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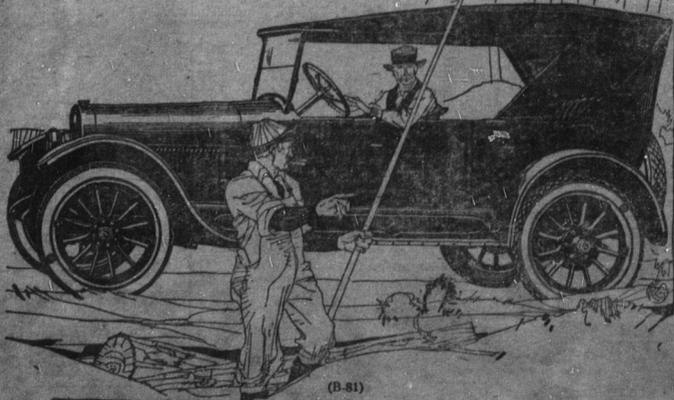


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## The Voice of the Pack

BY EDISON MARSHALL

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### SYNOPSIS

#### PROLOGUE.

In the little town of Gitchessville small Dan Felling dreams boyish dreams, haunted with melancholy over his supposed physical weakness. There, years later, he meets Destiny.

#### BOOK I—REPRIATION.

**CHAPTER I.**—Warned by his physician that he has not more than six months to live, Felling sits despondently on a park bench, wondering where he should spend those six months. A friendly squirrel practically decides the matter for him. His blood is plotters' blood, and he decides to end his days in the forests of Oregon. Memories of his grandfather and a deep love for all things of the wild help him in reaching a decision.

**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 Silas Lennox, a typical westerner. The only other members of the household are Lennox's son, "Bill," and daughter, "Snowbird." Their abode is many miles from "civilization," in the Umpqua divide, and there Felling plans to live out the short span of life which he has been told is his. His extreme weakness in the face of even a slight exertion convinces him that the doctor had made a correct diagnosis of his case.

**CHAPTER III.**—From the first Felling's health shows a marked improvement, and in the companionship of Lennox and his son and daughter he fits into the woods life as if he had been born to it. By quick thinking and a remarkable display of "nerve" he saves Lennox's life and his own when they are attacked by a mad coyote. Lennox declares he is a reincarnation of his grandfather, Dan Felling I, whose fame as a woodsman is a household word.

#### BOOK TWO—THE DEBT.

**CHAPTER I.**—Dan, now thoroughly proficient in woods lore, learns from Lennox that an organized band of outlaws, of which Bert Cranston is the leader, is making trouble in the vicinity. Landry Hildreth, a former member of the gang, has been induced to turn state's evidence. On his way to the city Hildreth was waylaid by Cranston, shot, and left for dead. Cranston, however, overlooked the fact that Hildreth might have some important evidence on his person, and is satisfied that his enemy will never reach the city to tell what he knows of the operations of the gang.

#### CHAPTER II.

Shortly after nine o'clock, Whisperfoot encountered his first herd of deer. But they caught his scent and scattered before he could get up to them. He met Wolf, grunting through the underbrush, and he punctiliously, but with wretched spirit, left the trail. A fight with Wolf the bear was one of the most unpleasant experiences that could be imagined. He had a pair of strong arms of which one embrace of a cougar's body meant death in one long shriek of pain. Of course they didn't fight often. They had entirely opposite interests. The bear was a berry-eater and a honey-grubber, and the cougar cared too much for his own life and beauty to tackle Wolf in a hunting way.

A fawn leaped from the thicket in front of him, startled by his sound in the thicket. The truth was, Whisperfoot had made a wholly unjustified mistake on a dry twig, just at the crucial moment. Perhaps it was the fault of Wolf, whose presence had driven Whisperfoot from the trail, and perhaps because old age and stiffness was coming upon him. In neither of these facts appressed his anger. He could scarcely suppress a snarl of fury and disappointment.

He continued along the ridge, still stealing, still alert, but his anger increasing with every moment. The fact that he had to leave the trail again to permit still another animal to pass, and a particularly insignificant one too, didn't make him feel any better. This animal had a number of curious stripes along his back, and usually did nothing more desperate than steal eggs and eat bird fledglings. Whisperfoot could have crushed him with one bite, but this was one thing that the great cat, as long as he lived, would never try to do. He got out of the way politely when Stripe-back was still a quarter of a mile away; which was quite a compliment to the little animal's ability to introduce himself. Stripe-back was familiarly known as a skunk.

Shortly after ten, the mountain lion had a remarkably fine chance at a buck. The direction of the wind, the trees, the thickets and the light were all in his favor. It was old Blacktail, wallowing in the tall tick; and Whisperfoot's heart bounded when he detected him. No human hunter could have laid his plans with greater care. He had to cut up the side of the ridge, mindful of the wind. Then there was a long dense thicket in which he might approach within fifty feet of the tick, still with the wind in his face. Just beside the tick was another deep thicket, from which he could make his leap.

His body lowered, the tall lashed back and forth, and now it had begun to have a slight vertical motion that frontiersmen have learned to watch for. He placed every paw with consummate grace, and few sets of human nerves have sufficient control over leg muscles to move with such astonishing patience. He scarcely seemed to move at all; and when he was nearly ten feet remained to stalk, a sudden sound pricked through the darkness. It came from afar, but it was no less terrible. It was really two sounds, so close together that they sounded as one. Neither Blacktail nor Whisperfoot had any delusions about them. They recognized them at once, in strange ways under the skin that no man may describe, as the far-off reports of a rifle. Just today Blacktail had seen his doe fall bleeding when this sound, only louder, spoke from a covert from which Bert Cranston, and poached her—and he left the tick in one bound.

Ferried though he was by the rifle shot, still Whisperfoot sprang. But the distance was too far. He stretched paw hummed, down four feet behind Blacktail's flank. Then forgetting everything but his anger and disappointment, the great cougar opened his mouth and howled.

The long night was almost done when he got sight of further danger. First a flock of ravens circled about a pair of vultures from a thicket to which they had been yanked by the first whisper of dawn in the wind, and he really had no chance at them. Soon after this, the moon set.

The larger creatures of the forest are almost as helpless in absolute darkness as human beings. It is very well to talk of seeing in the dark, but even the nature of things, even vertical pupils may only respond to light. No owl or bat can see in absolute darkness. It became increasingly likely that Whisperfoot would have to retire to his lair without any meal whatever.

But still he remained, hoping against hope. After a futile fifteen minutes of watching a trail, he heard a doe feeding on a hillside. Its foot-fall was not so heavy as the sturdy tramp of a buck, and besides, the bucks would be higher on the ridges this time of morning. He began a cautious advance toward it.

For the first fifty yards the hunt was in his favor. He came up wind, and the brush made a perfect cover.

But the doe unfortunately was standing a full twenty yards farther, in an open glade. Under ordinary circumstances, Whisperfoot would not have made an attack. A cougar can run swiftly, but a deer is light itself. The big cat would have preferred to linger, a motionless thing in the thicket, hoping some other member of the deer herd to which the doe must have belonged would come into his ambush. But the hunt was late, and Whisperfoot was very, very angry. Too many times this night he had missed his hit. In desperation, he leaped from the thicket and charged the deer.

In spite of the preponderant odds against him, the charge was almost a success. He went fully half the distance between them before the deer perceived him. Then she leaped. There seemed to be no interlude of time between the instant that she beheld the dim, tawny figure in the air and that in which her long legs pushed out in a spring. But she didn't leap straight ahead. She knew enough of the cougers to know that the great cat would certainly aim for her head and neck in the same way that a duck-hunter leads a fast-flying duck—hoping to intercept her leap. Even as her feet left the ground she seemed to whirl in the air, and the deadly talons whipped down in vain. Then, cutting back in front, she raced down wind.

It is usually the most unmitigated folly for a cougar to chase a deer against which he has missed his stroke; and it is also quite fatal to his dignity. And whoever doubts for a minute that the larger creatures have no dignity, and that it is not very dear to them, simply knows nothing about the ways of animals. They cling to it to the death. But tonight one disappointment after another had crumbled, as the rains crumble leaves, the last vestige of Whisperfoot's self-control. Snarling in fury, he bounded after the doe.

She was lost to sight at once in the darkness, but for fully thirty yards he raced in her pursuit. If he had stopped to think, it would have been one of the really great surprises of his life to hear the sudden, unmistakable stir and movement of a large, living creature not fifteen feet distant in the thicket.

He didn't stop to think at all. He didn't puzzle on the extreme unlikelihood of a doe halting in her flight from the thicket; he had any perceptions of the creature other than its movements. He was running down wind, so it is certain that he didn't smell it. If he saw it at all, it was just as a shadow, sufficiently large to be that of a deer. It was moving, crawling as Wolf the bear sometimes crawled, seemingly to get out of his path. And Whisperfoot leaped straight at it. It was a perfect shot. He landed high on its shoulders. His head lashed down, and the white teeth closed. All the long life of his race he had known that pungent essence that flowed forth. His senses perceived it, a message shot along his nerves to his brain. And then he opened his mouth in a high, far-carrying squeal of utter, abject terror.

He sprang a full fifteen feet back into the thickets; then crouched. The hair stood stiff at his shoulders, his claws were bared; he was prepared to fight to the death. He didn't understand. He only knew the worst single terror of his life. It was not a doe that he had attacked in the darkness. It was not Ursus the porcupine, or even Wolf. It was that imperial master of all things, man himself. Unknowing, he had attacked Landry Hildreth, lying wounded from Cranston's bullet beside the trail. Word of the arrow ring would never reach the settlements, after all.

And as for Whisperfoot—the terror that choked his heart with blood began to wear off in a little while. The man lay so still in the thickets. Besides, there was a strange, wild smell in the air. Whisperfoot's stroke had gone home so true there had not even been a fight. The darkness began to lift around him, and a strange exultation, a rapture unknown before in all his hunting, began to creep into his wild blood. Then, as a shadow stole, he went creeping back to his lair.

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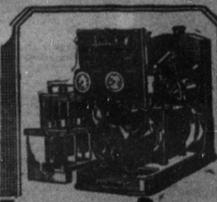
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