of the wilderness was in progress. It was the same play that had been enacted day after day, year upon year, until the centuries had become too many to count, and as usual, there were no human observers. There were no hunters armed with rifles waiting on the deer trails to kill some of the players. There were no naturalists taking notes that no one will believe in the coverts. It was the usual *matinée* performance; the long, hot day was almost at a close. The play would get better later in the evening, and really would not be at its best until the moon rose; but it was not a comedy-drama even now. Rather it was a drama of untamed passions and bloodshed, strife and carnage and lust and rapine; and it didn't, unfortunately, have a particularly happy ending. Mother Nature herself, sometimes kind but usually cruel, was the producer; she furnished the theater, even the spotted costume by which the fawn remained invisible in the patches of light and shadow; and she had certain great purposes of her own that no man understands. As the play was usually complicated with many fatalities, the buzzards were about the only ones to benefit. They were the real heroes of the play after all. Everything always turned out all right for them. They always triumphed in the end.

The greatest difference between this wilderness drama and the dramas that human beings see upon a stage is that one was reality and the other is pretense. The players were beasts, not men. The only human being anywhere in the near vicinity was the old trapper, Hudson, following down his trap line on the creek margin on the way to his camp. It is true that two other men, with a rather astounding similarity of purpose, were at present coming down two of the long trails that led to the region; but as yet the drama was hidden from their eyes. One of these two was Bruce, coming from Linda's cabin. One was Dave Turner, approaching from the direction of the Ross estates. Turner was much the nearer. Curiously, both had business with the trapper Hudson.

The action of the play was calm at first. Mostly the forest creatures were still in their afternoon sleep. Brother Bill, the great stag elk, had a bed in the very center of a thick wall of buckbush, and human observers at first could not have explained how his great body, with his vast spread of antlers, had been able to push through. But in reality his antlers aided rather than hindered. Streaming almost straight back they act something like a snow-plow, parting the heavy coverts.

The bull elk is in some ways the master of the forest, and one would wonder why he had gone to such an out-of-the-way place to sleep. Unless he is attacked from ambush, he has little to fear even from the Tawny One, the great cougar, and ordinarily the cougar waits until night to do his hunting. The lynx is just a source of scorn to the great bull, and even the timber wolf—except when he is combined with his relatives in winter—is scarcely to be feared. Yet he had been careful to surround himself with burglar alarms,—in other words, to go into the deep thicket that no beast of prey could penetrate without warning him—by the sound of breaking brush—of its approach. It would indicate that there was at least one living creature in this region—a place where men ordinarily did not come—that the bull elk feared.

The does and their little spotted fawns were sleeping too; the blacktail deer had not yet sought

the feeding grounds on the ridges. The cougar yawned in his lair, the wolf dozed in his covert, even the poison-people lay like long shadows on the hot rocks. But these latter couldn't be relied upon to sleep soundly. One of the many things they can do is to jump straight out of a dream like a flicking whiplash, coil and hit a mark that many a good pistol shot would miss.

Yet there was no chance of the buzzards, at present spectators in the clouds and waiting for the final act, to become bored. Particularly the lesser animals of the forest—the Little People—were busy at their occupations. A little brown-coated pine marten—who is really nothing but an overgrown weasel famous for his particularly handsome coat—went stealing through the branches of a pine as if he had rather questionable business. Some one had told him, and he couldn't remember who, that a magpie had her nest in that same tree, and Red Eye was going to look and see. Of course he merely wanted to satisfy his curiosity. Perhaps he would try to arrange to get a little sip of the mother's blood, just as it passed through the big vein of the throat,—but of course that was only incidental. He felt some curiosity about the magpie's eggs too, the last brood of the year. It might be that there were some little magpies all coiled up inside of them, that would be worth investigation by one of his scientific turn of mind. Perhaps even the male bird, coming frantically to look for his wife, might fly straight into the nest without noticing his brown body curled about the limb. It offered all kinds of pleasing prospects, this hunt through the branches.

Of course it is doubtful if the buzzards could detect his serpent-like form; yet it is a brave man who will say what a buzzard can and cannot see. Anything that can remain in the air as they do, seemingly without the flutter of a wing, has powers not to speak of lightly. But if they could have seen him they would have been particularly interested. A marten isn't a glutton in his feeding, and often is content with just a sip of blood from the throat. That leaves something warm and still for the buzzard's beak.

A long, spotted gopher snake slipped through the dead grass on the ground beneath. He didn't seem to be going anywhere in particular. He was just moseying—if there is such a word—along. Not a blade of grass rustled. Of course there was a chipmunk, sitting at the door of his house in the uplifted roots of a tree; but the snake—although he was approaching in his general direction—didn't seem at all interested in him. Were it not for two things, the serpent would have seemed to be utterly bored and indifferent to life in general. One of these things was its cold, glittering, reptile eyes. The other was its darting, forked tongue.

It may be, after all, that this little tongue was of really great importance in the serpent's hunting. Many naturalists think that quite often the little, rattle-brained birds and rodents that it hunts are so interested in this darting tongue that they quite fail to see the slow approach of the mottled body of the snake behind it. At least it was perfectly evident that the chipmunk did not see Limber-spine at present. Otherwise he wouldn't have been enjoying the scenery with quite the same complacency. If all went well, there might be a considerable lump in the snake's throat yet this afternoon. But it would be a quite different kind of lump from the one the chipmunk's little mate, waiting in vain for her lord to come to supper, would have in *her* throat.

An old raccoon wakened from his place on a high limb, stretched himself, scratched at his fur, then began to steal down the limb. He had a long way to go before dark. Hunting was getting poor in this part of the woods. He believed he would wander down toward Hudson's camp and look for crayfish in the water. A coyote is usually listed among the larger forest creatures, but early though the hour was—early, that is, for hunters to be out—he was stalking a fawn in a covert. The coyote has not an especially high place among the forest creatures, and he has to do his hunting early and late and any time that offers. Most of the larger creatures pick on him, all the time detesting him for his cunning. The timber wolf, a rather close relation whom he cordially hates, is apt to take bites out of him if he meets him on the trail. The old bull elk would like nothing better than to cut his hide into rag patches with the sharp-edged front hoofs. Even the magpies in the tree tops made up ribald verses about him. But nevertheless the spotted fawn had cause to fear him. The coyote is an infamous coward; but even the little cotton tail rabbit does not have to fear a fawn.

All these hunts were progressing famously when there came a curious interruption. It was just a sound at first. And strangely, not one of the forest creatures that heard it had ears sharp enough to tell exactly from what direction it had come. And that made it all the more unpleasant to listen to.

It was a peculiar growl, quite low at first. It lasted a long time, then died away. There was no opposition to it. The forest creatures had paused in their tracks at its first note, and now they stood as if the winter had come down upon them suddenly and frozen them solid. All the other sounds of the forest—the little whispering noises of gliding bodies and fluttering feet, and perhaps a bird's call in a shrub—were suddenly stilled. There was a moment of breathless suspense. Then the sound commenced again.

It was louder this time. It rose and gathered volume until it was almost a roar. It carried through the silences in great waves of sound. And in it was a sense of resistless power; no creature in the forest but what knew this fact.

"The Gray King," one could imagine them saying among themselves. The effect was instantaneous. The little raccoon halted in his descent, then crept out to the end of a limb. Perhaps he knew that the gray monarch could not climb trees, but nevertheless he felt that he would be more secure clear at the swaying limb-tip. The marten forgot his curiosity in regard to

the nest of the magpie. The gopher snake coiled, then slipped away silently through the grass.

The coyote, an instant before crawling with body close to the earth, whipped about as if he had some strange kind of circular spring inside of him. His nerves were always rather ragged, and the sound had frightened out of him the rigid control of his muscles that was so necessary if he were to make a successful stalk upon the fawn. The spotted creature bleated in terror, then darted away; and the coyote snarled once in the general direction of the Gray King. Then he lowered his head and skulked off deeper into the coverts.

The blacktail deer, the gray wolf, even the stately Tawny One, stretched in grace in his lair, wakened from sleep. The languor died quickly in the latter's eyes, leaving only fear. These were braver than the Little People. They waited until the thick brush, not far distant from where the bull elk slept, began to break down and part before an enormous, gray body.

No longer would an observer think of the elk as the forest monarch. He was but a pretender, after all. The real king had just wakened from his afternoon nap and was starting forth to hunt.

Even his little cousins, the black bears (who, after all is said and done, furnish most of the comedy of the deadly forest drama) did not wait to make conversation. They tumbled awkwardly down the hill to get out of his way. For the massive gray form—weighing over half a ton—was none other than that of the last of the grizzly bears, that terrible forest hunter and monarch, the Killer himself.

XIV

Long ago, when Oregon was a new land to white men, in the days of the clipper ships and the Old Oregon Trail, the breed to which the Killer belonged were really numerous through the little corner north of the Siskiyou and west of the Cascades. The land was far different then. The transcontinental lines had not yet been built; the only settlements were small trading posts and mining camps, and people did not travel over paved highways in automobiles. If they went at all it was in a prairie-schooner or on horseback. And the old grizzly bears must have found the region a veritable heaven.

They were a worthy breed! It is doubtful if any other section of the United States offered an environment so favorable to them. Game was in abundance, they could venture down into the valleys at the approach of winter and thus miss the rigors of the snow, and at first there were no human enemies. Unfortunately, stories are likely to grow and become sadly added after many tellings; but if the words of certain old men could be believed, the Southern Oregon grizzly occasionally, in the bountiful fall days, attained a weight of two thousand pounds. No doubt whatever remains that thousand-pound bears were fairly numerous. They trailed up and down the brown hillsides; they hunted and honey-grubbed and mated in the fall; they had their young and fought their battles and died, and once in a long while the skeleton of a frontiersman would be found with his skull battered perfectly flat where one of the great beasts had taken a short-arm pat at him.

But unlike the little black bears, the grizzlies developed displeasing habits. They were much more carnivorous in character than the blacks, and their great bodily strength and power enabled them to master all of the myriad forms of game in the Oregon woods. By the same token, they could take a full-grown steer and carry it off as a woman carries her baby.

It couldn't be endured. The cattlemen had begun to settle the valleys, and it was either a case of killing the grizzlies or yielding the valleys to them. In the relentless war that followed, the breed had been practically wiped out. A few of them, perhaps, fled farther and farther up the Cascades, finding refuges in the Canadian mountains. Others traveled east, locating at last in the Rocky Mountains, and countless numbers of them died. At last, as far as the frontiersmen knew, only one great specimen remained. This was a famous bear that men called Slewfoot,—a magnificent animal that ranged far and hunted relentlessly, and no one ever knew just when they were going to run across him. It made traveling in the mountains a rather ticklish business. He was apt suddenly to loom up, like a gray cliff, at any turn in the trail, and his disposition grew querulous with age. In fact, instead of fleeing as most wild creatures have learned to do, he was rather likely to make sudden and unexpected charges.

He was killed at last; and seemingly the Southern Oregon grizzlies were wiped out. But it is rather easy to believe that in some of his wanderings he encountered—lost and far in the deepest heart of the land called Trail's End—a female of his own breed. There must have been cubs who, in their turn, mated and fought and died, and perhaps two generations after them. And out of the last brood had emerged a single great male, a worthy descendant of his famous ancestor. This was the Killer, who in a few months since he had left his fastnesses, was beginning to ruin the cattle business in Trail's End.

As he came growling from his bed this September evening he was not a creature to speak of lightly. He was down on all fours, his vast head was lowered, his huge fangs gleamed in the dark red mouth. The eyes were small, and curious little red lights glowed in each of them. The Killer was cross; and he didn't care who knew it. He was hungry too; but hunger is an emotion for the beasts of prey to keep carefully to themselves. He walked slowly across the little glen, carelessly

at first, for he was too cross and out of temper to have the patience to stalk. He stopped, turning his head this way and that, marking the flight of the wild creatures. He saw a pair of blacktail bucks spring up from a covert and dash away; but he only made one short, angry lunge toward them. He knew that it would only cost him his dignity to try to chase them. A grizzly bear can move astonishingly fast considering his weight—for a short distance he can keep pace with a running horse—but a deer is light itself. He uttered one short, low growl, then headed over toward a great wall of buckbush at the base of the hill.

But now his hunting cunning had begun to return to him. The sun was setting, the pines were growing dusky, and he began to feel the first excitement and fever that the fall of night always brings to the beasts of prey. It is a feeling that his insignificant cousins, the black bears, could not possibly have,—for the sole reason that they are berry-eaters, not hunters. But the cougar, stealing down a deer trail on the ridge above, and a lean old male wolf—stalking a herd of deer on the other side of the thicket—understood it very well. His blood began to roll faster through his great veins. The sullen glare grew in his eyes.

It was the beginning of the hunting hour of the larger creatures. All the forest world knew it. The air seemed to throb and tingle, the shadowing thickets began to pulse and stir with life. The Fear—the age-old heritage of all the hunted creatures—returned to the deer.

The Killer moved quite softly now. One would have marveled how silently his great feet fell upon the dry earth and with what slight sound his heavy form moved through the thickets. Once he halted, gazing with reddening eyes. But the coyote—the gray figure that had broken a twig on the trail beside him—slipped quickly away.

He skirted the thicket, knowing that no successful stalk could be made where he had to force his way through dry brush. He moved slowly, cautiously—all the time mounting farther up the little hill that rose from the banks of the stream. He came to an opening in the thicket, a little brown pathway that vanished quickly into the shadows of the coverts.

The Killer slipped softly into the heavy brush just at its mouth. It was his ambush. Soon, he knew, some of the creatures that had bowers in the heart of the thicket would be coming along that trail toward the feeding grounds on the ridge. He only had to wait.

As the shadows grew and the twilight deepened, the undercurrent of savagery that is the eternal quality of the wilderness grew ever more pronounced. A thrill and fever came in the air, mystery in the deepening shadows, and brighter lights into the eyes of the hunting folk. The dusk deepened between the trees; the distant trunks dimmed and faded quite away. The stars emerged. The nightwind, rising somewhere in the region of the snow banks on the highest mountains, blew down into the Killer's face and brought messages that no human being may ever receive. Then his sharp ears heard the sound of brush cracked softly as some one of the larger forest creatures came up the trail toward him.

The steps drew nearer and the Killer recognized them. They were plainly the soft footfall of some member of the deer tribe, yet they were too pronounced to be the step of any of the lesser deer. The bull elk had left his bed. The red eyes of the grizzly seemed to glow as he waited. Great though the stag was, only one little blow of the massive forearm would be needed. The huge fangs would have to close down but once. The long, many-tined antlers, the sharp front hoofs would not avail him in a surprise attack such as this would be. Best of all, he was not suspecting danger. He was walking down wind, so that the pungent odor of the bear was blown away from him.

The bear did not move a single telltale muscle. He scarcely breathed. And the one movement that there was was such that not even the keen ears of an elk could discern, just a curious erection of the gray hairs on his vast neck.

The bull was almost within striking range now. The wicked red eyes could already discern the dimmest shadow of his outline through the thickets. But all at once he stopped, head lifting.

Perhaps a grizzly bear does not have mental processes as human beings know them. Perhaps all impulse is the result of instinct alone,—instinct tuned and trained to a degree that human beings find hard to imagine. But if the bear couldn't understand the sudden halt just at the eve of his triumph, at least he felt growing anger. He knew perfectly that the elk had neither detected his odor nor heard him, and he had made no movements that the sharp eyes could detect. Just a glimpse of gray in the heavy brush would not have been enough in itself to arouse the stag's suspicions. For the lower creatures are rarely able to interpret outline alone; there must be movement too.

Yet the bull was evidently alarmed. He stood immobile, one foot lifted, nostrils open, head raised. Then, the wind blowing true, the grizzly understood.

A pungent smell reached him from below,—evidently the smell of a living creature that followed the trail along the stream that flowed through the glen. He recognized it in an instant. He had detected it many times, particularly when he went into the cleared lands to kill cattle. It was man, an odor almost unknown in this lonely glen. Dave Turner, brother of Simon, was walking down the stream toward Hudson's camp.

The elk was widely traveled too, and he also realized the proximity of man. But his reaction was entirely different. To the grizzly it was an annoying interruption to his hunt; and a great flood of

rage swept over him. It seemed to him that these tall creatures were always crossing his path, spoiling his hunting, even questioning his rule of the forests. They did not seem to realize that he was the wilderness king, and that he could break their slight forms in two with one blow of his paw. It was true that their eyes had strange powers to disquiet him; but his isolation in the fastnesses of Trail's End had kept him from any full recognition of their real strength, and he was unfortunately lacking in the awe with which most of the forest creatures regarded them. But to the elk this smell was Fear itself. He knew the ways of men only too well. Too many times he had seen members of his herd fall stricken at a word from the glittering sticks they carried in their hands. He uttered a far-ringing snort.

It was a distinctive sound, beginning rather high on the scale as a loud whistle and descending into a deep bass bawl. And the Killer knew perfectly what that sound meant. It was a simple way of saying that the elk would progress no further down *that* trail. The bear leaped in wild fury.

A growl that was more near a puma-like snarl came from between the bared teeth, and the great body lunged out with incredible speed. Although the distance was far, the charge was almost a success. If one second had intervened before the elk saw the movement, if his muscles had not been fitted out with invisible wings, he would have fought no more battles with his herd brethren in the fall. The bull seemed to leap straight up. His muscles had been set at his first alarm from Turner's smell on the wind, and they drove forth the powerful limbs as if by a powder explosion. He was full in the air when the forepaws battered down where he had been. Then he darted away into the coverts.

The grizzly knew better than to try to overtake him. Almost rabid with wrath he turned back to his ambush.

XV

Simon Turner had given Dave very definite instructions concerning his embassy to Hudson. They were given in the great house that Simon occupied, in the same room, lighted by the fire's glow, from which instructions had gone out to the clan so many times before. "The first thing this Bruce will do," Simon had said, "is to hunt up Hudson—the one living man that witnessed that agreement between Ross and old Folger. One reason is that he'll want to verify Linda's story. The next is to persuade the old man to go down to the courts with him as his witness. And what you have to do is line him up on our side first."

Dave had felt Simon's eyes upon him, so he didn't look straight up. "And that's what the hundred is for?" he asked.

"Of course. Get the old man's word that he'll tell Bruce he never witnessed any such agreement. Maybe fifty dollars will do it; the old trapper is pretty hard up, I reckon. He'd make us a lot of trouble if Bruce got him as a witness."

"You think—" Dave's eyes wandered about the room, "you think that's the best way?"

"I wouldn't be tellin' you to do it if I didn't think so." Simon laughed,—a sudden, grim syllable. "Dave, you're a blood-thirsty devil. I see what you're thinking of—of a safer way to keep him from telling. But you know the word I sent out. 'Go easy!' That's the wisest course to follow at present. The valley people pay more attention to such things than they used to; the fewer the killings, the wiser we will be. If he'll keep quiet for the hundred let him have it in peace."

Dave hadn't forgotten. But his features were sharper and more ratlike than ever when he came in sight of Hudson's camp, just after the fall of darkness of the second day out. The trapper was cooking his simple meal,—a blue grouse frying in his skillet, coffee boiling, and flapjack batter ready for the moment the grouse was done. He was kneeling close to the coals; the firelight cast a red glow over him, and the picture started a train of rather pleasing conjectures in Dave's mind.

He halted in the shadows and stood a moment watching. After all he wasn't greatly different from the wolf that watched by the deer trail or the Killer in his ambush, less than a mile distant in the glen. The same strange, dark passion that was over them both was over him also. One could see it in the almost imperceptible drawing back of his dark lips over his teeth. There was just a hint of it in the lurid eyes.

Dave's thought returned to the hundred dollars in his pocket,—a good sum in the hills. A brass rifle cartridge, such as he could fire in the thirty-thirty that he carried in the hollow of his arm, cost only about six cents. The net gain would be—the figures flew quickly through his mind—ninety-nine dollars and ninety-four cents; quite a good piece of business for Dave. But the trouble was that Simon might find out.

It was not, he remembered, that Simon was adverse to this sort of operation when necessary. Perhaps the straight-out sport of the thing meant more to him than to Dave; he was a braver man and more primitive in impulse. There were certain memory pictures in Dave's mind of this younger, more powerful brother of his; and he smiled grimly when he recalled them. They had been wild, strange scenes of long ago, usually in the pale light of the moon, and he could recall Simon's face with singular clearness. There had always been the same drawing back of the lips,

the same gusty breathing, the same strange little flakes of fire in the savage eyes. He had always trembled all over too, but not from fear; and Dave remembered especially well the little drama outside Matthew Folger's cabin in the darkness. He was no stranger to the blood madness, this brother of his, and the clan had high hopes for him even in his growing days. And he had fulfilled those hopes. Never could the fact be doubted! He could still make a fresh notch in his rifle stock with the same rapture. But the word had gone out, for the present at least, to "go easy." Such little games as occurred to Dave now—as he watched the trapper in the firelight with one hundred dollars of the clan's money in his own pocket—had been prohibited until further notice.

The thing looked so simple that Dave squirmed all over with annoyance. It hurt him to think that the hundred dollars that he carried was to be passed over, without a wink of an eye, to this bearded trapper; and the only return for it was to be a promise that Hudson would not testify in Bruce's behalf. And a hundred dollars was real money! It was to be thought of twice. On the other hand, it would be wholly impossible for one that lies face half-buried in the pine needles beside a dead fire to make any kind of testimony whatsoever. It would come to the same thing, and the hundred dollars would still be in his pocket. Just a little matter of a single glance down his rifle barrel at the figure in the silhouette of the fire glow—and a half-ounce of pressure on the hair trigger. Half jesting with himself, he dropped on one knee and raised the weapon. The trapper did not guess his presence. The blood leaped in Dave's veins.

It would be so easy; the drawing back of the hammer would be only the work of a second; and an instant's peering through the sights was all that would be needed further. His body trembled as if with passion, as he started to draw back the hammer.

But he caught himself with a wrench. He had a single second of vivid introspection; and what he saw filled his cunning eyes with wonder. There would have been no holding back, once the rifle was cocked and he saw the man through the sights. The blood madness would have been too strong to resist. He felt as might one who, taking a few injections of morphine on prescription, finds himself inadvertently with a loaded needle in his hands. He knew a moment of remorse—so overwhelming that it was almost terror—that the shedding of blood had become so easy to him. He hadn't known how easy it had been to learn. He didn't know that a vice is nothing but a lust that has been given free play so many times that the will can no longer restrain it.

But the sight of Hudson's form, sitting down now to his meal, dispelled his remorse quickly. After all, his own course would have been the simplest way to handle the matter. There would be no danger that Hudson would double-cross them then. But he realized that Simon had spoken true when he said that the old days were gone, that the arm of the law reached farther than formerly, and it might even stretch to this far place. He remembered Simon's instructions. "The quieter we can do these things, the better," the clan leader had said. "If we can get through to October thirtieth with no killings, the safer it is for us. We don't know how the tenderfeet in the valley are going to act—there isn't the same feeling about blood-feuds that there used to be. Go easy, Dave. Sound this Hudson out. If he'll keep still for a hundred, let him have it in peace."

Dave slipped his rifle into the hollow of his arm and continued on down the trail. He didn't try to stalk. In a moment Hudson heard his step and looked up. They met in a circle of firelight.

It is not the mountain way to fraternize quickly, nor are the mountain men quick to show astonishment. Hudson had not seen another human being since his last visit to the settlements. Yet his voice indicated no surprise at this visitation.

"Howdy," he grunted.

"Howdy," Dave replied. "How about grub?"

"Help yourself. Supper just ready."

Dave helped himself to the food of the man that, a moment before, he would have slain; and in the light of the high fire that followed the meal, he got down to the real business of the visit.

Dave knew that a fairly straight course was best. It was general knowledge through the hills that the Turners had gouged the Rosses of their lands and it was absurd to think that Hudson did not realize the true state of affairs. "I suppose you've forgotten that little deed you witnessed between old Mat Folger and Ross—twenty years ago," Dave began easily, his pipe between his teeth.

Hudson turned with a cunning glitter in his eyes. Dave saw it and grew bolder. "Who wants me to forget it?" Hudson demanded.

"I ain't said that anybody wants you to," Dave responded. "I asked if you had."

Hudson was still a moment, stroking absently his beard. "If you want to know," he said, "I ain't forgotten. But there wasn't just a deed. There was an agreement too."

Dave nodded. Hudson's eyes traveled to his rifle,—for the simple reason that he wanted to know just how many jumps he would be obliged to make to reach it in case of emergencies. Such things are good to know in meetings like this.

"I know all about that agreement," Dave confessed.

"You do, eh? So do I. I ain't likely to forget."

Dave studied him closely. "What good is it going to do you to remember?" he demanded.

"I ain't saying that it's going to do me any good. At present I ain't got nothing against the Turners. They've always been all right to me. What's between them and the Rosses is past and done—although I know just in what way Folger held that land and no transfer from him to you was legal. But that's all part of the past. As long as the Turners continue to be my friends I don't see why anything should be said about it."

Dave did not misunderstand him. He didn't in the least assume that these friendly words meant that he could go back to the ranches with the hundred dollars still in his pocket. It meant merely that Hudson was open to reason and it wouldn't have to be a shooting affair.

Dave speculated. It was wholly plain that the old man had not yet heard of Bruce's return. There was no need to mention him. "We're glad you are our friend," Dave went on. "But we don't expect no one to stay friends with us unless they benefit to some small extent by it. How many furs do you hope to take this year?"

"Not enough to pay to pack out. Maybe two hundred dollars in bounties before New Year—coyotes and wolves. Maybe a little better in the three months following in furs."

"Then maybe fifty or seventy-five dollars, without bothering to set the traps, wouldn't come in so bad."

"It wouldn't come in bad, but it doesn't buy much these days. A hundred would do better."

"A hundred it is," Dave told him with finality.

The eyes above the dark beard shone in the firelight. "I'd forget I had a mother for a hundred dollars," he said. He watched, greedily, as Dave's gaunt hand went into his pocket. "I'm gettin' old, Dave. Every dollar is harder for me to get. The wolves are gettin' wiser, the mink are fewer. There ain't much that I wouldn't do for a hundred dollars now. You know how it is."

Yes, Dave knew. The money changed hands. The fire burned down. They sat a long time, deep in their own thoughts.

"All we ask," Dave said, "is that you don't take sides against us."

"I'll remember. Of course you want me, in case I'm ever subpoenaed, to recall signing the deed itself."

"Yes, we'd want you to testify to that."

"Of course. If there hadn't been any kind of a deed, Folger couldn't have deeded the property to you. But how would it be, if any one asks me about it, to swear that there *never was* no secret agreement, but a clear transfer; and to make it sound reasonable for me to say—to say that Ross was forced to deed the land to Folger because he'd had goings-on with Folger's wife, and Folger was about to kill him?"

The only response, at first, was the slightest, almost imperceptible narrowing of Dave's eyes. He had considerable native cunning, but such an idea as this had never occurred to him. But he was crafty enough to see its tremendous possibilities at once. All that either Simon or himself had hoped for was that the old man would not testify in Bruce's behalf. But he saw that such a story, coming from the apparently honest old trapper, might have a profound effect upon Bruce. Dave understood human nature well enough to know that he would probably lose faith in the entire enterprise. To Bruce it had been nothing but an old woman's story, after all; it was wholly possible that he would relinquish all effort to return the lands to Linda Ross. Men always can believe stranger things of sex than any other thing; Bruce would in all probability find Hudson's story much more logical than the one Linda had told him under the pine. It was worth one hundred dollars, after all.

"I'll bet you could make him swallow it, hook, bait, and sinker," Dave responded at last, flattering. They chuckled together in the darkness. Then they turned to the blankets.

"I'll show you another trail out to-morrow," Hudson told him. "It comes into the glen that you passed to-night—the canyon that the Killer has been using lately for a hunting ground."

XVI

The Killer had had an unsuccessful night. He had waited the long hours through at the mouth of the trail, but only the Little People—such as the rabbits and similar folk that hardly constituted a single bite in his great jaws—had come his way. Now it was morning and it looked as if he would have to go hungry.

The thought didn't improve his already doubtful mood. He wanted to growl. The only thing that kept him from it was the realization that it would frighten away any living creature that might be approaching toward him up the trail. He started to stretch his great muscles, intending to leave his ambush. But all at once he froze again into a lifeless gray patch in the thickets.

There were light steps on the trail. Again they were the steps of deer,—but not of the great, wary elk this time. Instead it was just a fawn, or a yearling doe at least, such a creature as had not yet learned to suspect every turn in the trail. The morning light was steadily growing, the stars were all dimmed or else entirely faded in the sky, and it would have been highly improbable that a full-grown buck in his wisdom would draw within leaping range without detecting him. But he hadn't the slightest doubt about the fawn. They were innocent people,—and their flesh was very tender. The forest gods had been good to him, after all.

He peered through the thickets, and in a moment more he had a glimpse of the spotted skin. It was almost too easy. The fawn was stealing toward him with mincing steps—as graceful a creature as dwelt in all this wilderness world of grace—and its eyes were soft and tender as a girl's. It was evidently giving no thought to danger, only rejoicing that the fearful hours of night were done. The mountain lion had already sought its lair. The fawn didn't know that a worse terror still lingered at the mouth of the trail.

But even as the Killer watched, the prize was simply taken out of his mouth. A gray wolf—a savage old male that also had just finished an unsuccessful hunt—had been stealing through the thickets in search of a lair, and he came out on the trail not fifty feet distant, halfway between the bear and the fawn. The one was almost as surprised as the other. The fawn turned with a frightened bleat and darted away; the wolf swung into pursuit.

The bear lunged forward with a howl of rage. He leaped into the trail mouth, then ran as fast as he could in pursuit of the running wolf. He was too enraged to stop to think that a grizzly bear has never yet been able to overtake a wolf, once the trim legs got well into action. At first he couldn't think about anything; he had been cheated too many times. His first impulse was one of tremendous and overpowering wrath,—a fury that meant death to the first living creature that he met.

But in a single second he realized that this wild chase was fairly good tactics, after all. The chances for a meal were still rather good. The fawn and the wolf were in the open now, and it was wholly evident that the gray hunter would overtake the quarry in another moment. It was true that the Killer would miss the pleasure of slaying his own game,—the ecstatic blow to the shoulder and the bite to the throat that followed it. In this case, the wolf would do that part of the work for him. It was just a simple matter of driving the creature away from his dead.

The fawn reached the stream bank, then went bounding down the margin. The distance shortened between them. It was leaping wildly, already almost exhausted; the wolf raced easily, body close to the ground, in long, tireless strides. The grizzly bear sped behind him.

But at that instant fate took a hand in this merry little chase. To the fawn, it was nothing but a sharp clang of metal behind him and an answering shriek of pain,—sounds that in its terror it heard but dimly. But it was an unlooked-for and tragic reality to the wolf. His leap was suddenly arrested in mid-air, and he was hurled to the ground with stunning force. Cruel metal teeth had seized his leg, and a strong chain held him when he tried to escape. He fought it with desperate savagery. The fawn leaped on to safety.

But there was no need of the grizzly continuing its pursuit. Everything had turned out quite well for him, after all. A wolf is ever so much more filling than any kind of seasonal fawn; and the old gray pack leader was imprisoned and helpless in one of Hudson's traps.

In the first gray of morning, Dave Turner started back toward his home. "I'll go with you to the forks in the trail," Hudson told him. "I want to take a look at some of my traps, anyhow."

Turner had completed his business none too soon. At the same hour—as soon as it was light enough to see—Bruce was finishing his breakfast in preparation for the last lap of his journey. He had passed the night by a spring on a long ridge, almost in eye range of Hudson's camp. Now he was preparing to dip down into the Killer's glen.

Turner and Hudson followed up the little creek, walking almost in silence. It is a habit all mountain men fall into, sooner or later,—not to waste words. The great silences of the wild places seem to forbid it. Hudson walked ahead, Turner possibly a dozen feet behind him. And because of the carpet of pine needles, the forest creatures could hardly hear them come.

Occasionally they caught glimpses of the wild life that teemed about them, but they experienced none of the delight that had made the two-day tramp such a pleasure to Bruce. Hudson thought in terms of pelts only; no creature that did not wear a marketable hide was worth a glance. Turner did not feel even this interest.

The first of Hudson's sets proved empty. The second was about a turn in the creek, and a wall of brush made it impossible for him to tell at a distance whether or not he had made a catch. But when still a quarter of a mile distant, Hudson heard a sound that he thought he recognized. It was a high, sharp, agonized bark that dimmed into a low whine. "I believe I've got a coyote or a wolf up there," he said. They hastened their steps.

"And you use that little pea-gun for wolves?" Dave Turner asked. He pointed to the short-barreled, twenty-two caliber rifle that was slung on the trapper's back. "It doesn't look like it would kill a mosquito."

"A killer gun," Hudson explained. "For polishin' 'em off when they are alive in the traps. Of course, it wouldn't be no good more'n ten feet away, and then you have to aim at a vital spot. But I've heard tell of animals I wouldn't want to meet with that thirty-thirty of yours."

This was true enough. Dave had heard of them also. A thirty-thirty is a powerful weapon, but it isn't an elephant gun. They hurried on, Dave very anxious to watch the execution that would shortly ensue if whatever animal had cried from the trap was still alive. Such things were only the day's work to Hudson, but Dave felt a little tingle of anticipation. And the thought damned him beyond redemption.

But instead of the joy of killing a cowering, terror-stricken animal, helpless in the trap, the wilderness had made other plans for Hudson and Dave. They hastened about the impenetrable wall of brush, and in one glance they knew that more urgent business awaited them.

The whole picture loomed suddenly before their eyes. There was no wolf in the trap. The steel had sprung, certainly, but only a hideous fragment of a foot remained between the jaws. The bone had been broken sharply off, as a man might break a match in his fingers. There was no living wolf for Hudson to execute with his killer gun. Life had gone out of the gray body many minutes before. The two men saw all these things as a background only,—dim details about the central figure. But the thing that froze them in their tracks with terror was the great, gray form of the Killer, not twenty feet distant, beside the mangled body of the wolf.

The events that followed thereafter came in such quick succession as to seem simultaneous. For one fraction of an instant all three figures stood motionless, the two men staring, the grizzly half-leaning over his prey, his head turned, his little red eyes full of hatred. Too many times this night he had missed his game. It was the same intrusion that had angered him before,—slight figures to break to pieces with one blow. Perhaps—for no man may trace fully the mental processes of animals—his fury fully transcended the fear that he must have instinctively felt; at least, he did not even attempt to flee. He uttered one hoarse, savage note, a sound in which all his hatred and his fury and his savage power were made manifest, whirled with incredible speed, and charged.

The lunge seemed only a swift passing of gray light. No eye could believe that the vast form could move with such swiftness. There was little impression of an actual leap. Rather it was just a blow; the great form, huddled over the dead wolf, had simply reached the full distance to Hudson.

The man did not even have time to turn. There was no defense; his killer-gun was strapped on his back, and even if it had been in his hands, its little bullet would not have mattered the sting of a bee in honey-robbing. The only possible chance of breaking that deadly charge lay in the thirty-thirty deer rifle in Dave's arms; but the craven who held it did not even fire. He was standing just below the outstretched limb of a tree, and the weapon fell from his hands as he swung up into the limb. The fact that Hudson stood weaponless, ten feet away in the clearing, did not deter him in the least.

No human flesh could stand against that charge. The vast paw fell with resistless force; and no need arose for a second blow. The trapper's body was struck down as if felled by a meteor, and the power of the impact forced it deep into the carpet of pine needles. The savage creature turned, the white fangs caught the light in the open mouth. The head lunged toward the man's shoulder.

No man may say what agony Hudson would have endured in the last few seconds of his life if the Killer had been given time and opportunity. His usual way was to linger long, sharp fangs closing again and again, until all living likeness was destroyed. The blood-lust was upon him; there would have been no mercy to the dying creature in the pine needles. Yet it transpired that Hudson's flesh was not to know those rending fangs a second time. Although it is an unfamiliar thing in the wilderness, the end of Hudson's trail was peaceful, after all.

On the hillside above, a stranger to this land had dropped to his knee in the shrubbery, his rifle lifted to the level of his eyes. It was Bruce, who had come in time to see the charge through a rift in the trees.

XVII

There were deep significances in the fact that Bruce kept his head in this moment of crisis. It meant nothing less than an iron self-control such as only the strongest men possess, and it meant nerves steady as steel bars.

The bear was on Hudson, and the man had gone down, before Bruce even interpreted him. Then it was just a gray patch, a full three hundred yards away. His instinct was to throw the gun to his shoulder and fire without aiming; yet he conquered it with an iron will. But he did move quickly. He dropped to his knee the single second that the gun leaped to his shoulder. He seemed to know that from a lower position the target would be more clearly revealed. The finger pressed back against the trigger.

The distance was far; Bruce was not a practiced rifle shot, and it bordered on the miraculous that his lead went anywhere near the bear's body. And it was true that the bullet did not reach a vital

place. It stung like a wasp at the Killer's flank, however, cutting a shallow flesh wound. But it was enough to take his dreadful attention from the mortally wounded trapper in the pine needles.

He whirled about, growling furiously and biting at the wound. Then he stood still, turning his gaze first to the pale face of Dave Turner thirty feet above him in the pine. The eyes glowed in fury and hatred. He had found men out at last; they died even more easily than the fawn. He started to turn back to the fallen, and the rifle spoke again.

It was a complete miss, this time; yet the bear leaped in fear when the bullet thwacked into the dust beside him. He did not wait for a third. His caution suddenly returning to him, and perhaps his anger somewhat satiated by the blow he had dealt Hudson, he crashed into the security of the thicket.

Bruce waited a single instant, hoping for another glimpse of the creature; then ran down to aid Hudson. But in driving the bear from the trapper's helpless body he had already given all the aid that he could. Understanding came quickly. He had arrived only in time for the Departure,—just a glimpse of a light as it faded. The blow had been more than any human being could survive; even now Hudson was entering upon that strange calm which often, so mercifully, immediately precedes death.

He opened his eyes and looked with some wonder into Bruce's face. The light in them was dimming, fading like a twilight, yet there was indication of neither confusion nor delirium. Hudson, in that last moment of his life, was quite himself.

There was, however, some indication of perplexity at the peculiar turn affairs had taken. "You're not Dave Turner," he said wonderingly.

Dim though the voice was, there was considerable emphasis in the tone. Hudson seemed quite sure of this point, whether or not he knew anything concerning the dark gates he was about to enter. He wouldn't have spoken greatly different if he had been sitting in perfect health before his own camp fire and the shadow was now already so deep his eyes could scarcely penetrate it.

"No," Bruce answered. "Dave Turner is up a tree. He didn't even wait to shoot."

"Of course he wouldn't." Hudson spoke with assurance. The words dimmed at the end, and he half-closed his eyes as if he were too sleepy to stay awake longer. Then Bruce saw a strange thing. He saw, unmistakable as the sun in the sky, the signs of a curious struggle in the man's face. There was a singular deepening of the lines, a twitching of the muscles, a queer set to the lips and jaws. They were as much signs of battle as the sound of firing a general hears from far away.

The trapper—a moment before sinking into the calm of death—was fighting desperately for a few moments of respite. There could be no other explanation. And he won it at last,—an interlude of half a dozen breaths. "Who are you?" he whispered.

Bruce bowed his head until his ear was close to the lips. "Bruce Folger," he answered,—for the first time in his knowledge speaking his full name. "Son of Matthew Folger who lived at Trail's End long ago."

The man still struggled. "I knew it," he said. "I saw it—in your face. I see—everything now. Listen—can you hear me?"

"Yes."

"I just did a wrong—there's a hundred dollars in my pocket that I just got for doing it. I made a promise—to lie to you. Take the money—it ought to be yours, anyway—and hers; and use it toward fighting the wrong. It will go a little way."

"Yes," Bruce looked him full in the eyes. "No matter about the money. What did you promise Turner?"

"That I'd lie to you. Grip my arms with your hands—till it hurts. I've only got one breath more. Your father held those lands only in trust—the Turners' deed is forged. And the secret agreement that I witnessed is hidden—"

The breath seemed to go out of the man. Bruce shook him by the shoulders. Dave, still in the tree, strained to hear the rest. "Yes—where?"

"It's hidden—just—out—" The words were no longer audible to Dave, and what followed Bruce also strained to hear in vain. The lips ceased moving. The shadow grew in the eyes, and the lids flickered down over them. A traveler had gone.

Bruce got up, a strange, cold light in his eyes. He glanced up. Dave Turner was climbing slowly down the tree. Bruce made six strides and seized his rifle.

The effect on Dave was ludicrous. He clung fast to the tree limbs, as if he thought a bullet—like a grizzly's claws—could not reach him there. Bruce laid the gun behind him, then stood waiting with his own weapon resting in his arms.

"Come down, Dave," he commanded. "The bear is gone."

Dave crept down the trunk and halted at its base. He studied the cold face before him. "Better

not try nothing," he advised hoarsely.

"Why not?" Bruce asked. "Do you think I'm afraid of a coward?" The man started at the words; his head bobbed backward as if Bruce had struck him beneath the jaw with his fist.

"People don't call the Turners cowards and walk off with it," the man told him.

"Oh, the lowest coward!" Bruce said between set teeth. "The yellowest, mongrel coward! Your own confederate—and you had to drop your gun and run up a tree. You might have stopped the bear's charge."

Dave's face twisted in a scowl. "You're brave enough now. Wait to see what happens later. Give me my gun. I'm going to go."

"You can go, but you don't get your gun. I'll fill you full of lead if you try to touch it."

Dave looked up with some care. He wanted to know for certain if this tenderfoot meant what he said. The man was blind in some things, his vision was twisted and dark, but he made no mistake about the look on the cold, set face before him. Bruce's finger was curled about the trigger, and it looked to Dave as if it itched to exert further pressure.

"I don't see why I spare you, anyway," Bruce went on. His tone was self-reproachful. "God knows I hadn't ought to—remembering who and what you are. If you'd only give me one little bit of provocation—"

Dave saw lurid lights growing in the man's eyes; and all at once a conclusion came to him. He decided he'd make no further effort to regain the gun. His life was rather precious to him, strangely, and it was wholly plain that a dread and terrible passion was slowly creeping over his enemy. He could see it in the darkening face, the tight grip of the hands on the rifle stock. His own sharp features grew more cunning. "You ought to be glad I didn't stop the bear with my rifle," he said hurriedly. "I had Hudson bribed—you wouldn't have found out something that you did find out if he hadn't lain here dying. You wouldn't have learned—"

But the sentence died in the middle. Bruce made answer to it. For once in his life Dave's cunning had not availed him; he had said the last thing in the world that he should have said, the one thing that was needed to cause an explosion. He hadn't known that some men have standards other than self gain. And some small measure of realization came to him when he felt the dust his full length under him.

Bruce's answer had been a straight-out blow with his fist, with all his strength behind it, in the very center of his enemy's face.

XVIII

In his years of residence at Trail's End, Dave Turner had acquired a thorough knowledge of all its paths. That knowledge stood him in good stead now. He wished to cross the ridges to Simon's house at least an hour before Bruce could return to Linda.

He traveled hard and late, and he reached Simon's door just before sundown of the second day. Bruce was still a full two hours distant. But Dave did not stay to knock. It was chore-time, and he thought he would find Simon in his barn, supervising the feeding and care of the livestock. He had guessed right, and the two men had a moment's talk in the dusky passage behind the stalls.

"I've brought news," Dave said.

Simon made no answer at first. The saddle pony in the stall immediately in front of them, frightened at Dave's unfamiliar figure, had crowded, trembling, against his manger. Simon's red eyes watched him; then he uttered a short oath. He took two strides into the stall and seized the halter rope in his huge, muscular hand. Three times he jerked it with a peculiar, quartering pull, a curbing that might have been ineffective by a man of ordinary strength, but with the incomprehensible might of the great forearm behind it was really terrible punishment. Dave thought for a moment his brother would break the animal's neck; the whites began to show about the soft, dark pupils of its eyes. The strap over the head broke with the fourth pull; then the horse recoiled, plunging and terrified, into the opposite corner of the stall.

Simon leaped with shattering power at the creature's shoulders, his huge arms encircled its neck, his shoulders heaved, and he half-threw it to the floor. Then, as it staggered to rise, his heavy fist flailed against its neck. Again and again he struck, and in the half-darkness of the stable it was a dreadful thing to behold. The man's fury, always quickly aroused, was upon him; his brawny form moved with the agility of a panther. Even Dave, whose shallow eyes were usually wont to feast on cruelty, viewed the scene with some alarm. It wasn't that he was moved by the agony of the horse. But he did remember that horses cost money, and Simon seemed determined to kill the animal before his passion was spent.

The horse cowered, and in a moment more it was hard to remember he was a member of a noble, high-spirited breed,—a swift runner, brainy as a dog, a servant faithful and worthy. It was no longer easy to think of him as a creature of beauty,—and there is no other word than beauty for

these long-maned, long-tailed, trim-lined animals. He stood quiet at last, his head hanging low, knees bent, eyes curiously sorrowful and dark. Simon fastened the broken strap about his neck, gave it one more jerk that almost knocked the animal off his feet, then turned back to Dave. Except for a higher color in his cheeks, darker lights in his eyes, and an almost imperceptible quickening of his breathing, it did not seem as if he had moved.

"You're always bringing news," he said.

Dave opened his eyes. He had forgotten his own words in the tumult of the fight he had just watched, but plainly Simon hadn't forgotten. He opened his mouth to speak.

"Well, what is it? Out with it," his brother urged. "If it's as important as some of the other news you've brought don't take my time."

"All right," the other replied sullenly. "You don't have to hear it. But I'm telling you it's of real importance this time—and sometime you'll find out." He scowled into the dark face. "But suit yourself."

He turned as if to go. He rather thought that Simon would call him back. It would be, in a measure, a victory. But Simon went back to his inspection of the stalls.

Dave walked clear to the door, then turned. "Don't be a fool, Simon," he urged. "Listen to what I have to tell you. Bruce Folger knows where that secret agreement is."

For once in his life Dave got a response of sufficient emphasis to satisfy him. His brother whirled, his whole expression undergoing an immediate and startling change. If there was one emotion that Dave had never seen on Simon's face it was fear,—and he didn't know for certain that he saw it now. But there was alarm—unmistakable—and surprise too.

"What do you mean?" he demanded.

Dave exulted inwardly. His brother's response had almost made up for the evil news that he brought. For Dave's fortunes, as well as Simon's, depended on the vast fertile tract being kept in the clan's possession. His eyes narrowed ever so slightly. For the first time in his life, as far as Dave could remember, Simon had encountered a situation that he had not immediately mastered. Perhaps it was the beginning of Simon's downfall, which meant—by no great stretch of the imagination—the advancement of Dave. But in another second of clear thinking Dave knew that in his brother's strength lay his own; if this mighty force at the head of the clan was weakening, no hope remained for any of them. His own face grew anxious.

"Out with it," Simon stormed. His tone was really urgent now, not insolent as usual. "Good Lord, man, don't you know that if Bruce gets that down to the settlements before the thirtieth of next month we're lost—and nothing in this world can save us? We can't drive *him* off, like we drove the Rosses. There's too much law down in the valleys. If he's got that paper, there's only one thing to do. Help me saddle a horse."

"Wait a minute. I didn't say he had it. I only said he knew where it was. He's still an hour or two walk from here, toward Little River, and if we have to wait for him on the trail, we've got plenty of time. And of course I ain't quite sure he *does* know where it is."

Simon smiled mirthlessly. "The news is beginning to sound like the rest of yours."

"Old Hudson is dead," Dave went on. "And don't look at me—I didn't do it. I wish I had, though, first off. For once my judgment was better than yours. The Killer got him."

"Yes. Go on."

"I was with him when it happened. My gun got jammed so I couldn't shoot."

"Where is it now?"

Dave scrambled in vain for a story to explain the loss of his weapon to Bruce, and the one that came out at last didn't do him particular credit. "I—I threw the damn thing away. Wish I hadn't now, but it made me so mad by jamming—it was a fool trick. Maybe I can go back after it and find it."

Simon smiled again. "Very good so far," he commented.

Dave flushed. "Bruce was there too—fact is, creased the bear—and the last minute before he died Hudson told him where the agreement was hidden. I couldn't hear all he said—I was too far away—but I heard enough to think that he told Bruce the hiding place. It was natural Hudson would know it, and we were fools for not asking him about it long ago."

"And why didn't you get that information away from Bruce with your gun?"

"Didn't I tell you the thing was jammed? If it hadn't of been for that, I'd done something more than find out where it is. I'd stopped this nonsense once and for all, and let a hole through that tenderfoot big enough to see through. *Then* there'd never be any more trouble. It's the thing to do now."

Simon looked at his brother's face with some wonder. More crafty and cunning, Dave was like the coyote in that he didn't yield so quickly to fury as that gray wolf, his brother. But when it did come, it seared him. It had come now. Simon couldn't mistake the fact; he saw it plain in the

glowing eyes, the clenched hands, the drawn lips. Dave was remembering the pain of the blow Bruce had given him, and the smart of the words that had preceded it.

"You and he must have had a little session down there by the creek," Simon suggested slowly, "when your gun was jammed. Of course, he took the gun. What's the use of trying to lie to me?"

"He did. What could I do?"

"And now you want him potted—from ambush."

"What's the use of waiting? Who'd know?" The two men stood face to face in the quiet and deepening dusk of the barn; and there was growing determination on each face. "Every day our chance is less and less," Dave went on. "We've been thinking we're safe, but if he knows where that agreement is, we're not safe at all. How would you like to get booted off these three thousand acres now, just after we've all got attached to them? To start making our living as day laborers—and maybe face a hangin' for some things of long ago? With this land behind him, he'd be in a position to pay old debts, I'm telling you. We're not secure, and you know it. The law doesn't forget, and it doesn't forgive. We've been fooling away our time ever since we knew he was coming. We should have met him on the trail and let the buzzards talk to him."

"Yes," Simon echoed in a strange half-whisper. "Let the buzzards talk to him."

Dave took fresh heart at the sound of that voice. "No one would have ever knowed it," he went on. "No one would ever know it now. They'd find his bones, some time maybe, but there'd be no one to point to. They'd never get any thing against us. Everybody except the mountain people have forgotten about this affair. Those in the mountains are too scattered and few to take any part in it. I tell you—it's all the way, or no way at all. Tell me to wait for him on the trail."

"Wait. Wait a minute. How long before he will come?"

"Any time now. And don't postpone this matter any more. We're men, not babies. He's not a fool or not a coward, either. He's got his old man's blood in him—not his mother's to run away. As long as he ain't croaked, all we've done so far is apt to come to nothing. And there's one thing more. He's going to take the blood-feud up again."

"Lots of good it would do him. One against a dozen."

"But he's a shot—I saw that plain enough—and how'd you like to have him shoot through *your* windows some time? Old Elmira and Linda have set him on, and he's hot for it."

"I wish you'd got that old heifer when you got her son," Simon said. He still spoke calmly; but it was plain enough that Dave's words were having the desired effect. Dave could discern this fact by certain lights and expressions about the pupils of his brother's eyes, signs learned and remembered long ago. "So he's taken up the blood-feud, has he? I thought I gave his father some lessons in that a long time since. Well, I suppose we must let him have his way!"

"And remember too," Dave urged, "what you told him when you met him in the store. You said you wouldn't warn him twice."

"I remember." The two men were silent, but Dave stood no longer motionless. The motions that he made, however, were not discernible in the growing gloom of the barn. He was shivering all over with malice and fury.

"Then you've given the word?" he asked.

"I've given the word, but I'll do it my own way. Listen, Dave." Simon stood, head bent, deep in thought. "Could you arrange to have Linda and the old hag out of the house when Bruce gets back?"

"Yes—"

"We've got to work this thing right. We can't operate in the open like we used to. This man has taken up the blood-feud—but the thing to do—is to let him come to us."

"But he won't do it. He'll go to the courts first."

Simon's face grew stern. "I don't want any more interruptions, Dave. I mean we will want to give the impression that he attacked us first—on his own free will. What if he comes into our house—a man unknown in these parts—and something happens to him there—in the dead of night? It wouldn't look so bad then, would it? Besides—if we got him here—before the clan, we might be able to find out where that document is. At least we'll have him here where everything will be in our favor. First, how can you tell when he's going to come?"

"He ought to be here very soon. The moon's bright and I can get up on the ridge and see his shadow through your field glasses when he crosses the big south pasture. That will give me a full half-hour before he comes."

"It's enough. I'm ready to give you your orders now. They are—just to use your head, and on some pretext get those two women out of the house so that Bruce can't find them when he returns. Don't let them come back for an hour, if you can help it. If it works—all right. If it doesn't, we'll use more direct measures. I'll tend to the rest."

He strode to the wall and took down a saddle from the hook. Quickly he threw it over the back of

one of the cow ponies, the animal that he had punished. He put the bridle in Dave's hand. "Stop at the house for the glasses, then ride to the ridge at once," he ordered. "Then keep watch."

Without words Dave led the horse through the door and swung on to its back. In an instant the wild folk, in the fringe of forest beyond, paused in their night occupations to listen to the sound of hoof beats on the turf. Then Simon slowly saddled his own horse.

XIX

The day was quite dead when Dave Turner reached his post on top of the ridge. The gray of twilight had passed, the forest was lost in darkness, the stars were all out. The only vestige of daylight that remained was a pale, red glow over the Western mountains,—and this was more like red flowers that had been placed on its grave in remembrance.

Fortunately, the moon rose early. Otherwise Dave's watch would have been in vain. The soft light wrought strange miracles in the forest: bathing the tree tops in silver, laying wonderful cobweb tapestries between the trunks, upsetting the whole perspective as to distance and contour. Dave didn't have long to wait. At the end of a half-hour he saw, through the field glasses, the wavering of a strange black shadow on the distant meadow. Only the vivid quality of the full moon enabled him to see it at all.

He tried to get a better focus. It might be just the shadow of deer, come to browse on the parched grass. Dave felt a little tremor of excitement at the thought that if it were not Bruce, it was more likely the last of the grizzlies, the Killer. The previous night the gray forest king had made an excursion into Simon's pastures and had killed a yearling calf; in all probability he would return to-night to finish his feast. In fact, this night would in all probability see the end of the Killer. Some one of the Turners would wait for him, with a loaded rifle, in a safe ambush.

But it wasn't the Killer, after all. It was before his time; besides, the shadow was too slender to be that of the huge bear. Dave Turner watched a moment longer, so that there could be no possibility of a mistake. Bruce was returning; he was little more than a half-hour's walk from Linda's home.

Turner swung on his horse, then lashed the animal into a gallop. Less than five minutes later he drew up to a halt beneath the Sentinel Pine, almost a mile distant. For the first time, Dave began to move cautiously.

It would complicate matters if the two women had already gone to bed. The hour was early—not yet nine—but the fall of darkness is often the going-to-bed time of the mountain people. It is warmer there and safer; and the expense of candles is lessened. Incidentally, it is the natural course for the human breed,—to bed at nightfall and up at dawn; and only distortion of nature can change the habit. It is doubtful if even the earliest men—those curious, long-armed, stiff-thumbed, heavy-jowled forefathers far remote—were ever night hunters. Like the hawks and most of the other birds of prey they were content to leave the game trails to the beasts at night. As life in the mountains gets down to a primitive basis, most of the hill people soon fall into this natural course. But to-night Linda and old Elmira were sitting up, waiting for Bruce's return.

A candle flame flickered at the window. Dave went up to the door and knocked.

"Who's there?" Elmira called. It was a habit learned in the dreadful days of twenty years ago, not to open a door without at least some knowledge of who stood without. A lighted doorway sets off a target almost as well as a field of white sets off a black bull's-eye.

Dave knew that truth was the proper course. "Dave Turner," he replied.

A long second of heavy, strange silence ensued. Then the woman spoke again. There was a new note in her voice, a curious hoarseness, but at the same time a sense of exultation and excitement. But Dave didn't notice it. Perhaps the oaken door that the voice came through stripped away all the overtones; possibly his own perceptions were too blunt to receive it. He might, however, have been interested in the singular look of wonder that flashed over Linda's face as she stared at her aged aunt. Linda was not thinking of Dave. She had forgotten that he stood outside. His visit was the last thing that either of them expected—except, perhaps, on some such deadly business as the clan had come years before—yet she found no space in her thought for him. Her whole attention was seized and held by the unfamiliar note in her aunt's voice, and a strange drawing of the woman's features that the closed door prevented Dave from seeing. It was a look almost of rapture, hardly to be expected in the presence of an enemy. The dim eyes seemed to glow in the shadows. It was the look of one who had wandered steep and unknown trails for uncounted years and sees the distant lights of his home at last.

She got up from her chair and moved over to the little pack she had carried on her back when she had walked up from her cabin. Linda still gazed at her in growing wonder. The long years seemed to have fallen away from her; she slipped across the uncarpeted floor with the agility and silence of a tiger. She always had given the impression of latent power, but never so much as now. She took some little object from the bag and slipped it next to her withered and scrawny breast.

"What do you want?" she called out into the gloom.

Dave had been getting a little restless in the silence; but the voice reassured him. "I'll tell you when you open the door. It's something about Bruce."

Linda remembered him then. She leaped to the door and flung it wide. She saw the stars without, the dark fringe of pines against the sky line behind. She felt the wind and the cool breath of the darkness. But most of all she saw the cunning, sharp-featured face of Dave Turner, with the candlelight upon him. The yellow beams were in his eyes too. They seemed full of guttering lights.

The few times that Linda had talked to Dave she had always felt uneasy beneath his speculative gaze. The same sensation swept over her now. She knew perfectly what she would have had to expect, long since, from this man, were it not that he had lived in fear of his brother Simon. The mighty leader of the clan had set a barrier around her as far as personal attentions went,—and his reasons were obvious. The mountain girls do not usually attain her perfection of form and face; his desire for her was as jealous as it was intense and real. This dark-hearted man of great and terrible emotions did not only know how to hate. In his own savage way he could love too. Linda hated and feared him, but the emotion was wholly different from the dread and abhorrence with which she regarded Dave. "What about Bruce?" she demanded.

Dave leered. "Do you want to see him? He's lying—up here on the hill."

The tone was knowing, edged with cruelty; and it had the desired effect. The color swept from the girl's face. In a single fraction of an instant it showed stark white in the candlelight.

There was an instant's sensation of terrible cold. But her voice was hard and lifeless when she spoke.

"You mean you've killed him?" she asked simply.

"We ain't killed him. We've just been teaching him a lesson," Dave explained. "Simon warned him not to come up—and we've had to talk to him a little—with fists and heels."

Linda cried out then, one agonized syllable. She knew what fists and heels could do in the fights between the mountain men. They are as much weapons of torture as the claws and fangs of the Killer. She had an instant's dread picture of this strong man of hers lying maimed and broken, a battered, whimpering, ineffective thing in the moonlight of some distant hillside. The vision brought knowledge to her. Even more clearly than in the second of their kiss, before he had gone to see Hudson, she realized what an immutable part of her he was. She gazed with growing horror at Dave's leering face. "Where is he?" she asked. She remembered, with singular steadfastness, the pistol she had concealed in her own room.

"I'll show you. If you want to get him in you'd better bring the old hag with you. It'll take two of you to carry him."

"I'll come," the old woman said from across the shadowed room. She spoke with a curious breathlessness. "I'll go at once."

The door closed behind the three of them, and they went out into the moonlit forest. Dave walked first. There was an unlooked-for eagerness in his motions, but Linda thought that she understood it. It was wholly characteristic of him that he should find a degenerate rapture in showing these two women the terrible handiwork of the Turners. He rejoiced in just this sort of cruelty. She had no suspicion that this excursion was only a pretext to get the two women away from the house, and that his eagerness arose from deeper causes. It was true that Dave exulted in the work, and strangely the fact that it was part of the plot against Bruce had been almost forgotten in the face of a greater emotion. He was alone in the darkness with Linda—except of course for a helpless old woman—and the command of Simon in regard to his attitude toward her seemed suddenly dim and far away. He led them over a hill, into the deeper forest.

He walked swiftly, eagerly; the two women could hardly keep pace with him. He left the dim trail and skirted about the thickets. No cry for help could carry from this lonely place. No watchman on a hill could see what transpired in the heavy coverts.

So intent was he that he quite failed to observe a singular little signal between old Elmira and Linda. The woman half turned about, giving the girl an instant's glimpse of something that she transferred from her breast to her sleeve. It was slender and of steel, and it caught the moonlight on its shining surface.

The girl's eyes glittered when she beheld it. She nodded, scarcely perceptibly, and the strange file plunged deeper into the shadows.

Fifteen minutes later Dave drew up to a halt in a little patch of moonlight, surrounded by a wall of low trees and brush.

"There's more than one way to make a date for a walk with a pretty girl," he said.

The girl stared coldly into his eyes. "What do you mean?" she asked.

The man laughed harshly. "I mean that Bruce ain't got back yet—he's still on the other side of Little River, for all I know—"

"Then why did you bring us here?"

"Just to be sociable," Dave returned. "I'll tell you, Linda. I wanted to talk to you. I ain't been in favor of a lot of things Simon's been doing—to you and your people. I thought maybe you and I would like to be—friends."

No one could mistake the emotion behind the strained tone, the peculiar languor in the furtive eyes. The girl drew back, shuddering. "I'm going back," she told him.

"Wait. I'll take you back soon. Let's have a kiss and make friends. The old lady won't look—"

He laughed again, a hoarse sound that rang far through the silences. He moved toward her, hands reaching. She backed away. Then she half-tripped over an outstretched root.

The next instant she was in his arms, struggling against their steel. She didn't waste words in pleading. A sob caught at her throat, and she fought with all her strength against the drawn, nearing face. She had forgotten Elmira; in this dreadful moment of terror and danger the old woman's broken strength seemed too little to be of aid. And Dave thought her as helpless to oppose him as the tall pines that watched from above them.

His wild laughter obscured the single sound that she made, a strange cry that seemed lacking in all human quality. Rather it was such a sound as a puma utters as it leaps upon its prey. It was the articulation of a whole life of hatred that had come to a crisis at last,—of deadly and terrible triumph after a whole decade of waiting. If Dave had discerned that cry in time he would have hurled Linda from his arms to leap into a position of defense. The desire for women in men goes down to the roots of the world, but self-preservation is a deeper instinct still.

But he didn't hear it in time. Elmira had not struck with her knife. The distance was too far for that. But she swung her cane with all her force. The blow caught the man at the temple, his arms fell away from the girl's body, he staggered grotesquely in the carpet of pine needles. Then he fell face downward.

"His belt, quick!" the woman cried. No longer was her voice that of decrepit age. The girl struggled with herself, wrenched back her self-control, and leaped to obey her aunt. They snatched the man's belt from about his waist, and the women locked it swiftly about his ankles. With strong, hard hands they drew his wrists back of him and tied them tight with the long bandana handkerchief he wore about his neck. They worked almost in silence, with incredible rapidity and deftness.

The man was waking now, stirring in his unconsciousness, and swiftly the old woman cut the buckskin thongs from his tall logging boots. These also she twisted about the wrists, knotting them again and again, and pulling them so tight they were almost buried in the lean flesh. Then they turned him face upward to the moon.

The two women stood an instant, breathing hard. "What now?" Linda asked. And a shiver of awe went over her at the sight of the woman's face.

"Nothing more, Linda," she answered, in a distant voice. "Leave Dave Turner to me."

It was a strange picture. Womanhood—the softness and tenderness which men have learned to associate with the name—seemed fallen away from Linda and Elmira. They were only avengers,—like the she-bear that fights for her cubs or the she-wolf that guards the lair. There was no more mercy in them than in the females of the lower species. The moon flooded the place with silver, the pines were dark and impassive as ever above them.

Dave wakened. They saw him stir. They watched him try to draw his arms from behind him. It was just a faint, little-understanding pull at first. Then he wrenched and tugged with all his strength, flopping strangely in the dirt. The effort increased until it was some way suggestive of an animal in the death struggle,—a fur bearer dying in the trap.

Terror was upon him. It was in his wild eyes and his moonlit face; it was in the desperation and frenzy of his struggles. And the two women saw it and smiled into each other's eyes.

Slowly his efforts ceased. He lay still in the pine needles. He turned his head, first toward Linda, then to the inscrutable, dark face of the old woman. As understanding came to him, the cold drops emerged upon his swarthy skin.

"Good God!" he asked. "What are you going to do?"

"I'm going back," Linda answered. "You had some other purpose in bringing me out here—or you wouldn't have brought Elmira, too. I'm going back to wait for Bruce."

"And you and I will linger here," Elmira told him. "We have many things to say to each other. We have many things to do. About my Abner—there are many things you'll want to hear of him."

The last vestige of the man's spirit broke beneath the words. Abner had been old Elmira's son,—a youth who had laughed often, and the one hope of the old woman's declining years. And he had fallen before Dave's ambush in a half-forgotten fight of long years before.

The man shivered in his bonds. Linda turned to go. The silence of the wilderness deepened about them. "Oh, Linda, Linda," the man called. "Don't leave me. Don't leave me here with her!" he pleaded. "Please—please don't leave me in this devil's power. Make her let me go."

But Linda didn't seem to hear. The brush crackled and rustled; and the two—this dark-hearted man and the avenger—were left together.

XX

The homeward journey over the ridges had meant only pleasure to Bruce. Every hour of it had brought a deeper and more intimate knowledge of the wilderness. The days had been full of little, nerve-tingling adventures, and the nights full of peace. And beyond all these, there was the hope of seeing Linda again at the end of the trail.

Thoughts of her hardly ever left him throughout the long tramp. She had more than fulfilled every expectation. It was true that he had found no one of his own kin, as he had hoped; but the fact opened up new possibilities that would have been otherwise forbidden.

It was strange how he remembered her kiss. He had known other kisses in his days—being a purely rational and healthy young man—but there had been nothing of immortality about them. Their warmth had died quickly, and they had been forgotten. They were just delights of moonlight nights and nothing more. But he would wake up from his dreams at night to feel Linda's kiss still upon his lips. To recall it brought a strange tenderness,—a softening of all the hard outlines of his picture of life. It changed his viewpoint; it brought him a knowledge of a joy and a gentleness that could exist even in this stern world of wilderness and pines. With her face lingering before his eyes, the ridges themselves seemed less stern and forbidding; there were softer messages in the wind's breath; the drama of the wild that went on about him seemed less remorseless and cruel.

He remembered the touch of her hands. They had been so cool, so gentle. He remembered the changing lights in her dark eyes. Life had opened up new vistas to him. Instead of a stern battleground, he began to realize that it had a softer, gentler, kinder side,—a place where there could be love as well as hatred, peace as well as battle, cheery homes and firesides and pleasant ways and laughter instead of cold ways and lonely trails and empty hearts and grim thoughts. Perhaps, if all went well, tranquillity might come to him after all. Perhaps he might even know the tranquil spirit of the pines.

These were mating days. It was true that the rutting season had not, in reality, commenced. The wolf pack had not yet gathered, and would not until after the heavy frosts. But the bucks had begun to rub the velvet from their horns so that they would be hard and sharp for the fights to come. And these would be savage battles—with death at the end of many of them. But perhaps the joys that would follow—the roving, mating days with the does—would more than make up for their pain. The trim females were seen less often with their fawns; and they seemed strangely restless and tremulous, perhaps wondering what fortune the fall would have for them in the way of a mate.

The thought gave Bruce pleasure. He could picture the deer herd in the fall,—the proud buck in the lead, ready to fight all contenders, his harem of does, and what fawns and young bucks he permitted to follow him. They would make stealing journeys down to the foothills to avoid the snow, and all manner of pleasures would be theirs in the gentler temperatures of the lowlands. They would know crisp dawns and breathless nights, long runnings into the valleys, and to the does the realization of motherhood when the spring broke.

But aside from his contemplations of Linda, the long tramp had many delights for him. He rejoiced in every manifestation of the wild life about him, whether it was a bushy-tailed old gray squirrel, watching him from a tree limb, a magpie trying its best to insult him, or the fleeting glimpse of a deer in the coverts. Once he saw the black form of Ashur the bear, mumbling and grunting as he searched under rotten logs for grubs. But he didn't see the Killer again. He didn't particularly care to do so.

He kept his rifle ready during the day for game, but he shot only what he needed. He did not attempt to kill the deer. He knew that he would have no opportunity to care for the meat. But he did, occasionally, shoot the head off a cock-grouse at close range, and no chef of Paris could offer a more tempting dish than its flesh, rolled in flour and served up, fried brown, in bacon grease. It was mostly white meat, exceedingly tender, yet with the zest of wild game. But he dined on bacon exclusively one night because, after many misses at grouse, he declined to take the life of a gray squirrel that had perched in an oak tree above the trail. Someway, it seemed to be getting too much pleasure out of life for him to blast it with a rifle shot. A squirrel has only a few ounces of flesh, and the woods without them would be dull and inane indeed. Besides, they were bright-eyed, companionable people—dwellers of the wilderness even as Bruce—and their personality had already endeared itself to him.

Once he startled a fawn almost out of its wits when he came upon it suddenly in a bend in the trail, and he shouted with delight as it bounded awkwardly away. Once a porcupine rattled its quills at him and tried to seem very ferocious. But it was all the most palpable of bluffs, for Urson, while particularly adept at defense, has no powers of offense whatever. He cannot move quickly. He can't shoot his spines, as the story-books say. He can only sit on the ground and erect them into a sort of suit of armor to repel attack. But Bruce knew enough not to attempt to stroke

the creature. If he had done so, he would have spent the remainder of the season pulling out spines from the soft flesh of his hand.

Urson was a patient, stupid, guileless creature, and he and Bruce had a strange communion together as they stood face to face on the trail. "You've got the right idea," Bruce told him. "To erect a wall around you and let 'em yell outside without giving them a thought. To stand firm, not to take part. You're a true son of the pines, Urson. Now let me past."

But the idea was furthest from Urson's mind. He sat firm on the trail, hunched into a spiny ball. Instead of killing him with his rifle butt, as Dave would have done, Bruce laughed good-naturedly and went around him.

Both days of the journey home he wakened sharply at dawn. The cool, morning hours were the best for travel. He would follow down the narrow, brown trail,—now through a heavy covert that rustled as the wild creatures sped from his path, now up a long ridge, now down into a still, dark glen, and sometimes into a strange, bleak place where the forest fire had swept. Every foot was a delight to him.

He was of naturally strong physique, and although the days fatigued him unmercifully, he always wakened refreshed in the dawn. At noon he would stop to lunch, eating a few pieces of jerkey and frying a single flapjack in his skillet. He learned how to effect it quickly, first letting his fire burn down to coals. And usually, during the noon rest, he would practice with his rifle.

He knew that if he were to fight the Turners, skill with a rifle was an absolute necessity; such skill as would have felled the grizzly with one shot instead of administering merely a flesh wound, accuracy to take off the head of a grouse at fifty yards; and at the same time, an ability to swing and aim the weapon in the shortest possible space of time. The only thing that retarded him was the realization that he must not waste too many cartridges. Elmira had brought him only a small supply.

He would walk all afternoon—going somewhat easier and resting more often than in the morning; and these were the times that he appreciated a fragment of jerked venison. He would halt just before nightfall and make his camp.

The first work was usually to strip a young fir tree of its young, slender branches. These, according to Linda's instructions, were laid on the ground, their stalks overlapping, and in a remarkably few minutes he could construct a bed as comfortable as a hair mattress. It was true that the work always came at an hour when most of all he wanted food and rest, but he knew that a restless night means quick fatigue the next day. Then he would clean his game and build his fire and cook his evening meal. Simple food had never tasted so good to him before. Bacon grease was his only flavor, but it had a zest that all the sauces and dressings of France could not approach. The jerkey was crisp and nutty; his flapjacks went directly to the spot where he desired them to go.

But the best hour of all was after his meal, as he sat in the growing shadows with his pipe. It was always an hour of calm. The little, breathless noises of the wild people in the thickets; the gophers, to whose half blind eyes—used to the darkness of their underground passages—the firelight was almost blinding; the chipmunks, and even the larger creatures came clearest to him then and told him more. But they didn't frighten him. Ordinarily, he knew, the forest creatures of the Southern Oregon mountains mean and do no harm to lonely campers. Nevertheless, he kept fairly accurate track of his rifle. He had enough memory of the charge of the Killer to wish to do that. And he thought with some pleasure that he had a reserve arsenal,—Dave's thirty-thirty with five shells in its magazine.

At this hour he felt the spirit of the pines as never before. He knew their great, brooding sorrow, their infinite wisdom, their inexpressible aloofness with which they kept watch over the wilderness. The smoke would drift about him in soothing clouds; the glow of the coals was red and warm over him. He could think then. Life revealed some of its lesser mysteries to him. And he began to glimpse the distant gleam of even greater truths, and sometimes it seemed to him that he could almost catch and hold them. Always it was some message that the pines were trying to tell him,—partly in words they made when their limbs rubbed together, partly in the nature of a great allegory of which their dark, impassive forms were the symbols. If he could only see clearly! But it seemed to him that passion blinded his eyes.

"They talk only to the stars," Linda had said once of the pines. But he had no illusions about this talk of theirs. It was greater, more fraught with wisdom, than anything men might say together below them. He could imagine them telling high secrets that he himself could discern but dimly and could hardly understand. More and more he realized that the pines, like the stars, were living symbols of great powers who lived above the world, powers that would speak to men if they would but listen long and patiently enough, and in whose creed lay happiness.

When the pipe was out he would go to his fragrant bed. The night hours would pass in a breath. And he would rise and go on in the crisp dawns.

The last afternoon he traveled hard. He wanted to reach Linda's house before nightfall. But the trail was too long for that. The twilight fell, to find him still a weary two miles distant. And the way was quite dark when he plunged into the south pasture of the Ross estates.

Half an hour later he was beneath the Sentinel Pine. He wondered why Linda was not waiting

beneath it; in his fancy, he thought of it as being the ordained place for her. But perhaps she had merely failed to hear his footsteps. He called into the open door.

"Linda," he said. "I've come back."

No answer reached him. The words rang through the silent rooms and echoed back to him. He walked over the threshold.

A chair in the front room was turned over. His heart leaped at the sight of it. "Linda," he called in alarm, "where are you? It's Bruce."

He stood an instant listening, a great fear creeping over him. He called once more, first to Linda and then to the old woman. Then he leaped through the doorway.

The kitchen was similarly deserted. From there he went to Linda's room. Her coat and hat lay on the bed, but there was no Linda to stretch her arms to him. He started to go out the way he had come, but went instead to his own room. A sheet of note-paper lay on the bed.

It had been scrawled hurriedly; but although he had never received a written word from Linda he did not doubt but that it was her hand:

The Turners are coming—I caught a glimpse of them on the ridge. There is no use of my trying to resist, so I'll wait for them in the front room and maybe they won't find this note. They will take me to Simon's house, and I know from its structure that they will lock me in an interior room in the East wing. Use the window on that side nearest the North corner. My one hope is that you will come at once to save me.

Bruce's eyes leaped over the page; then thrust it into his pocket. He slipped through the rear door of the house, into the shadows.

XXI

As Bruce hurried up the hill toward the Ross estates, he made a swift calculation of the rifle shells in his pocket. The gun held six. He had perhaps fifteen others in his pockets, and he hadn't stopped to replenish them from the supply Elmira had brought. He hadn't brought Dave's rifle with him, but had left it with the remainder of his pack. He knew that the lighter he traveled the greater would be his chance of success.

The note had explained the situation perfectly. Obviously the girl had written when the clan was closing about the house, and finding her in the front room, there had been no occasion to search the other rooms and thus discover it. The girl had kept her head even in that moment of crisis. A wave of admiration for her passed over him.

And the little action had set an example for him. He knew that only rigid self-control and cool-headed strategy could achieve the thing he had set out to do. There must be no false motions, no missteps. He must put out of his mind all thought of what dreadful fate might have already come upon the girl; such fancies would cost him his grip upon his own faculties and lose him the power of clear thinking. His impulse was to storm the door, to pour his lead through the lighted windows; but such things could never take Linda out of Simon's hands. Only stealth and caution, not blind courage and frenzy, could serve her now. Such blind killing as his heart prompted had to wait for another time.

Nevertheless, the stock of his rifle felt good in his hands. Perhaps there would be a running fight after he got the girl out of the house, and then his cartridges would be needed. There might even be a moment of close work with what guards the Turners had set over her. But the heavy stock, used like a club, would be most use to him then.

He knew only the general direction of the Ross house where Simon lived. Linda had told him it rested upon the crest of a small hill, beyond a ridge of timber. The moonlight showed him a well-beaten trail, and he strode swiftly along it. For once, he gave no heed to the stirring forest life about him. When a dead log had fallen across his path, he swung over it and hastened on.

He had a vague sense of familiarity with this winding trail. Perhaps he had toddled down it as a baby, perhaps his mother had carried him along it on a neighborly visit to the Rosses. He went over the hill and pushed his way to the edge of the timber. All at once the moon showed him the house.

He couldn't mistake it, even at this distance. And to Bruce it had a singular effect of unreality. The mountain men did not ordinarily build homes of such dimensions. They were usually merely log cabins of two or three lower rooms and a garret to be reached with a ladder; or else, on the rough mountain highways, crude dwellings of unpainted frame. The ancestral home of the Rosses, however, had fully a dozen rooms, and it loomed to an incredible size in the mystery of the moonlight. He saw quaint gabled roofs and far-spreading wings. And it seemed more like a house of enchantment, a structure raised by the rubbing of a magic lamp, than the work of carpenters and masons.

Probably its wild surroundings had a great deal to do with this effect. There were no roads

leading to Trail's End. Material could not be carried over its winding trails except on pack animals. He had a realization of tremendous difficulties that had been conquered by tireless effort, of long months of unending toil, of exhaustless patience, and at the end,—a dream come true. All of its lumber had to be hewed from the forests about. Its stone had been quarried from the rock cliffs and hauled with infinite labor over the steep trails.

He understood now why the Turners had coveted it. It seemed the acme of luxury to them. And more clearly than ever he understood why the Rosses had died, sooner than relinquish it, and why its usurpation by the Turners had left such a debt of hatred to Linda. It was such a house as men dream about, a place to bequeath to their children and to perpetuate their names. Built like a rock, it would stand through the decades, to pass from one generation to another,—an enduring monument to the strong thews of the men who had builded it. All men know that the love of home is one of the few great impulses that has made toward civilization, but by the same token it has been the cause of many wars. It was never an instinct of a nomadic people, and possibly in these latter days—days of apartments and flats and hotels—its hold is less. Perhaps the day is coming when this love will die in the land, but with it will die the strength to repel the heathen from our walls, and the land will not be worth living in, anyway. But it was not dead to the mountain people. No really primitive emotion ever is.

Perhaps, after all, it is a question of the age-old longing for immortality, and therefore it must have its seat in a place higher than this world of death. Men know that when they walk no longer under the sun and the moon it is good to have certain monuments to keep their name alive, whether it be blocks of granite at the grave-head, or sons living in an ancestral home. The Rosses had known this instinct very well. As all men who are strong-thewed and of real natural virtue, they had known pride of race and name, and it had been a task worth while to build this stately house on their far-lying acres. They had given their fiber to it freely; no man who beheld the structure could doubt that fact. They had simply consecrated their lives to it; their one Work by which they could show to all who came after that by their own hands they had earned their right to live.

They had been workers, these men; and there is no higher degree. But their achievements had been stolen from their hands. Bruce felt the real significance of his undertaking as never before.

He saw the broad lands lying under the moon. There were hundreds of acres in alfalfa and clover to furnish hay for the winter feeding. There were wide, green pastures, ensilvered by the moon; and fields of corn laid out in even rows. The old appeal of the soil, an instinct that no person of Anglo-Saxon descent can ever completely escape, swept through him. They were worth fighting for, these fertile acres. The wind brought up the sweet breath of ripening hay.

Not for nothing have a hundred generations of Anglo-Saxon people been tillers of the soil. They had left a love of it to Bruce. In a single flash of thought, even as he hastened toward the house where he supposed Linda was held prisoner, the ancient joy returned to him. He knew what it would be like to feel the earth's pulse through the handles of a plow, to behold the first start of green things in the spring and the golden ripening in fall; to watch the flocks through the breathless nights and the herds feeding on the distant hills.

Bruce looked over the ground. He knew enough not to continue the trail farther. The space in front was bathed in moonlight, and he would make the best kind of target to any rifle-man watching from the windows of the house. He turned through the coverts, seeking the shadow of the forests at one side.

By going in a quartering direction he was able to approach within two hundred yards of the house without emerging into the moonlight. At that point the real difficulty of the stalk began. He hovered in the shadows, then slipped one hundred feet farther to the trunk of a great oak tree.

He could see the house much more plainly now. True, it had suffered neglect in the past twenty years; it needed painting and many of its windows were broken, but it was a magnificent old mansion even yet. It stood lost in its dreams in the moonlight; and if, as old stories say, houses have memories, this old structure was remembering certain tragic dramas that had waged within and about it in a long-ago day. Bruce rejoiced to see that there were no lights in the east wing of the house; the window that Linda had indicated in the note was just a black square on the moonlit wall.

There was a neglected garden close to this wing of the house. Bruce could make out rose bushes, grown to brambles, tall, rank weeds, and heavy clumps of vines. If he could reach this spot in safety he could approach within a few feet of the house and still remain in cover. He went flat; then slowly crawled toward it.

Once a light sprang up in a window near the front, and he pressed close to the earth. But in a moment it went away. He crept on. He didn't know when a watchman in one of the dark windows would discern his creeping figure. But he did know perfectly just what manner of greeting he might expect in this event. There would be a single little spurt of fire in the darkness, so small that probably his eyes would quite fail to catch it. If they did discern it, there would be no time for a message to be recorded in his brain. It would mean a swift and certain end of all messages. The Turners would lose no time in emptying their rifles at him, and there wouldn't be the slightest doubt about their hitting the mark. All the clan were expert shots and the range was close.

The house was deeply silent. He felt a growing sense of awe. In a moment more, he slipped into

the shadows of the neglected rose gardens.

He lay quiet an instant, resting. He didn't wish to risk the success of his expedition by fatiguing himself now. He wanted his full strength and breath for any crisis that he should meet in the room where Linda was confined.

Many times, he knew, skulking figures had been concealed in this garden. Probably the Turners, in the days of the blood-feud, had often waited in its shadows for a sight of some one of their enemies in a lighted window. Old ghosts dwelt in it; he could see their shadows waver out of the corner of his eyes. Or perhaps it was only the shadow of the brambles, blown by the wind.

Once his heart leaped into his throat at a sharp crack of brush beside him; and he could scarcely restrain a muscular jerk that might have revealed his position. But when he turned his head he could see nothing but the coverts and the moon above them. A garden snake, or perhaps a blind mole, had made the sound.

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 moonlit square on the floor it was quite in darkness. It seemed to him that even in the night hours over a camp fire he had never known such silence as this that pressed about him now.

He stood a moment, hardly breathing. But he decided it was not best to strike a match. There were no enemies here, or they certainly would have accosted him when he raised the window; and 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 hurl 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 whosoever 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 doubting its reality. And after one more instant in which his heart stood still, he knew what it was: the sound of suppressed breathing. A living creature occupied this place of darkness with him, and was either half-gagged 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.

XXII

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. It was the same long, white-walled room that Dave and Simon had conversed in, after Elmira had first dispatched her message by Barney Wegan. Bruce knew that he faced the Turner clan at last.

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 wanly. 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."

He regarded the clansmen again. He *had* missed Dave's crafty face in the circle.

"Yes, you're here," Simon confirmed. "And I'm wondering if you remember what I told you just as you left Martin's store that day—that I gave no man two 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 to-night," 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 returns 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 such 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 flying 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 to-night—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 to-night 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—*anything* you can do to-night. And you'll have to answer for it all the more."

He spoke the last sentence with a calm assurance. Though spoken softly, 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 doors of escape open to him, and he was face to face with his destiny, steadied him all the more.

The boy that had been wakened 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 tolerable 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 reign 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 begin 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. 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 you're 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 true 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. They understood, these wilderness men. They had seen their leader in such sessions before. A strange and grim idea had come to him; already he was feasting on its possibilities. It seemed to heat his blood and blur his vision.

"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-thirty 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."

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 were going to wait in trees to-night 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. Exultation 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 rage 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 telltale 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.

XXIII

"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 chair like a wild cat, aiming his hardened knuckles 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. When man was built of clay, Nature saw fit to leave him with certain imperfections lest he should think himself a god, and a weak spot in the region of the chin is one of them. The jaw bones carry the impact of a hard blow to certain nerve centers near the temples, and restful sleep comes quickly. There are never any ill effects, unless further damage is inflicted while unconsciousness is upon him. In spite of the fact that Simon got quickly into a position of defense, that first blow still had a fair chance of bringing the fight to an abrupt end. But still another consideration remained.

Bruce's muscles had refused to respond. 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 by 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 blow seemed to daze 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 thongs," 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. The group stood in the shadow of the building; the moon was behind. 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. He thought for an instant that it would step upon his own prone body, but he didn't flinch. 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 them 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 him to his own position with added force. The moonlight, soft as it was, had been a tremendous relief to him. 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. If the clouds spread, the moon that was his last remaining solace would be obscured.

He watched with growing horror the slow extension of the clouds. One by one the stars slipped beneath them. They drew slowly up to the moon and for a long minute seemed to hover. They were not heavy clouds, however, and in their thinner patches the stars looked dimly through. Finally the moon swept under them.

The shadow fell around Bruce. For the first time he knew the age-old terror of the darkness. Dreadful memories arose within him,—vague things that had their font in the labyrinthal depths of the germ-plasm. It is a knowledge that no man, with the weapons of the twentieth century in his hands and in the glow of that great symbol of domain, the camp fire, can really possess; but here, bound hand and foot in the darkness, full understanding came to Bruce. 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 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 grizzly had failed to return to his feast. It seemed endless hours since he had reëntered 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 alone had dimmed it; it had been a 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 unfathomable 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 waited, scarcely breathing, trying to tell himself he had been mistaken. But a wiser, calmer self deep within him would not accept the lie. 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 shadows grew and deepened and faded and grew again, as the moon passed from cloud to cloud.

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-calibered 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. The deer make it their business always to go with silence in these hours when the beasts of prey are abroad, and usually a beetle in the leaves makes more noise than they. 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. In the long silence that ensued Bruce began to hope that the animal had turned off.

At that instant the moon slipped under a particularly heavy fragment of cloud, and deep darkness settled over him. Even his white face was no longer discernible in the dusk. He lay scarcely breathing, trying to fight down his growing terror.

This silence could mean but one of two things. One of them was that the creature who had made the sounds had turned off on one of the many intersecting game trails that wind through the forest. This was his hope. The alternative was one of despair. It was simply that the creature had detected his presence and was stalking him in silence through the shadows.

He thought that the light would never come. He strained again at his ropes. The dark cloud swept on; and the moonlight, silver and bright, broke over the scene.

The forest stood once more in sharp silhouette against the sky. The moon stood high above the tapering tops of the pines. He studied with straining eyes the dark fringe of shadows one hundred feet distant. And at first he could see only the irregularities cast by the young trees, the firs between which lay the brush coverts.

Then he detected a strange variation in the dark border of shadows. It held his gaze, and its outlines slowly strengthened. So still it stood, so seemingly a natural shadow that some irregularly shaped tree had cast, that his eyes refused to recognize it. But in an instant more he knew the truth.

The shadow was that of a great beast that had stalked him clear to the border of the moonlight. The Killer had come for his dead.

XXIV

When Linda returned home the events of the night partook even of a greater mystery. The front door was open, and she found plenty of evidence that Bruce had returned from his journey. In the center of the room lay his pack, a rifle slanting across it.

At first she did not notice the gun in particular. She supposed it was Bruce's weapon and that he had come in, dropped his luggage, and was at present somewhere in the house. It was true that one chair was upset, but except for an instant's start she gave no thought to it. She thought that he would probably go to the kitchen first for a bite to eat. He was not in this room, however, nor had the lamp been lighted.

Her next idea was that Bruce, tired out, had gone to bed. She went back softly to the front room, intending not to disturb him. Once more she noticed the upset chair. The longer she regarded it, the more of a puzzle it became. She moved over toward the pack and looked casually at the rifle. In an instant more it was in her hands.

She saw at once that it was not Bruce's gun. The action, make, and caliber were different. She was not a rifle-woman, and the little shooting she had done had been with a pistol; but even a layman could tell this much. Besides, it had certain peculiar notches on the stock that the gun Elmira had furnished Bruce did not have.

She stood a moment in thought. 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.

She knocked on it softly. "Are you there, Bruce?" she called.

No answer returned to her. The rooms, in fact, were deeply silent. She tried the door and found it unlocked. The room had not been occupied.

Thoroughly alarmed, she went back into the front room and tried to decipher the mystery of the strange weapon. She couldn't conceive of any possibility whereby Bruce would exchange his father's trusted gun for this. Possibly it was an extra weapon that he had procured on his journey. And since no possible gain would come of her going out into the forests to seek him, she sat down to wait for his return. She knew that if she did start out he might easily return in her absence and be further alarmed.

The moments dragged by and her apprehension grew. She took the rifle in her hands and, slipping the lever part way back, looked to see if there were a cartridge in the barrel. She saw a

glitter of brass, and it gave her a measure of assurance. She had a pistol in her own room—a weapon that Elmira had procured, years before, from a passing sportsman—and for a moment she considered getting it also. She understood its action better and would probably be more efficient with it if the need arose, but for certain never-to-be-forgotten reasons she wished to keep this weapon until the moment of utmost need.

Her whole stock of pistol cartridges consisted of six—completely filling the magazine of the pistol. Closely watched by the Turners, she had been unable to procure more. Many a dreadful night these six little cylinders of brass had been a tremendous consolation to her. They had been her sole defense, and she knew that in the final emergency she could use them to deadly effect.

Linda was a girl who had always looked her situations in the face. She was not one to flinch from the truth and with false optimism disbelieve it. She had the courage of many generations of frontiersmen and woodsmen, and she had their vision too. She knew these mountain realms; better still she understood the dark passions of Simon and his followers, and this little half-pound of steel and wood with its brass shells might mean, in the dreadful last moment of despair, deliverance from them. It might mean escape for herself when all other ways were cut off. In this wild land, far from the reaches of law and without allies except for a decrepit old woman, the pistol and its deadly loads had been her greatest solace.

But she relied on the rifle now. And sitting in the shadow, she kept watch over the moonlit ridge.

The hours passed, and the clouds were starting up from the horizon when she thought she saw Bruce returning. A tall form came swinging toward her, over the little trail that led between the tree trunks. She peered intently. And in one instant more she knew that the approaching figure was not Bruce, but the man she most feared of anyone on earth, Simon Turner.

She knew him by his great form, his swinging stride. Her thoughts came clear and true. It was obvious that his was no mission of stealth. He was coming boldly, freely, not furtively; and he must have known that he presented a perfect rifle target from the windows. Nevertheless, it is well to be prepared for emergencies. If life in the mountains teaches anything, it teaches that. She took the rifle and laid it behind a little desk, out of sight. Then she went to the door.

"I want to come in, Linda," Simon told her.

"I told you long ago you couldn't come to this house," Linda answered through the panels. "I want you to go away."

Simon laughed softly. "You'd better let me in. I've brought word of the child you took to raise. You know who I mean."

Yes, Linda knew. "Do you mean Bruce?" she asked. "I let Dave in to-night on the same pretext. Don't expect me to be caught twice by the same lie."

"Dave? Where is Dave?" The fact was that the whereabouts of his brother had suddenly become considerable of a mystery to Simon. All the way from the pasture where he had left his clan he had been having black pictures of Dave. He had thought about him and Linda out in the darkness together, and his heart had seemed to smolder and burn with jealousy in his breast. It had been a great relief to him to find her in the house.

"I wonder—where he is by now," Linda answered in a strange voice. "No one in this world can answer that question, Simon. Tell me what you want."

She opened the door. She couldn't bear to show fear of this man. And she knew that an appearance of courage, at least, was the wisest course.

"No matter about him now. I want to talk to you on business. If I had meant rough measures, I wouldn't have come alone."

"No," Linda scorned. "You would have brought your whole murdering band with you. The Turners believe in overwhelming numbers."

The words stung him but he smiled grimly into her face. "I've come in peace, Linda," he said, more gently. "I've come to give you a last chance to make friends."

He walked past her into the room. He straightened the chair that had been upset, smiling strangely the while, and sat down in it.

"Then tell me what you have to tell me," she said. "I'm in a hurry to go to bed—and this really isn't the hour for calls."

He looked a long time into her face. She found it hard to hold her own gaze. Many things could be doubted about this man, but his power and his courage were not among them. The smile died from his lips, the lines deepened on his face. She realized as never before the tempestuous passions and unfathomable intensity of his nature.

"We've never been good friends," Simon went on slowly.

"We never could be," the girl answered. "We've stood for different things."

"At first my efforts to make friends were just—to win you over to our side. It didn't work—all it did was to waken other desires in me—desires that perhaps have come to mean more than the

possession of the lands. You know what they are. You've always known—that any time you wished—you could come and rule my house."

She nodded. She knew that she had won, against her will, the strange, somber love of this mighty man. She had known it for months.

"As my wife—don't make any mistake about that. Linda, I'm a stern, hard man. I've never known how to woo. I don't know that I want to know how, the way it is done by weaker men. It has never been my way to ask for what I wanted. But sometimes it seems to me that if I'd been a little more gentle—not so masterful and so relentless—that I'd won you long ago."

Linda looked up bravely into his face. "No, Simon. You could have never—never won me! Oh, can't you see—even in this awful place a woman wants something more than just brute strength and determination. Every woman prays to find strength in the man she loves—but it isn't the kind that you have, the kind that makes your men grovel before you, and makes me tremble when I'm talking to you. It's a big, calm strength—and I can't tell you what it is. It's something the pines have, maybe—strength not to yield to the passions, but to restrain, not to be afraid of, but to cling to—to stand upright and honorable and manly, and make a woman strong just to see it in the man she loves."

He listened gravely. Her cheeks blazed. It was a strange scene—the silent room, the implacable foes, the breathless suspense, the prophecy and inspiration in her tones.

"Perhaps I should have been more gentle," he admitted. "I might have forgotten—for a little while—this surging, irresistible impulse in my muscles—and tried just to woo you, gently and humbly. But it's too late now. I'm not a fool. I can't expect you to begin at the beginning. I can only go on in my own way—my hard, remorseless, ruthless way.

"It isn't every man who is brave enough to see what he wants and knock away all obstacles to get it," he went on. "Put that bravery to my credit. To pay no attention to methods, only to look forward to the result. That has been my creed. It is my creed now. Many less brave men would fear your hatred—but I don't fear it as long as I possess what I go after and a hope that I can get you over it. Many of my own brothers hate me, but yet I don't care as long as they do my will. No matter how much you scorn it, this bravery has always got me what I wanted, and it will get me what I want now."

The high color died in her face. She wondered if the final emergency had come at last.

"I've come to make a bargain. You can take it or you can refuse. On one side is the end of all this conflict, to be my wife, to have what you want—bought by the rich return from my thousands of acres. And I love you, Linda. You know that."

The man spoke the truth. His terrible, dark love was all over him—in his glowing eyes, in his drawn, deeply-lined face.

"In time, when you come around to my way of thinking, you'll love me. If you refuse—this last time—I've got to take other ways. On that side is defeat for you—as sure as day. The time is almost up when the title to those lands is secure. Bruce is in our hands—"

She got up, white-faced. "Bruce—?"

He arose too. "Yes! Did you think he could stand against us? I'll show him to you in the morning. To-night he's paying the price for ever daring to oppose my will."

She turned imploring eyes. He saw them, and perhaps—far distant—he saw the light of triumph too. A grim smile came to his lips.

"Simon," she cried. "Have mercy."

The word surprised him. It was the first time she had ever asked this man for mercy. "Then you surrender—?"

"Simon, listen to me," she begged. "Let him go—and I won't even try to fight you any more. I'll let you keep those lands and never try any more to make you give them up. You and your brothers can keep them forever, and we won't try to get revenge on you either. He and I will go away."

He gazed at her in deepening wonderment. For the moment, his mind refused to accept the truth. He only knew that since he had faced her before, some new, great strength had come to her,—that a power was in her life that would make her forego all the long dream of her days.

He had known perfectly the call of the blood in her. He had understood her hatred of the Turners, he could hate in the same way himself. He realized her love for her father's home and how she had dreamed of expelling its usurpers. Yet she was willing to renounce it all. The power that had come to her was one that he, a man whose code of life was no less cruel and remorseless than that of the Killer himself, could not understand.

"But why?" he demanded. "Why are you willing to do all this for him?"

"Why?" she echoed. Once more the luster was in her dark eyes. "I suppose it is because—I love him."

He looked at her with slowly darkening face. Passion welled within him. An oath dropped from

his lips, blasphemous, more savage than any wilderness voice. Then he raised his arm and struck her tender flesh.

He struck her breast. The brutality of the man stood forth at last. No picture that all the dreadful dramas of the wild could portray was more terrible than this. The girl cried out, reeled and fell fainting from the pain, and with smoldering eyes he gazed at her unmoved. Then he turned out of the door.

But the curtain of this drama in the mountain home had not yet rung down. Half-unconscious, she listened to his steps. He was out in the moonlight, vanishing among the trees. Strange fancies swept her, all in the smallest fraction of an instant, and a voice spoke clearly. With all the strength of her will she dispelled the mists of dawning unconsciousness that the pain had wrought and crept swiftly to the little desk placed against the wall. Her hand fumbled in the shadow behind it and brought out a glittering rifle. Then she crept to the open doorway.

Lying on the floor, she raised the weapon to her shoulder. Her thumb pressed back, strong and unfaltering, against the hammer; and she heard it click as it sprung into place. Then she looked along the barrel until she saw the swinging form of Simon through the sights.

There was no remorse in that cold gaze of hers. The wings of death hovered over the man, ready to swoop down. Her fingers curled tighter about the trigger. One ounce more pressure, and Simon's trail of wickedness and bloodshed would have come to an end at last. But at that instant her eyes widened with the dawn of an idea.

She knew this man. She knew the hatred that was upon him. And she realized, as if by an inspiration from on High, that before he went to his house and to sleep he would go once more into the presence of Bruce, confined somewhere among these ridges and suffering the punishment of having opposed his will. Simon would want one look to see how his plan was getting on; perhaps he would want to utter one taunting word. And Linda saw her chance.

She started to creep out of the door. Then she turned back, crawled until she was no longer revealed in the silhouette of the lighted doorway, and got swiftly to her feet. She dropped the rifle and darted into her own room. There she procured a weapon that she trusted more, her little pistol, loaded with six cartridges.

If she had understood the real nature of the danger that Bruce faced she would have retained the rifle. It shot with many times the smashing power of the little gun, and at long range was many times as accurate, but even it would have seemed an ineffective defense against such an enemy as was even now creeping toward Bruce's body. But she knew that in a crisis, against such of the Turners as she thought she might have to face, it would serve her much better than the more awkward, heavier weapon. Besides, she knew how to wield it, and all her life she had kept it for just such an emergency.

The pain of the blow was quite gone now, except for a strange sickness that had encompassed her. But she was never colder of nerve and surer of muscle. Cunningly she lay down again before she crept through the door, so that if Simon chanced to look about he would fail to see that she followed him. She crept to the thickets, then stood up. Three hundred yards down the slope she could see Simon's dimming figure in the moonlight, and swiftly she sped after him.

XXV

The shadow that Bruce saw at the edge of the forest could not be mistaken as to identity. The hopes that he had held before—that this stalking figure might be that of a deer or an elk—could no longer be entertained. Men as a rule do not love the wild and wailing sobs of a coyote, as he looks down upon a camp fire from the ridge above. Sleep does not come easily when a gaunt wolf walks in a slow, inquisitive circle about the pallet, scarcely a leaf rustling beneath his feet. And a few times, in the history of the frontier, men have had queer tinglings and creepings in the scalp when they have happened to glance over their shoulders and see the eyes of a great, tawny puma, glowing an odd blue in the firelight. Yet Bruce would have had any one of these, or all three together, in preference to the Killer.

The reason was extremely simple. No words have ever been capable of expressing the depths of cowardice of which a coyote is capable. He will whine and weep about a camp, like a soul lost between two worlds, but if he is in his right mind he would have each one of his gray hairs plucked out, one by one, rather than attack a man. The cunning breed to which he belongs has found out that it doesn't pay. The wolf is sometimes disquietingly brave when he is fortified by his pack brethren in the winter, but in such a season as this he is particularly careful to keep out of the sight of man. And the Tawny One himself, white-fanged and long-clawed and powerful as he is, never gets farther than certain dreadful, speculative dreams.

But none of these things was true of the Killer. He had already shown his scorn of men. His very stride showed that he feared no living creature that shared the forest with him. In fact, he considered himself the forest master. The bear is never a particularly timid animal, and whatever timidity the Killer possessed was as utterly gone as yesterday's daylight.

Bruce watched him with unwinking eyes. The shadow wavered ever so slightly, as the Killer

turned his head this way and that. But except to follow it with his eyes, Bruce made no motion. The inner guardians of a man's life—voices that are more to be relied upon than the promptings of any conscious knowledge—had already told him what to do. These monitors had the wisdom of the pines themselves, and they had revealed to him his one hope. It was just to lie still, without a twitch of a muscle. It might be that the Killer would fail to discern his outline. Bruce had no conscious knowledge, as yet, that it is movement rather than form to which the eyes of the wild creatures are most receptive. But he acted upon that fact now as if by instinct. He was not lying in quite the exact spot where the Killer had left his dead the preceding night, and possibly his outline was not enough like it to attract the grizzly's attention. Besides, in the intermittent light, it was wholly possible that the grizzly would try to find the remains of his feast by smell alone; and if this were lacking, and Bruce made no movements to attract his attention, he might wander away in search of other game.

For the first time in his life, Bruce knew Fear as it really was. It is a knowledge that few dwellers in cities can possibly have; and so few times has it really been experienced in these days of civilization that men have mostly forgotten what it is like. If they experience it at all, it is usually only in a dream that arises from the germ-plasm,—a nightmare to paralyze the muscles and chill the heart and freeze a man in his bed. The moon was strange and white as it slipped in and out of the clouds, and the forest, mysterious as Death itself, lightened and darkened alternately with a strange effect of unreality; but for all that, Bruce could not make himself believe that this was just a dream. The dreadful reality remained that the Killer, whose name and works he knew, was even now investigating him from the shadows one hundred feet away.

The fear that came to him was that of the young world,—fear without recompense, direct and primitive fear that grew on him like a sickness. It was the fear that the deer knew as they crept down their dusky trails at night; it was the fear of darkness and silence and pain and heaven knows what cruelty that would be visited upon him by those terrible, rending fangs and claws. It was the fear that can be heard in the pack song in the dreadful winter season, and that can be felt in strange overtones, in the sobbing wail of despair that the coyote utters in the half-darkness. He had been afraid for his life every moment he was in the hands of the Turners. He knew that if he survived this night, he would have to face death again. He had no hopes of deliverance altogether. But the Turners were men, and they worked with knife blade and bullet, not rending fang and claw. He could face men bravely; but it was hard to keep a strong heart in the face of this ancient fear of beasts.

The Killer seemed disturbed and moved slowly along the edge of the moonlight. Bruce could trace his movements by the irregularity in the line of shadows. He seemed to be moving more cautiously than ever, now. Bruce could not hear the slightest sound.

For an instant Bruce had an exultant hope that the bear would continue on down the edge of the forest and leave him; and his heart stood still as the great beast paused, sniffing. But some smell in the air seemed to reach him, and he came stealing back.

In reality, the Killer was puzzled. He had come to this place straight through the forest with the expectation that food—flesh to tear with his fangs—would be waiting for him. Perhaps he had no actual memory of killing the calf the night before. Possibly it was only instinct, not conscious intelligence, that brought him back to what was left of his feast the preceding night. And now, as he waited at the border of the darkness, he knew that a strange change had taken place. And the Killer did not like strangeness.

The smell that he had expected had dimmed to such an extent that it promoted no muscular impulse. Perhaps it was only obliterated by a stranger smell,—one that was vaguely familiar and wakened a slow, brooding anger in his great beast's heart.

He was not timid; yet he retained some of his natural caution and remained in the gloom while he made his investigations. Probably it was a hunting instinct alone. He crept slowly up and down the border of moonlight, and his anger seemed to grow and deepen within him. He felt dimly that he had been cheated out of his meal. And once before he had been similarly cheated; but there had been singular triumph at the end of that experience.

All at once a movement, far across the pasture, caught his attention. Remote as it was, he identified the tall form at once; it was just such a creature as he had blasted with one blow a day or two before. But it dimmed quickly in the darkness. It seemed only that some one had come, taken one glance at the drama at the edge of the forest, and had departed. Bruce himself had not seen the figure; and perhaps it was the mercy of Fate—not usually merciful—that he did not. He might have been caused to hope again, only to know a deeper despair when the man left him without giving aid. For the tall form had been that of Simon coming, as Linda had anticipated, for a moment's inspection of his handiwork. And seeing that it was good, he had departed again.

The grizzly watched him go, then turned back to his questioning regard of the strange, dark figure that lay so prone in the grass in front. The darkness dropped over him as the moon went behind a heavy patch of cloud.

And in that moment of darkness, the Killer understood. He remembered now. Possibly the upright form of Simon had suggested it to him; possibly the wind had only blown straighter and thus permitted him to identify the troubling smells. All at once a memory flashed over him,—of a scene in a distant glen, and similar tall figures that tried to drive him from his food. He had charged then, struck once, and one of the forms had lain very still. He remembered the pungent,

maddening odor that had reached him after his blow had gone home. Most clearly of all, he remembered how his fangs had struck and sunk.

He knew this strange shadow now. It was just another of that tall breed he had learned to hate, and it was simply lying prone as his foe had done after the charge beside Little River. In fact, the still-lying form recalled the other occasion with particular vividness. The excitement that he had felt before returned to him now; he remembered his disappointment when the whistling bullets from the hillside above had driven him from his dead. But there were no whistling bullets now. Except for them, there would have been further rapture beside that stream; but he might have it now.

His fangs had sunk home just once, before, and his blood leaped as he recalled the passion he had felt. The old hunting madness came back to him. It was the fair game, this that lay so still in the grass, just as the body of the calf had been and just as the warm body of Hudson in the distant glen.

The wound at his side gave him a twinge of pain. It served to make his memories all the clearer. The lurid lights grew in his eyes. Rage swept over him.

But he didn't charge blindly. He retained enough of his hunting caution to know that to stalk was the proper course. It was true that there was no shrubbery to hide him, yet in his time he had made successful stalks in the open, even upon deer. He moved farther out from the edge of the forest.

At that instant the moon came out and revealed him, all too vividly, to Bruce. The Killer's great gray figure in the silver light was creeping toward him across the silvered grass.

When Linda left her house, her first realization was the need of caution. It would not do to let Simon see her. And she knew that only her long training in the hills, her practice in climbing the winding trails, would enable her to keep pace with the fast-walking man without being seen.

In her concern for Bruce, she had completely forgotten the events of the earlier part of the evening. Wild and stirring though they were, they now seemed to her as incidents of remote years, nothing to be remembered in this hour of crisis. But she remembered them vividly when, two hundred yards from the house, she saw two strange figures coming toward her between the moonlit tree trunks.

There was very little of reality about either. The foremost figure was bent and strange, but she knew that it could be no one but Elmira. The second, however—half-observed behind her—offered no interpretation of outline at all at first. But at the turn of the trail she saw both figures in vivid profile. Elmira was coming homeward, bent over her cane, and she led a saddled horse by its bridle rein.

Still keeping Simon in sight, Linda ran swiftly toward her. She didn't understand the deep awe that stole over her,—an emotion that even her fear for Bruce could not transcend. There was a quality in Elmira's face and posture that she had never seen before. It was as if she were walking in her sleep, she came with such a strange heaviness and languor, her cane creeping through the pine needles of the trail in front. She did not seem to be aware of Linda's approach until the girl was only ten feet distant. Then she looked up, and Linda saw the moonlight on her face.

She saw something else too, but she didn't know what it was. Her own eyes widened. The thin lips were drooping, the eyes looked as if she were asleep. The face was a strange net of wrinkles in the soft light. Terrible emotions had but recently died and left their ashes upon it. But Linda knew that this was no time to stop and wonder and ask questions.

"Give me the horse," she commanded. "I'm going to help Bruce."

"You can have it," Elmira answered in an unfamiliar voice. "It's the horse that—that Dave Turner rode here—and he won't want him any more."

Linda took the rein, passed it over the horse's head, and started to swing into the saddle. Then she turned with a gasp as the woman slipped something into her hand.

Linda looked down and saw it was the hilt of the knife that Elmira had carried with her when the two women had gone with Dave into the woods. The blade glittered; but Linda was afraid to look at it closely. "You might need that, too," the old woman said. "It may be wet—I can't remember. But take it, anyway."

Linda hardly heard. She thrust the blade into the leather of the saddle, then swung on her horse. Once more she sought Simon's figure. Far away she saw it, just as it vanished into the heavy timber on top of the hill.

She rode swiftly until she began to fear that he might hear the hoof beat of her mount; then she drew up to a walk. And when she had crested the hill and had followed down its long slope into the glen, the moon went under the clouds for the first time.

She lost sight of Simon at once. Seemingly her effort to save Bruce had come to nothing, after all.

But she didn't turn back. There were light patches in the sky, and the moon might shine forth again.

She followed down the trail toward the cleared lands that the Turners cultivated. She went to their very edge. It was a rather high point, so she waited here for the moon to emerge again. Never, it seemed to her, had it moved so slowly. But all at once its light flowed forth over the land.

Her eyes searched the distant spaces, but she could catch no glimpse of Simon between the trees. Evidently he no longer walked in the direction of the house. Then she looked out over the tilled lands.

Almost a quarter of a mile away she saw the flicker of a miniature shadow. Only the vivid quality of the moonlight, against which any shadow was clear-cut and sharp, enabled her to discern it at all. It was Simon, and evidently his business had taken him into the meadows. Feeling that she was on the right track at last, she urged her horse forward again, keeping to the shadow of the timber at first.

Simon walked almost parallel to the dark fringe for nearly a mile; then turned off into the tilled lands. She rode opposite him and reined in the horse to watch.

When the distance had almost obscured him, she saw him stop. He waited a long time, then turned back. The moon went in and out of the clouds. Then, trusting to the distance to conceal her, Linda rode slowly out into the clearing.

Simon reentered the timber, his inspection seemingly done, and Linda still rode in the general direction he had gone. The darkness fell again, and for the space of perhaps five minutes all the surroundings were obscured. A curious sense of impending events came over her as she headed on toward the distant wall of forest beyond.

Then, the clouds slowly dimming under the moon, the light grew with almost imperceptible encroachments. At first it was only bright enough to show her own dim shadow on the grass. The utter gloom that was over the fields lessened and drew away like receding curtains; her vision reached ever farther, the shadows grew more clearly outlined and distinct. Then the moon rolled forth into a wholly open patch of sky—a white sphere with a sprinkling of vivid stars around it—and the silver radiance poured down.

It was like the breaking of dawn. The fields stretched to incredible distances about her. The forest beyond emerged in distinct outline; she could see every irregularity in the plain. And in one instant's glance she knew that she had found Bruce.

His situation went home to her in one sweep of the eyes. Bruce was not alone. Even now a great, towering figure was creeping toward him from the forest. Linda cried out, and with the long strap of her rein lashed her horse into the fastest pace it knew.

Bruce did not hear her come. He lay in the soft grass, waiting for death. A great calm had come upon him; a strange, quiet strength that the pines themselves might have lent to him; and he made no cry. In this dreadful last moment of despair the worst of his terror had gone and left his thoughts singularly clear. And but one desire was left to him: that the Killer might be merciful and end his frail existence with one blow.

It was not a great deal to ask for; but he knew perfectly that only by the mercy of the forest gods could it come to pass. They are usually not so kind to the dying; and it is not the wild-animal way to take pains to kill at the first blow. Yet his eyes held straight. The Killer crept slowly toward him; more and more of his vast body was revealed above the tall heads of the grass. And now all that Bruce knew was a great wonder,—a strange expectancy and awe of what the opening gates of darkness would reveal.

The Killer moved with dreadful slowness and deliberation. He was no longer afraid. It was just as it had been before,—a warm figure lying still and helpless for his own terrible pleasure. A few more steps and he would be near enough to see plainly; then—after the grizzly habit—to fling into the charge. It was his own way of hunting,—to stalk within a few score of feet, then to make a furious, resistless rush. He paused, his muscles setting. And then the meadows suddenly rang with the undulations of his snarl.

Almost unconscious, Bruce did not understand what had caused this utterance. But strangely, the bear had lifted his head and was staring straight over him. For the first time Bruce heard the wild beat of hoofs on the turf behind him.

He didn't have time to turn and look. There was no opportunity even for a flood of renewed hope. Events followed upon one another with startling rapidity. The sharp, unmistakable crack of a pistol leaped through the dusk, and a bullet sung over his body. And then a wild-riding figure swept up to him.

It was Linda, firing as she came. How she had been able to control her horse and ride him into that scene of peril no words may reveal. Perhaps, running wildly beneath the lash, his starting eyes did not discern or interpret the gray figure scarcely a score of yards distant from Bruce; and

it is true the grizzly's pungent smell—a thing to terrify much more and to be interpreted more clearly than any kind of dim form in the moonlight—was blown in the opposite direction. Perhaps the lashing strap recalled the terrible punishment the horse had undergone earlier that evening at the hands of Simon and no room was left for any lesser terror. But most likely of all, just as in the case of brave soldiers riding their horses into battle, the girl's own strength and courage went into him. Always it has been the same; the steed partook of its rider's own spirit.

The bear reared up, snarling with wrath, but for a moment it dared not charge. The sudden appearance of the girl and the horse held him momentarily at bay. The girl swung to the ground in one leap, fired again, thrust her arm through the loop of the bridle rein, then knelt at Bruce's side. The white blade that she carried in her left hand slashed at his bonds.

The horse, plunging, seemed to jerk her body back and forth, and endless seconds seemed to go by before the last of the thongs was severed. In reality the whole rescue was unbelievably swift. The man helped her all he could. "Up—up into the saddle," she commanded. The grizzly growled again, advancing remorselessly toward them, and twice more she fired. Two of the bullets went home in his great body, but their weight and shocking power were too slight to affect him. He went down once more on all fours, preparing to charge.

Bruce, in spite of the fact that his limbs had been nearly paralyzed by the tight bonds, managed to grasp the saddlehorn. In the strength of new-born hope he pulled himself half up on it, and he felt Linda's strong arms behind him pushing up. The horse plunged in deadly fear; and the Killer leaped toward them. Once more the pistol cracked. Then the horse broke and ran in a frenzy of terror.

Bruce was full in the saddle by then, and even at the first leap his arm swept out to the girl on the ground beside him. He swung her towards him, and at the same time her hands caught at the arching back of the saddle. Never had her fine young strength been put to a greater test than when she tried to pull herself up on the speeding animal's back. For the first fifty feet she was half-dragged, but slowly—with Bruce's help—she pulled herself up to a position of security.

The Killer's charge had come a few seconds too late. For a moment he raced behind them in insane fury, but only his savage growl leaped through the darkness fast enough to catch up with them. And the distance slowly widened.

The Killer had been cheated again; and by the same token Simon's oath had been proved untrue. For once the remorseless strength of which he boasted had been worsted by a greater strength; and love, not hate, was the power that gave it. For once a girl's courage—a courage greater than that with which he obeyed the dictates of his cruel will—had cost him his victory. The war that he and his outlaw band had begun so long ago had not yet been won.

Indeed, if Simon could have seen what the moon saw as it peered out from behind the clouds, he would have known that one of the debts of blood incurred so many years ago had even now been paid. Far away on a distant hillside there was one who gave no heed to the fast hoof beats of the speeding horse. It was Dave Turner, and his trail of lust and wickedness was ended at last. He lay with lifted face, and there were curious dark stains on the pine needles.

It was the first blood since the reopening of the feud. And the pines, those tall, dark sentinels of the wilderness, seemed to look down upon him in passionless contemplation, as if they wondered at the stumbling ways of men. Their branches rubbed together and made words as the wind swept through them, but no man may say what those words were.

BOOK THREE

THE COMING OF THE STRENGTH

XXVI

Fall was at hand at Trail's End. One night, and the summer was still a joyous spirit in the land, birds nested, skies were blue, soft winds wandered here and there through the forest. One morning, and a startling change had come upon the wilderness world. The spirit of autumn had come with golden wings.

The wild creatures, up and about at their pursuits long before dawn, were the first to see the change. A buck deer—a noble creature with six points on his spreading horns—got the first inkling of it when he stopped at a spring to drink. It was true that an hour before he had noticed a curious crispness and a new stir in the air, but he had been so busy keeping out of the ambushes of the Tawny One that he had not noticed it. The air had been chill in his nostrils, but thanks to a heavy growth of hair that—with mysterious foresight—had begun to come upon his body, it gave him no discomfort. But it was a puzzling and significant thing that the water he bent to drink had been transformed to something hard and white and burning cold to the tip of his nose.

It was the first real freeze. True, for the past few nights there had been a measure of tinkling, cobweb frost on the ground in wet places, but even the tender-skinned birds—always most watchful of signs of this kind—had disregarded it. But there was no disregarding this half-inch of blue ice that had covered the spring. The buck deer struck it angrily with his front hoofs, broke through and drank; then went snorting up the hill.

His anger was in itself a significant thing. In the long, easy-going summer days, Blacktail had almost forgotten what anger was like. He had been content to roam over the ridges, cropping the leaves and grass, avoiding danger and growing fat. But all at once this kind of existence had palled on him. He felt that he wanted only one thing—not food or drink or safety—but a good, slashing, hooking, hoof-carving battle with another buck of his own species. An unwonted crossness had come upon him, and his soft eyes burned with a blue fire. He remembered the does, too—with a sudden leap of his blood—and wondered where they were keeping themselves. Being only a beast he did not know that this new belligerent spirit was just as much a sign of fall as the soft blush that was coming on the leaves. The simple fact was that fall means the beginning of the rut—the wild mating days when the bucks battle among themselves and choose their harems of does.

He had rather liked his appearance as he saw himself in the water of the spring. The last of the velvet had been rubbed from his horns, and the twelve tines (six on each horn) were as hard and almost as sharp as so many bayonet points. As the morning dawned, the change in the face of nature became ever more manifest. The leaves of the shrubbery began to change in color. The wind out of the north had a keener, more biting quality, and the birds were having some sort of exciting debate in the tree tops.

The birds are always a scurried, nervous, rather rattle-brained outfit, and seem wholly incapable of making a decision about anything without hours of argument and discussion. Their days are simply filled with one excitement after another, and they tell more scandal in an hour than the old ladies in a resort manage in the entire summer. This slow transformation in the color of the leaves, not to mention the chill of the frost through their scanty feathers, had created a sensation from one end of birdland to another. And there was only one thing to do about it. That was to wait until the darkness closed down again, then start away toward the path of the sun in search of their winter resorts in the south.

The Little People in the forest of ferns beneath were not such gay birds, and they did not have such high-flown ideas as these feathered folk in the branches. They didn't talk such foolishness and small talk from dawn to dark. They didn't wear gay clothes that weren't a particle of good to them in cold weather. You can imagine them as being good, substantial, middle-class people, much more sober-minded, tending strictly to business and working hard, and among other things they saw no need of flitting down to southern resorts for the cold season. These people—being mostly ground squirrels and gophers and chipmunks and rabbits—had not been fitted by nature for wide travel and had made all arrangements for a pleasant winter at home. You could almost see a smile on the fat face of a plump old gopher when he came out and found the frost upon the ground; for he knew that for months past he had been putting away stores for just this season. In the snows that would follow he would simply retire into the farthest recesses of his burrow and let the winds whistle vainly above him.

The larger creatures, however, were less complacent. The wolves—if animals have any powers of foresight whatever—knew that only hard days, not luscious nuts and roots, were in store for them. There would be many days of hunger once the snow came over the land. The black bear saw the signs and began a desperate effort to lay up as many extra pounds of fat as possible before the snows broke. Ashur's appetite was always as much with him as his bobbed-off excuse for a tail, and as he was more or less indifferent to a fair supply of dirt, he always managed to put away considerable food in a rather astonishingly short period of time; and now he tried to eat all the faster in view of the hungry days to come. He would have need of the extra flesh. The time was coming when all sources of food would be cut off by the snows, and he would have to seek the security of hibernation. He had already chosen an underground abode for himself and there he could doze away in the cold-trance through the winter months, subsisting on the supplies of fat that he had stored next to his furry hide.

The greatest of all the bears, the Killer, knew that some such fate awaited him also. But he looked forward to it with wretched spirit. He was master of the forest, and perhaps he did not like to yield even to the spirit of winter. His savagery grew upon him every day, and his dislike for men had turned to a veritable hatred. But he had found them out. When he crossed their trails again, he would not wait to stalk. They were apt to slip away from him in this case and sting him unmercifully with bullets. The thing to do was charge quickly and strike with all his power.

The three minor wounds he had received—two from pistol bullets and one from Bruce's rifle—had not lessened his strength at all. They did, however, serve to keep his blood-heat at the explosive stage most of the day and night.

The flowers and the grasses were dying; the moths that paid calls on the flowers had laid their eggs and had perished, and winter lurked—ready to pounce forth—just beyond the distant mountains. There is nothing so thoroughly unreliable as the mountain autumn. It may linger in entrancing golds and browns month after month, until it is almost time for spring to come again; and again it may make one short bow and usher in the winter. To Bruce and Linda, in the old Folger home in Trail's End, these fall days offered the last hope of success in their war against the Turners.

The adventure in the pasture with the Killer had handicapped them to an unlooked-for degree. Bruce's muscles had been severely strained by the bonds; several days had elapsed before he regained their full use. Linda was a mountain girl, hardy as a deer, yet her nerves had suffered a greater shock by the experience than either of them had guessed. The wild ride, the fear and the stress, and most of all the base blow that Simon had dealt her had been too much even for her strong constitution; and she had been obliged to go to bed for a few days of rest. Old Elmira worked about the house the same as ever, but strange, new lights were in her eyes. For reasons that went down to the roots of things, neither Bruce nor Linda questioned her as to her scene with Dave Turner in the coverts; and what thoughts dwelt in her aged mind neither of them could guess.

The truth was that in these short weeks of trial and danger whatever dreadful events had come to pass in that meeting were worth neither thought nor words. Both Bruce and Linda were down to essentials. It is a descent that most human beings—some time in their lives—find they are able to make; and there was no room for sentimentality or hysteria in this grim household. The ideas, the softnesses, the laws of the valleys were far away from them; they were face to face with realities. Their code had become the basic code of life: to kill for self-protection without mercy or remorse.

They did not know when the Turners would attack. It was the dark of the moon, and the men would be able to approach the house without presenting themselves as targets for Bruce's rifle. The danger was not a thing on which to conjecture and forget; it was an ever-present reality. Never they stepped out of the door, never they crossed a lighted window, never a pane rattled in the wind but that the wings of Death might have been hovering over them. The days were passing, the date when the chance for victory would utterly vanish was almost at hand, and they were haunted by the ghastly fact that their whole defense lay in a single thirty-thirty rifle and five cartridges. Bruce's own gun had been taken from him in Simon's house; Linda had emptied her pistol at the Killer.

"We've got to get more shells," Bruce told Linda. "The Turners won't be such fools as to wait until we have the moon again to attack. I can't understand why they haven't already come. Of course, they don't know the condition of our ammunition supply, but it doesn't seem to me that that alone would have held them off. They are sure to come soon, and you know what we could do with five cartridges, don't you?"

"I know." She looked up into his earnest face. "We could die—that's all."

"Yes—like rabbits. Without hurting them at all. I wouldn't mind dying so much, if I did plenty of damage first. It's death for me, anyway, I suppose—and no one but a fool can see it otherwise. There are simply too many against us. But I do want to make some payment first."

Her hand fumbled and groped for his. Her eyes pled to him,—more than any words. "And you mean you've given up hope?" she asked.

He smiled down at her,—a grave, strange little smile that moved her in secret ways. "Not given up hope, Linda," he said gently. They were standing at the door and the sunlight—coming low from the South—was on his face. "I've never had any hope to give up—just realization of what lay ahead of us. I'm looking it all in the face now, just as I did at first."

"And what you see—makes you afraid?"

Yet she need not have asked that question. His face gave an unmistakable answer: that this man had conquered fear in the terrible night with the Killer. "Not afraid, Linda," he explained, "only seeing things as they really are. There are too many against us. If we had that great estate behind us, with all its wealth, we might have a chance; if we had an arsenal of rifles with thousands of cartridges, we might make a stand against them. But we are three—two women and one man—and one rifle between us all. Five little shells to be expended in five seconds. They are seven or eight, each man armed, each man a rifle-shot. They are certain to attack within a day or two—before we have the moon again. In less than two weeks we can no longer contest their title to the estate. A little month or two more and we will be snowed in—with no chance to get out at all."

"Perhaps before that," she told him.

"Yes. Perhaps before that."

They found a confirmation of this prophecy in the signs of fall without—the coloring leaves, the dying flowers, the new, cold breath of the wind. Only the pines remained unchanged; they were the same grave sentinels they always were.

"And you can forgive me?" Linda asked humbly.

"Forgive you?" The man turned to her in surprise. "What have you done that needs to be forgiven?"

"Oh, don't you see? To bring you here—out of your cities—to throw your life away. To enlist you in a fight that you can't hope to win. I've killed you, that's all I've done. Perhaps to-night—perhaps a few days later."

He nodded gravely.

"And I've already killed your smile," she went on, looking down. "You don't smile any more the way you used to. You're not the boy you were when you came. Oh, to think of it—that it's all been my work. To kill your youth, to lead you into this slaughter pen where nothing—nothing lives but death—and hatred—and unhappiness."

The tears leaped to her eyes. He caught her hands and pressed them between his until pain came into her fingers. "Listen, Linda," he commanded. She looked straight up at him. "Are you sorry I came?"

"More than I can tell you—for your sake."

"But when people look for the truth in this world, Linda, they don't take any one's sake into consideration. They balance all things and give them their true worth. Would you rather that you and I had never met—that I had never received Elmira's message—that you should live your life up here without ever hearing of me?"

She dropped her eyes. "It isn't fair—to ask me that—"

"Tell me the truth. Hasn't it been worth while? Even if we lose and die before this night is done, hasn't it all been worth while? Are you sorry you have seen me change? Isn't the change for the better—a man grown instead of a boy? One who looks straight and sees clear?"

He studied her face; and after a while he found his answer. It was not in the form of words at first. As a man might watch a miracle he watched a new light come into her dark eyes. All the gloom and sorrow of the wilderness without could not affect its quality. It was a light of joy, of exultation, of new-found strength.

"You hadn't ought to ask me that, Bruce," she said with a rather strained distinctness. "It has been like being born again. There aren't any words to tell you what it has meant to me. And don't think I haven't seen the change in you, too—the birth of a new strength that every day is greater, higher—until it is—almost more than I can understand. The old smiles are gone, but something else has taken their place—something much more dear to me—but what it is I can hardly tell you. Maybe it's something that the pines have."

But he hadn't wholly forgotten how to smile. His face lighted as remembrance came to him. "They are a different kind of smiles—that's all," he explained. "Perhaps there will be many of them in the days to come. Linda, I have no regrets. I've played the game. Whether it was Destiny that brought me here, or only chance, or perhaps—if we take just life and death into consideration—just misfortune, whatever it is I feel no resentment toward it. It has been the worthwhile adventure. In the first place, I love the woods. There's something else in them besides death and hatred and unhappiness. Besides, it seems to me that I can understand the whole world better than I used to. Maybe I can begin to see a big purpose and theme running through it all—but it's not yet clear enough to put into words. Certain things in this world are essentials, certain other ones are froth. And I see which things belong to one class and which to another so much more clearly than I did before. One of the things that matters is throwing one's whole life into whatever task he has set out to do—whether he fails or succeeds doesn't seem greatly to matter. The main thing, it appears to me, is that he has tried. To stand strong and kind of calm, and not be afraid—if I can always do it, Linda, it is all I ask for myself. Not to flinch now. Not to give up as long as I have the strength for another step. And to have you with me—all the way."

"Then you and I—take fresh heart?"

"We've never lost heart, Linda."

"Not to give up, but only be glad we've tried?"

"Yes. And keep on trying."

"With no regrets?"

"None—and maybe to borrow a little strength from the pines!"

This was their new pact. To stand firm and strong and unflinching, and never to yield as long as an ounce of strength remained. As if to seal it, her arms crept about his neck and her soft lips pressed his.

XXVII

Toward the end of the afternoon Linda saddled the horse and rode down the trail toward Martin's store. She had considerable business to attend to. Among other things, she was going to buy thirty-thirty cartridges,—all that Martin had in stock. She had some hope of securing an extra gun or two with shells to match. The additional space in her pack was to be filled with provisions.

For she was faced with the unpleasant fact that her larder was nearly empty. The jerked venison was almost gone; only a little flour and a few canned things remained. She had space for only small supplies on the horse's back, and there would be no luxuries among them.—Their fare had been plain up to this time; but from now on it was to consist of only such things as were

absolutely necessary to sustain life.

She rode unarmed. Without informing him of the fact, the rifle had been left for Bruce. She did not expect for herself a rifle shot from ambush—for the simple reason that Simon had bidden otherwise—and Bruce might be attacked at any moment.

She was dreaming dreams, that day. The talk with Bruce had given her fresh heart, and as she rode down the sunlit trail the future opened up entrancing vistas to her. Perhaps they yet could conquer, and that would mean reestablishment on the far-flung lands of her father. Matthew Folger had possessed a fertile farm also, and its green pastures might still be utilized. It suddenly occurred to her that it would be of interest to turn off the main trail, take a little dim path up the ridge that she had discovered years before, and look over these lands. The hour was early; besides, Bruce would find her report of the greatest interest.

She jogged slowly along in the Western fashion,—which means something quite different from army fashion or sportsman fashion. Western riders do not post. Riding is not exercise to them; it is rest. They hang limp in the saddle, and all jar is taken up, as if by a spring, somewhere in the region of the floating ribs that only a physician can correctly designate. They never sit firm, these Western riders, and as a rule their riding is not a particularly graceful thing to watch. But they do not care greatly about grace as long as they may encompass their fifty miles a day and still be fresh enough for a country dance at night. There are many other differences in Western and Eastern riding, one of them being the way in which the horse is mounted. Another difference is the riding habit. Linda had no trim riding trousers, with tall glossy boots, red coat, and stock. It was rather doubtful whether she knew such things existed. She did, however, wear a trim riding skirt of khaki and a middie blouse washed spotlessly clean by her own hands; and no one would have missed the other things. It is an indisputable fact that she made a rather alluring picture—eyes bright and hair dark and strong arms bare to the elbow—as she came riding down the pine-needle trail.

She came to the opening of the dimmer trail and turned down it. She did not jog so easily now. The descent was more steep. She entered a still glen, and the color in her cheeks and the soft brown of her arms blended well with the new tints of the autumn leaves. Then she turned up a long ridge.

The trail led through an old burn—a bleak, eerie place where the fire had swept down the forest, leaving only strange, black palings here and there—and she stopped in the middle of it to look down. The mountain world was laid out below her as clearly as in a relief map. Her eyes lighted as its beauty and its fearsomeness went home to her, and her keen eyes slowly swept over the surrounding hill tops. Then for a long moment she sat very still in the saddle.

A thousand feet distant, on the same ridge on which she rode, she caught sight of another horse. It held her gaze, and in an instant she discerned the rather startling fact that it was saddled, bridled, and apparently tied to a tree. Momentarily she thought that its rider was probably one of the Turners who was at present at work on the old Folger farm; yet she knew at once the tilled lands were still too far distant for that. She studied closely the maze of light and shadow of the underbrush and in a moment more distinguished the figure of the horseman.

It was one of the Turners,—but he was not working in the fields. He was standing near the animal's head, back to her, and his rifle lay in his arms. And then Linda understood.

He was simply guarding the trail down to Martin's store. Except for the fact that she had turned off the main trail by no possibility could she have seen him and escaped whatever fate he had for her.

She held hard on her faculties and tried to puzzle it out. She understood now why the Turners had not as yet made an attack upon them at their home. It wasn't the Turner way to wage open warfare. They were the wolves that struck from ambush, the rattlesnakes that lunged with poisoned fangs from beneath the rocks. There was some security for her in the Folger home, but none whatever here. There she had a strong man to fight for her, a loaded rifle, and under ordinary conditions the Turners could not hope to batter down the oaken door and overwhelm them without at least some loss of life. For all they knew, Bruce had a large stock of rifles and ammunition,—and the Turners did not look forward with pleasure to casualties in their ranks. The much simpler way was to watch the trail.

They had known that sooner or later one of them would attempt to ride down after either supplies or aid. Linda was a mountain girl and she knew the mountain methods of procedure; and she knew quite well what she would have had to expect if she had not discovered the ambush in time. She didn't think that the sentry would actually fire on her; he would merely shoot the horse from beneath her. It would be a simple feat by the least of the Turners,—for these gaunt men were marksmen if nothing else. It wouldn't be in accord with Simon's plan or desire to leave her body lying still on the trail. But the horse killed, flight would be impossible, and what would transpire thereafter she did not dare to think. She had not forgotten Simon's threat in regard to any attempt to go down into the settlements. She knew that it still held good.

Of course, if Bruce made the excursion, the sentry's target would be somewhat different. He would shoot him down as remorselessly as he would shatter a lynx from a tree top.

The truth was that Linda had guessed just right. "It's the easiest way," Simon had said. "They'll be trying to get out in a very few days. If the man—shoot straight and to kill! If Linda, plug the

horse and bring her here behind the saddle."

Linda turned softly, then started back. She did not even give a second's thought to the folly of trying to break through. She watched the sentinel over her shoulder and saw him turn about. Far distant though he was, she could tell by the movement he made that he had discovered her.

She was almost four hundred yards away by then, and she lashed her horse into a gallop. The man cried to her to halt, a sound that came dim and strange through the burn, and then a bullet sent up a cloud of ashes a few feet to one side. But the range was too far even for the Turners, and she only urged her horse to a faster pace.

She flew down the narrow trail, turned into the main trail, and galloped wildly toward home. But the sentry did not follow her. He valued his precious life too much for that. He had no intention of offering himself as a target to Bruce's rifle as he neared the house. He headed back to report to Simon.

Young Bill—for such had been the identity of the sentry—found his chief in the large field not far distant from where Bruce had been confined. The man was supervising the harvest of the fall growth of alfalfa. The two men walked slowly away from the workers, toward the fringe of woods.

"It looks as if we'll have to adopt rough measures, after all," Young Bill began.

Simon turned with flushing face. "Do you mean you let him get past you—and missed him? Young Bill, if you've done that—"

"Won't you wait till I've told you how it happened? It wasn't Bruce; it was Linda. For some reason I can't dope out, she went up in the big burn back of me and saw me—when I was too far off to shoot her horse. Then she rode back like a witch. They'll not take that trail again."

"It means one of two things," Simon said after a pause. "One of them is to starve 'em out. It won't take long. Their supplies won't last forever. The other is to call the clan and attack—to-night."

"And that means loss of life."

"Not necessarily. I don't know how many guns they've got. If any of you were worth your salt, you'd find out those things. I wish Dave was here."

And Simon spoke the truth for once in his life: he did miss Dave. And it was not that there had been any love lost between them. But the truth was—although Simon never would have admitted it—the weaker man's cunning had been of the greatest aid to his chief. Simon needed it sorely now.

"And we can't wait till to-morrow night—because we've got the moon then," Young Bill added. "Just a new moon, but it will prevent a surprise attack. I suppose you still have hopes of Dave coming back?"

"I don't see why not. I'll venture to say now he's off on some good piece of business—doing something none of the rest of you have thought of. He'll come riding back one of these days with something actually accomplished. I see no reason for thinking that he's dead. Bruce hasn't had any chance at him that I know of. But if I thought he was—there'd be no more waiting. We'd tear down that nest to-night."

Simon spoke in his usual voice—with the same emphasis, the same undertones of passion. But the last words ended with a queer inflection. The truth was that he had slowly become aware that Young Bill was not giving him his full attention, but rather was gazing off—unfamiliar speculation in his eyes—toward the forests beyond.

Simon's impulse was to follow the gaze; yet he would not yield to it. "Well?" he demanded. "I'm not talking to amuse myself."

The younger man seemed to start. His eyes were half-closed; and there was a strange look of intentness about his facial lines when he turned back to Simon. "You haven't missed any stock?" he asked abruptly.

Simon's eyes widened. "No. Why?"

"Look there—over the forest." Young Bill pointed. Simon shielded his eyes from the sunset glare and studied the blue-green skyline above the fringe of pines. There were many grotesque, black birds wheeling on slow wings above the spot. Now and then they dropped down, out of sight behind the trees.

"Buzzards!" Simon exclaimed.

"Yes," Young Bill answered quietly. "You see, it isn't much over a mile from Folger's house—in the deep woods. There's something dead there, Simon. And I think we'd better look to see what it is."

"You think—" Then Simon hesitated and looked again with reddening eyes toward the gliding buzzards.

"I think—that maybe we're going to find Dave," Young Bill replied.

XXVIII

The darkness of this October night fell before its time. The twilight at Trail's End is never long in duration, due to the simple fact that the mountains cut off the flood of light from the west after the setting of the sun, but to-night there seemed none at all. The reason was merely that heavy banks of clouds swept up from the southeast just after sunset.

They came with rather startling rapidity and almost immediately completely filled the sky. Young Bill had many things on his mind as he rode beneath them, yet he found time to gaze at them with some curiosity. They were of singular greenish hue, and they hung so low that the tops of near-by mountains were obscured.

The fact that there would be no moon to-night was no longer important. The clouds would have cut off any telltale light that might illumine the activities of the Turners. There would not be even the dim mist of starlight.

Young Bill rode from house to house through the estate,—the homes occupied by Simon's brothers and cousins and their respective families. He knocked on each door and he only gave one little message. "Simon wants you at the house," he said, "and come heeled."

He would turn to go, but always a singular quiet and breathlessness remained in the homes after his departure. There would be a curious exchange of glances and certain significant sounds. One of them was the metallic click of cartridges being slipped into the magazine of a rifle. Another was the buckling on of spurs, and perhaps the rattle of a pistol in its holster. Before the night fell in reality, the clan came riding—strange, tall figures in the half-darkness—straight for Simon's house.

His horse was saddled too, and he met them in front of his door. And in a very few words he made all things plain to them.

"We've found Dave," he told them simply. "Most of you already know it. We've decided there isn't any use of waiting any more. We're going to the Folger house to-night."

The men stood silent, breathing hard. The clouds seemed to lower, menacingly, toward them. Simon spoke very quietly, yet his voice carried far. In their growing excitement they did not observe the reason, that a puzzling, deep calm had come over the whole wilderness world. Even in the quietest night there is usually a faint background of winds in the mountain realms—troubled breaths that whisper in the thickets and rustle the dead leaves—but to-night the heavy air had no breath of life.

"To-night Bruce Folger is going to pay the price, just as I said." He spoke rather boastingly; perhaps more to impress his followers than from impulse. Indeed, the passion that he felt left no room for his usual arrogance. "Fire on sight. Bill and I will come from the rear, and we will be ready to push through the back door the minute you break through the front. The rest of you surround the house on three sides. And remember—no man is to touch Linda."

They nodded grimly; then the file of horsemen started toward the ridge. Far distant they heard a sound such as had reached them often in summer but was unfamiliar in fall. It was the faint rumble of distant thunder.

Bruce and Linda sat in the front room of the Folger house, quiet and watchful and unafraid. It was not that they did not realize their danger. They had simply taken all possible measures of defense; and they were waiting for what the night would bring forth.

"I know they'll come to-night," Linda had said. "To-morrow night there will be a moon, and though it won't give much light, it will hurt their chances of success. Besides—they've found that their other plot—to kill you from ambush—isn't going to work."

Bruce nodded and got up to examine the shutters. He wanted no ray of light to steal out into the growing darkness and make a target. It was a significant fact that the rifle did not occupy its usual place behind the desk. Bruce kept it in his hands as he made the inspection. Linda had her empty pistol, knowing that it might—in the mayhap of circumstance—be of aid in frightening an assailant. Old Elmira sat beside the fire, her stiff fingers busy at a piece of sewing.

"You know—" Bruce said to her, "that we are expecting an attack to-night?"

The woman nodded, but didn't miss a stitch. No gleam of interest came into her eyes. Bruce's gaze fell to her work basket, and something glittered from its depth. Evidently Elmira had regained her knife.

He went back to his chair beside Linda, and the two sat listening. They had never known a more quiet night. They listened in vain for the little night sounds that usually come stealing, so hushed and tremulous, from the forest. The noises that always, like feeble ghosts, dwell in a house at night—the little explosions of a scraping board or a banging shutter or perhaps a mouse, scratching in the walls—were all lacking too. And they both started, ever so slightly, when they heard a distant rumble of thunder.

"It's going to storm," Linda told him.

"Yes. A thunderstorm—rather unusual in the fall, isn't it?"

"Almost unknown. It's growing cold too."

They waited a breathless minute, then the thunder spoke again. It was immeasurably nearer. It was as if it had leaped toward them, through the darkness, with incredible speed in the minute that had intervened. The last echo of the sound was not dead when they heard it a third time.

The storm swept toward them and increased in fury. On a distant hillside the strange file that was the Turners halted, then gathered around Simon. Already the lightning made vivid, white gashes in the sky and illumined—for a breathless instant—the long sweep of the ridge above them. "We'll make good targets in the lightning," Old Bill said.

"Ride on," Simon ordered. "You know a man can't find a target in the hundredth of a second of a lightning flash. We're not going to turn back now."

They rode on. Far away they heard the whine and roar of wind, and in a moment it was upon them. The forest was no longer silent. The peal of the thunder was almost continuous.

The breaking of the storm seemed to rock the Folger house on its foundation. Both Linda and Bruce leaped to their feet; but they felt a little tingle of awe when they saw that old Elmira still sat sewing. It was as if the calm that dwelt in the Sentinel Pine outside had come down to abide in her. No force that the world possessed could ever take it from her.

They heard the rumble and creak of the trees as the wind smote them, and the flame of the lamp danced wildly, filling the room with flickering shadows. Bruce straightened, the lines of his face setting deep. He glanced once more at the rifle in his hands.

"Linda," he said, "put out that fire. If there's going to be an attack, we'd have a better chance if the room were in darkness. We can shoot through the door then."

She obeyed at once, knocking the burning sticks apart and drenching them with water. They hissed, and steamed, but the noise of the storm almost effaced the sound. "Now the light?" Linda asked.

"Yes. See where you are and have everything ready."

She took off the glass shade of the lamp, and the little gusts of wind that crept in the cracks of the windows immediately extinguished the flame. The darkness dropped down. Then Bruce opened the door.

The whole wilderness world struggled in the grasp of the storm. The scene was such that no mortal memory could possibly forget. They saw it in great, vivid glimpses in the intermittent flashes of the lightning, and the world seemed no longer that which they had come to know. Chaos was upon it. They saw young trees whipping in the wind, their slender branches flailing the air. They saw the distant ridges in black and startling contrast against the lighted sky. The tall tops of the trees wagged back and forth in frenzied signals; their branches smote and rubbed together. And just without their door the Sentinel Pine stood with top lifted to the fury of the storm.

A strange awe swept over Bruce. A moment later he was to behold a sight that for the moment would make him completely forget the existence of the great tree; but for an instant he poised at the brink of a profound and far-reaching discovery. There was a great lesson for him in that dark, towering figure that the lightning revealed. Even in the fury of the storm it still stood infinitely calm, watchful, strong as the mountains themselves. Its great limbs moved and spoke; its top swayed back and forth, yet still it held its high place as Sentinel of the Forest, passionless, patient, talking through the murk of clouds to the stars that burned beyond.

"See," Linda said. "The Turners are coming."

It was true. Bruce dropped his eyes. Even now the clan had spread out in a great wing and was bearing down upon the house. The lightning showed them in strange, vivid flashes. Bruce nodded slowly.

"I see," he answered. "I'm ready."

"Then shoot them, quick—when the lightning shows them," she whispered in his ear. "They're in range now." Her hand seized his arm. "What are you waiting for?"

He turned to her sternly. "Have you forgotten we only have five shells?" he asked. "Go back to Elmira."

Her eyes met his, and she tried to smile into them. "Forgive me, Bruce—it's hard—to be calm."

But at once she understood why he was waiting. The flashes of lightning offered no opportunity for an accurate shot. Bruce meant to conserve his little supply of shells until the moment of utmost need. The clan drew nearer. They were riding slowly, with ready rifles. And ever the storm increased in fury. The thunder was so close that it no longer gave the impression of being merely sound. It was a veritable explosion just above their heads. The flashes came so near together that for an instant Bruce began to hope they would reveal the attackers clearly enough

to give him a chance for a well-aimed shot. The first drops of rain fell one by one on the roof.

His eyes sought for Simon's figure. To Simon he owed the greatest debt, and to lay Simon low might mean to dishearten the whole clan. But although the attackers were in fair range now, scarcely two hundred yards away, he could not identify him. They drew closer. He raised his gun, waiting for a chance to fire. And at that instant a resistless force hurled him to the floor.

There was the sense of vast catastrophe, a great rocking and shuddering that was lost in billowing waves of sound; and then a frantic effort to recall his wandering faculties. A blinding light cut the darkness in twain; it smote his eyeballs as if with a physical blow; and summoning all his powers of will he sprang to his feet.

There was only darkness at first; and he did not understand. But it was of scarcely less duration than the flash of lightning. A red flame suddenly leaped into the air, roared and grew and spread as if scattered by the wind itself. And Bruce's breath caught in a sob of wonder.

The Sentinel Pine, that ancient friend and counselor that stood not over one hundred feet from the house, had been struck by a lightning bolt, its trunk had been cleft open as if by a giant's ax, and the flame was already springing through its balsam-laden branches.

XXIX

Bruce stood as if entranced, gazing with awed face at the flaming tree. There was little danger of the house itself catching fire. The wind blew the flame in the opposite direction; besides, the rains were beating on the roof. The fire in the great tree itself, however, was too well started to be extinguished at once by any kind of rainfall; but it did burn with less fierceness.

Dimly he felt the girl's hand grasping at his arm. Her fingers pressed until he felt pain. His eyes lowered to hers. The sight of that passion-drawn face—recalling in an instant the scene beside the camp fire his first night at Trail's End—called him to himself. "Shoot, you fool!" she stormed at him. "The tree's lighted up the whole countryside, and you can't miss. Shoot them before they run away."

He glanced quickly out. The clan that had drawn within sixty yards of the house at the time the lightning struck had been thrown into confusion. Their horses had been knocked down by the force of the bolt and were fleeing, riderless, away. The men followed them, shouting, plainly revealed in the light from the burning tree. The great torch beside the house had completely turned the tables. And Linda spoke true; they offered the best of targets.

Again the girl's eyes were lurid slits between the lids. Her lips were drawn, and her breathing was strange. He looked at her calmly.

"No, Linda. I can't—"

"You can't," she cried. "You coward—you traitor! Kill—kill—kill them while there's time."

She saw the resolve in his face, and she snatched the rifle from his hands. She hurled it to her shoulder and three times fired blindly toward the retreating Turners.

At that instant Bruce seemed to come to life. His thoughts had been clear ever since the tree had been struck; his vision was straighter and more far-reaching than ever in his life before, but now his muscles wakened too. He sprang toward the girl and snatched the rifle from her hand. She fought for it, and he held her with a strong arm.

"Wait—wait, Linda," he said gently. "You've wasted three cartridges now. There are only two left. And we may need them some other time."

He held her from him with his arm; and it was as if his strength flowed into her. Her blazing eyes sought his, and for a long second their wills battled. And then a deep wonder seemed to come over her.

"What is it?" she breathed. "What have you found out?"

She spoke in a strange and distant voice. Slowly the fire died in her eyes, the drawn features relaxed, her hands fell at her side. He drew her away from the lighted doorway, out of the range of any of the Turners that should turn to answer the rifle fire. The wind roared over the house and swept by in clamoring fury, the electric storm dimmed and lessened as it journeyed on.

These two knew that if death spared them in all the long passage of their years, they could never forget that moment. The girl watched him breathlessly, oblivious to all things else. He seemed wholly unaware of her now. There was something aloof, impassive, infinitely calm about him, and a great, far-reaching understanding was in his eyes. Her own eyes suddenly filled with tears.

"Linda, there's something come to me—and I don't know that I can make you understand. I can only call it strength—a new strength and a greater strength than I ever had before. It's something that the pine—that great tree that we just saw split open—has been trying to tell me for a long time. Oh, can't you see, Linda? There it stood, hundreds of years—so great, so tall, so wise—in a moment broken like a reed. It takes away my arrogance, Linda. It makes me see myself as I really

am. And that means—*power*."

His eyes blazed, and he caught her hands in his.

"It was a symbol, Linda, not only of the wilderness, but of powers higher and greater than the wilderness. Powers that can look down, and not be swept away by passion, and not try to tear to pieces those who in their folly harm them. There's no room for such things as vengeance in this new strength. There's no room for murder, and malice, and hatred, and bloodshed."

Linda understood. She knew that this new-found strength did not mean renunciation of her cause. It did not mean that he would give over his attempt to reinstate her as the owner of her father's estates. It only meant that the impulse of personal vengeance was dead within him. He knew now—the same as ever—that the duty of the men that dwell upon the earth is to do their allotted tasks, and without hatred and without passion to overcome the difficulties that stand in the way. She realized that if one of the Turners should leap through the door and attack her, Bruce would kill him without mercy or regret. She knew that he would make every effort to bring the offenders to the law. But the ability to shoot a fleeing enemy in the back, because of wrongs done long ago, was past.

Bruce's vision had come to him. He knew that if vengeance had been the creed of the powers that ruled the world, the sphere would have been destroyed with fire long since. To stand firm and straight and unflinching; not to judge, not to condemn, not to resent; this was true strength. He began to see the whole race of men as so many leaves, buffeted by the winds of chance and circumstance; and was it for the oak leaf that the wind carried swift and high to hold in scorn the shrub leaf that the storm had already hurled to the dust?

"I know," the girl said, her thoughts wandering afar. "Perhaps the name for it all is—tolerance."

"Perhaps," he nodded. "And possibly it is only—worship!"

The Turners had gone. The dimming lightning revealed the entire attacking party half a mile distant and out of rifle range on the ridge; and Bruce and Linda stole together out into the storm. The green foliage of the tree had already burned away, but some of the upper branches still glowed against the dark sky. A fallen branch smoldered on the ground, hissing in the rain, and it lighted their way.

Awed and mystified, Bruce halted before the ruin of the great tree. He had almost forgotten the stress of the moment just passed. It did not even occur to him that some of his enemies, unseen before, might still be lurking in the shadow, watching for a chance to harm. They stood a moment in silence. Then Bruce uttered one little gasp and stretched his arm into the hollow that the cleft in the trunk had revealed.

The light from the burning branch behind him had shown him a small, dark object that had evidently been inserted in the hollow tree trunk through some little aperture that had either since been closed up or they had never observed. It was a leathern wallet, and Bruce opened it under Linda's startled gaze. He drew out a single white paper.

He held it in the light, and his glance swept down its lines of faded ink. Then he looked up with brightening eyes.

"What is it?" she asked.

"The secret agreement between your father and mine," he told her simply. "And we've won."

He watched her eyes brighten. It seemed to him that nothing life had ever offered had given him the same pleasure. It was a moment of triumph. But before half of its long seconds were gone, it became a moment of despair.

A rifle spoke from the coverts beyond,—one sharp, angry note that rose distinct and penetrating above the noise of the distant thunder. A little tongue of fire darted, like a snake's head, in the darkness. And the triumph on Bruce's face changed to a singular look of wonder.

XXX

To Simon, the night had seemingly ended in triumph after all. It had looked dark for a while. The bolt of lightning, setting fire to the pine, had deranged all of his plans. His men had been thrown from their horses, the blazing pine tree had left them exposed to fire from the house, and they had not yet caught their mounts and rallied. Young Bill and himself, however, had tied their horses before the lightning had struck and had lingered in the thickets in front of the house for just such a chance as had been given them.

He hadn't understood why Bruce had not opened fire on the fleeing Turners. He wondered if his enemy were out of ammunition. The tragedy of the Sentinel Pine had had no meaning for him; and he had held his rifle cocked and ready for the instant that Bruce had shown himself.

Young Bill had heard his little exultant gasp when Linda and Bruce had come out into the firelight. Plainly they had kept track of all the attacking party that had been visible, and supposed that all their enemies had gone. He felt the movement of Simon's strong arms as he raised the rifle. Those arms were never steadier. In the darkness the younger man could not see his face, but his own fancy pictured it with entire clearness. The eyes were narrowed and red, the lines cut deep about the bloodhound lips, and mercy was as far from him as from the Killer who hunted on the distant ridge.

But Simon didn't fire at once. The two were coming steadily toward him, and the nearer they were the better his chance of success in the unsteady light. He sat as breathless, as wholly free from telltale motion as a puma who waits in ambush for an approaching deer. He meant to take careful aim. It was his big chance, and he intended to make the most of it.

The two had halted beside the ruined pine, but for a moment he held his fire. They stood rather close together; he wanted to wait until Bruce offered a clear target. And at that instant Bruce had drawn the leather wallet from the tree.

Curiosity alone stayed Simon's finger as Bruce had opened it. He saw the gleam of the white paper in the dim light; and then he understood.

Simon was a man of rigid, unwavering self-control; and his usual way was to look a long time between the sights before he fired. Yet the sight of that document—the missing Folger-Ross agreement on which had hung victory or defeat—sent a violent impulse through all his nervous system. For the first time in his memory his reflexes got away from him.

It had meant too much; and his finger pressed back involuntarily against the trigger. He hadn't taken his usual deliberate aim, although he had seen Bruce's figure clearly between the sights the instant before he had fired. Simon was a rifle-man, bred in the bone, and he had no reason to think that the hasty aim meant a complete miss. He did realize, however, the difficulties of night shooting—a realization that all men who have lingered after dusk in the duck blind experience sooner or later—and he looked up over his sights to see the result of his shot. His self-control had completely returned to him; and he was perfectly cold about the whole matter.

From the first second he knew he hadn't completely missed. He raised his rifle to shoot again.

But Bruce's body was no longer revealed. Linda stood in the way. It looked as if she had deliberately thrown her own body as a shield between.

Simon spoke then,—a single, terrible oath of hatred and jealousy. But in a second more he saw his triumph. Bruce swayed, reeled, and fell in Linda's arms, and he saw her half-drag him into the house.

He stood shivering, but not from the cold that the storm had brought. "Come on," he ordered Young Bill. "I think we've downed him for good, but we've got to get that paper."

But Simon did not see all things clearly. He had little real knowledge of the little drama that had followed his shot from ambush.

Human nature is full of odd quirks and twists, and among other things, symptoms are misleading. There is an accepted way for men to act when they are struck with a rifle bullet. They are expected to reel, to throw their arms wide, and usually to cry out. The only trouble with these actions, as most men who have been in French battle-fields know very well, is that they do not usually happen in real life.

Bruce, with Linda's eyes upon him, took one rather long, troubled breath. And he did look somewhat puzzled. Then he looked down at his shoulder.

"I'm hit, Linda," he said in a quiet way. "I think just a scratch."

The tremendous shock of any kind of wound from a thirty-four caliber bullet had not seemingly affected him outwardly at all. Linda's response was rather curious. Some hours were to pass before he completely understood. The truth was that the shock of that rifle bullet, ordinarily striking a blow of a half-ton, had cost him for the moment an ability to make any logical interpretation of events. The girl moved swiftly, yet without giving an impression of leaping, and stood very close and in front of him. In one lightning movement she had made of her own body a shield for his, in case the assassin in the covert should shoot again.

She was trained to mountain ways, and instantly she regained a perfect mastery of herself. Her arms went about and seized his shoulders. "Stagger," she whispered quickly. "Pretend to fall. It's the one chance to save you."

He dispelled the mists in his own brain and obeyed her. He swayed, and her arms went about him. Then he fell forward.

Her strong arms encircled his waist and with all her magnificent young strength she dragged him to the door. It was noticeable, however—to all eyes except Bruce's—that she kept her own body as much as she could between him and the ambush. In an instant they were in the darkened room. Bruce stood up, once more wholly master of himself.

"You're not hurt bad?" she asked quickly.

"No. Just a deep scratch in the arm muscle near the shoulder. Bullet just must have grazed me. But it's bleeding pretty bad."

"Then there's no time to be lost." Her hands in her eagerness went again to his shoulder. "Don't you see—he'll be here in a minute. We'll steal out the back door and try to ride down to the courts before they can overtake us—"

In one instant he had grasped the idea; and he laughed softly in the gloom. "I know. I'll snatch two blankets and the food. You get the horse."

She sprang out the kitchen door and he hurried into the bedrooms. He snatched two of the warmest blankets from the beds and hurled them over his shoulder. He hooked the camp ax on his belt, then hastened into the little kitchen. He took up the little sack containing a few pounds of jerked venison, spilled out a few pieces for Elmira, and carried it—with a few pounds of flour—out to meet Linda. The horse still stood saddled, and with deft hands they tied on their supplies and fastened the blankets in a long roll in front of the saddle.

"Get on," she whispered. "I'll get up behind you."

She spoke in the utter darkness; he felt her breath against his cheek. Then the lightning came dimly and showed him her face.

"No, Linda," he replied quietly. "You are going alone—"

She cut him off with a despairing cry. "Oh, please, Bruce—I won't. I'll stay here then—"

"Don't you see?" he demanded. "You can make it out without me. I'm wounded and bleeding, and can't tell how long I can keep up. We've only got one horse, and without me to weigh him down you can get down to the courts—"

"And leave you here to be murdered? Oh, don't waste the precious seconds any more. I won't go without you. I mean it. If you stay here, I do too. Believe me if you ever believed anything."

Once more the lightning revealed her face, and on it was the determination of a zealot. He knew that she spoke the truth. He climbed with some difficulty into the saddle. A moment more and she swung up behind him.

The entire operation had taken an astonishingly short period of time. Bruce had worked like mad, wholly disregarding his injured arm. The rain had already changed to snow, and the wet flakes beat in his face, but he did not heed them. Just beyond, Simon with ready rifle was creeping toward the house.

"Which way?" Bruce asked.

"The out-trail—around the mountain," she whispered. "Simon will overtake us on the other—he's got a magnificent horse. On the mountain trail we'll have a better chance to keep out of his sight."

She spoke hurriedly, yet conveyed her message with entire clearness. They knew what they had to face, these two. Simon and whoever of the clan was with him would lose no time in springing in pursuit. They each had a strong horse, they knew the trails, they carried long-range rifles and would open fire at the first glimpse of the fugitives. Bruce was wounded; slight as the injury was it would seriously handicap them in such a test as this. Their one chance was to keep to the remote trails, to lurk unseen in the thickets, and try to break through to safety. And they knew that only by the doubtful mercy of the forest gods could they ever succeed.

She took the reins and pulled out of the trail, then encircled a heavy wall of brush. She didn't wish to take the risk of Simon seeing their forms in the dimming lightning and opening fire so soon. Then she turned back into the trail and headed into the storm.

Simon had clear enough memory of the rifle fire that Linda had opened upon the clan to wish to approach the house with care. It would be wholly typical of the girl to lay her lover on his bed, then go back to the window to wait for a sight of his assassin. She could look straight along a rifle barrel! A few moments were lost as Young Bill and himself encircled the thickets, keeping out of the gleam of the smoldering tree. Its light was almost gone; it hissed and glowed in the wet snow.

They crept up from the shadow, and holding their rifles ready, opened the door. They were somewhat surprised to find it unlocked. The truth was it had been left thus by design; Linda did not wish them to encircle the house to the rear door and discover Bruce and herself in the act of departure. The room was in darkness, and the two intruders rather expected to find Bruce's body on the threshold.

These were mountain men; and they had been in rifle duels before. They had the sure instincts of the beasts of prey in the hills without, and among other things they knew it wasn't wise to stand long in an open doorway with the firelight of the ruined pine behind them. They slipped quickly into the darkness.

Then they stopped and listened. The room was deeply silent. They couldn't hear the sound that both of them had so confidently expected,—the faint breathing of a dying man. Simon struck a match. The room was quite deserted.

"What's up?" Bill demanded.

Simon turned toward him with a scowl, and the match flickered and burned out in his fingers. "Keep your rifle ready. He may be hiding somewhere—still able to shoot."

They stole to the door of Linda's room and listened. Then they threw it wide.

One of their foes was in this room—an implacable foe whose eyes were glittering and strange in the matchlight. But it was neither Bruce nor Linda. It was old Elmira, cold and sinister as a rattler in its lair. Simon cursed her and hurried on.

At that instant both men began to move swiftly. Holding his rifle like a club, Simon swung through into, Bruce's room, lighted another match, then darted into the kitchen. In the dim matchlight the truth went home to him.

He turned, eyes glittering. "They've gone—on Dave's horse," he said. "Thank God they've only got one horse between 'em and can't go fast. You ride like hell up the trail toward the store—they might have gone that way. Keep close watch and shoot when you can make 'em out."

"You mean—" Bill's eyes widened.

"Mean! I mean do as I say. Shoot by sound, if you can't see them, and don't lose another second or I'll shoot you too. Aim for the man if a chance offers—but shoot, anyway. Don't stop hunting till you find them—they'll duck off in the brush sure. If they get through, everything is lost. I'll take the trail around the mountain."

They raced to their horses, untied them, and mounted swiftly. The darkness swallowed them at once.

XXXI

In the depth of gloom even the wild folk—usually keeping so close a watch on those that move on the shadowed trails—did not see Linda and Bruce ride past. The darkness is usually their time of dominance, but to-night most of them had yielded to the storm and the snow. They hovered in their coverts. What movement there was among them was mostly toward the foothills; for the message had gone forth over the wilderness that the cold had come to stay. The little gnawing folk, emerging for another night's work at filling their larders with food, crept down into the scarcely less impenetrable darkness of their underground burrows. Even the bears, whose furry coats were impervious to any ordinary cold, felt the beginnings of the cold-trance creeping over them. They were remembering the security and warmth of their last winter's dens, and they began to long for them again.

The horse walked slowly, head close to the ground. The girl made no effort to guide him. The lightning had all but ceased; and in an instant it had become apparent that only by trusting to the animal's instinct could the trail be kept at all; almost at once all sense of direction was lost to them. The snow and the darkness obscured the outline of the ridges against the sky; the trail was wholly invisible beneath them.

After the first hundred yards, they had no way of knowing that the horse was actually on the trail. While animals in the light of day cannot see nearly so far or interpret nearly so clearly as human beings, they usually seem to make their way much better at night. Many a frontiersman has been saved from death by realization of this fact; and, bewildered by the ridges, has permitted his dog to lead him into camp. But nature has never devised a creature that can see in the utter darkness, and the gloom that enfolded them now seemed simply unfathomable. Bruce found it increasingly hard to believe that the horse's eyes could make out any kind of dim pathway in the pine needles. The feeling grew on him and on Linda as well that they were lost and aimlessly wandering in the storm.

Of all the sensations that the wilderness can afford, there are few more dreadful to the spirit than this. It is never pleasant to lose one's bearings,—and in the night and the cold and miles from any friendly habitation it is particularly hard to bear. Bruce felt the age-old menace of the wilderness as never before. It always seemed to be crouching, waiting to take a man at a disadvantage; and like the gods that first make mad those whom they would destroy, it doesn't quite play fair. He understood now certain wilderness tragedies of which he had heard: how tenderfeet—lost among the ridges—had broken into a wild run that had ended nowhere except in exhaustion and death.

Bruce himself felt a wild desire to lash his horse into a gallop, but he forced it back with all his powers of will. His calmer, saner self explained that folly with entire clearness. It would mean panic for the horse, and then a quick and certain death either at the foot of a precipice or from a blow from a low-hanging limb. The horse seemed to be feeling its way, rather than seeing.

They were strange, lonely figures in the darkness; and for a long time they rode almost in silence. Then Bruce felt the girl's breath as she whispered.

"Bruce," she said. "Let's be brave and look this matter in the face. Do you think we've got a chance?"

He rode a long time before he answered. He groped desperately for a word that might bring her cheer, but it was hard to find. The cold seemed to deepen about them, the remorseless snow beat into his face.

"Linda," he replied, "it is one of the mercies of this world for men always to think that they've got a chance. Maybe it's only a cruelty in our case."

"I think I ought to tell you something else. I haven't the least way of knowing whether we are on the right trail."

"I knew that long ago. Whether we are on any trail at all."

"I've just been thinking. I don't know how many forks it has. We might have already got on a wrong one. Perhaps the horse is turned about and is heading back home—toward Simon's stables."

She spoke dully, and he thrust his arm back to her. "Linda, try to be brave," he urged. "We can only take a chance."

The horse plodded a few more steps. "Brave! To think that it is *you* that has to encourage *me*—instead of my trying to keep up your spirits. I will try to be brave, Bruce. And if we don't live through the night, my last remembrance will be of your bravery—how you, injured and weak from loss of blood, still remembered to give a cheery word to me."

"I'm not badly injured," he told her gently. "And there are certain things that have come clear to me lately. One of them is that except for you—throwing your own precious body between—I wouldn't be here at all."

The feeling that they had lost the trail grew upon them. More than once the stirrup struck the bark of a tree and often the thickets gave way beneath them. Once they halted to adjust the blankets on the saddle, and they listened for any sounds that might indicate that Simon was overtaking them. But all they heard was the soft rustle of the leaves under the wind-blown snow.

"Linda," he asked suddenly. "Does it seem to you to be awfully cold?"

She waited a long time before she spoke. This was not the hour to make quick answers. On any decision might rest their success or failure.

"I believe I can stand it—awhile longer," she answered at last.

"But I don't think we'd better try to. It's getting cold. Every hour it's colder, and I seem to be getting weaker. It isn't a real wound, Linda—but it seems to have knocked some of my vitality out of me, and I'm dreadfully in need of rest. I think we'd better try to make a camp."

"And go on by morning light?"

"Yes."

"But Simon might overtake us then."

"We must stay out of sight of the trail. But somehow—I can't help but hope he won't try to follow us on such a night as this."

He drew up the horse, and they sat in the beat of the snow. "Don't make any mistake about that, Bruce," she told him. "Remember, that unless he overtakes us before we come into the protection of the courts, his whole fight is lost. It doesn't alone mean loss of the estate—for which he would risk his life just as he has a dozen times. It means defeat—a thing that would come hard to Simon. Besides, he's got a fire within him that will keep him warm."

"You mean—hatred?"

"Hatred. Nothing else."

"But in spite of it we must make camp. We'll get off the trail—if we're still on it—and try to slip through to-morrow. You see what's going to happen if we keep on going this way?"

"I know that I feel a queer dread—and hopelessness—"

"And that dread and hopelessness are just as much danger signals as the sound of Simon's horse behind us. It means that the cold and the snow and the fear are getting the better of us. Linda, it's a race with death. Don't misunderstand me or disbelieve me. It isn't Simon alone now. It's the cold and the snow and the fear. The thing to do is to make camp, keep as warm as we can in our blankets, and push on in the morning. It's two full days' ride, going fast, the best we can go—and God knows what will happen before the end."

"Then turn off the trail, Bruce," the girl told him.

"I don't know that we're even on the trail."

"Turn off, anyway. As long as we stay together—it doesn't matter."

She spoke very quietly. Then he felt a strange thing. A warmth which even that growing, terrible

cold could not transcend swept over him. For her arms had crept out under his arms and encircled his great breast, then pressed with all her gentle strength.

No word of encouragement, no cheery expression of hope could have meant so much. Not defeat, not even the long darkness of death itself could appall him now. All that he had given and suffered and endured, all the mighty effort that he had made had in an instant been shown in its true light, a thing worth while, a sacrifice atoned for and redeemed.

They headed off into the thickets, blindly, letting the horse choose the way. They felt him turn to avoid some object in his path—evidently a fallen tree—and they mounted a slight ridge or rise. Then they felt the wet touch of fir branches against their cheeks.

Bruce stopped the horse and both dismounted. Both of them knew that under the drooping limbs of the tree they would find, at least until the snows deepened, comparative shelter from the storm. Here, rolled in their blankets, they might pass the remainder of the night hours.

Bruce tied the horse, and the girl unrolled the blankets. But she did not lay them together to make a rude bed,—and the dictates of conventionality had nothing whatever to do with it. If one jot more warmth could have been achieved by it, these two would have lain side by side through the night hours between the same blankets. She knew, however, that more warmth could be achieved if each of them took a blanket and rolled up in it; thus they would get two thicknesses instead of one and no openings to admit the freezing air. When this was done they lay side by side, economizing the last atom of warmth.

The night hours were dreary and long. The rain beat into the limbs above them, and sometimes it sifted through. At the first gray of dawn Bruce opened his eyes.

His dreams had been troubled and strange, but the reality to which he awakened gave him no sense of relief. The first knowledge that he had was that the snow had continued to sift down throughout the night, that it had already laid a white mantle over the wilderness, and the whirling flakes still cut off all view of the familiar landmarks by which he might get his bearings.

He had this knowledge before he was actually cognizant of the cold. And then its first realization came to him in a strange heaviness and dullness in his body, and an almost irresistible desire to sleep.

He fought a little battle, lying there under the snow-covered limbs of the fir tree. Because it was one in which no blows were exchanged, no shots fired, and no muscles called into action, it was no less a battle, trying and stern. It was a fight waged in his own spirit, and it seemed to rend him in twain.

The whole issue was clear in his mind at once. The cold had deepened in these hours of dawn, and he was slowly, steadily freezing to death. Even now the blood flowed less swiftly in his veins. Death itself, in the moment, had lost all horror for him; rather it was a thing of peace, of ease. All he had to do was to lie still. Just close his eyes,—and soft shadows would drop over him.

They would drop over Linda too. She lay still beside him; perhaps they had already fallen. The war he had waged so long and so relentlessly would end in blissful calm. Outside there was only snow and cold and wracking limbs and pain, only further conflict with tireless enemies, only struggle to tear his agonized body to pieces; and the bitterness of defeat in the end. He saw his chances plain as he lay beneath that gray sky. Even now, perhaps, Simon was upon them. Only two little rifle shells remained with which to combat him, and he doubted that his wounded arm would hold the rifle steady. There were weary, innumerable miles between them and any shelter, and only the terrible, trackless forest lay between.

Why not lie still and let the curtains fall? This was an easy, tranquil passing, and heaven alone knew what dreadful mode of egress would be his if he rose to battle further. All the argument seemed on one side.

But high and bright above all this burned the indomitable flame of his spirit. Even as the thoughts came to him it mounted higher, it propelled its essence of strength through his veins, it brought new steel to his muscles. To rise, to fight, to struggle on! Never to yield until the Power above decreed! To stand firm, even as the pines themselves. The dominant greatness that Linda had found in this man rose in him, and he set his muscles like iron.

He struggled to rise. He shook off the mists of the frost in his brain. He seemed to come to life. Quickly he knelt by Linda and shook her shoulders in his hands. She opened her eyes.

"Get up, Linda," he said gently. "We have to go on."

She started to object, but a message in his eyes kept her from it. His own spirit went into her. He helped her to her feet.

"Help me roll the blankets," he commanded, "and take out enough food for breakfast. We can't stop to eat it here. I think we're in sight of the main trail; whether we can find it—in the snow—I don't know." She understood; usually the absence of vegetation on a well-worn trail makes a shallow covering of snow appear more level and smooth and thus possible to follow.

"I'm afraid the snow's already too deep," he continued, "but we can go on in a general direction for a while at least—unless the snow gets worse so I can't even guess the position of the sun. We must get farther into the thickets before we stop to eat."

They were strange figures in the snow flurries as they went to work to roll the blankets into a compact bundle. The food she had taken from their stores for breakfast he thrust into the pocket of his coat; the rest, with the blankets, she tied swiftly on the horse. They unfastened the animal and for a moment she stood holding the reins while Bruce crept back on the hillside to look for the trail.

The snow swept round them, and they felt the lowering menace of the cold. And at that instant those dread spirits that rule the wilderness, jealous then and jealous still of the intrusion of man, dealt them a final, deadly blow.

Its weapon was just a sound—a loud crash in a distant thicket—and a pungent message on the wind that their human senses were too blunt to receive. Bruce saw the full dreadfulness of the blow and was powerless to save. The horse suddenly snorted loudly, then reared up. He saw as in a tragic, dream the girl struggle to hold him; he saw her pulled down into the snow and the rein jerked from her hand. Then the animal plunged, wheeled, and raced at top speed away into the snow flurries. Some Terror that as yet they could not name had broken their control of him and in an instant taken from them this one last hope of safety.

XXXII

Bruce walked over to Linda, waiting in the snow on her knees. It was not an intentional posture. She had been jerked down by the plunging horse, and she had not yet completely risen. But the sight of her slight figure, her raised white face, her clasped hands, and the remorseless snow of the wilderness about her moved Bruce to his depths. He saw her but dimly in the snow flurries, and she looked as if she were in an attitude of prayer.

He came rather slowly, and he even smiled a little. And she gave him a wan, strange, little smile in return.

"We're down to cases at last," he said, with a rather startling quietness of tone. "You see what it means?"

She nodded, then got to her feet.

"We can walk out, if we are let alone and given time; it isn't that we are obliged to have the horse. But our blankets are on its back, and this storm is steadily becoming a blizzard. And you see—*time* is one thing that we don't have. No human being can stand this cold for long unprotected."

"And we can't keep going—keep warm by walking?"

His answer was to take out his knife and put the point of the steel to his thumb nail. His eyes strained, then looked up. "A little way," he answered, "but we can't keep our main directions. The sun doesn't even cast a shadow on my nail to show us which is west. We could keep up a while, perhaps, but there is no end to this wilderness and at noon or to-night—the result would be the same."

"And it means—the end?"

"If I can't catch the horse. I'm going now. If we can regain the blankets—by getting in rifle range of the horse—we might make some sort of shelter in the snow and last out until we can see our way and get our bearings. You don't know of any shelter—any cave or cabin where we might build a fire?"

"No. There are some in the hills, but we can't see our way to find them."

"I know. I should have thought of that. And you see, we can't build a fire here—everything is wet, and the snow is beginning to whirl so we couldn't keep it going. If we should stagger on all day in this storm and this snow, we couldn't endure the night." He smiled again. "And I want you to climb a tree—and stay there—until I come back."

She looked at him dully. "What's the use, Bruce? You won't come back. You'll chase the thing until you die—I know you. You don't know when to give up. And if you want to come back—you couldn't find the way. I'm going with you."

"No." Once more she started to disobey, but the grave displeasure in his eyes restrained her. "It's going to take all my strength to fight through that snow—I must go fast—and maybe life and death will have to depend on your strength at the end of the trail. You must save it—the little you have left. I can find my way back to you by following my own tracks—the snow won't fill them up so soon. And since I must take the rifle—to shoot the horse if I can't catch him—you must climb a tree. You know why."

"Partly to hide from Simon if he comes this way. And partly—"

"Because there's some danger in that thicket beyond!" he interrupted her. "The horse's terror was real—besides, you heard the sound. It might be only a puma. But it might be—the Killer. Swing your arms and struggle all you can to keep the blood flowing. I won't be gone long."

He started to go, and she ran after him with outstretched arms. "Oh, Bruce," she cried, "come back soon—soon. Don't leave me to die alone. I'm not strong enough for that—"

He whirled, took two paces back, and his arms went about her. He had forgotten his injury long since. He kissed her cool lips and smiled into her eyes. Then at once the flurries hid him.

The girl climbed up into the branches of a fir tree. In the thicket beyond a great gray form tacked back and forth, trying to locate a scent that a second before he had caught but dimly and had lost. It was the Killer, and his temper was lost long ago in the whirling snow. His anger was upon him, partly from the discomfort of the storm, partly from the constant, gnawing pain of three bullet wounds in his powerful body. Besides, he realized the presence of his old and greatest enemy,—those tall, slight forms that had crossed him so many times, that had stung him with their bullets, and whose weakness he had learned.

The wind was variable, and all at once he caught the scent plain. He lurched forward, crashed again through the brush, and walked out into the snow-swept open. Linda saw his vague outline, and at first she hung perfectly motionless, hoping to escape his gaze. She had been told many times that grizzlies cannot climb, yet she had no desire to see him raging below her, reaching, possibly trying to shake her from the limbs. Her muscles were stiff and inactive from the cold, and she doubted her ability to hold on. Besides, in that dread moment she found it hard to believe that the Killer would not be able to swing into the lower limbs, high enough to strike her down.

He didn't seem to see her. His eyes were lowered; besides, it was never the grizzly way to search the branches of a tree. The wind blew the message that he might have read clearly in the opposite direction. She saw him walk slowly across the snow, head lowered, a huge gray ghost in the snow flurries not one hundred feet distant. Then she saw him pause, with lowered head.

In the little second before the truth came to her, the bear had already turned. Bruce's tracks were somewhat dimmed by the snow, but the Killer interpreted them truly. She saw too late that he had crossed them, read their message, and now had turned into the clouds of snow to trace them down.

For an instant she gazed at him in speechless horror; and already the flurries had almost obscured his gray figure. Desperately she tried to call his attention from the tracks. She called, then she rustled the branches as loudly as she could. But the noise of the wind obscured what sound she made, and the bear was already too absorbed in the hunt to turn and see her. As always, in the nearing presence of a foe, his rage grew upon him.

Sobbing, Linda swung down from the tree. She had no conscious plan of aid to her lover. She only had a blind instinct to seek him, to try to warn him of his danger, and at least to be with him at the death. The great tracks of the Killer, seemingly almost as long as her own arm, made a plain trail for her to follow. She too struck off into the storm-swept canyon.

And the forest gods who dwell somewhere in the region where the pine tops taper into the sky, and who pull the strings that drop and raise the curtain and work the puppets that are the players of the wilderness dramas, saw a chance for a great and tragic jest in this strange chase over the snow. The destinies of Bruce, Linda, and the Killer were already converging on this trail that all three followed,—the path that the runaway horse made in the snow. Only one of the great forces of the war that had been waged at Trail's End was lacking, and now he came also.

Simon Turner had ridden late into the night and from before dawn; with remorseless fury he had goaded on his exhausted horse, he had driven him with un pitying strength through coverts, over great rocks, down into rocky canyons in search of Bruce and Linda, and now, as the dawn broke, he thought that he had found them. He had suddenly come upon the tracks of Bruce's horse in the snow.

If he had encountered them farther back, when the animal had been running wildly, he might have guessed the truth and rejoiced. No man would attempt to ride a horse at a gallop through that trailless stretch. But at the point he found the tracks most of the horse's terror had been spent, and it was walking leisurely, sometimes lowering its head to crop the shrubbery. The trail was comparatively fresh too; or else the fast-falling snow would have already obscured it. He thought that his hour of triumph was near.

But it had come none too soon. And Simon—out of passion-filled eyes—looked and saw that it would likely bring death with it.

He realized his position fully. The storm was steadily developing into one of those terrible mountain blizzards in which, without shelter, no human being might live. He was far from his home, he had no blankets, and he could not find his way. Yet he would not have turned back if he could.

In all the manifold mysteries of the wilderness there was no stranger thing than this: that in the face of his passion Simon had forgotten and ignored even that deepest instinct, self-preservation. Nothing mattered any more except his hatred. No desire was left except its expression.

The securing of the document by which Bruce could take the great estates from him was only a trifle now. He believed wholly within his own soul that the wilderness—without his aid—would do his work of hatred for him; and that by no conceivable circumstances could Bruce and Linda find shelter from the blizzard and live through the day. He could find their bodies in the spring if he by any chance escaped himself, and take the Ross-Folger agreement from them. But it was not

enough. He wanted also to do the work of destruction.

Even his own death—if it were only delayed until his vengeance was wreaked—could not matter now. In all the ancient strife and fury and ceaseless war of the wild through which he had come, there was no passion to equal this. The Killer was content to let the wolf kill the fawn for him. The cougar will turn from its warm, newly slain prey, in which its white fangs have already dipped, at the sight of some great danger in the thickets. But Simon could not turn. Death lowered its wings upon him as well as upon his enemy, yet the fire in his heart and the fury in his brain shut out all thought of it.

He sprang off his horse better to examine the tracks, and then stood, half bent over, in the snow.

Bruce Folger headed swiftly up the trail that his runaway horse had made. It was, he thought, his last effort, and he gave his full strength to it. Weakened as he was by the cold and the wound, he could not have made headway at all except for the fact that the wind was behind him.

The snow ever fell faster, in larger flakes, and the track dimmed before his eyes. It was a losing game. Terrified not only by the beast that had stirred in the thicket but by the ever-increasing wind as well, the animal would not linger to be overtaken. Bruce had not ridden it enough to have tamed it, and his plan was to attempt to shoot the creature on sight, rather than try to catch it. They could not go forward, anyway, as long as the blizzard lasted. Which way was east and which was west he could no longer guess. And with the blankets they might make some sort of shelter and keep life in their bodies until the snow ceased and they could find their way.

The cold was deepening, the storm was increasing in fury. Bruce's bones ached, his wounded arm felt numb and strange, the frost was getting into his lungs. The wind's breath was ever keener, its whistle was louder in the pines. There was no hope of the storm decreasing, rather it was steadily growing worse. And Bruce had some pre-knowledge—an inheritance, perhaps, from frontier ancestors—of the real nature of the mountain blizzard such as was descending on him now. It was a losing fight. All the optimism of youth and the spirit of the angels could not deny this fact.

The tracks grew more dim, and he began to be afraid that the falling flakes would obscure his own footprints so that he could not find his way back to Linda. And he knew, beyond all other knowledge, that he wanted her with him when the shadows dropped down for good and all. He couldn't face them bravely alone. He wanted her arms about him; the flight would be easier then.

"Oh, what's the use?" he suddenly said to the wind. "Why not give up and go back?"

He halted in the trail and started to turn. But at that instant a banner of wind swept down into his face, and the eddy of snow in front of him was brushed from his gaze. Just for the space of a breath the canyon for a hundred feet distant was partially cleared of the blinding streamers of snow. And he uttered a long gasp when he saw, thirty yards distant and at the farthest reaches of his sight, the figure of a saddled horse.

His gun leaped to his shoulder, yet his eagerness did not cost him his self-control. He gazed quietly along the sights until he saw the animal's shoulder between them. His finger pressed back against the trigger.

The horse rocked down, seemingly instantly killed, and the snow swept in between. Bruce cried out in triumph. Then he broke into a run and sped through the flurries toward his dead.

But it came about that there was other business for Bruce than the recovery of his blankets that he had supposed would be tied to the saddle. The snow was thick between, and he was within twenty feet of the animal's body before he glimpsed it clearly again. And he felt the first wave of wonder, the first promptings of the thought that the horse he had shot down was not his, but one that he had never seen before.

But there was no time for the thought to go fully home. Some one cried out—a strange, half-snarl of hatred and triumph that was almost lacking in all human quality—and a man's body leaped toward him from the thicket before which the horse had fallen. It was Simon, and Bruce had mistaken his horse for the one he had ridden.

XXXIII

Even in that instant crisis Bruce did not forget that he had as yet neglected to expel the empty cartridge from the barrel of his rifle and to throw in the other from the magazine. He tried to get the gun to his shoulder, working the lever at the same time. But Simon's leap was too fast for him. His strong hand seized the barrel of the gun and snatched it from his hands. Then the assailant threw it back, over his shoulder, and it fell softly in the snow. He waited, crouched.

The two men stood face to face at last. All things else were forgotten. The world they had known before—a world of sorrow and pleasures, of mountains and woods and homes—faded out and left

no realities except each other's presence. All about them were the snow flurries that their eyes could not penetrate, and it was as if they were two lone contestants on an otherwise uninhabited sphere who had come to grips at last. The falling snow gave the whole picture a curious tone of unreality and dimness.

Bruce straightened, and his face was of iron. "Well, Simon," he said. "You've come."

The man's eyes burned red through the snow. "Of course I would. Did you think you could escape me?"

"It didn't much matter whether I escaped you or not," Bruce answered rather quietly. "Neither one of us is going to escape the storm and the cold. I suppose you know that."

"I know that *one* of us is. Because one of us is going out—a more direct way—first. Which one that is doesn't much matter." His great hands clasped. "Bruce, when I snatched your gun right now I could have done more. I could have sprung a few feet farther and had you around the waist—taken by surprise. The fight would have been already over. I think I could have done more than that even—with my own rifle as you came up. It's laying there, just beside the horse."

But Bruce didn't turn his eyes to look at it. He was waiting for the attack.

"I could have snatched your life just as well, but I wanted to wait," Simon went on. "I wanted to say a few words first, and wanted to master you—not by surprise—but by superior strength alone."

It came into Bruce's mind that he could tell Simon of the wound near his shoulder, how because of it no fight between them would be a fair test of superiority, yet the words didn't come to his lips. He could not ask mercy of this man, either directly or indirectly, any more than the pines asked mercy of the snows that covered them.

"You were right when you said there is no escaping from this storm," Simon went on. "But it doesn't much matter. It's the end of a long war, and what happens to the victor is neither here nor there. It seems all the more fitting that we should meet just as we have—at the very brink of death—and Death should be waiting at the end for the one of us who survives. It's so like this damned, terrible wilderness in which we live."

Bruce gazed in amazement. The dark and dreadful poetry of this man's nature was coming to the fore. The wind made a strange echo to his words,—a long, wild shriek as it swept over the heads of the pines.

"Then why are you waiting?" Bruce asked.

"So you can understand everything. But I guess that time is here. There is to be no mercy at the end of this fight, Bruce; I ask none and will give none. You have waged a war against me, you have escaped me many times, you have won the love of the woman I love—and this is to be my answer." His voice dropped a note and he spoke more quietly. "I'm going to kill you, Bruce."

"Then try it," Bruce answered steadily. "I'm in a hurry to go back to Linda."

Simon's smoldering wrath blazed up at the words. Both men seemed to spring at the same time. Their arms flailed, then interlocked; and they rocked a long time—back and forth in the snow.

They fought in silence. The flurries dropped over them, and the wind swept by in its frantic wandering. Bruce called upon his last ounce of reserve strength,—that mysterious force that always sweeps to a man's aid in a moment of crisis.

For the first time he had full realization of Simon's mighty strength. With all the power of his body he tried to wrench him off his feet, but it was like trying to tear a tree from the ground.

But surprise at the other's power was not confined to Bruce alone. Simon knew that he had an opponent worthy of the iron of his own muscles, and he put all his terrible might into the battle. He tried to reach Bruce's throat, but the man's strong shoulder held the arm against his side. Simon's great hand reached to pin Bruce's arm, and for the first time he discovered the location of his weakness.

He saw the color sweep from Bruce's face and water drops that were not melted snow come upon it. It was all the advantage needed between such evenly matched contestants. And Simon forgot his spoken word that he wished this fight to be a test of superiority alone. His fury swept over him like a flood and effaced all things else; and he centered his whole attack upon Bruce's wound.

In a moment he had him down, and he struck once into Bruce's white face with his terrible knuckles. The blow sent a strange sickness through the younger man's frame; and he tried vainly to struggle to his feet. "Fight! Fight on!" was the message his mind dispatched along his nerves to his tortured muscles, but for an instant they wholly refused to respond. They had endured too much. Total unconsciousness hovered above him, ready to descend.

Strangely, he seemed to know that Simon had crept from his body and was even now reaching some dreadful weapon that lay beside the dead form of the horse. In an instant he had it, and Bruce's eyes opened in time to see him swinging it aloft. It was his rifle, and Simon was aiming a murderous blow at him with its stock.

There was no chance to ward it off. No human skull could withstand its shattering impact. Bruce saw the man's dark face with the murder madness upon it, the blazing eyes, the lips drawn back. The muscles contracted to deal the blow.

But that war of life and death in the far reaches of Trail's End was not to end so soon. At that instant there was an amazing intervention.

A great gray form came lunging out of the snow flurries. Their vision was limited to a few feet, and so fast the creature came, with such incredible, smashing power, that he was upon them in a breath. It was the Killer in the full glory of the charge; and he had caught up with them at last.

Bruce saw only his great figure looming just over him. Simon, with amazing agility, leaped to one side just in time, then battered down the rifle stock with all his strength. But the blow was not meant for Bruce. It struck where aimed,—the great gray shoulder of the grizzly.

Then, dimmed and half-observed by the snow flurries, there began as strange a battle as the great pines above them had ever beheld. The Killer's rage was upon him, and the blow at the shoulder had arrested his charge for a moment only. Then he wheeled, a snarling, fighting monster with death for any living creature in the blow of his forearm, and lunged toward Simon again.

It was the Killer at his grandest. The little eyes blazed, the neck hair bristled, he struck with forearms and jaws—lashing, lunging, recoiling—all the terrible might and fury of the wilderness centered and personified in his mighty form. Simon had no chance to shoot his rifle. In the instant that he would raise it those great claws and fangs would be upon him. He swung it as a club, striking again and again, dodging the sledge-hammer blows and springing aside in the second of the Killer's lunges. He was fighting for his life, and no eye could bemean that effort.

Simon himself seemed exalted, and for once it appeared that the grizzly had found an opponent worthy of his might. It was all so fitting: that these two mighty powers, typifying all that is remorseless and terrible in the wild, should clash at last in the gathering fury of the storm. They were of one kind, and they seemed to understand each other. The lust and passion and fury of battle were upon them both.

The scene harked back to the young days of the world, when man and beast battled for dominance. Nothing had changed. The forest stood grave and silent, just the same. The elements warred against them from the clouds,—that ancient persecution of which the wolf pack sings on the ridge at night, that endless strife that has made of existence a travail and a scourge. Man and beast and storm—those three great foes were arrayed the same as ever. Time swung backward a thousand-thousand years.

The storm gathered in force. The full strength of the blizzard was upon them. The snow seemed to come from all directions in great clouds and flurries and streamers, and time after time it wholly hid the contestants from Bruce's eyes. At such times he could tell how the fight was going by sound alone,—the snarls of the Killer, the wild oaths of Simon, the impact of the descending rifle-butt. Bruce gave no thought to taking part. Both were enemies; his own strength seemed gone. The cold deepened; Bruce could feel it creeping into his blood, halting its flow, threatening the spark of life within him. The full light of day had come out upon the land.

Bruce knew the wilderness now. All its primitive passions were in play, all its mighty forces at grips. The storm seemed to be trying to extinguish these mortal lives; jealous of their intrusion, longing for the world it knew before living things came to dwell upon it, when its winds swept endlessly over an uninhabited earth, and its winter snows lay trackless and its rule was supreme. And beneath it, blind to the knowledge that in union alone lay strength to oppose its might—to oppose all those cruel forces that make a battleground of life—man and beast fought their battle to the death.

It seemed to go on forever. Linda came stealing out of the snow—following the grizzly's trail—and crept beside Bruce. She crouched beside him, and his arm went about her as if to shield her. She had heard the sounds of the battle from afar; she had thought that Bruce was the contestant, and her terror had left a deep pallor upon her face; yet now she gazed upon that frightful conflict with a strange and enduring calm. Both she and Bruce knew that there was but one sure conqueror, and that was Death. If the Killer survived the fight and through the mercy of the forest gods spared their lives, there remained the blizzard. They could conceive of no circumstances whereby further effort would be of the least avail. The horse on which was tied their scanty blankets was miles away by now; its tracks were obscured in the snow, and they could not find their way to any shelter that might be concealed among the ridges.

The scene grew in fury. The last burst of strength was upon Simon; in another moment he would be exhausted. The bear had suffered terrible punishment from the blows of the rifle stock. He recoiled once more, then lunged with unbelievable speed. His huge paw, with all his might behind it, struck the weapon from Simon's hand.

It shot through the air seemingly almost as fast as the bullets it had often propelled from its muzzle and struck the trunk of a tree. So hard it came that the lock was shattered; they heard the ring of metal. The bear rocked forward once more and struck again. And then all the sound that was left was the eerie complaint of the wind.

Simon lay still. The brave fight was over. His trial had ended fittingly,—in the grip of such powers

as were typical of himself. But the bear did not leap upon him to tear his flesh. For an instant he stood like a statue in gray stone, head lowered, as if in a strange attitude of thought. The snow swept over him.

Linda and Bruce gazed at him in silent awe. Some way, they felt no fear. No room in their hearts was left for it after the tumult of that battle. The great grizzly uttered one deep note and half-turned about. His eyes rested upon the twain, but he did not seem to see them.

The fury was dead within him; this much was plain. The hair began to lie down at his shoulders. The terrible eyes lost their fire. Then he turned again and headed off slowly, deliberately, directly into the face of the storm.

XXXIV

The flurries almost immediately obscured the Killer's form, and Bruce turned his attention back to Linda. "It's the end," he said quietly. "Why not here—as well as anywhere else?"

But before the question was finished, a strange note had come into his voice. It was as if his attention had been called from his words by something much more momentous. The truth was that it had been caught and held by a curious expression on the girl's face.

Some great idea, partaking of the nature of inspiration, had come to her. He saw it in the growing light in her eyes, the deepening of the soft lines of her face. All at once she sprang to her feet.

"Bruce!" she cried. "Perhaps there's a way yet. A long, long chance, but maybe a way yet. Get your rifle—Simon's is broken—and come with me."

Without waiting for him to rise she struck off into the storm, following the huge footprints of the bear. The man struggled with himself, summoned all that was left of his reserve supply of strength, and leaped up. He snatched his rifle from the ground where Simon had thrown it, and in an instant was beside her. Her cheeks were blazing.

"Maybe it just means further torture," she confessed to him, "but don't you want to make every effort we can to save ourselves? Don't you want to fight till the last breath?"

She glanced up and saw her answer in the growing strength of his face. Then his words spoke too. "As long as the slightest chance remains," he replied.

"And you'll forgive me if it comes to nothing?"

He smiled, dimly. She took fresh heart when she saw he still had strength enough to smile. "You don't have to ask me that."

"A moment ago an idea came to me—it came so straight and sure it was as if a voice told me," she explained hurriedly. She didn't look at him again. She kept her eyes intent upon the great footprints in the snow. To miss them for a second meant, in that world of whirling snow, to lose them forever. "It was after the bear had killed Simon and had gone away. He acted exactly as if he thought of something and went out to do it—exactly as if he had a destination in view. Didn't you see—his anger seemed to die in him and he started off in the *face of the storm*. I've watched the ways of animals too long not to know that he had something in view. It wasn't food; he would have attacked the body of the horse, or even Simon's body. If he had just been running away or wandering, he would have gone with the wind, not against it. He was weakened from the fight, perhaps dying—and I think—"

He finished the sentence for her, breathlessly. "That he's going toward shelter."

"Yes. You know, Bruce—the bears hibernate every year. They always seem to have places all chosen—usually caverns in the hillsides or under uprooted trees—and when the winter cuts off their supplies of food they go straight toward them. That's my one hope now—that the Killer has gone to some cave he knows about to hibernate until this storm is over. I think from the way he started off, so sure and so straight, that it's near. It would be dry and out of the storm, and if we could take it away from him we could make a fire that the snow wouldn't put out. It would mean life—and we could go on when the storm is over."

"You remember—we have only one cartridge."

"Yes, I know—I heard you fire. And it's only a thirty-thirty at that. It's a risk—as terrible a risk as we've yet run. But it's a chance."

They talked no more. Instead, they walked as fast as they could into the face of the storm. It was a moment of respite. This new hope returned some measure of their strength to them. They walked much more swiftly than the bear, and they could tell by the appearance of the tracks that they were but a few yards behind him.

"He won't smell us, the wind blowing as it does," Linda encouraged. "And he won't hear us either."

Now the tracks were practically unspotted with the flakes. They strained into the flurries. Now they walked almost in silence, their footfall muffled in the snow.

They soon became aware that they were mounting a low ridge. They left the underbrush and emerged into the open timber. And all at once Bruce, who now walked in front, paused with lifted hand, and pointed. Dim through the flurries they made out the outline of the bear. And Linda's inspiration had come true.

There was a ledge of rocks just in front—a place such as the rattlesnakes had loved in the blasting sun of summer—and a black hole yawned in its side. The aperture had been almost covered with the snow, and they saw that the great creature was scooping away the remainder of the white drift with his paw. As they waited, the opening grew steadily wider, revealing the mouth of a little cavern in the face of the rock.

"Shoot!" Linda whispered. "If he gets inside we won't be able to get him out."

But Bruce shook his head, then stole nearer. She understood; he had only one cartridge, and he must not take the risk of wounding the animal. The fire had to be centered on a vital place.

He walked steadily nearer until it seemed to Linda he would advance straight into reach of the terrible claws. He held the rifle firmly; his jaw was set, his face white, his eyes straight and strong with the strength of the pines themselves. He went as softly as he could—nearer, ever nearer—the rifle cocked and ready in his hands.

The Killer turned his head and saw Bruce. Rage flamed again in his eyes. He half-turned about; then poised to charge.

The gun moved swiftly, easily, to the man's shoulder, his chin dropped down, his straight eyes gazed along the barrel. In spite of his wound never had human arms held more steady than his did then. And he marked the little space of gray squarely between the two reddening eyes.

The finger pressed back steadily against the trigger. The rifle cracked in the silence. And then there was a curious effect of tableau, a long second in which all three figures seemed to stand deathly still.

The bear leaped forward, and it seemed wholly impossible to Linda that Bruce could swerve aside in time to avoid the blow. She cried out in horror as the great paws whipped down in the place where Bruce had stood. But the man had been prepared for this very recoil, and he had sprung aside just as the claws raked past.

And the Killer would hunt no more in Trail's End. At the end of that leap he fell, his great body quivering strangely in the snow. The lead had gone straight home where it had been aimed, and the charge itself had been mostly muscular reflex. He lay still at last, a gray, mammoth figure that was majestic even in death.

No more would the deer shudder with terror at the sound of his heavy step in the thicket. No more would the herds fly into stampede at the sight of his great shadow on the moonlit grass. The last of the Oregon grizzlies had gone the way of all his breed.

To Bruce and Linda, standing breathless and awed in the snow-flurries, his death imaged the passing of an old order—the last stand that the forces of the wild had made against conquering man. But there was pathos in it too. There was the symbol of mighty breeds humbled and destroyed.

But the pines were left. Those eternal symbols of the wilderness—and of powers beyond the wilderness—still stood straight and grand and impassive above them. While these two lived, at least, they would still keep their watch over the wilderness, they would still stand erect and brave to the buffeting of the storm and snow, and in their shade dwelt strength and peace.

The cavern that was revealed to them had a rock floor and had been hollowed out by running water in ages past. Bruce built a fire at its mouth of some of the long tree roots that extended down into it, and the life-giving warmth was a benediction. Already the drifting snow had begun to cover the aperture.

"We can wait here until the blizzard is done," Bruce told Linda, as she sat beside him in the soft glow of the fire. "We have a little food, and we can cut more from the body of the grizzly when we need it. There's dead wood under the snow. And when the storm is over, we can get our bearings and walk out."

She sat a long time without answering. "And after that?" she asked.

He smiled. "No one knows. It's ten days before the thirtieth—the blizzards up here never last over three or four days. We've got plenty of time to get the document down to the courts. The law will deal with the rest of the Turners. We've won, Linda."

His hands groped for hers, and he laid it against his lips. With her other hand she stroked his snow-wet hair. Her eyes were lustrous in the firelight.

"And after that—after all that is settled? You will come back to the mountains?"

"Could I ever leave them!" he exclaimed. "Of course, Linda. But I don't know what I can do up here—except maybe to establish my claim to my father's old farm. There's a hundred or so acres. I believe I'd like to feel the handles of a plow in my palms."

"It was what you were made for, Bruce," she told him. "It's born in you. There's a hundred acres there—and three thousand—somewhere else. You've got new strength, Bruce. You could take hold and make them yield up their hay—and their crops—and fill all these hills with the herds." She stretched out her arms. Then all at once she dropped them almost as if in supplication. But her voice had regained the old merry tone he had learned to love when she spoke again. "Bruce, have I got to do all the asking?"

His answer was to stretch his great arms and draw her into them. His laugh rang in the cavern.

"Oh, my dearest!" he cried. The eyes lighted in his bronzed face. "I ask for everything—everything—bold that I am! And what I want worst—this minute—"

"Yes?"

"—Is just—a kiss."

She gave it to him with all the tenderness of her soft lips. The snow sifted down outside. Again the pines spoke to one another, but the sadness seemed mostly gone from their soft voices.

THE END

By EDISON MARSHALL

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