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Hats—Shoes—and Haberdashery, Too



SYNOPSIS

PROLOGUE.

In the little town of Ottobachville around Dan Felling disease began to spread with menacingly over his supposed physical weakness.

BOOK I—REPARTITION.

CHAPTER I.—Warned by his physician that he has not more than six months to live, Felling decides to spend the last three months of his life in the mountains.

CHAPTER II.—In a large southern Oregon city he meets people who had known and loved his grandfather, a famous frontiersman. He makes his home with Blue Lennox, a trapper, woodsman.

CHAPTER III.

The Lennox home was a typical mountain ranch-house—square, solid, comforting in storm and wind.

"You must be chilly and worn out from the long ride," Lennox suggested, "sit down by the fire."

"I'm not cold," he said, "it's hardly dark yet. I'd sooner go outdoors and look around."

The elder man regarded him curiously, perhaps with the faintest glimmer of admiration.

"What is this meant?" he asked, "I've certainly tasted it before."

"It'll bet a few dollars that you haven't, if you've lived all your life in the Middle West," Lennox answered.

"Soon after dinner Lennox led him out of the house for his first glimpse of the hills in the darkness."

They walked together out to the gate, across the first of the wide pastures where, at certain seasons, Lennox kept his cattle.

"You'd better wait till tomorrow, Dan," he replied.

"But, good heavens! I'm not going to try to spare myself while I'm here, it's too late for that."

"Of course—but sit down now, anyway. I'm sorry that Snowbird isn't here."

"My daughter. My boy, she can make a biscuit! That's not her name, of course, but we've always called her that. She got tired of keeping house and is working this summer. Poor Bill has to keep house for her, and no wonder he's eager to take the stock down to the lower levels. I only wish he hadn't brought 'em up this spring at all. I've lost dozens from the coyotes."

"But a coyote can't kill cattle—"

"It can if it has hydrophobia, a common thing in the mountains this time of year. But as I say, Bill will take the stock down next season, and then Snowbird's work will be through, and she'll come back here."

"Then she's down in the valley?"

"Far from it. She's a mountain girl if one ever lived. Perhaps you don't know the recent policy of the forest service to lure women when they can be obtained. It was a policy enacted in war times and kept up now because it is economical and efficient. She and a girl from college have a cabin not five miles from here on old Bald mountain, and they're doing look-out duty."

Dan wondered intensely what look-out duty might be. "You see, Dan," Lennox said in explanation, "the government loses thousands of dollars every year by forest fire. A fire can be stopped easily if it is soon soon after it starts. But let it burn awhile,

in this dry season, and it's a terror—a wall of flame that races through the forests and can hardly be stopped. And maybe you don't realize how enormous this region is—literally hundreds of miles across. We're the first outpost—the eye four cabins, if you can find them, in the first seventy miles back to town. So they have to put lookouts on the high points, and now they're coming to the use of airplanes. Snowbird and a girl friend from college got jobs this summer as lookouts—they are hiring women for the work. They are more vigilant than men, less inclined to take chances, and work cheaper. These two girls have a cabin near a spring, and they cook their own food, and are making what is big wages in the mountains. I'm rather hoping she'll drop over for a few minutes tonight."

"Good Lord! Does she travel over these hills in the darkness?"

The mountaineer laughed—a delighted sound that came somewhat curiously from the bearded lips of the stern, dark man, "Dan, I'll swear she's afraid of nothing that walks the face of the earth—and it isn't because she hasn't had experience either. She's a dead shot with a pistol, for one thing. She's physically strong, and every muscle is hard as nails. She used to have Shag, too—the best dog in all these mountains. She's a mountain girl, I tell you; whoever wins her has got to be able to tame her!"

The mountaineer laughed again, and the call to supper came then, and Dan got his first sight of mountain food. There were potatoes, newly dug, and green beans, and a little corn, and a great bowl of purple berries to be eaten with sugar and cream. Dan's appetite was not as a rule particularly good. But evidently the long ride had affected him. He simply didn't have the moral courage to refuse when the elder Lennox heaped his plate.

"Good heavens, I can't eat all that," he said, as it was passed to him. But the others laughed and told him to take heart.

He took heart. It was a stupor of bliss, but at that first bite his sudden confidence in his predatory ability almost overwhelmed him. So he cut himself a bite of the tender steak—fully half as generous as the bites that Bill was consuming across the table. And his first flavor simply filled him with delight.

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him in strange, deep ways in which he had never been stirred before; it left him exultant and, in deep wells of his nature far below the usual currents of excitement, a little excited too.

Then both of them were startled out of their reflections by the clear, unmistakable sound of footsteps on the ridge. Both of them turned, and Lennox laughed softly in the darkness. "My daughter," he said, "I knew she wouldn't be afraid to come."

Dan could see only Snowbird's outline at first, just her shadow against the moonlit hillside. His glasses were none too good at long range. And possibly, when she came within range, the first thing that he noticed about her was her stride. The girls he knew didn't walk in quite that free, strong way. She took almost a man-size step; and yet it was curious that she did not seem ungraceful. Dan had a distinct impression that she was floating down to him on the moonlight as if she were a trained singer.

The sound gave him a distinct sense of surprise. Some way, he hadn't associated a voice like this with a mountain girl; he had supposed that there would be so many harshening influences in this wild place. Yet the tone was as clear and full as a trained singer's. It was not a high voice; and yet it seemed simply brimming, as a cup brims with wine, with the rapture of life. It was a self-confident and, wholly without embarrassment.

Then she came close, and Dan saw the moonlight on her face. And so it came, as clear and full as a trained singer's. It was not a high voice; and yet it seemed simply brimming, as a cup brims with wine, with the rapture of life. It was a self-confident and, wholly without embarrassment.

The girl who stood in the moonlight had health. She was simply vibrant with health. It brought a light to her eyes, and a color to her cheeks, and life and shimmer to her moorland hair. It brought curves to her body, and strength and firmness to her limbs, and the grace of a deer to her carriage. Whether she had regular features or not Dan would have been unable to state. He didn't even notice. They weren't important when health was present. Yet there was nothing of the coarse or bold or voluptuous about her. She was just a slender girl, perhaps twenty years of age, and weighing even less than the figure occasionally to be seen in the health magazines for girls of her height. And she was fresh and cool beyond all words to tell.

And Dan had no delusions about her attitude toward him. For a long instant she turned her keen, young eyes to his white, thin face; and at once it became abundantly evident that beyond a few girlish speculations she felt no interest in him. After a single moment of rather strained, polite conversation with Dan—just enough to satisfy her idea of the conventions—she began a thrilling girlhood tale to her father. And she was still telling it when they reached the house.

Dan held a chair for her in front of the fireplace, and she took it with entire naturalness. He was careful to put it where the firelight was at its height. He wanted to see its effect on the flushed cheeks, the soft dark hair. And then, standing in the shadows, he simply watched her. With the eye of an artist he delighted in her gestures, her rippling enthusiasm, her utter irrepressible gladness that all of time had not yet come to an end.

Bill stood watching her, his hands deep in his pockets, evidently a companion of the best. Her father gazed at her with amused tolerance. And Dan—he didn't know in just what way he did look at her. And he didn't have time to decide. In less than fifteen minutes, and wholly without warning, she sprang up from her chair and started toward the door.

"Good Lord!" Dan breathed. "If you make such sudden motions as that I'll have heart failure. Where are you going now?"

"Back to my watch," she answered, her tone wholly lacking the personal note which men have learned to expect in the voices of women. And an instant later the three of them saw her retreating shadow as she vanished among the pines.

Dan had to be helped to bed. The long ride had been too hard on his shattered lungs; and nerves and body collapsed. An instant after the door was closed behind the departing girl, he laughed weakly and begged their pardon; and the two men were really very gentle. They told him it was their own fault for permitting him to overdo. Lennox himself blew out the candle in the big, cold bedroom.

Dan saw the door close behind him, and he had an instant's glimpse of the long sweep of moonlight ridge that stretched beneath the window. Then,

all at once, seemingly without warning, it simply blinked out. Not until the next morning did he really know why. Insomnia was an old acquaintance of Dan's, and he had expected to have some trouble in getting to sleep. His only real trouble was waking up again when Lennox called him to breakfast. He couldn't believe that the light at his window shade was really that of morning.

"Good Heavens!" his host exploded. "You sleep the sleep of the just."

Dan was about to tell him that on the contrary he was a very nervous sleeper, but he thought better of it. Something had surely happened to his insomnia. The next instant he even forgot to wonder about it in the realization that his tired body had been wonderfully refreshed. He had no dread now of the long tramp up the ridge that his host had planned.

But first came target practice. In Dan's baggage he had a certain very plain but serviceable sporting rifle of about thirty-four caliber—a gun that the information department of the large sporting-goods store in Gitchepolis had recommended for his purpose. Except for the few moments in the store, Dan had never held a rifle in his hands. The first shot he hit the trunk of a five-foot pine at thirty paces.

"That I couldn't very well have missed it!" he replied to Lennox's cheer. "You see, I aimed at the middle—but I just grazed the edge."

The second shot was not so good, missing the tree altogether. And it was a singular thing that he aimed longer and tried harder on this shot than on the first. The third time he tried still harder, and made by far the worst shot of all.

"What's the matter?" he demanded. "I'm getting worse all the time."

Lennox didn't know for sure. But he made a long guess. "It might be beginner's luck," he said, "but I'm inclined to think you're trying too hard. Take it easier—depend more on your instincts."

Dan's reply was to lift the rifle lightly to his shoulder, glance quickly along the trigger and fire. The bullet struck within one inch of the center of the pine.

For a long second Lennox gazed at him in open-mouthed astonishment. "My stars, boy!" he cried at last. "Was I mistaken in thinking you were a born tenderfoot—after all? Can it be that a little of your old grandfather's skill has been passed down to you? But you can't do it again."

But Dan did do it again. If anything, the bullet was a little nearer the center. And then he aimed at a more distant tree.

But the hammer snapped down ineffectively on the breach. He turned with a look of question.

"Your gun only holds five shots," Lennox explained. Reloading, Dan tried a more difficult target—a trunk almost one hundred yards distant. Of course it would have been only child's play to an experienced hunter; but to a tenderfoot, it was a difficult mark indeed. Twice out of four shots Dan hit the tree trunk, and one of his two hits was practically a bull's-eye. His two misses were the result of the same mistake he had made before—attempting to hold his aim too long.

Dan and Lennox started together up the long slope of the ridge. Dan alone armed; Lennox went with him solely as a guide. The deer season had just opened, and it might be that Dan would want to procure one of these creatures.

"But I'm not sure I want to hunt deer," Dan told him. "You speak of them as being so beautiful—"

"They are beautiful and your grandfather would never hunt them, either, except for meat. But maybe you'll change your mind when you see a buck. Besides, we might run into a lynx or a panther. But not very likely, without dogs."

They trudged up, over the carpet of pine needles. They fought their way through a thicket of buckbrush. Once they saw the gray squirrels in the tree tops. And before Lennox had as much as supposed they were near the haunts of big game, a yearling doe sprang up from its bed in the thicket.

For an instant she stood motionless, presenting a perfect target. It was evident that she had heard the sound of the approaching hunters, but had not as yet located or identified them with her near-sighted eyes. Lennox whirled to find Dan standing very still, peering along the barrel of his rifle. But he didn't shoot. The deer, seeing Lennox move, leaped into her terror—such a bounding run that it was one of the fastest gait in the whole animal world. In the wink of an eye she was out of sight.

"Why didn't you shoot?" Lennox demanded. "Shoot? It was a doe, wasn't it?" "Good Lord, of course it was a doe! But there are no game laws that go back this far. Besides—you aimed at it."

"I aimed just to see if I could catch it through my sights. And I could. My glasses sort of made it blur—but I think—perhaps—that I could have shot it. But I'm not going to kill deer. There must be some reason for the game laws, or they wouldn't exist."

"You're a funny one. Come three thousand miles to hunt and then pass up the first deer you see. You could almost have been your grandfather, to have done that. He thought killing deer needlessly was almost as bad as killing a man. They are beautiful things, aren't they?"

Dan answered him with startling emphasis. But the look that he wore said more than his words. They trudged on, and Lennox grew thoughtful. He was recalling the picture that he had seen when he had whirled to look at Dan, immediately after the deer had leaped from its bed. It puzzled him a little. He had turned to find the younger man in a perfect posture to shoot, his feet placed in exactly the position that years of experience had taught Lennox was correct; and withal, absolutely motionless. What many hunters take years to learn, Dan had seemed to know by instinct. Could it be, after all, that this slender, weakling, even now bowed down with a terrible malady, had inherited the true frontiersman's instincts of his ancestors?

The result of this thought was at least to hover in the near vicinity of a certain conclusion. That conclusion was that at least a few of the characteristics of his grandfather had been passed down to Dan. It meant that possibly, if time remained, he would not turn out such a weakling, after all. Of course his courage, his nerve, had yet to be tested; but the fact remained that long generations of frontiersmen ancestors had left his influence upon him. The wild was calling to him, wakening instincts long smothered in cities, but sure and true as ever. It was the beginning of regeneration. Voices of the long past were speaking to him, and the Fallings once more had begun to run true to form. Inherited tendencies were in a moment changing this weak, diseased youth into a frontiersman and wilderness inhabitant such as his ancestors had been before him.

They were slipping along over the pine needles, their eyes intent on the trail ahead. And then Lennox saw a curious thing. He beheld Dan suddenly stop in the trail and turn his eyes toward a heavy thicket that lay back of the ridge. He looked almost like a wild creature himself. His head was lowered, as if he were listening. His muscles were set and ready.

Lennox had prided himself that he had retained all the powers of his five senses, and that few men in the mountains had keener ears than he. Yet it was truth that at first he only knew the silence, and the stir and pulse of his own blood. He assumed then that Dan was watching something that from his position, twenty feet behind, he could not see. He tried to probe the thickets with his eyes.

Then Dan whispered. Ever so soft a sound, but yet distinct in the stillness.

"There's something living in that thicket!"

Then Lennox heard it, too. As they stood still, the sound became ever clearer and more pronounced. Some living creature was advancing toward them; and twice were cracking beneath its feet. The sounds were rather subdued, and yet, as the animal approached, both of them instinctively knew that they were extremely loud for the usual footsteps of any of the wild creatures.

"What is it?" Dan asked quietly. Lennox was so intrigued by the sounds that he was not even observant of the peculiar, subdued quality in Dan's voice. Otherwise, he would have wondered at it. "I'm free to confess I don't know," he said. "It's booming right toward us, like most animals don't care to do. Of course it may be a human being. You must watch out for that."

They waited. The sound ended. They stood straining for a long moment without speech.

"That was the dumbest thing!" Lennox went on. "Of course it might have been a bear—you never know what they're going to do. It might have got sight of us and turned off. But I can't believe that it was just a deer—"

But then his words chopped squarely off in his throat. The plodding advance commenced again. And the next instant a gray form revealed itself at the edge of the thicket.

It was Graycoat the coyote, half-blind with his madness, and desperate in his agony.

"There was no more deadly thing in all the hills than he. Even the bite of a rattlesnake would have been welcomed beside him. He stood a long instant, and all his instincts and reflexes that would have ordinarily made him flee in abject terror were thwarted and twisted by the fever of his madness. He stared a moment at the two figures, and his red eyes could not interpret them. They were simply foes, for it was true that when this reeking agony was upon him, even lifeless trees seemed foes sometimes. He seemed eerie and unreal as he gazed at them out of his burning eyes; and the white foam gathered at his fangs. And then, wholly without warning, he charged down at them.

He came with unbelievable speed. The elder Lennox cried once in warning and cursed himself for venturing forth on the ridge without a gun. He was fully twenty feet distant from Dan; yet he saw in an instant his only course. This was no time to trust their lives to the marksmanship of an amateur. He sprang toward Dan, intending to wrench the weapons from his hand.

But he didn't achieve his purpose. At the first step his foot caught in a protruding root, and he was shot to his face on the trail. But a long life in the wilderness had developed Lennox's reflexes to an abnormal degree; many crises had taught him muscle

(CONTINUED ON FOURTH PAGE)

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