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The Voice of the Pack

By Edison Marshall

BOOK THREE—THE PAYMENT.

CHAPTER I.—Hildred's disappearance is unaccounted for until Dan finds his mutilated body and near it the evidence which will send Cranston to the gallows and break up the outlaw gang. A record cold winter sets in. Cranston, suspecting that Hildred's evidence is in existence, visits the Lenox home in the absence of Dan and "Snowbird" to search for it. He fails to find it, and his rage and disappointment are so great that he and Lenox being powerless to stop him. The almost helpless man drags himself outside.

Dan had cut the green limbs of the trees and planned them with his ax. The sled had been completed, handles attached for pushing it, and a piece of fence wire fastened with nails as a rope to pull it. The warm moccasins of both of them as well as the one blanket that Lenox had saved from the fire were wrapped about the old frontiersman's wasted body—Dan and Snowbird hoping to keep warm by the exercise of propelling the sled. Except for the dull ax and the half-empty pistol, their only equipment was a single charred pot for melting snow that Dan had recovered from the ashes of the kitchen.

The three had worked almost in silence. Words didn't help now. They wasted no words, they had to get it done in one minute to talk when they got to the top of the little ridge that had overlooked the house.

"We'll travel mostly at night," Dan told them. "We can see in the snow, and by taking our rest in the daytime, when the sun is bright and warm, we can save our strength. We won't have to keep such big fires then—and at night our exertion will keep us as warm as we can hope for. Getting up all night to cut green wood with this dull ax in the snow would break us to pieces very soon, for remember that we haven't any food. I know how to build a fire even in the snow—especially if I can find the dead, dry heart of a rotten log—but it isn't any fun to keep it going with green wood. We don't want to have to spend any more of our strength stripping off wet bark and hacking at saplings than we can help; and that means we'd better do our resting in the heat of the day. After all, it's a fight against starvation more than anything else."

"Just think," the girl told them, reproaching herself, "if I had shot straight at that wolf today, we could have gone back and got his body. It might have carried us through."

Neither of the others as much as looked surprised at these amazing remarks over the lost, mangled flesh of a wolf. They were up against realities, and they didn't mince words. Dan smiled at her gently, and his great shoulder leaned against the traces.

"They moved through a dead world. The ever-present menace of the wild life that had been such a delight to Dan in the summer and fall were quite lacking now. The snow was trackless. Once they thought they saw a snowshoe rabbit, a strange shadow on the snow, but he was too far away for them to risk a pistol shot. The pound or two of flesh would be sorely needed before the journey was over, but the pistol cartridges might be needed still more. He didn't let her mind rest on certain possibilities where they might be needed. Such thoughts stole the courage from the spirit, and courage was essential beyond all things else to bring them through.

As the dawn came out, they all stood still and listened to the wolf pack, singing on the ridge somewhere behind them.

It was a large pack. They couldn't make out individual voices—neither the more shrill cry of the females, the yapping of the cubs, or the low, clear G-below-middle-C note of the males. "If they should cross our tracks," Lenox suggested.

"No use worrying about that now—until we come to it," Dan told him.

The morning broke, the sun rose bright in a clear sky. But still they trudged on. In spite of the fact that the sled was heavy and broke through the snow crust as they tugged at it, they had made good time since their departure. But now every step was a pronounced effort. It was the dreadful beginning of fatigue that only food and warmth and rest could rectify.

They couldn't have told just why, even if they had wanted to talk about it. In some dim way, Dan had lost the strange quality of sleep that had held before. It was as if the pack were running with renewed life, that each wolf was calling to another with a dreadful sort of excitement. It was an excited cry, too—not the long, and three was hoping against hope in his very heart; and at the same time, hoping that the others did not understand. They couldn't help but listen. No human ears could have shut out the sound. But none of them pretended that they had heard. And this was the worst sign of all. Each one of the three was hoping against hope in his very heart; and at the same time, hoping that the others did not understand.

The man looked back at the girl, smiling into her eyes. Lenox lay as if asleep, the lines of his dark face curiously pronounced. And the girl, because she was of the mountains, body and hand, answered Dan's smile. Then they knew that all of them knew the truth. Not even an inexperienced ear could have any delusions about the pack song now. It was that oldest of wilderness songs, the hunting-cry that meant a score of bloodhounds that the wolf pack utters when it is running on the trail of game. It had found the track of living flesh at last.

"There's no use stopping, or trying to climb a tree," Dan told them simply. "In the first place, Lenox can't do it. In the second, we've got to take a chance—for cold and hunger can get up a tree where the wolf pack can't. He spoke wholly without emotion. Once more he tightened the traces of the sled.

"I've heard that sometimes the pack will chase a man for days without attacking," Lenox told them. "It all depends on how long they've gone without food. Keep on and try to forget."

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

"The second reason is that it's the one hope we have left. I take it that none of us are deceived on that point. And no man can die tamely—if he is a man—while there's a chance. I mean a young man, and a young man is old and tired. It sounds perfectly silly to talk about finding Cranston's winter quarters, and then, with my bare hands, conquering him, taking his food and his blankets and his snowshoes and his rifle, to fight away these wolves, and bring 'em to the door."

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

"CONTINUED NEXT WEEK."

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