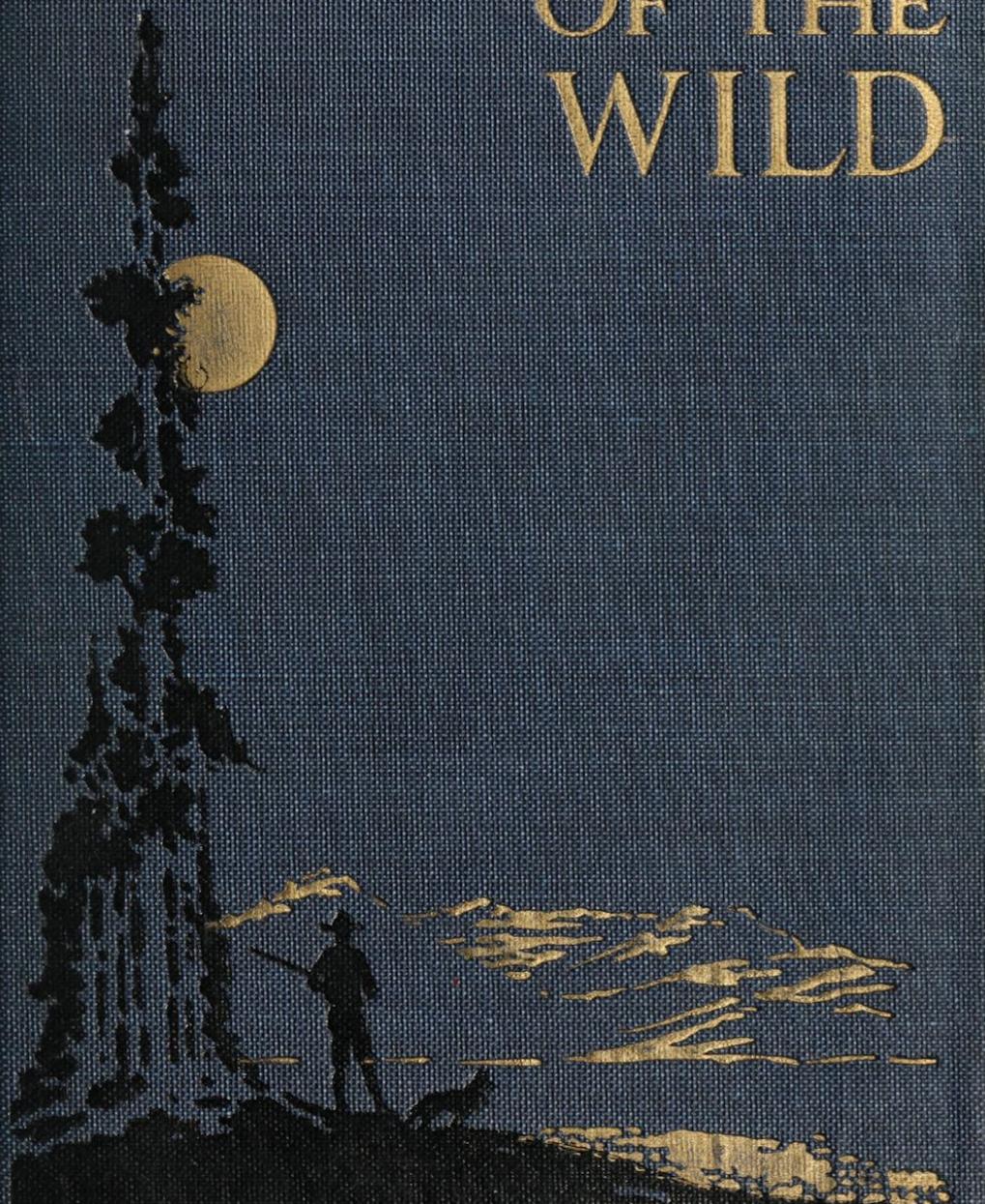


SHEPHERDS OF THE WILD



EDISON MARSHALL

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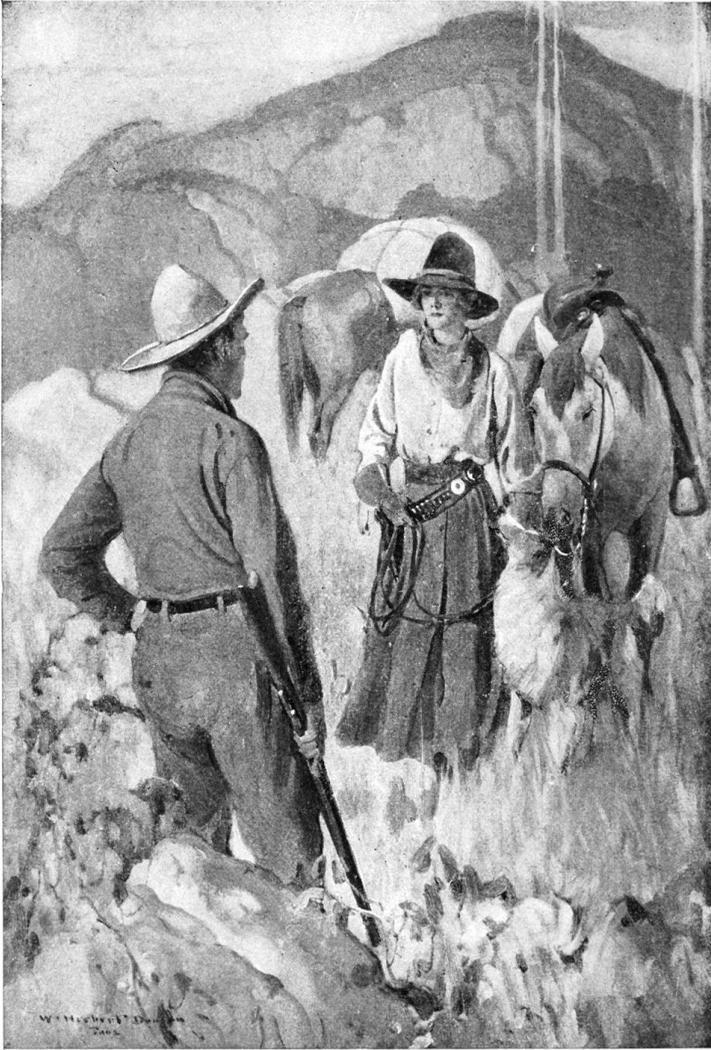
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“We’ll pay you two dollars a day—and furnish you with supplies,” she assured him soberly.—
FRONTISPIECE. [See page 122.](#)

SHEPHERDS OF THE WILD

BY EDISON MARSHALL

AUTHOR OF

“The Snowshoe Trail,” “The Voice of the Pack,”

“The Strength of the Pines,” etc.



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Shepherds of the Wild

CHAPTER I

The mouth of the canyon was darkened with shadows when the bull elk came stealing down the brown trail through the dusky thicket. In all this mountain realm, a land where the wild things of the forest still held sway, there was no creature of more majestic bearing or noble beauty. He was full-grown; his great antlers swept back over his powerful shoulders; and it was evident from his carriage that he had no fear of such enemies as might be lurking in the gloomy canyon. For it was known far through the forest that even the great puma or the terrible grizzly, unless they had the advantage of ambush, treated Spread Horn with considerable respect.

Signs of July were everywhere: signs that were large print and clear to the eyes of the wild creatures, but which would have been mostly unintelligible to men. The huckleberries were just beginning to ripen in the thickets as always, in the seventh month. The fledglings, the little weasel noticed as he climbed here and there through the branches, were just the July size,—still soft with the fat of squabhood but yet big enough to make a pleasing lump in the stomach. The pines are a wonderful calendar in themselves; and only to the eyes of human beings, badly in need of spectacles, do they seem never to change. They go from a deep, rich green to a strange dusky blue, and now they were just about halfway between. This fact, as well as the size and developments of their cones, indicated as clearly as a printed calendar that the month was July. Besides, old Spread Horn had a sure index to the month in his own antlers.

Time was, and not many months back at that, when he had no more sign of antlers than his own cows. The time would come, just before they fell off completely, when they would be suitably hard and sharp for the edification of any rival stags that should attempt to disrupt his family life. Just at present they were full-grown but still in the “velvet,”—covered with a sort of tawny fuzz that was soft to the touch. It indicated July without the least chance for doubt.

He came slipping easily down the canyon; and there was no reason whatever for expecting him. He walked into the wind: his scent was blown behind. Otherwise certain coyotes and lynx and such hunters, too ineffective ever to get farther than hungry thoughts and speculations, would have been

somewhat excited by his approach. Spread Horn made it his business to walk into the face of the wind just as much as possible, and in that way he was aware of all living creatures in the foreground before they were aware of him. To walk down the wind, all creatures know, is to announce one's self as clearly as to wear a bell around the neck.

Neither did the great elk make any sounds in particular. If indeed a twig cracked from time to time beneath his foot it was not enough to arouse any interest. He was not especially hungry, but now and then he lowered his head to crop a tender shoot from the shrubbery. At such times he kept watch, out of the corner of his eyes, for any enemies that might be waiting in ambush beside the trail. He would stake his horns and hoofs against any wild creature that inhabited Smoky Land, in a fair fight; but the puma—and sometimes even the grizzly—didn't always play fair. They knew how to leap like the blast of doom from a heavy thicket.

A coyote—most despised of hunters—saw Spread Horn's tall form in the shrubbery and glided away. There was a legend in the coyote's family of how once a particularly bold forefather had seized a cow elk by the leg, and of the subsequent tragedy that had befallen. The only result, it had seemed, was a careful and patient dissection of the gray body beneath the front hoofs of the bull—arriving just the wrong moment—and Gray Thief had no desire to start a new legend on his own account.

Spread Horn showed no surprise at his appearance. His only neighbors were the wild folk,—the only people that he knew. For the wild creatures were still, as far as facts went, the real owners and habitants of Smoky Land. It is true that in various heavy and dusty books in legal offices it could be learned that this particular part of Idaho was public domain, but as yet few frontiersmen had come to clear away the forest and till the meadows. The place was really startlingly large—distances are always rather generous in the West—but few were the maps that named it. Those that had gone to fish in its waters and hunt its mountains thought of it always as beyond,—beyond the last outposts of civilization, beyond the end of the trails, and clear where the little rivers rose in great springs. The cattlemen had named it, and at the end of the dry summer, when forest fires ranged here and there through the high ridges on each side, the name was particularly appropriate. Because of the structure of the passes the winds were likely to fill the region with pale, blue smoke.

In reality Smoky Land lay on the great shoulders of the Rockies,—a high plateau, studded here and there by grim and lofty snow peaks. It was not a land for gentlefolk. It was a hard, grim place, a forbidding land where the sun was a curse in summer and the winds a stinging lash in winter, where

great glaciers gleamed in the morning light and snow fields lay unchanging above the line where the timber became stunted and died. There were rugged crags and impassable cliffs, deep gorges and dark, still canyons; miles of gray sliderock and glossy grass slope; and through it all, dwelling like a spirit, there was a beauty that could not be denied. It manifested itself to every sweep of the eyes.

Game trails wound and crisscrossed through the thickets, and the dung was not dried to dust and the tracks half obliterated and stale as in many of the game trails of the West. One only had to wait, to lie still as a shadow in the coverts to see such sights as the forest gods usually reserved for the chosen few. Sometimes it was a doe, stealing with mincing steps and incredible grace from thicket to thicket; sometimes a puma, glaring of eye and hushed of foot and curiously interested in all the doings of the deer; sometimes an old black bear grunted and mumbled and soliloquized as he blundered along; and there is a tale, one that only the swans that come to the high lakes lived long enough to remember, that years ago, in a particularly cold winter, Old Argali, the great mountain ram, led his flock down from the high peaks to feed on the green banks of the streams.

Spread Horn knew them all. They were his neighbors. Also he knew the people that lived in the cataract at the bottom of the gorge. Sometimes, when he paused to drink, the salmon rushed past him in their mysterious journeyings,—their fourth-year migration to the waters in which they were born. They come to spawn in the waters where they were themselves spawned before they go down to the sea, and after they spawn they die. To the naturalist there are strange significances in this repatriation of the salmon. There is a sense of curious relationships,—for strong men, too, always try to return to their homeland for their last days. After four years, almost to the day, the salmon come fighting their way back through the riffles, into dreadful gorges, up cataracts, and high is the waterfall that holds them back.

The salmon were not the only water people that Spread Horn knew. He had seen the trout, too (of course the salmon himself is just an overgrown trout that has taken up a seafaring life) and some of them, like the salmon themselves, took an occasional thousand-mile jaunt to the ocean. These were the great steelheads and such seagoing people, and sportsmen say that a five-pounder at the end of a silk line will permit, for ten tearing, fighting, breathless moments, a glimpse into the Promised Land. But you can imagine the mighty salmon, who have spent four years in the sea and who have swum about the reefs of Kamchatka, regarding them with some patronage. Then there were the little trout: quivering, timid, sparkling creatures that,

although great stay-at-homes and never going to sea, still look very beautiful in a creel.

It seems to be one of Nature's aims to make life interesting and exciting for all her creatures, so she had provided certain other river-folk to entertain these finned people. Their method of entertainment was to take a sudden leap into a riffle or trout pool with glittering, gleaming razor-edged teeth all set and ready. One little instant's delay in darting to safety, one little clasping of those wicked teeth into the beautiful silver shoulder,—and the trout leaped no more for flies in the cool of the evening. These were the otter and mink and such fur-bearing people, and they existed in plentiful numbers because in this region the trapper had not yet made himself particularly manifest. Then there were plenty of mergansers and other feathered fishermen to take care of the fingerlings.

The cattle herds fed through the region, and sometimes sportsmen penetrated its fastnesses, but mostly Smoky Land was simply the wilderness, primeval and unchanged. The venerable grizzly still dug for marmots on the high ranges,—the great killer that shared the mountain monarchy with the bull elk. The Rocky Mountain goat, white-whiskered as a patriarch, had a range just adjoining that of the bighorn. The wolf pack sang of death and hunger when the ridges were swept with snow.

The late afternoon sunlight, shot and dappled by the shadows of the leaves, fell over the bull elk's body; and the animal sensed the approach of night. It was the drinking hour. A spring flowed at the foot of the glen, Spread Horn knew, and he turned toward it, stealing softly. And all at once he seemed to freeze in his tracks.

The wind had brought him a message, unmistakably as wireless telephones bring messages of approaching foes across a battle field. His nervous reaction was instantaneous: danger, go slow! Yet it was not a familiar smell, and scientists would have a hard time explaining why the stag had at once recognized its menace. For the creature from whom it came was almost a stranger to these mountains, and it was wholly possible that Spread Horn had never perceived the breed before.

He stood still, gazing, and he looked a long time through the shrubby branches down to a little green glade beside the spring. He raised one foot and lifted his long muzzle. Then he gave the warning cry,—the sound with which, in the fall, he would warn his herd of danger.

There was no more distinctive cry in the whole wilderness world than this,—a strange, whistling snort, beginning high on the scale and descending

to a deep bawl. It traveled far through the stillness. He waited a breathless instant while the echo came back to him. Then he sprang and darted at full speed away into the heavier thickets.

Far below, at the spring, an unfamiliar figure in these wilds leaped to his feet with a guttural cry. It was also a distinctive sound: and no wonder the little chipmunk paused in his scurried occupations to listen to it. Even to the addled brain of the squirrel it suggested annoyance and anger,—a quality possessed by the snarl of the puma when it had missed its stroke. No wonder Spread Horn had fled. The figure was none other than that tall harbinger of death and peril, man.

“It was an elk,” the man cried. “You’ve missed your chance.”

Some one stretched on the grass at his feet answered with a half-snarl. “To hell with the elk,” he replied. “You’ve tipped over the last quart.”

CHAPTER II

It is a far cry from the fastnesses of Idaho back to the lounging room of the Greenwood Club in a great and fashionable city on the Atlantic seaboard; but that distance must be traveled in order to explain at all, to the satisfaction of the old camp-robber bird that perched and squawked upon a limb beside his camp, the presence of Hugh Gaylord in Smoky Land. It all went back to a June evening, immediately preceding the dinner hour, in which he had a short and somewhat important talk with that gray, wise, venerable head of the board of governors whom all men knew fondly as the "Old Colonel."

It was always very easy to learn to love the Old Colonel. On the particular late June night in question the Colonel looked his usual best in correctly tailored dinner clothes, possessing only one note of individuality, the black bow, obviously factory-tied, set at his collar at a rather startling angle.

"Gaylord," he said suddenly. "I'd like a few words with you. Bring your glass over to my chair."

The young man thus addressed had been one of a gay group across the lounging room, and they all looked up with interest. It was a remembered fact that when the Colonel spoke in that tone of voice it was well to listen closely. Gaylord himself smiled and came at once toward him. The group went on with their talk.

The club lights showed the young man plainly, yet he did not in the least stand out. In fact, at first glance there was very little to distinguish him from most of the other men of his age that frequented the club rooms. It was not until two weeks later, when his great adventure had actually begun, and when the camp-robber studied him from the tree limb, that his real personality stood forth. Of course it was by light of contrast. In these luxurious rooms he was among his own kind: in those far mountains he was a stranger and an alien.

He was a familiar type: rather boyish, kind-hearted as are most men who have lived sheltered lives, a fair athlete and a good sportsman at the poker table. It was enough; most of his young friends were wholly satisfied with him, and except perhaps for a vague, troubled hour—usually late at night—Hugh Gaylord was wholly satisfied with himself. And perhaps the reason

why the blood mounted higher in his cheeks as the Colonel summoned him was his realization that the old man had had sterner training, and that he possessed X-ray eyes that could read straight into a man. In the first place the Colonel had amassed a fortune by his own resistless effort. In the second, he had known the great school of the forest. He was a sportsman whose metal had been tried and proven on the game trails of two continents.

His eyes leaped over Hugh's face, and he wondered if he had undertaken a vain task. He knew that a steel-worker cannot make tempered blades out of inferior metal. He wondered if he could hope for any real response from the treatment he was about to suggest. Hugh looked soft, and soft men are not usually made hard by a few weeks in the mountains. To follow the high trails, to seek the hidden people, to scale the cliffs and wade the marsh require a certain hardihood of spirit to start with,—and Hugh Gaylord seemed lacking in that trait. It was not that he had a weakling's body. Because it was the thing to do in his own circle he had kept himself fit on the gym-floor of his athletic club. His hands were hard and brown, his figure lithe, his face and neck were tanned in tennis court and golf links.

Yet that hard-eyed old woodsman looked at him straight and knew the truth. Hugh would not be able at once to enter into the spirit of the land where the Colonel was about to advise him to go. The lean foresters, natives of the land, would not accept him either; nor would they stay to eat at his camp. They wouldn't linger to tell him secrets of the wild. If they talked to him at all, it would be to narrate long and impossible adventures that are usually, on the frontier, the "feed" for tenderfeet. He could not enter into the communion of the camp fire; and yet no one—except possibly the Colonel himself—could tell him why.

Perhaps he lacked the basic stuff. The Old Colonel was a little despairing: he had begun to fear that in this lay the true explanation. But perhaps—and this was the old man's hope—the matter got down to a simple phrase of ancient usage: that Hugh had merely not yet learned to be a "man of his hands." The meaning goes deeper than mere manual toil. It implies achievement, discipline, self-reliance. It is not a thing to mistake. It promotes the kind of equality that the Old Colonel himself knew,—that which abides at a Western cow ranch or in the battle trench. Hugh's face was not unlined; but dissipation rather than stress had made the furrows. The lips did not set quite firm, the young eyes were slightly dimmed and bloodshot. There was, however, the Colonel saw with relief, no trace of viciousness in his youthful face. He was an Anglo-Saxon: after the manner of most Northern men he was an honest young debaucher, taking his orgies rather seriously and overdoing them in a way that would be shocking in a Latin.

Possibly the same Northern blood gave him a background of strength: this was the old man's hope.

"You're looking a bit seedy, Hugh," the Old Colonel began in his usual straightforward way. "I'm afraid you're getting to be sort of a poor stick."

His tone was that with which he was wont to begin an interesting story: perfectly matter-of-fact, just as if he were pronouncing a judgment on the weather. Hugh flushed to the roots of his hair but he didn't take offense. No one ever could take offense when the Colonel told them truths.

"Complimentary mood to-day, eh, Colonel," Hugh commented lightly. In reality he didn't feel in a festive mood at all. But he sat still, dreading what might come next.

"No, not particularly," the Colonel answered soberly. "You know, Hugh, the interest I've always taken in you. And you know why."

Yes, Hugh knew why. It went back to one of his own mother's girlhood romances,—a rather beautiful story such as men tell their wives and sweethearts but from masculine reserve do not talk over among themselves.

"I know," Hugh agreed.

"I can't see," the old man went on thoughtfully, "that in spite of the—er—damnable joy of having you around, you're any good to yourself or any one else. Why don't you lay off of it a while?"

"You mean—this?" Hugh tilted his glass up on one edge.

"I didn't happen to mean that, but perhaps I'd better include it. I saw you last night, Hugh, and I'm not one to think hard of a boy for an occasional exhilaration. But the trouble was—it was the night before too, and the night before that, and nobody knows how many more such nights. You're looking a little soft around the mouth, and just a little—too old for your years. Won't do, Hughey boy. I mean why don't you lay off this sort of life you've been leading: too much ease, too much loaf, too much booze, too much chorus, not enough work. Oh, damn their skins! I wish they'd sent you to France."

"And I guess you know how I felt about that," Hugh replied in his own defense. Yes, the Colonel knew: Hugh had really and earnestly wanted to go to France. He had been commissioned, however, rather sooner than was best for him, and he had been kept in an office in Washington.

"And the worst of it is you never even had to go through the grind of being a real buck private, with nothing particularly in sight. You've had everything too easy. You ought to sweat once, and feel a few breaks in your skin and a few sore muscles. Soft, Hugh, soft as soap. Lazy as sin. Why don't you get out and rough it for a while?"

Hugh stood up. “I don’t know——” he began stiffly.

“But I do. Sit down.”

The eyes of the two men met, and those of the old man smiled under his bushy brows. Hugh sat down again. He knew, only too well, how true these words were. He had always been soft, and trial had never hardened him. “I suppose the same old chant—to go to work.”

“Not this time. I’m going to prescribe another treatment—a more pleasant one. I know there’s no use of asking you to go to work. I don’t see what work you could do. Sitting around an office, considering the safe and sane nature of your investments, wouldn’t help you much. But, Hugh, I have some English friends—good enough beggars most of ’em—and once or twice they’ve confessed—that the only thing that kept them from utter damnation was devoting their lives to sport.”

Hugh knew about these “good enough beggars” that were friends to the Colonel—many of them men of great names and titles whom lesser Americans would boast of knowing. The Old Colonel shook his head somewhat sadly, and for a moment his eyes gazed out over the twilight grounds.

“When I say ‘sport,’ ” he explained, “I mean he-man sport. Into Africa after lions. Shooting a tiger from the ground. Up to Tibet after snow leopards. Down to New Zealand after trout. Going—going—going—never getting soft. Blizzards and jungle and thirst and cold. I know there’s no chance for me to get you to do real work. But damn me—I can’t help but think there’s a little of the old stuff in you somewhere, and I’ve been thinking that a hard course with rifle and fly rod might—might get you going along the right lines. If you’d once learn to love the outdoors, and learn to love to fight, who knows what might not happen.”

“And you suggest—that I take a trip after lions?”

“Lions are hard game, not for children,” was the reply. “‘I hunted the lion,’ was one of the few things an old and tough Egyptian Pharaoh saw fit to record imperishably on his monument—but you’re not a Pharaoh yet. I’ve got something here.”

He fished through many waistcoat pockets and drew out a clipping, spreading it out on the broad arm of his chair. “I thought of you when I read it—and cut it out—and I thought what I would have done if it wasn’t for the old game leg. I thought maybe it would stir up your dormant imagination and set you off. Read it.”

Hugh read, noting first that the clipping was a reprint from an Idaho paper:

The stockmen of the Smoky Land section, up Silver Creek way, say that unless government hunters come to their aid, the stock business in that district will be seriously impaired. Wolves and coyotes seem extra plentiful this year, and besides a giant cougar, to whom the sparse settlers have given the name of Broken Fang, has been ranging there for some months, doing thousands of dollars' worth of damage to cattle and sheep. From the size of his track and the occasional glimpses of him, the residents of that section think that he is the largest of the great cats that has ranged in Idaho for many years.

The Old Colonel studied Hugh's face as he read. "Not very interesting, eh?" he commented at last. "My boy—he would be a trophy. I know something about that hairy old breed of mountaineers in the Upper Salmon country. They don't take the trouble to give a puma a name unless he's a moose. I know quite a little about pumas, too—or cougars, they call 'em. Usually they are about as dangerous as white rabbits. But once in a while one of them gets overgrown and thinks he bosses the range. If wounded—and sometimes by a long chance even if he isn't wounded—they put up a wicked fight. This big boy would be a trophy worth having; besides, you might pick up a grizzly or a smaller puma. There are always trout, and this is trout-time in the West. Why don't you go after him?"

The Old Colonel always put his propositions in just that straight-out way; and it made them hard to refuse.

"You mean—go out there three thousand miles on a long chance of killing this cattle-slayer?"

"Why not? You're not paralyzed or anything. You ought to see Idaho. Every man should. As I said, there are worlds of smaller game. Every man ought to have an objective in his trip; so I say go to Smoky Land. These two weeks might teach you to love the woods so you'd go again and again. And a few trips to the high ranges, once you really got to love 'em and play 'em right, might make—might do wonders for you. Please give me the pleasure of telling the boys that Hughey Gaylord has gone big-game hunting."

Hugh felt the wave of red spreading in his cheeks again. He knew perfectly what the old man had been about to say—"to make a man of him."

"Remember," the Old Colonel urged further, "you're an Anglo-Saxon—a white man of straight descent. It's a heritage, Hugh. And it implies an obligation."

"I'd hate it," Hugh protested.

“Try it and see. Perhaps—there might be a miracle.”

Hugh drained his glass; then stood up. “Very well, I’ll start next week,” he said at last simply.

Thus this son of cities gave his promise to go forth into a man’s land: a land of trial and travail, of many perils and strong delights, a jagged mountain land where the powers of the wilderness still ruled supreme—and yet a place where miracles might come to pass.

CHAPTER III

The camp-robber, perched on a limb, was in considerable of a mental turmoil. His mentality was never of an extra high grade, and to-day his intellectual grasp had almost failed him. And the reason was that he had made an astonishing discovery; and these remote Idaho forests had suddenly revealed to him a form of life that he hadn't had any idea existed.

Of course his true name wasn't "camp-robber." In reality he belonged to that noisy, thievish jay-magpie assemblage that is to be found in almost all of the great Western forests, and he had a long and jaw-breaking scientific designation besides. But on the lower East Side it isn't necessary to hunt up the name in full of Tony the Dip, because the title describes him better than the name his mother gave him. It was much the same with the camp-robber. He got the title from his habits and it fitted him to perfection.

He was rather a gay old bird with considerable blue and gray in his feathers, and in his several months of life he had concluded that he knew these Idaho woods from one end to another. He thought it would be a long, cold summer day before he would meet a situation that he could not immediately handle. He knew just how to look twice into a cluster of leaves and twigs before he lighted among them—lest a certain little brown-furred cutthroat that was rather unpleasantly known to his family should be waiting in ambush. He knew how to select a nest-site out of the reach of a prowling raccoon, and he was as impertinent and saucy from all this knowledge as words can tell. Yet out of a perfectly clear ground, so to speak (it wouldn't be correct to say out of a clear sky when referring to one who habitually lives in the sky) two utterly unknown and enormous living creatures had revealed themselves.

The camp-robber had been winging back and forth through the forest and had flitted down to the spring for a bath. One of the two figures was standing erect, shaking his fist at the speeding form of Spread Horn,—a creature from the back of which the camp-robber had almost, if not quite, gathered vermin. The other was lying down, gazing moodily at an interesting-looking object that had oozed what had seemed to be dark blood on the pine needles. In form they resembled bears; yet he didn't for an instant think that they were. They were not deer or cougar or even overgrown raccoons. He perched upon the limb to think it over.

Yet the camp-robber never spends a great deal of time in such a profitless occupation as thought. At once his instincts began to get busy inside of him. He was a born kleptomaniac, and he was simply fascinated by the number of bright and interesting things lying about the ashes of the dead fire. He began to have all manner of pleasing conjectures in regard to them. Like many gentlemen-of-fortune in the Parisian underworld he had a long ancestry of famous criminals; and now he remembered certain advice his mother had given him when he was a fledgling in the nest.

“If ever you find a camp of men,” one can imagine the old mother-bird chirping, as she flicked her tail here and there, “fly right down into it. You will have more fun than you ever had in your life before.”

These were men: no other supposition remained. The camp-robber squawked once, in enthusiasm, and sailed down to the ground beside the prone figure.

The result was rather astonishing. For the second at least Hugh Gaylord forgot the late tragedy to his last bottle of bourbon. A smile that was singularly winning and boyish played around his lips.

It was not quite Gaylord’s way to smile at such little things as this. It usually required a very keen jest from a clever comedian in a musical comedy to draw a smile from him. Strangest of all, he hadn’t been in the least in the humor for gaiety since the first day he had come to these stern, lonely mountains.

He watched the bird with growing astonishment. His surprise was really no less than that of the camp-robber on first beholding the two men. The bird hopped here and there among the camp supplies, scratched in the pine needles for crumbs, and then, with astounding cheek, began to peck holes in the soap. He had tasted many things in his months of foraging, but here was something the like of which he had never tasted before. The truth was that more than one camp, here and there through the forest, could not yield up such a treat as this. Many of the sparse visitors to the Upper Salmon mountains regarded the use of soap as they did Christmas,—something to celebrate once a year.

Hugh had not discerned the fleeting form of the elk in the thickets, and except for his guide, this bird was the first living thing he had seen since he had come to Smoky Land. It was not that the forest did not literally teem with life. The trouble lay in Hugh’s eyes. The living things of the great forest are always furtive and hidden, and they only yield their most priceless secrets to those who seek them.

A man never sees clearly when his brain is misted and blurred from the fumes of strong drink; besides, Hugh had not yet gone a half-mile from camp. He was a tenderfoot in the raw, and the forest creatures had been able to discern his heavy tread in plenty of time to get out of sight. He had been disgusted and annoyed by the discomforts of camp life, and he was eager to return to his own kind; his stock of liquor had been running low and without it he did not believe he could exist; he spoke loudly and his spirit was dead within him: and thus the forest had remained a closed book. His choice of a companion had not been particularly fortunate either. Pete had good blood in him, the blood of as brave and hardy a race as ever lived, but degeneracy was upon him and his people. He had been employed as Hugh's guide, but he had found it much more convenient to stay in camp and drink Hugh's whisky.

The Indian guide would have been a familiar type to any one of the hardy, farseeing frontiersmen that occasionally ranged through the forest, but Hugh himself would have wakened some wonder. He was still obviously a man of cities. He wore the outdoor clothes of a gentleman, which is but rarely the outdoor garb of the frontier. They were stained with dirt and their careful crease was destroyed; yet they marked him as a tenderfoot.

The truth was that the Colonel's experiment had seemingly failed: the few days that Hugh had already spent in the far Rockies had wrought no change in him. He had not found Broken Fang—the great cougar that had already won a name through a thousand square miles of Idaho forest—and he was ready to admit to himself, at least, that he had made no real effort to find him. He had fished once, succeeding in breaking a number of expensive gut leaders and high-grade flies in the brush along the stream. The remainder of the time he had lain in camp, wishing he hadn't come. Fortunately the two weeks were nearly over.

The guide brought his wandering mind back to the disaster of his liquor. "I know where you can buy quart—take place that one I spilled," the Indian said.

Hugh's face brightened. "Lead me to it."

"Just over ridge. Sheep camp there—only one this part of mountains. Herder'll have extra quart or two."

Hugh looked at his watch. "We can get over and back by dark?"

"Maybe soon after. Going to be pretty dusky right away."

The man spoke true. The twilight was falling over Smoky Land. The sun was set, the tall pines seemed to darken above them, the dusk grew and deepened between the distant trunks. The immeasurable silence of the

mountain night, broken by such little sounds as only accentuate the hush, was deepening about them.

Hugh had no answer at first. For once no words were at his lips, and it was a good and portentous sign. He stood listening. Perhaps because the visit of the camp-robber had been an impulse to his imagination, perhaps only because the effect of his last drink was dying within him, some little portion at least of the age-old magic of the wilderness twilight was going home to him. Now that his guide's voice died away, he was a little startled by the vastness of the silence.

Far and wide through the forest the wild creatures were starting forth on their night's business. But they moved with stealth. Hugh had an instant's dim realization that thickets moved and rustled in the ultimate reaches of hearing; that dim shadows wavered so far distant that he could not be sure of them. The wilderness forces were coming to life.

He lifted his face. As usual in the twilight hour, the faintest breath of wind came slipping, light as a deer-tread itself, from the further mountains. He saw the two long ridges that enclosed his particular part of the plateau, and the last light of day gleamed on their tall, white, snow-laden peaks. These were the high Rockies; sentinel mountains grand and austere.

These mountains looked just at hand in the daylight, but now in the gathering gloom they seemed to be receding into the infinite distance. The attention of Hugh Gaylord was not usually held by mere scenic beauty, but to-night, for a lone, long instant, he felt vaguely stirred.

Then a faint, sharp sound reached him through the growing silence. It came from an amazing distance, and but for the fact that all his senses had been unusually alert he would not have discerned it at all. All that was left of it was a faint prick in the eardrums,—a noise that a beetle might make in the leaves.

“Did you hear something?” he asked his guide doubtfully.

“Yes,” the Indian replied. “Little noise. Know who made it?”

“A shot?”

“Yes. Maybe 'nother hunter, but they don't often come here. Over toward sheep camp. But gotto hurry heap—get whisky—come back while plenty light to see.”

Hugh nodded, and they headed up the ridge.

CHAPTER IV

It was written, by those special jungle gods that plan entertainment for tenderfeet, that Hugh Gaylord should get some slight taste of the real mountains on his walk to the sheep camp. It was only a mile, but the trail was nothing whatever like the golf course that Hugh had been wont to walk around on Friday afternoons. It was narrow and brown, and hard-packed by the feet of the wild folk that had been passing up and down that way since the mountains were new. They hadn't been careful to keep the grade under six per cent. There was also an occasional rock and a rather frequent dead log that had to be leaped. Moreover the berry vines scratched the face and caught at his clothes when the trail twined between the heavier thickets.

Hugh had been proud of his physical condition. He had been under the tutelage of a high-paid physical director, and he could swing the Indian clubs a startling number of times without fatigue. Before that walk was done, however, the fine edge of his self-assurance had been somewhat dulled. In the first place, the pace was rather fast. Pete the guide was inordinately lazy and a wretched guide, but like most wilderness men who get their exercise in walking game trails rather than in swinging Indian clubs, he knew how to make the long miles slide under his feet. It is not an accomplishment of a day—that bent-kneed, shuffling walk, shoulders sagging and feet falling lightly—and it is far from graceful. But it clicks out four miles in every hour through the long mountain day without fatigue. It carries a man up mountains and into glens, and he feels fresh at the end. Tonight Pete was in a particular hurry. The devils that dwell just under the dark skins of all his race were crying for strong drink. Besides, darkness would be upon them very soon.

The pace took Gaylord's wind. It brought queer pains low in his chest and an odd heaviness in his legs. But for all that, a physician could have prescribed no better medicine for him. The sweat leaped from his white skin and felt prickly at his neck and forehead, and the fumes of alcohol departed from his brain. The truth was that in this deepening twilight Gaylord saw more clearly than any time since his arrival at Smoky Land.

His senses became more alert, his eyes began to penetrate deeper into the thickets. He began to notice dainty mountain flowers, and he took a singular delight in the tracks of the wild things that had been left in the trail. Here a coyote had skulked, here a wolf had raced along in some chase of death, and

here a cougar had crept by in some dreadful business of a few nights before. His hearing was sharper, and once the rustle of leaves above his head called his attention to a family of gray squirrels, disporting on the limbs. He found himself watching, with unexplainable interest, his guide.

For the first time he marked clearly the silent tread, the peculiar alertness of his carriage, and most of all the dark surface-lights in his eyes. As they headed deeper into the thickets a strange change seemed to come over the man. Perhaps the liquor was dying in him, too, or possibly Gaylord's imagination was playing tricks upon him. He received an odd impression that hitherto his guide had been asleep and had just now wakened. They were near the sheep camp now; they could hear the faint bleat of the bedding animals, and the Indian seemed to forget the other's presence. All at once he began to stalk in earnest. He slackened his pace: Gaylord behind him slackened his. The moccasined feet had fallen softly before; now they seemingly made no sound at all. The dark eyes brightened, the muscles rippled under the dusky skin, a new vitality seemed to come over him. The truth was that this son of a savage race had not undergone so great degeneration but that he still responded to the age-old intoxication of the falling night. It was the hunting hour, and Hugh could imagine the tawny cougar, Broken Fang, whom he had come to slay, responding in the same way.

Abruptly the Indian paused and held up his hand. Hugh crept near.

"—— Big animal—close," the guide whispered. "Maybe you get a shot."

Hugh stood still, listening. Far distant he heard the usual, faint mysterious sounds that the early night hours always bring to the wilderness world; but if anything, the primordial silence was more heavy and portentous than ever. The snow peaks still gleamed faintly, and he sensed their majesty and grandeur as never before. It was not alone an impression of beauty. Beauty is an external thing alone: in this moment of farseeing, he understood something of their mighty symbolism, their eternal watch over the waste places. He saw them as they were: grand, silent, unutterably aloof.

"How do you know?" he asked, in reply to his guide. "I don't hear anything."

The truth was that Pete would have found considerable difficulty in telling just how he knew. Rather it was a sixth sense, an essence in the air that blunter senses could not have perceived. "We're near flock—maybe lot of varmints hanging close. Always is—around sheep. Don't know what animal came near just now—cougar, I think."

“Maybe old Broken Fang himself?”

“I don’t know. Heap maybe not. Country’s big.”

Pete was given to telling lies, on occasion, but he had told the truth for once. Hugh’s eyes leaped from peak to peak, and he began to realize something of the vast, tremendous distances of the region. They pushed on, over the ridge and through the last of a heavy wall of brush.

They came out on the edge of a small meadow,—one of those grassy, treeless stretches that are so often encountered in the high ranges. Silver Creek ran through it: a stream that was a “creek” only in the Western sense. In reality it carried more water than many a famous river. It was narrow, however, lined with thickets, and evidently deep and swift. Five hundred yards beyond the great forest encroached again, and the meadow was even more narrow, parallel to the creek. And at the first glance Hugh might have thought that the meadow was covered with deep snow.

It was the sheep. They were bedding down for the night,—a flock that could not contain less than three thousand ewes and lambs. They had crowded so close together that they occupied, in all, a space hardly more than a hundred yards square, and the only break in the white drift was an occasional spot of inky black. These, in a moment’s inspection, revealed themselves as black sheep,—animals that occur in every western flock and are generally used by the herdsmen as markers.

Their numbers staggered Hugh. He wondered how any one herder could care for them. And he was suddenly amazed at the strange thoughts that flooded him.

The truth was that Hugh was an exceedingly sensitive man, finely tuned to all manner of external impressions. Something about that snowy band touched a side of his nature of which he had never been aware before. He couldn’t quite identify the thoughts that stirred him. They dwelt in an unknown realm of his being; he grasped for them but always they flitted away. He held hard on himself and tried to understand. The sheep bleated, the shadows grew over the distant mountains. He began to think that the plaintive bleat of the sheep was playing tricks upon his imagination. It sounded to him almost as a direct appeal for help and protection. He realized at once the truth of a fact he had heard long ago,—that sheep, above all other domestic animals, are dependent upon men for their very lives. A horse may run freely in the waste places, fighting off with slashing fore feet and terrible teeth such wild enemies as molest it. The cattle can range far in comparative safety: for even the great grizzly has been known to avoid the horned steer.

Even the hogs, half-wild in the underbrush, have some means of self-protection. These sheep had none.

But the thoughts he had went deeper than that. He was dimly aware of a vague symbolism, a realization that in this mountain scene could be read some of the great, essential truths of life. He had a curious impression of being face to face, for the first time in his life, with realities,—in spite of the paradoxical fact that a vagueness, seemingly a bewilderment, was upon him.

All his life Hugh Gaylord had dwelt in cities. He had traveled far: sometimes in motors, usually in luxurious sleeping cars, occasionally in steamships. Yet he had never really been outside of cities. He knew the hurrying throngs, the great buildings, the busy streets. The shops, the theaters, the gaiety had been acquaintances as long as he could remember. He had never dreamed of a world without these things. Yet, in an instant, all of them seemed infinitely distant. Strangest of all, they suddenly didn't seem to matter.

It was an impression that all his life there had been a cloud before his vision, and all at once he could see clear. Here, not in those swarming cities, was reality. The cities had been built in a day; the other factors that had been so necessary in his life—his clubs, his motor cars, his amusements, even much of the great world of business—were merely mushroom growths of a little handful of centuries that men called the age of civilization. Strangely, they no longer seemed to him the basic things of existence. Rather now, for the first time in his days, he was face to face with life,—life in its simplest phases, with all its unrealities and superficialities swept away. This was no vista of the present: this scene of the white sheep bedding down for the night in the dim light of the herder's fire. Rather it was an image of the uncounted ages. All the basic elements of life were here: the flocks, the herder's little shelter, the fire glowing in the falling darkness, the watchful shepherd dog guarding the lambs, the beasts of prey lurking in the growing shadows.

There was nothing here to perish or change. It had been the same for uncounted centuries,—since the first dim days when the nomads drove their flocks over the plains of Asia. Cities are born, grow great, are cursed with wickedness, and perish. The flocks still wander on the hills. Men catch new fancies, follow new teachings, build new orders, and pursue new ways. The firelight of the herder still glows in the twilight. Civilization rises and falls like the tide. The beasts of prey still lurk in the thickets to slay the sheep. Fashions, hobbies, pleasures, habits and modes of life, faiths and doctrines, even kingdoms and palaces start up, flourish, change and die,—and still the shepherd dog keeps his watch.

He was suddenly called from his reverie by the voice of the guide beside him. "Fire's about out," the man said. "Time herder put on more fuel."

It was a commonplace remark, yet it compelled Hugh's attention. His startled eyes turned to the Indian's impassive face. "It's not cold to-night," he replied. "What's the need of the fire?"

The Indian made no immediate reply. He did, however, hold up his hand. Hugh listened. Somewhere back of them in the thicket a twig broke with miniature explosion. Then two leaves rustled together.

"That's why," the Indian said. "Keep off varmints."

At that instant the dog discerned them and came barking toward them. He was a beautiful shepherd—from his unusual size evidently a crossed breed—and the light was still good enough for them to see his lustrous coat, his powerful form, his intelligent head, his fine brush that he carried high. The dog slowed to a walk, and Hugh spoke to him. A moment more the animal was at his knees.

Hugh had always been a dog-lover—giving his regard to an ill-mannered, savage German police dog that lived a parasitical life at his city house—and he knelt quickly to caress the shepherd's head. And for the second time that night he had a series of impressions that he could not trace or name.

They arose from the behavior of the dog. The animal seemed oddly nervous and shaken, and the great, brown, lustrous eyes were full of singular appeal. He ran from them a little way, barking, then returned as if he desired them to follow him. "What's the matter, old boy?" Gaylord asked. "What's up?"

The dog barked again, coming to his arms for more petting. Then the Indian dropped to his knees with a curious little cry.

Pete the guide had an exceedingly good command of English for a half-breed. But in that moment of astonishment the use of the language fell away from him, and his only utterance was an exclamation in his own almost-forgotten tongue. He rubbed his hand over the animal's shoulder.

"What is it, Pete?" Hugh asked quietly.

"He's creased. Dog's been shot—bullet took away a little skin."

"The shot we heard?"

"No. That rifle shot. The dog shot with pistol."

"And how in the world did you find that out?"

“Not know sure—looks heap like a scratch by small-caliber bullet. Couldn’t hear pistol shot so far.”

“I’ve heard,” Hugh said thoughtfully, “that it isn’t good form—for a herder to shoot at his own dog.”

“Maybe not that,” the Indian went on. His tone was so strange and flat that Hugh whirled to stare at him. “Fire’s burning out too—sheep getting restless. Maybe better see where herder is.”

“Don’t you suppose he’s in his shelter tent?”

“We’ll look and see.”

They started out into the clearing, the dog running in front of them. The sheep, after the manner of their kind, paid no attention to them. They walked swiftly toward the little tent beside the stream.

The dog stopped, sniffing at something that lay in a little clump of thicket. When still a few paces distant, Hugh thought it was one of the black sheep, separated from the flock. The Indian, however, made no such mistake. And he hardly turned to glance at it.

“The herder’s other dog,” he explained. “Knew there ought to be two. Better shooting this time.”

Hugh felt a little stir of excitement. The black dog had been slain by a small-calibered bullet, and his body was still warm. The Indian increased his pace.

A second more, and they were at the door of the tent. It was hard for them to see clearly at first. The shadows were quite deep inside. And at first they were only aware of a heavy, strange silence that seemed to grow and deepen as they stood looking.

The herder was not standing up to greet them. Neither was he busy at any of his late-evening tasks. They made out his figure dimly, sprawled on his blankets in one corner of the tent.

“By Jove!” Hugh exclaimed. “I believe the beggar’s asleep.”

But he didn’t speak quite the truth. In reality, he believed something far different. It is the way of a certain type of man to avoid at all costs any appearance or semblance of hysterics or sensationalism. Hugh was of that type, and he unconsciously shrank from the utterance of his true beliefs.

“Not asleep,” the Indian replied bluntly. He stopped, walked into the tent, and turned the man’s body in his hands. No wonder the camp fire was dying. Its tender—the sheep herder—had been shot and killed a few moments before.

CHAPTER V

Hugh Gaylord had never known a more mysterious hour than that in which the darkness fell over the sheep camp. At the end of it he felt as if he had lost himself in a dim and eerie dream and only the eternal reality of the sheep, bedding down and bleating in the falling shadows, made it credible to him. But the mystery did not lie in the qualities of the scene itself. Rather it was in his own attitude toward them: a feeling of familiarity and long acquaintance that he could not understand.

It all seemed so natural and real. Even the dim twilight and the glow of the dying fire seemed something vividly remembered from long ago. Yet there was nothing here of the world he knew, the world of cities and gaieties and throngs. There was nothing in his past life to explain the intimacy he felt. At the edge of the little meadow the dusk deepened between the trees. The strong profiles of the pines dimmed and blurred, the distant peaks receded—with a curious effect of actual motion—into the further recesses of the twilight. Here and there the stars were pushing through, and he suddenly regarded them with some wonder. He couldn't ever remember noticing them in particular before. Perhaps the smoke that ever hung over his city mostly obscured them; possibly he had never had occasion to think about them. Now he was startled by the same curious sense of familiarity,—as if he had lain beneath them a thousand-thousand years and they were old friends come back to talk to him again.

They grew inexpressively bright. Their numbers increased, they filled the sky, they grouped themselves in geometrical patterns and designs, dropping down as if on invisible threads to the spires of the distant pines. For one little instant, as he raised his eyes aloft, he was an astrologer of old, and a knowledge of the ages was upon him. He felt stirred to the depths of his being.

He dropped his eyes to regard the sheep. The outline of the separate animals was altogether lost by now: they were just a dim, white mass in the faint glow of the fire. It was the same as always: they had all bedded down for the night. He saw the light spring up in the herder's tent as the guide lighted a candle, and this was familiar too.

The Indian came out and with strong, steady strokes began to break wood for the fire. The swarthy face looked unusually dusky in the red glow

of the coals. As yet the two men had not discussed the grim find in the tent. There had been scarcely nothing to say in regard to it. Hugh felt no especial excitement or awe: he had been almost as cold and impassive in regard to the tragedy as Pete himself.

Such an attitude might have been expected in the guide, but it caused some self-wonder to see it in himself. Pete was a wilderness man, and if there is one lesson to be learned in the primeval forest it is the reality and the inevitability of death. He was used to death. He had seen it every day. All night long the ancient war of the wilderness waged on, and many were its casualties. The night shuddered with them: the agony of the deer in the cougar's claws; the crunch of fangs when the wolves tracked down their game; even the shrill, terrible death-cry of the birds when the climbing marten overtook them on their perches. Not for nothing does the buzzard watch all day from the clouds. *He knows*; and whoever listens to the wilderness voices knows too. The wild, despairing song of the pack, the wail of the coyote, even the murmur of the pines is a song of death, immutable and dark, at the end of their little days. But what did Hugh know of these things? He had always lived a sheltered life. Yet now he felt no horror, no excitement, only the realization that he was face to face with reality at last.

The guide had heaped fuel on the fire and it threw a bright glare over the whole camp. Hugh could even make out the dark border of the forest at the extremities of its glow. Then the Indian turning back into the tent, Hugh entered also.

"Then the shot we heard was the one that killed this man?" he asked.

"Yes. Pistol killed dog. Maybe we too far to hear shot."

"And you haven't any idea—what could have been the motive, the reason for killing him."

"Yes——" The Indian paused and stared down at the still form.

"What do you think it was?" Hugh spoke very quietly.

"Big fight—over the range," Pete explained with difficulty. "This big cattle country—cattlemen always try to keep out sheep. Maybe other reasons too, but that began it. Always shooting—cattlemen and sheepmen. This first flock anywhere near—first in this part of Smoky Land."

"Then it was just cold-blooded murder."

"Yes. No signs of a fight. Maybe shot him through tent door, then tried to kill dogs. Killed one, wounded other. Now I cook supper."

The Indian, wholly without emotion, began to take stores from the dead herder's grub-box. He noted that the man's supplies seemed almost gone,

only a few potatoes, a small piece of bacon in an oiled paper, and a little flour remaining. The guide saw his look of question and made explanation.

“Camp-tender come soon,” he said.

“And who is the camp-tender?”

“Each sheep camp has two men. One herder. The other packs in supplies—food for herder, salt for sheep. Come every two weeks, maybe sooner, and camp-tender due here pretty soon. But he’ll find—plenty sheep dead.”

For once Hugh did not have to ask questions. The guide’s last few words explained, in a measure, the motive for the murder. Without a herder and with only one dog left to care for the flocks, the beasts of prey would find easy hunting. “But we’ll stop that game,” Hugh said decidedly. “To-morrow morning—to-night, if you think we can make the trail, we’ll go in and take this man’s body to the coroner. Then the sheep owner can send up another herder.”

Hugh looked up to find an odd, grim little smile at the guide’s lips. It was a thing to notice: this dark savage was not given to smiling. “You don’t know sheep,” he explained. “You don’t know Running Feet—what he can do in one night.”

By intuition more than by actual interpretation of the words Hugh understood. He studied his guide with growing wonder. For the second time that day Pete had dropped back into his own speech. True, in this case the language itself was Hugh’s own, but the idiom was, beyond all denial, savage. He had revealed for an instant something of the strange poetry of the Indian, as well as the Indian’s imaginative interpretation of the wilderness. Running Feet, past all doubt, referred to some of the predatory animals that habitually preyed on the sheep.

“In other words—if we hadn’t discovered this murder, the flock would be practically wiped out by the time the camp-tender got here?”

“Maybe all gone.”

“Even if they send up a man right away there will be some losses.”

“We start to-morrow,” Pete explained laboriously. “To-morrow sunset before we reach tel—tel—talk-over-wire? Another sunset, maybe another sunrise, before herder can come all long way. Plenty likely can’t get no one. Cattlemen rich—mighty—many. Maybe no one want the job.”

“And we can’t start to-night?”

“Trail too dark. Maybe couldn’t catch the horse. Run fast in the dark.”

Hugh turned quickly. “What horse do you mean?”

Pete smiled again, very dimly. "Eyes maybe half blind. Horse grazing just inside the forest, just outside meadow. Herders always have one horse, maybe two."

Hugh had not noticed: his eyes were not trained to penetrate the thickets as those of the Indian. And at once he made up his mind as to the morning's work. After all, it was only decent to get word to the owner of the flock as soon as possible. He would not permit his own hunting trip to stand in the way. It was true that he had been looking for a good excuse to return to civilization, and now he had it; but it was not without some unexpected regrets. He had received a new point of view in this visit to the camp, and he felt that he would enjoy a few more days in the evergreen forest. But even the Old Colonel would understand why it was necessary that he change his plans. In the morning they would catch the horse, place the herder's body upon it, and go down with their story to the settlements. He wondered if there would be a bereaved family to face; he hoped that this, at least, would be spared him. The murdered man looked like a South-European, evidently of the class of shiftless and uneducated men from which most flock owners have to recruit their herders.

His mind flew back to the Old Colonel, sitting in the Greenwood Club. Some way, the memory of the old man was more clear than any time since he had come. It seemed to him that he could remember, word for word, all that the old sportsman had told him. Curiously he had not remembered being so impressed at the time. In some dim under-consciousness he realized that there would be further instructions for him now; but just what they were he did not permit himself to guess. He was eager to return,—go back to God's country.

After the simple meal, the guide prepared to go back to the camp after some of the more valuable of the camp supplies and Hugh's bedding. "And where do you expect to sleep yourself?" Hugh asked.

The Indian pointed to the herder's bed, as if that explained the matter completely. And, after all, why not? This was no time for nonsense and hysteria. For once in his life, there in that far sheep camp, Hugh felt that he was down to facts.

He heard the departing footsteps of the Indian fading slowly to a dim whisper infinitely distant. He was alone. He awoke with a start to the fact that he was really alone for the first time in his life. At this hour, in his own city, he would be either at his club or at dinner, in each case surrounded by his fellow human beings. Servants slept within a few doors of his room at his own house; his pleasures had always been of a sociable nature. On

previous nights in the wild he had his guide: what loneliness he might have felt was forgotten in the fumes of strong drink. For the first time in his life, it seemed to him, Hugh had a chance to become acquainted with himself.

His thoughts were singularly clear as he sat beside the camp fire. He looked back over his past life, and it seemed to him that he was looking for something in it that he could not find. He didn't know quite what it was. He wasn't sure why he felt such a sudden, overpowering need for it. Perhaps the name of it was *justification*,—and yet he could not have told what was the high offense he wanted to justify. There beside the sleeping flock new knowledge came to him, a realization of the great themes and purposes of existence never known before. He felt vaguely uneasy about his wasted days, wishing that he could see some destination, some height, some star to which they were pointing. He had an obscure feeling that all his life he had shirked responsibility; and stranger still,—that in the deep realms of his spirit he was shirking it now.

The great shepherd dog came and crouched beside him, and the man held the soft head in his hands. His thought went back to the pedigreed, savage, characterless dog that he himself owned, and unconsciously he compared the animals. The thought returned to him again and again, try as he might to repel it. It haunted and disturbed him, and he didn't know why. His own dog had won numerous ribbons at the dog shows, he had been bought at a fabulous price, and his pedigree went back many generations. Yet by what fairness could the two animals be named in the same breath? One was a slacker: the other a brave and faithful servant of a great cause. One was an ornament in a dog show: the other guarded—with his life if necessary—the grazing flocks. From dawn till dark he was at his toil, through the blasting heat of summer and the bitter winter cold, watching through the night and running through the day. Hugh was not blind to the fact of his present fidelity: that although his master lay murdered and he himself had been slightly wounded, the brave animal still kept his watch over the sheep. He had been busy at it when the two men had come, and even now his intelligent eyes studied the shadows of the encroaching forest. Hugh felt a sudden glow in his heart. His hands pressed tighter at the soft ears.

A word came to Hugh's lips and he spoke it in the silence. "Service," he said softly. "Old fellow, you give *service*." Suddenly he knew that this was the great debt that all living things owed: service in the great cause of existence that no man fully understands. He tried to remember what service he himself had given. Dim regrets swept over him.

He rose to throw more wood upon the fire; then stood listening to the voices of the forest. They were so faint and obscure that he had to strain to hear them. It was strange that he had been deaf to them before. They came whispering through the mighty silences, and they filled him with haunting memories. At first the crackle of the fire had obscured them, but as he waited the separate tones became more distinct and permitted some measure of interpretation. He heard the rustling of the thickets, the noise of flicking leaves dim as eyelids winking against a pillow, the sad murmur of the pine limbs, scraping together. Behind them all was the faint murmur of the wind,—a little wind that had sprung up in the snow fields and was making a secret march down through the thickets.

Something of the same sense of familiarity that had come to him on first observing the sheep returned to him now. It seemed wholly natural that he should be sitting here in the silence, beside the flocks.—Throughout the ages men of his breed had sat the same way, the firelight playing on them, the faithful dog beside them. The wind whispered and stirred in the wilderness just the same, the white sheep slept. Watching the flocks,—the phrase was as old as the mountains themselves.

Yet for a moment he found it hard to believe in the dangers of which the guide had spoken: dangers that would soon exterminate the flock except for the protection of herders and dogs. No scene could be more peaceful: the dark forest so lightly stirred by the wind, the river singing past, the soft firelight, the stars in the sky. The breath of the night was sweet and cool; surely there would be no hurry about notifying the flock owner of the herder's death. He turned again to the dog. "You can take care of them, can't you, boy?" he asked.

He glanced down, then stiffened with excitement. For once the dog did not seem to hear him. The animal had got up and now was standing braced, every nerve and muscle alert, gazing into the shadows beyond the river. Hugh's hand fell on the shaggy neck, but the animal didn't start. And the hair stood stiff like quills at the shoulders.

"What is it, boy?" Hugh asked.

The dog made no answer. Instead, a strange and terrible reply came from the wilderness. It was a dreadful, a commanding voice, and it seemed to freeze the whole forest world with horror. It obliterated the wind and silenced all the little voices to which Hugh had listened with such delight a moment before. It was a long, wild scream, beginning low in the scale and rising to an incredible height.

For innumerable seconds, it seemed to Hugh, the same crescendo note was maintained. The air seemed to shudder. Then, with great soaring leaps, the scream dropped away into a long, singsong whine. Slowly this faded, growing dim and more dim, until it was just a dying whimper in the air. Hugh couldn't tell exactly when the voice ceased. He had a strange impression that it still continued, only so dim and fine that human ears were not tuned to receive it. Then the wilderness silence closed down again.

The dog leaped forward, barking, and Hugh found himself erect, with his rifle in his hands. In his own heart he knew this wilderness voice. If he did not know the breed that uttered it, at least he realized its savagery, its age-old menace. There is no utterance that pen can describe more wild and weird than some of the twilight cries of the coyotes; yet Hugh was inclined to think that another, more deadly animal had spoken in this case. On a few occasions he had heard members of his club—back from hunting trips in the West—describe the cries of the cougars or pumas: one of the most distinctive and awe-inspiring of all the wilderness voices. It is not heard often. Many men have lived years in the forest without ever hearing it at all. But once heard it is never forgotten. Hugh believed that he had heard it now.

And it had meant more to him than the mere night cry of an animal. It typified to him the very spirit of the wilderness. It was the voice not alone of a hungry creature, stalking in the shadows, but—in his thought—it expressed all the ancient terror of the darkness, the primeval forces that war with man.

Nothing had changed. Still the sheep slept in the meadow and a great beast of prey menaced them from the shadowed forest. The long conflicts against the powers of the wilderness had not yet been won: the shepherds of Judea might have known the same cry. The fire burned low, and it seemed to Hugh that the shadows gathered menacingly about the sheep.

Perhaps Broken Fang himself had spoken. Besides its menace and savagery the voice had been also a living expression of power and pride that only one of the greatest of wilderness creatures would possess. No craven coyote, he believed, could utter such a ringing challenge. The dog raced around the flock, seemingly ready to protect them with his life. No wilderness voice was so terrible as to frighten him from his watch.

And then, at the most wonderful thought of all, Hugh's heart gave a great leap in his breast. Watching the flock! That was it,—he was watching the flock himself. True, the dog was still on guard, fearless and constant in his vigil, but he could not claim all the guardianship of the sheep. It was his own presence as much as the growlings of the dog that kept the puma at a

distance. Except for him, white fangs even now would be tearing at the throats of the lambs.

For the first time in his life he was *serv*ing. Was not his gun resting in his hands? For once in his life he was bearing arms in the oldest war that mankind knows,—the war against the menace of the wild. The blood leaped and sang in his veins.

CHAPTER VI

In the hour before Pete, the guide, returned with camp supplies to the sheep camp, Hugh had a chance to observe various things about this mountain land of which he had never been aware before. He sensed, for really the first time, the mystery of the forest in the darkness. The domain of man, it seemed to him, extended just to the limits of the little meadow where the sheep were bedded: beyond that lay the Kingdom of the Wild. He saw, with an inner gladness and stir, the long outline of the high range against the pale western sky,—the one part of the firmament the darkness had not yet completely over-spread. The peaks seemed to rise to the upper reaches of the heavens; between them he could see the sweeping concave line, rough-edged, of the pine forests. He learned certain things concerning the way the firelight leaps into the shadow and the darkness comes racing back. He heard the various overtones, known only to a woodsman, in the crackle of the fire. At the end of the hour he beheld an even greater mystery.

At first it was just a smear of silver, suddenly catching his eye, in the darkness of the east. It grew, it extended; clouds were ensilvered by it and broken apart; it gleamed with indescribable beauty, and in a moment it evolved into the moon. The orb rose higher, the beams slanted down.

But the enchantment of the forest only seemed to deepen beneath it. Only at intervals could the beams penetrate between the trees, and the silver patches that came, now and then, between the trunks only mystified the eyes. And it soon became an indisputable fact that these patches were not motionless and unvarying in outline as Hugh might have expected. Sometimes they blended and moved; and once or twice a swift shadow flicked across them. There was only one explanation. Living creatures—beasts of prey such as always linger about the sheep flocks—hovered at the border of darkness ready to swoop forth.

Pete returned soon after and began upon the simple tasks of the night. He went to the edge of the forest, returning with a bundle of fir boughs for Hugh's bed. He chopped more fuel, and once he mystified the Eastern man by some hurried business in the dead herder's tent. He seemed to be making a frenzied search for something that he needed very badly.

He found it at last, and a moment of drama resulted when he came forth into the firelight. A dark bottle was clutched in each of his hands. Hugh

glanced at them, then looked with even greater interest at the deep lines in the guide's face.

"I've found 'em," the Indian told him eagerly. "Knew sure he had 'em somewhere. Fire water."

The blood leaped once in Hugh's veins, and a great desire seemed to set fire to his brain. For a moment it seemed to cost him all power of thought. His hand started to reach forward. Then, almost as if the gesture had been inadvertent, he drew it slowly back.

He smiled; and his eyes gave no sign of the vision that was before them. The Indian's sight was keen, but he had no realization of the grim and terrible battle that was being waged in the man's own soul. There was no outward indication of the convulsive wrench that had been necessary to draw his hand back to his side. Even in that mountain silence, voiceless as the interstellar spaces, the Indian could not hear the voice of demons, shrieking within the man.

The truth was that Hugh had just been given a glimpse into his own soul: a sight that he had never really had before. He did not know from whence such power of vision came. It was something the wilderness had taught him in the hour that he had watched the sheep. He had always been ready to deny that strong drink had any hold upon him whatsoever. He believed that he had always drunk heavily because there had been no reason for doing otherwise. That such a hold could exist upon any one of the self-reliant, aristocratic circle in which he moved was simply one admission that would never be made, but had rather been linked with the offensive sentimentality that has constituted so much of the hue and cry of over-officious prohibitionists. Yet in one single vivid second of introspection he knew the truth. In this hour when all his best instincts warned him to abstain, the craving was almost too terrible to resist.

But he won that fight at last. He would have been ashamed to admit it, but little, icy sweat-drops had come out upon his forehead. And the victory left him curiously sobered. For the first time in his life, it seemed to him, he knew Hugh Gaylord as he really was.

The guide still stood waiting. Hugh's eyes swept to the flock. The two of them were on guard to-night, and this was no time to blur the senses with heady liquor. A hard task awaited them on the morrow. Besides—it was dead man's drink.

"Put it back," Hugh directed quietly.

The Indian stiffened, and his dark face grew sullen. Hugh watched him coldly. It looked like mutiny, and Hugh might have wondered at his own

composure, his confidence in his own ability to win this battle, too.

“I don’t put ’em back,” the guide retorted. “He—won’t need ’em now. Why put ’em back?”

“The reason why,” Hugh explained in a passionless voice, “is because I said so. I remember—I’d forgotten it until now—that there’s a national law against giving whisky to Indians. Besides—you’ve got work to do tomorrow, and I want you to be fresh.”

It was the first time since his arrival in Smoky Land that he had mentioned the man’s race. He knew that he ran the risk of wakening savage anger in the Indian’s breast. Yet he was willing to take that risk.

“What you got to say about it?” the Indian responded insolently. “We go back to-morrow. Job’s over. You ain’t given it to me. I found it. Come on—maybe take a little drink together.”

At that instant Hugh remembered that he was of a dominant race, and the familiarity of the remark grated somewhat unpleasantly upon him. He got up rather leisurely. He felt that in case of emergencies he preferred to be upon his feet. “Put the bottles back,” he said again. “I happen to be in command of this expedition. If you don’t obey, I’ll fire you right here—and you know what that would mean as far as ever getting a job as guide again. Put ’em back and put ’em back quick.”

The Indian’s expression changed. The sullenness gave way to surprise; then—to some measure, at least—to respect. He turned and walked back to the tent. Then Hugh heard his powerful strokes as he cut more fuel for the fire.

Hugh went to bed soon after this, and the night hours began their stealthy march, one after one, across the spaces of the wilderness. The two men had only a few more sentences of conversation. The silence and the mystery had seemingly taken out of Hugh all desire to talk.

“You told the truth, Pete, when you said this job was almost over,” Hugh remarked from his blankets. “And I’ve been thinking of something. If you’d help me load it on, I might be able to pack that poor devil down to the settlements by myself. You could stay here, and I could hunt up the flock owner and get him to give you a steady job as herder. He’d be grateful enough to you for staying to watch his sheep so that he’ll gladly do it. How would you like that?”

The Indian grunted. “Me no sheep herder,” he said distinctly.

Hugh marked the tone with some surprise. Its inference could not well be mistaken. Evidently Pete felt himself much above such an occupation.

“I thought you might like to be,” Hugh responded pleasantly.

“No. Only dagoes and Mexicans sheep herders. I’m a guide. Other herder got shot. Maybe I get shot too.”

Hugh didn’t pursue the subject further. After all, he couldn’t blame the man. By the code of the West it was degrading work; besides, the war with the cattlemen made it as perilous an occupation as could well be imagined. The glimpse of the still form that the guide had rolled in a blanket and which now lay outside the tent door was evidence in plenty of this fact.

He lay on the buoyant, fragrant fir boughs, watching the dancing shadows. The wilderness stirred and whispered with life. The sheep slept. The moon that had looked upon many shepherds shone on his face.

This same moon meant good hunting to the wild creatures that ranged the forest about the little meadow. It was hard for them to work in the utter darkness. And one can only imagine—because no naturalist has ever yet been able to know in full the inner natures of animals—the thrill and the exultation that had passed from border to border through the wilderness world when the great white disk first rose above the mountains.

“The hunting hour” was the word that passed—in the secret ways of the forest—from mouth to mouth. The wind seemed to carry it, and the whole wilderness thrilled and pulsed with it. Wild, hot blood leaped in savage veins; strange terrible lights sprang up in fierce eyes. “It is time to start forth,” the whisper passed: and the whole wild-life kingdom seemed to go mad.

It was a rapturous, an exultant thing, and human beings—jaded with too many centuries of repression that men call civilization—find it hard to understand. Only those who have stood in a duck blind watching a flock of mallard swing down toward the decoys, only those who have lain pressed to the slide rock and seen the mountain sheep, the incomparable Bighorn, in a long file against the snow, or those who have beheld the waters break and explode as the steelhead strikes can comprehend this wilderness ecstasy at all. The smells on the winds, the little hushed noises in the thickets, the startled waverings of shadows all added their influence; and the blood-lust came upon the beasts of prey.

It was their long-awaited hour. It was their time of triumph: stealth and strength, fang and claw, the stalk in the shadows, the leap, the blow, the feasting in the moonlight. The she-wolf came creeping from her lair, her cubs behind her, and all of their eyes were just so many twin circles of green light in the darkness. Were not the deer feeding on the ridges? The coyotes skulked in the shadows about the sheep camp; the lynx went stealing toward

the perches of the mountain grouse. The hunting fever spares none of the flesh-eaters, and from the smallest to the great—from the little, deadly, white-fanged mink following a rabbit's trail beside the river to the mighty grizzly, stalking a cow elk in the thicket—they felt in their veins the age-old stir that is ever new.

But there was one resident of Smoky Land that felt it more than any of his neighbors. In the first place he was a feline,—and that means that he was just a bundle of singing, vibrant, hair-trigger nerves. For sheer sensuality there are no creatures on earth to equal the cats,—and he was king and monarch of all the breed. The animal that catches his prey by an exhausting run, a simple test of wind and limb, cannot from the nature of things feel the wild rapture and suppressed excitement of one that stalks and leaps from ambush; and the cats are the foremost exponents of this latter method of hunting.

There were certain private reasons, too. Part of the hunting fever is due to pride, a sense of power and might. A lowly skunk, trotting along looking for fledglings, must have a hard time persuading himself he is very great and powerful, but this oversized monarch of the cat family had no difficulty whatever. In his time—and his years were rather more than is best in the wilderness—he had seen the bull elk turn from his path, and *that* is a sight to pass down to one's cubs. Even the old black bear, the honey-grubber who is, after all, the most lovable spirit in the forest, had been known to speak politely when the two of them met on the trail. Those who know Growl-in-the-throat can appreciate what a triumph this was,—because he rarely goes to any particular trouble to be polite to any one. This didn't mean, however, that even in his best days the great cat cared to engage him in a fair fight. Growl-in-the-throat was a honey-robber and an eater of fat grubs; he was forgetful and awkward and given to long weeks of sleeping; but he was living, forked, chain lightning in a hand-to-hand fight. No, it was rather a good thing to keep at peace with Woof.

But the coyotes, the lesser felines, even the wolves—making perfectly good meals off one another when they got the chance—were all fair prey to this tawny forest monarch. It made hunting pleasant. He didn't always have to be careful to see that he was not being hunted himself. It gave him a certain complacency and arrogance, and he expressed it from time to time in a long, wild, triumphant scream that lesser members of his family were ordinarily afraid to utter, lest it should call their enemies down upon them.

Just as the dark came down he had uttered the cry, and he had tingled with savage ecstasy as it echoed back to him. He had seen the first glint of the moon, and the green glare played in his terrible eyes as he started out

upon his hunting. The moonlight showed him vaguely, huge and sinuous and graceful past all words, as he stole through the forest on the way to the game trails of the ridge.

He flattered himself that not even the wild creatures, dreading or waiting for just this moment, had ears keen enough to hear him. A perfect stalk had been his pride, in his younger days, and he still assumed that he possessed it. Time was when his stealing feet—in which his terrible talons were even now encased ready to thrust forth—fell soft as pine needles on the trail. If indeed he were past his prime, at this hour at least—just as the moon rose—he would not admit it.

He opened his savage mouth, and for an instant the moonlight gleamed on the white teeth. The forest people could not have mistaken his identity thereafter. One of the great dog-fangs had been broken sharply off in some stress of years before.

He was the great Broken Fang, the monarch of the cougars. Was not the trail cleared, for long distances ahead, of all the lesser hunters? And yet this triumph brought no pleasure, for it led to the undeniable inference that his feet had spoken loudly, rather than whispered, on the narrow path.

CHAPTER VII

Of the three that lay beside the sheep that night, Hugh slept lightest of all. He missed the effects of strong drink. Night after night—more of them than he liked to remember—he had gone to bed half-torpid from the after-effects of the poison in his veins; but to-night he was singularly alert and watchful. The mountain air got to him for the first time since he had come to Smoky Land, and it invigorated him. Besides, perhaps his mind was too busy with thoughts to yield quickly to slumber.

The Indian came of a race that ordinarily sleeps lightly as the wild creatures—a habit learned by uncounted generations in the wild. It is good—wilderness people know—to be able to spring out of a dream and be instantly alert and ready for any crisis. But to-night he neglected the fire. And of course the late sheep herder slept soundest of all. Loud must be the alarm to waken him.

The night hours passed, and Hugh stirred and muttered in his half-sleep. He was troubled with curious dreams; and even on wakening he didn't know quite what they were. It seemed to him that some one had been trying to tell him something to which he did not want to listen. He kept trying to shut his ears, yet the words got through. They were accusing words, damning him for shirking a great responsibility that had been put upon him. He could see the scorn in the accuser's face. He was facing some sort of a test, and he broke beneath it.

He would rouse himself, listen to the mysterious sounds of the night, then drop back to sleep. He couldn't get away from a recurring dream that some terrible Foe was lurking in the shadows just beyond his vision, ready to swoop down on one who was very weak and helpless; yet he wouldn't stay to fight it off.

Once or twice he got up to mind the fire, and at such times the night noises reached him with startling vividness. Dawn was nearing; the sheep were stirring and uneasy. Once more he went to sleep. For a little while all his dreams departed. Then he felt a hand on his shoulder.

“Get up,” a voice said in his ear. “We got start now—make it down by night.”

He opened his eyes. The forest world was still lost in darkness. True, a faint grayness had spread over the east, but the moon still rode vividly in the

sky. And, yes, the sheep had got up and were feeding in the grass.

Hugh leaped to his feet. The guide had already rebuilt the fire; and the two of them went about the tasks that were necessary before departure. Pete caught the horse, Hugh himself completed the cooking of breakfast that the guide had already started. He watched with an extraordinary fascination the grim, certain motions of the Indian as he prepared the herder's body for the day's journey. The animal was saddled, the stiffening form tied on. Hugh helped put out the fire—the last act of a real woodsman when he breaks camp—and laid out food for the dog. A few moments more and they were ready to go.

“You're sure you won't stay—and take a job as sheep herder?” Hugh asked.

“Not me,” the Indian replied. “Herder shot—me shot next.”

“There's no reason for thinking you would be shot.”

“You don't know cattlemen—Landy Fargo—José Mertos—Besides—Pete got other work to do.”

Perhaps it was true. The guide had other work to do. Hugh glanced toward the flock. The animals were not bunched so closely now, and some of the lambs were feeding at the very margin of the river. Their numbers, now that they were widely spread, seemed greater than ever.

The shepherd dog came running to him, and Hugh bent to caress him for the last time. He held the head in his hands and looked into the brown eyes. The dog's gaze did not flinch as is usual when his majesty, man, looks into the eyes of one of the lower creatures. Instead, Hugh couldn't get away from a haunting idea that the dog's expression was one of pathetic appeal. It was almost as if the animal had spoken in words, and Hugh could not laugh at his own discomfort. “Aid me,” the dog seemed to say. “Help me keep my trust. The odds are long against me, so give me your aid.”

The dog leaped from his arms; then ran forward a little way, barking, toward the sheep. But Hugh laughed and called him back again.

“Good-by, old fellow,” he said. “Mind the sheep!”

The dog whined softly, and Hugh tried not to understand.

“There'll be a herder up here in a day or two, if the owner can procure one. And I've left out food for you. Good-by again, for the last time.”

But the concluding words of that farewell the animal did not seem to hear. Hugh felt him stiffen in his arms and saw that the intelligent eyes were gazing away, over the flock toward the river. Hugh followed the line of

sight, but all he could see was the shadows, bleached here and there by the bodies of the sheep. Then the dog leaped frantically from his arms.

Hugh watched him till the shadows hid him, saw him encircle the wing of the flock, and race at top speed toward the river. It was as if a message had come to him to which Hugh was deaf, that the dog's eyes had discerned some occurrence on the distant river bank that Hugh himself could not see, and, obedient to a great law within himself, true to a deathless trust that had been bestowed upon him, had dashed forth to give aid.

And the miracle was no less than Hugh thought. The dog *had* gone to give aid, and no man may say by what avenue of sense, by what inscrutable means he knew that aid was needed. The distance seemed too far for eyesight. There was no actual voice in the air that Hugh could hear. On the green bank of the river one of the ewes raced up and down, bleating pitifully, evidently in great distress. Hundreds of sheep were bleating at the same time, and it seemed hard to believe that the dog could have distinguished a note of distress, unheard in the others, in her voice. She seemed to be gazing in frantic terror down into the wild and seething cataract.

Far across the meadow Hugh did not hear and he did not heed. He turned to the guide, waiting at the horse's head. "Lead the way," he ordered. "There's no use of our waiting any longer."

Broken Fang, the cougar, had had a discouraging night. Never in his long years could he remember a time of darkness when the hunting had been so barren of results. Now the dawn was coming out, and not even a rabbit had been caught to appease the gnawing hunger within him.

He wouldn't have liked to admit the true explanation: that he had seen his best days. The cougar shares with all living things a resistless propensity to grow old, and already his years were many. He had had his day. The deer that had died in his talons, even the elk that he had laid low with one lightning, terrible bite to the throat would make a number not pleasing to contemplate by lovers of the wild game. It is to be remembered that an ordinary cougar will kill two deer a week, year on year, until the buzzards come to feed upon him. Broken Fang was no ordinary cougar: for more years than the swan could remember he had ranged through Smoky Land, killing as he went. He had felled the horned cattle; in one starving winter he had fought Cry-in-the-night, the wolf, and had mastered him; he had taken the old tusked boar gone wild in the underbrush. He knew the hunting craft to the last wile, and time had been when a cat-tail plume, falling on the

reeds, made more noise than his own step. But he was old: his unusual size proved that fact. By the same token was revealed his past prowess: only an animal that had surpassed in all the wiles of hunting and self-preservation could live to attain such a growth. But to-night—the deer had fled from him before he ever got within leaping range.

The wind had been right, the thickets had hidden his advance, the magic and the thrill of the hunting hour had been upon him. No human ear could have discerned his approach on the winding trail. But the difficulty lay in the fact that the deer have not human ears, but rather marvelous receivers as sensitive as the antennæ of a wireless outfit. Broken Fang was growing old; some of his marvelous muscle-control was breaking; and no longer could he accomplish a successful stalk.

The triumph that he had felt the first hour of the hunt was quite dead in him now. He would have welcomed any kind of prey. Just before dawn he had come upon a porcupine; but even this unprepossessing game had escaped him. It didn't make a story that he would care to tell to his cubs. There is a certain legend, in the forest, regarding those who cannot catch a porcupine.

“When Quill-back escapes the hunter,” the saying goes, “the buzzards will be full-fed to-morrow.”

The meaning is wholly simple to one who knows porcupines and buzzards. There is no more awkward, stupid, guileless creature in the woods than Quill-back, and the only reason why the beasts of prey haven't wiped out his breed centuries ago is because he is so fiendishly awkward to kill and eat. One spine in the nose means days of agony, a few in the mouth is apt to bring on slow starvation. And when one hunts porcupines, and they escape him, it means simply that the hunter is getting so old and so stiff that the scavengers may dine upon him very soon. In this case Quill-back crept up a tree and crawled out to the end of a limb where Broken Fang couldn't get him.

There was no more magnificent slayer in the whole woods than this huge puma, yet he had gone for a full day without food. And it was not to be wondered at that—just before dawn—the blood leaped in his veins anew when he caught the smell of the sheep flock on the wind.

He had killed sheep in plenty in his time, only on the far eastern border of his range. He hadn't known that any were to be found in this part of Smoky Land. They were an easy game to kill, dying at one little touch to the head or shoulder, and offering no sport at all to a bold hunter of deer. Yet to-

night he was in no mood to be discriminating. And it was wholly possible that the smell of that flock seemed to grant a new lease of life.

To linger at the outskirts of the band, to kill when he chose, perhaps even to know that most terrible of all wilderness lusts,—the feast of death. All forest creatures know this feast: they have an inborn passion for it that simply must almost tear them in twain. In all the world of carnage and wickedness there is no debauch that is half so terrible, and the first laws of the forest have decreed against it. For the death-feast is not the rational, honest killing of the hunt. Rather it is the thing that sheepmen dread above all things else: a perfect orgy of slaying, not for food but from desire, the tearing-out of a hundred throats in so many seconds. Yet was not Broken Fang the monarch of the forest? What laws were there to restrain him?

His long tail began to lash back and forth; his fangs caught the dim light of the encroaching dawn as he crept like a serpent through the thickets. The smell became even more plain, the fierce blood leaped even more wildly in his veins. There was nothing here to fear: no leaping camp fire to fill him with the age-old awe, no tall form of the herder on constant guard. He could kill, kill, kill—as much as he wanted—until the savagery in his heart was satiated. It was true that human beings had recently been on guard, but their smell was dim, and even now they were starting away, into the forest.

He paused, taking full stock of the situation. Usually at camps such as this there were, besides the herder with his death-stick, two dogs that would die before they would permit him to touch the sheep. He knew something about the fighting spirit of the shepherd dogs. He knew their blind courage, their terrible ferocity, and he knew only one fighting spirit to compare with theirs,—that with which the she-wolf guards her whelps. Such dogs always seemed to partake of man's own unconquerable spirit and they were terrible to face. But to-night only one of the dogs was on guard, and he could find killing in plenty before they should come to grips.

Then he drew up short, scarcely able to restrain a yowl of disappointment. He was on the wrong side of the river. A veritable torrent, deep and swift, flowed between. He came of a breed that has no love for water. Of course he could cross in time, he could wander up and down the bank until he found a dead tree stretching the full way over, but he was in no mood for delays. There was a log here, true, slanting down from his own shore, but it thrust down into water but a few feet from the bank and offered no crossing. And his passion almost consumed him at the sight of a ewe and lamb, just out of leaping range,—feeding at the very margin of the river on the opposite bank.

He shivered all over with excitement. He knew already the taste of the red ecstasy in their veins. He knew—in his dark beast-fancy—the feel of their soft flesh beneath his own terrible talons. He lay still, watching greedily.

But the forest gods were good to him, after all. He couldn't see just what happened. The whole tragedy had occupied but a miniature fraction of a second. Perhaps the bank gave way, possibly the sure little feet missed their hold, or a rock rolled and struck from behind. No matter the cause, the result was the same: the ewe stood alone on the margin. The lamb—a white, dainty creature whose flesh was soft and warm as a bird's—had fallen into that raging torrent, had been swept down the stream, and as if by a miracle had been hurled into a thatch of dead sticks and driftwood that had been wedged between some of the great boulders of the river bed.

The glaring eyes beheld its struggles and his own triumph. It was as if the forest gods had planned the whole disaster for his especial benefit. The barrier of the river was an advantage now: such guardians as kept watch over the flock could not cross those frightful waters to fight him off. He had only to steal down the log that slanted into the water, stretch out a paw to the white struggling figure half-submerged in the raft of driftwood, and snatch it up to his own remorseless fangs.

CHAPTER VIII

For the first dozen paces up the trail Hugh tried to shut his ears to the frenzied barking of the dog. He found it hard to believe that the animal was merely rounding up the sheep, keeping them in a compact herd as he had been trained to do. It wasn't the same cry that he had listened to before. It had an angry, warning quality, a threatening note as if it were trying to intimidate some enemy of the sheep. Then Hugh began to believe that his own fancy was carrying him away. For it seemed to him that the animal's voice had an actual undertone addressed to himself,—an appeal for aid before it was too late.

But, after all, he was not responsible for the flock. They were not his sheep. He had not been employed by the flock owner to care for them; and the idea of Hugh Gaylord, member of the Greenwood Club, acting as sheep herder was simply laughable. It was not his war,—that in which the herder had been struck down. He was anxious to go back to his own kind, to take up anew his old carefree life in his home city.

The dog's bark rose to a veritable clamor. Then he came racing back toward Hugh.

He approached within twenty feet of him, barking, then started back toward the river. Still Hugh did not follow. The dog rushed forward again and again turned. He didn't seem to be able to understand. Always before the men that he knew hurried to his aid at a time like this. Hugh felt a sudden rush of blood to his face.

“Good Lord, Pete,” he exclaimed. “I've got to see what's the matter with that dog.”

He caught up his rifle, then followed the dog to the water's edge. The river itself was a thing to stir the fancies. The dawn had not yet broken and in the dim, eerie grayness the stream had lost all quality of reality, all semblance to the sheet of sparkling water flowing between green banks that Hugh had beheld the previous night. He felt a sense of deepening awe. Rather, it seemed like some river of a Beyond, a sinister and terrible cataract in a twilight land of souls, a Lethe flowing darkly at the edge of a Hereafter. To a poet it might have seemed the River of Life itself, deep, fretful, full of peril and tragedy, and flowing from the beginning of the world to its end.

When the waters struck the great boulders of the river bed the foam gleamed a curious, pale white in the twilight,—otherwise the waters would have seemed like a dark void. The dog raced up and down the bank in excitement, then half-entered the water. Hugh saw his difficulty at once. He could not make headway in that raging torrent, and was trusting to Hugh for aid.

“What is it, old man?” he asked quietly, just loud enough to be heard above the noise of the waters. “What do you want me to do?”

The old ewe brushed close to him, as if she too looked to him for aid. If the light had been better, he could have seen the despair and agony in her quiet eyes. He studied closely the white patches on the river. He did not have the feline’s eyes, to see plain in the half-dark, and the dog’s were better able to penetrate the gloom than his. But slowly he grew accustomed to the half-darkness, and he knew the truth.

The lamb still struggled in the driftwood. And for one fraction of a second he thought that he saw something else.

It seemed to him that two strange, sinister lights suddenly glowed from the thickets on the opposite bank; then went out. They were close together, and they were round, and they were just alike. They were not twinkling lights: but rather were a strange blue-green like the flame that plays about an alcohol burner. No human being could have seen those dreadful blue disks and ignored them: their terror went too deep for that. Man knows the terror of lightning, the dread (as well as the love) of fire, the fear of flooding waters, but he knows those two twin circles best of all. They carry him back to the first great Terror; they waken memories from the depths of the germ plasm; they recall the sight of other such fiery spheres, gleaming in the darkness at the mouth of the cave. Hugh’s heart seemed to pump an icy stream through his veins.

But he forced his growing terror from him and made a swift study of the currents. The lamb seemed doomed. There was no wading that frightful stream. A log sloped down into the water from the opposite bank, but there was no way to cross. The only hope lay in hurling himself into the torrent, fighting his way to the middle of the stream, seizing the lamb, and swimming with it to safety.

The dog could not give aid. The river was a succession of great rocks and treacherous whirlpools, the water was icy cold, and in the darkness a swimmer might easily be swept downstream to his death. Hugh saw all these things plainly. In his own heart he sensed an equal menace in some dim form that waited on the opposite bank to combat him for those few pounds of

living flesh. And in that dim light he saw that only a few seconds remained in which to attempt a rescue. The wild waters broke against the rocks between which the lamb lay; and in a few seconds more it would cease its struggles.

It was only an animal, a baby sheep that was one of three thousand, a little armful of warm flesh that would never be missed. To rescue it would tax the last ounce of strength in Hugh's body. It might very easily cost him his life. It wasn't worth it. By all the dictates of good sense, the thing to do was to turn back, to leave the dog barking at the water's edge and the ewe mourning on the shore. There were no human spectators to praise him for the deed or condemn him for its omission. He knew that even if he were put on trial no sensible man on the broad earth would hold it against him if he left the lamb to its fate.

Yet in that moment of inner trial a great and a serene knowledge came to him. He knew—in one instant of vision—that it did not lay with the shepherd to consider abstract issues of life and death. It was not for him to try to balance the value of a lamb's life with his own. His business was to watch the flock. His work was to guard the sheep. Nothing could come between.

All the voices of prudence and good sense were stilled before the voice of his own soul. He was afraid, but his fear could not come between the shepherd and his work. He wanted to turn away; but a power greater than his own will made him stand fast. The laws of his own being had given their decree,—and they could not be denied.

“All right, old fellow,” he said simply to the dog. “We'll get the little devil.”

The dog plunged in. It was the voice he had awaited. The man dropped his coat, his gun, and the small pack that he wore on his back, then ran a short distance up the stream. And the muscles of his body seemed to shiver and vibrate with strength as he plunged into the dark waters.

Broken Fang, the cougar, had seen the dog and the man on the opposite bank, and at first he had been afraid. He retained enough of his natural caution not to wish to reveal himself at once. “Most of all, fear men,” was one of the first of the long scroll of forest laws, and time had been when he had shivered and skulked with fear at just the human smell on the wind. But to-night he was very hungry. And the game was almost in his claws.

He hadn't forgotten that he was the master of the forest, who had felled even the horned steer. What were these slight figures to stand against him? Many of the forest laws he had already broken; he might even yet break the

law that forbade the death-feast,—and why should he obey now? A slow, terrible anger began to overcome him.

He had missed his kill too many times that night. He felt a blind desire not to run away but to stay and fight. He crept down nearer the water's edge, his glaring eyes on the two figures on the opposite bank. At that instant he saw both of them plunge into the torrent.

This was the action of the deer when the wolves pressed them close,—to jump into the river to escape. These creatures were like the deer, a breed known to him of old. Little Death the mink had done the same thing, the night he had been so hungry and in which the miniature slayer had slipped between his talons. The river was always a place of refuge for those that were afraid. Thus it was plain that if the dog and the man feared him there was no further cause for him to be afraid of them. He crept out boldly, a magnificent, tawny figure in the dim light, on to the log that led down into the water. His eyes shone with blue fire.

Perhaps the dog saw him first. He swam with wide-open eyes. He had jumped in almost opposite the little pile of driftwood where the lamb lay and was immediately swept downstream. Hugh, however, had leaped in farther up, and he had had a chance to work into the middle of the current as he was carried down.

He had always been a strong swimmer, and he needed that strength now. The water was icy cold; it gripped him with resistless strength. He fought it with powerful strokes, but it seemed to him that he was tossed about like a straw. Even he headed upstream and out, not hoping to make headway but only to offset, in some degree, the incredible power of the current. He had never done such swimming as this before. Silver Creek was not at all like the swimming tank in his athletic club. He gave his whole strength; and it seemed to him that he was fighting for his life.

His plan was to seize the log that extended down into the water, brace himself while he rescued the lamb, and either climb up the log or be carried on down and swim to the bank. He didn't know that the log was already occupied: that a great forest creature had come down to contest the lamb's life with him. He was full in the middle of the current, by now; and then, with a powerful lunge of his body, his arms swept about the log.

He braced himself, then turned in order to reach the lamb. He reached for a hold higher on the log. Something brown, with extended talons, rested upon the rough bark within a few inches of his hand, and at first he did not understand. Then the spray cleared from his eyes, and he knew the truth.

It was not a thing to forget: that wilderness scene in mid-stream in which Broken Fang and this man of cities came face to face for the first time. It made a grim and moving picture: the magnificent outline of the great cat in silhouette against the slowly brightening eastern sky; the lamb, struggling in the little patch of driftwood; the watching forest, the dark river with its ivory foam; and the gray half-light of dawn casting dimness over all. Yet there was no such folly as mistaking its reality. The form on the log was not just a shadow, an image, a drunken fancy. It was as real as the icy touch of the river and so near that he could see the creature's ears, lying flat against the savage head.

Hugh's head, shoulders and one arm were clear of the water: a few inches distant gleamed the white fangs of the puma. The fight for the life of the lamb was at close quarters at last. And Broken Fang had all the advantage. He was above and had room in plenty to strike; he had only to tap down with his paw or lash out with his deadly fangs. Hugh, on the other hand, had braced himself against the log and had only one arm free.

It came to Hugh that he might give up his attempt to save the lamb, slip back into the water, and be carried down out of the reach of the rending fangs. But even before the thought went fully home he had taken the opposite course. Perhaps it was because he was the shepherd—for the moment at least forgetting and ignoring all things but his guardianship of the sheep—and Broken Fang was an ancient enemy. Perhaps he instinctively realized that if he turned even for an instant those terrible talons would lash down at him. His instincts came sure and true, and he knew he must make no sudden motions. He began to pull himself upward toward the great cat.

He knew one single moment of blighting terror when he thought that the cougar was going to stand its ground. The animal crouched, his lips drew in a snarl, he raised one foot with extended claws. He was the great Broken Fang; and this creature that rose up from the waters was but a fawn in strength compared to him. The lamb was almost in his grasp. His sinuous tail twitched at the tip.

It was the most terrible moment in Hugh's life, a moment of test in which the basic metal within the man was tried in the fire. He could not turn back now. He shouted with the full power of his lungs; but on the might of his own eye and will, on the old elemental superiority of man over the beasts of the field and the fowls of the air rested life or death. He was of the dominant breed, and if he forgot that fact for one instant—in this moment of stress—those white fangs would lash out.

For the first time in his life Hugh Gaylord had to rely on his own manhood for success or failure. His wealth, his influential social connections, breeding and birth and class could not aid him here. It was simply the trial of man against beast, the power of man's will against resistless physical might. If he flinched, if he turned for an instant, all was lost.

His face was white as white foam, the lines cut deep like brands, the heart of the man was like ice. Yet the eyes didn't flinch. They burned steady and straight,—into the glowing twin circles of blue fire just above him.

There was a long, strange moment of silence in which it seemed that the river flowed like a soft wind. All the power and strength of his being was at test. And slowly—snarling at every step—the puma began to back away up the log into the thickets.

Still Hugh held firm. He waited until the great cougar was ten feet distant, then his arm shot out like a serpent's head toward the lamb. He seized it in a strong grasp, released the log, and yielded himself to the full force of the current. As he swept down he saw the cougar—his courage come back to him now that the masterful eyes no longer glared into his—spring out with a savage snarl to the end of the log. But he was out of reach now, and safe, struggling once more against the might of the current.

He fought with all his strength and slowly worked his way into the shore. The guide came running toward him: the dog—fifty feet farther down—pulled himself up, dripping and exhausted, on the rocky margin. Hugh caught at the overhanging bushes and slowly he gained the bank. And with a queer, dim smile he set the lamb down beside the ewe.

It seemed endless moments before he felt able to speak. His breath seemed gone, he felt weak as a child, his muscles ached and his wet clothes chilled him, yet he felt strangely, deeply happy. He didn't know why. He was too tired for introspection. He only knew a great, unfamiliar joy, an inner peace.

“Don't wait any longer for me,” he said at last when he got his breath. Pete looked down at him in amazement. Hugh smiled into his dark eyes.

“What you mean?” Pete asked in bewilderment.

Hugh smiled again but felt too tired to explain. There was no use of explanations: he didn't know that he could find words for them. For the moment he had lost faith in words: only deeds mattered now. He didn't seem to be able to tell why Hugh Gaylord, the son of wealth and of cities, should yield himself to such folly. The body of the dead herder still lay across the

horse's back: the fact that another week might find himself in the same position could not matter either.

“You're to go on alone,” he explained quite clearly. “I'm going to stay here—until some one comes up and takes my place—and watch the sheep.”

For Hugh knew the truth at last. A new power, a greater strength had risen within him. His eyes saw clear at last. In that wild moment in the heart of the stream he had given service, he had risked all for a cause. None of his old, soft delights had yielded one part of the pleasure that had been his as his strong strokes braved the current; no false flattery had ever been so satisfying as his victory over Broken Fang. It was service, it was conquest, it was manhood at last.

He had no sense of self-sacrifice as he made his decision to stay with the sheep. The joy of strong deeds does not lie in self-pity. Rather it was an inner knowledge that he had found happiness—at least the beginnings of it—and only a fool would throw it away. He had no wish to forego the first pleasure that life had ever given him.

He started away into the forest with his sheep.

CHAPTER IX

As the dawn broke over Smoky Land, the sheep fed farther and farther out from the camp,—a long, white column like a moving snow field against the deep dusk of the forest. The light grew, the last stars faded, the gloom of the underbrush evolved into distinct browns and greens; most of the beasts of prey returned to their lairs. Unlike Hugh they had no love for these daylight hours. Dawn meant the end of their reign.

For the night has always been the time of triumph to the hunting creatures. It is the hour of glory when fang and talon and strength and stealth come into their own. Now the deer had left their feeding ground and had gone into the heavy brush through which even a cougar could not creep without being heard. The birds had left their perches, the little underground people had retired to their burrows. In the nighttime the dim, sinuous movements of the hunters' bodies could hardly be distinguished from the wavering shadows, but the deer made no such mistake in the hours of daylight. Many of the flesh-eaters had not yet killed, and those that had been successful found no pleasure in leaving their warm, dripping feasts to the buzzards in the sky. Only the coyotes and such low-caste people remained to hunt; and they didn't stay from choice. With them it was a simple matter of hunting all the time, of seeking tirelessly with never a rest, that kept them fed at all.

The reason went back to a curse that Manitou put upon the coyotes in the young days of the earth. No one knows just what their offense was—whether they were once dogs who betrayed men, or the fathers of dogs that betrayed the wild by selling their sons into the bondage of men—but not even a tenderfoot can doubt the severity of their punishment and the depths of their remorse. Many of the voices of the forest are dim and small, many of them are inaudible except to those who give their lives and their souls to the wild, but the curse upon Running Feet the coyote is usually made clear in one night at the twilight hour. For the coyotes do not keep their afflictions to themselves. Their voice suddenly shudders out of the half-darkness, a long wail broken by half-sobs,—infinitely despairing and sad.

Very few of the wilderness voices are joyful. Even the whistling of the birds—close observers find out at last—have a plaintive note that seems never entirely absent. No man can doubt the sadness in the wailing cries of the passing geese,—telling of the bleak, glooming marshes where they live

and die. The winter song of the pack, the little shrieking of pikas on the sliderock, even the murmur of the pines are filled with the ancient sadness of existence, the old complaint of the pain of living with only Fear and Death at the end. But none of these voices contain the utter despair, the incomprehensible sadness of the twilight cries of the coyotes. Thus wise men know that they—because of some offense of long ago—have been accursed among beasts.

They have been exiled to the rocky hills, they are afflicted with madness in Indian summer, their pride has been taken from them, and all of the greater forest creatures treat them with contempt. They are driven from the game trails, and thus they have to do their hunting at any time that offers, early or late. All of the larger beasts of prey had now gone to their lairs and to sleep, but these gray skulkers still lingered about the flock.

Once Hugh caught a glimpse of a gray figure in a distant thicket; but it was too far to shoot. An expert marksman would have felled him in an instant; and Hugh began to regret that he had not—by taking to the hunting trails in some of his wasted days—learned this art. Try as he might he couldn't see that he was in the least equipped for taking care of the flocks until another herder could be secured. And for the first hour he was deeply troubled as to the success of his undertaking.

No man, he considered—not even the Innuits of the Arctic—knew less concerning the white grazers than he himself. He had read no books about them, and except for the fact that he had bought various all-wool fabrics for his clothes and had eaten many a lamb chop, he had had no dealings with them whatsoever. He hadn't the least idea how to control or care for the vast flock, when to water them and when to feed them salt, at what hours they should bed down and what orders to give his one faithful assistant, the dog. This animal, he concluded, knew worlds more about the business than he himself. In his new humbleness he seriously regretted that the barrier of speech prevented him from taking orders from the dog.

Fortunately Hugh was blessed with a sense of humor, and soon it came to his aid. After the first doleful hour he found considerable amusement in his own predicament,—a clubman with three thousand sheep suddenly thrust upon his hands. He had read stories of men who had been given the care of one or more babies,—and he laughed when he thought how his own experiences had put them out of the running. Fifteen hundred babies, and as many helpless mothers, all of them wholly in his care. He was tickled all over, and after that he had no place in his mind for worry and doubt about the outcome.

And the fact that he regained his poise was the best thing that ever happened for the sheep. Realizing his own ignorance he made no attempt to herd or guide them. He was not in the least nervous or excited himself, and thus there was no contagion of alarm to carry to the flock. "After all," he thought, "these brutes know what's best for 'em better than I know myself. Let nature take its course. Let 'em do what they want and I'll follow along and keep off the cougars; and of course, get 'em back to the camp at night."

The wisest herdsman on earth could not have given him better advice. He didn't hurry the sheep. But it was not because he had heard that old Hebrew maxim,—that a lame herder takes the best care of sheep. The idea is, of course, that a lame man does not walk fast and hurry his animals. By letting them follow their own ways, he avoided the usual mistake of an inexperienced herder in trying to keep his flock too close together. They were Rambouillets—a breed in which the gregarious instinct is highly developed—and they hung close enough together for general purposes. They grazed slowly: Hugh had time to see the sky and the pines and all the miracle and magic of the wonderland about him.

Never, he thought, had there been a more sudden change in human fortunes. Two little weeks before his own sphere of life had been restricted by a few blocks of an eastern metropolis; he had been a clubman, possibly—and he thought upon the phrase with a strange derision—a social favorite. He had been what men call—without greatly bothering to discriminate—a gentleman. He had lived the life that men of his class were expected to live, drinking rather more than was good for him, wasting time, and being frightfully and immeasurably bored. Now—by the exigencies of the hour, by a single prank of fate—he was simply a herder of sheep. He was giving all he possessed of time and skill to a job that as a rule only Mexicans and uneducated foreigners deigned to accept. He suddenly laughed when he remembered that—although the flock owner and himself had not yet agreed on terms—he would probably secure wages for the time spent. Two dollars a day, perhaps,—such a sum as he ordinarily spent for cigarettes. Thinking of cigarettes he delved into his pocket, searching for a new pipe that on the advice of the Old Colonel at his club he had brought with him to Smoky Land and which had not yet been tried.

It had cost, he remembered, something less than a dollar. The Old Colonel himself had passed upon it, explaining certain virtues in regard to it that Hugh had since forgotten. "You'll like a pipe," the old gentleman had said, "if you ever get into a real outdoor-man's mood. Cigarettes are all right, of course—probably don't give you the nicotine kick that a pipe does

—but a pipe has been the woodsman’s smoke from Sir Walter Raleigh and the Indians down.”

He found the pipe and meditatively filled it with fragrant tobacco. It was new, the taste of burning varnish was not wholly absent, yet he couldn’t remember that his expensive cigarettes had ever given him the same delight. It was a herdsman’s smoke, he thought, and for the time being at least he was a herdsman. And the thought of refusing the meager wage that the flock owner would be willing to pay for his inexperienced services didn’t even occur to him. He wasn’t, he remembered, devoting his time for nothing. And he was somewhat startled by the thought that for the first time in his life his—Hugh Gaylord’s—time was actually worth somebody’s good money.

There would be a satisfaction in that little wage that he had never received from the handsome checks that he got monthly from his trust company. The clinking dollars would be worth showing to the boys at his club,—trophies greater than the cups he had occasionally won at golf and tennis. A herder of sheep,—that was the title and degree of Hugh Gaylord, late of the Greenwood Club. The whole idea amused him more than he could tell.

The best of it was that no one would mistake his calling. He looked the part. He hadn’t shaved—he remembered by the sudden feel of scratchy whiskers on his chin—for three days, and he had the disreputable look that usually results from such an omission. His outing clothes were torn, drenched, soiled, and dust-covered. At first he had felt somewhat uncomfortable in his unsightly togs; he had regretted the departure of his usual well-groomed appearance, but now he actually rejoiced in his disreputability. He wouldn’t have any trouble convincing the camp-tender—when that mysterious gentleman should reveal himself—that sheep-herding was his fitting station in life. He would make, he thought with a laugh, a fairly plausible tramp.

He had been greatly fatigued by his hard swim in Silver Creek, but now he felt refreshed. And he found himself wondering at the ease with which laughter came to his lips. It wasn’t the usual thing with Hugh Gaylord at all. He found to his surprise that life was full of things to laugh at: the incongruity of his position, the awkward antics of the lambs, the grandmotherly concern of the ewes, the whole irresistible joke of existence. Before, Hugh had laughed in really but two ways—one at wit (usually the forced wit of a professional comedian) and the other in scorn. One of these two ways, it seemed to him, had wholly left him now. The ability to be really scornful of anything in the wide world had seemingly passed away. The vision of himself watching the flocks had brought a new tolerance, a

new breadth of view toward all the world. Never in his life, so far as he could remember, had he laughed from the simple joy of life, the laugh of sheer delight. Somehow, he had never learned to know delight in its true sense.

Then Hugh came to a curious conclusion. He denied it a long time, but slowly the facts to support it became too many to resist. It was simply that in his past life—the life between which mighty mountains now raised a formidable barrier—he had grown old before his time. Nor was it kindly and wholesome old age that had come to him: the ripened wisdom of venerable years. It was a false age, and it had given him a wholly false outlook on life. Two weeks ago he had felt infinitely old and tired, and now he had been born again.

His vision hadn't been quite straight. He had taken his own little sphere of life to represent the whole magnificent sphere in which the continents rise above the sea. Unlike all truly great people, unlike the most worthy even among his own set, he had adopted an attitude of what he flattered himself was sophistication. But he had not been a true Sophist, one who could immutably separate the gold from the dross, one who knew the infinite good humor as well as the remorseless travail of life. He had thought that everything was dross. He had lost faith in the world, conceiving virtue as the exception rather than the rule, doubting the compensation of clean living, the sanctity of homes, the solace of religion, the pride of good work, the purity of womanhood, the immortality of ideals. And most of all he doubted happiness. He didn't believe that it existed.

Yet all at once he had found it: a quiet, healthy happiness that was constant as his own breathing. It lay, not in stimulation or in pleasures between which the mood drops down, but in a clear, sweet level of contentment, of personal worth, of time well spent, of existence justified and destiny fulfilled. There behind that flock, tired of muscle but still on duty, guarding with watchful eye and ready weapon, Hugh Gaylord felt content for the first time in his life.

If there was one blessing in particular that his false sophistication had cost him it was that of simple faith,—the faith of children, faith in the redemption of the race and the high constancy of the stars. It meant, clearest of all perhaps, that he had lost faith in miracles. Yet he now found a miraculous quality in this very happiness that had come upon him. He had self-wonder no less amazing at the curious familiarity and boundless peace with which he fell into the spirit of the sheep.

He felt at peace. There was no other word. Could it be that he had come into his own at last? All his life, it had seemed to him, he had carried in the deepest realms of his spirit a vision that had now come true: just the feeding flocks in the deep shade of the forest. He had the strange feelings of one who—exiled in babyhood—catches the far gleam of his homeland at last.

It seemed wholly natural that he should be walking here—behind the flocks—in silent vigil as the sun climbed up over the far, white peaks. He had a sense of having returned, after long and futile wanderings, to his own home. Always there had been blind, little-understood gropings in his own soul, a reaching outward; and had he found his destiny at last?

Up Silver Creek came the salmon, returning to their home waters for their last days. Four years had they dwelt in the dark bewilderment of the sea, but they came back to their own places in the end. Did they, all through those four years of their exile, carry in the deepest recesses of their beings a vision of their Lost Land to which they would return to die? Did they know a vague bewilderment, blind gropings in their fishy souls, an unfamiliarity with the gray wastes and the incessant waves that was not to end until they could know again the shallows and cataracts and waterfalls of their native river? Did peace come to them then? It was repatriation,—and Hugh felt that he had repatriated too. Only the exile had not been confined to his own little life. Instead of four years it was—more likely—four generations, even four centuries. He had been an alien in those far, tumultuous cities, but he had come home to the open places at last.

“You are an Anglo-Saxon,” the Old Colonel had said, and that had meant that for as many years as could be counted in a day his people had been tillers of the soil. The Anglo-Saxon was never one to gather into cities. He knew the meadows, the forests, the feel of the earth through the handles of his plow, the sheep feeding on the hillside. When his land became too heavy with people—so that he could no longer see the sun breaking forth in glory to the east because of city spires that rose between—he was likely to set sail for the far places of the earth, still to watch the sheep as they fed at the edge of the forest. His was a people of the soil: before they learned to plow, their flocks fed in the downs. The love of the soil had been bred into his race, warp and woof, and the little generations of exile in cities could not take his heritage away from him.

The flock fed for about two hours, then bedded down to chew their cud. Hugh was perplexed at first. He was somewhat fearful that a sudden illness had come upon the entire flock. The dog, however, seemed to understand. He came back to his master’s side and the two of them had a little chat as the

morning advanced. After a short rest the sheep got up and started to feed again.

There was really not much work for Hugh to do. Occasionally he would see a small band of the sheep browsing off in a different direction from the course of the main flock, but at such times the dog knew the exact course of action. He would circle around the straying animals, cut off their escape, and they were always glad to head back into the main flock. It became increasingly evident, however, how difficult it was to keep track of the entire band. Only the gregarious instinct of the animals maintained their formation at all: in the dense woods he could see only a small part of the flock at one time. He had no way of knowing if various detachments had not already wandered away from the main band. Of course he didn't know the methods by which most herders guard against this danger: by an approximate count achieved by keeping track of the black sheep, or markers. It seemed to him also that the wolves and other predatory animals had every opportunity in the world to lurk about the flanks of the flock and steal the lambs. The truth was that losses were sustained in this manner every day, and his presence alone prevented a wholesale slaughter.

About ten he decided it was time to turn the sheep. They had been moving since before dawn: he wanted to give them time in plenty to get back to the camp before night. He didn't know how many rests they would wish to take in the afternoon.

He made a big circle about the flock, turning back at its head. He supposed that he could make the animals wheel straight about in a to-the-rear march, permitting those at the rear of the main band to get first chance at the feed on the way home. The way of sheep, however, is different. They executed what was more nearly a squads right, keeping the same leaders. The great advantage of the scheme lay in the fact that circling, they made the return trip on fresh feeding grounds.

He felt increasingly thankful for the aid of his dog. He seemed to interpret Hugh's every wish. And when at the head of the main band, the man got his first glimpse of Spot.

CHAPTER X

No observer could make any mistake about Spot's position in the flock. Through all the maneuvers of the great band he kept the foremost place; and the other sheep followed him without question. The young and inexperienced herdsman thought at first that he was the old "bellwether" of the flock.

But in a very few moments he had to reconstruct some of his ideas. In the first place Spot was not old, and in the second he was obviously not a wether. He was not wrinkled and withered like the old ewes: sheep that had yielded their wool for many seasons. To Hugh's eyes he looked like a yearling ram; and rather amazing horns had begun to curve from his bold, rugged head.

Hugh was considerably puzzled. He was not a sheepman, but for the simple reason that there were no other yearling rams in the flock he believed that most of the previous season's crop of male lambs had been sold as wethers to the markets. The mature lambs were obviously kept apart until the breeding season in late fall or winter. Some exception had thus been made in the case of Spot. And Hugh found himself watching the sturdy sheep with a singular interest.

In the first place the animal lacked the uniform color of the other sheep. His basic color was neither white nor black, but a decided dark brown with white at the backs of the legs and the rump. This variation of color immediately won him his name. He was the only sheep in the flock with horns, and in some vague way the man realized that the outline of his figure was entirely different from that of the ewes.

Although he was massively and boldly built, there was an actual grace about his motions not to be seen in the ewes. His form looked lean and hard, for all its massive development, and he stood several good inches above the tallest ewe in the flock. Hugh found it hard to believe, however, that he was some imported, high-bred yearling ram that would later be used to help build up the standard of the flock. In spite of his exceptional height and strength, his trim body probably weighed less than some of the fat ewes, his wool was not unusual, and certainly one of his rugged, agile form would not yield tender mutton. The man found it increasingly difficult to explain his presence in the flock.

Hugh tried to head him off, only to find that he was surprisingly quick on his feet. Only because his flock were unable to follow him and the young ram whipped back to join them was Hugh able to round him up at all. And when he darted off in a half-circle the whole band came pell-mell after him as if, young as he was, they were afraid to trust themselves without his guidance.

The longer Hugh looked at him, the more he was marked from all the other sheep in the flock. Of course it was possible that the mere fact that he was a male of the species was enough thus to distinguish him; yet ignorant though he was of the ways of sheep, Hugh found this explanation insufficient. In the first place Spot was just a yearling and evidently not yet mature. He could not imagine some of those strong-minded old ewes trusting their lives and fortunes to any ordinary immature ram. But this creature had a carriage not to be seen in the others, seemingly a spirit and pride and self-reliance that didn't quite fit in with the nature of domestic sheep. His very stride revealed a bold, fearless, domineering disposition.

He did not graze easily, as did most of his followers. He skipped about across the whole front of the flock, now perching upon some lofty crag, now scampering up a narrow trail where the flock could scarcely follow. But in the hot, still late afternoon, as the sheep were beginning to stir after a long rest in the forest shade, Spot gave him even further cause to wonder.

To Hugh, it seemed the hottest hour of the day. His human sense, however, misled him: in reality, the highest point had been reached, and the cool winds from off the snow fields were on their way to bring relief. The sheep were still resting in a compact band: Spot, at the extreme front rank of the flock, had climbed upon a little rocky eminence on the hillside. It was such a promontory as is to be seen often in the high Rockies, an outcropping of the rocky skeleton of the hill emerging—like the end of a broken bone through the flesh—from the brown earth of the hillside. It was such a place as the wolf chooses for her lair, and the poison people—the gray speckled rattlesnakes whose bite is death—like to stretch out upon through the long, still afternoons. Because it overlooked the whole glen and was at the edge of the stony hillside where he had been doomed to live, Running Feet, the coyote, found it a convenient place to look for game.

Why Spot had chosen such a place for his rest Hugh could not guess. It was not shaded and comfortable like the glen beneath. Nor did he lie down like the ewes below him, but stood alert, head up, nostrils open to receive any message that the wind might bring. Hugh found himself watching him with fascinated interest. It seemed to him that the animal was on guard over

the flock, even as he himself and the dog,—a watchful sentinel for any danger that might threaten them.

If it were true, he had a right to his wonder. The domestic animals do not ordinarily appoint one of their number as a sentinel. They have depended on the protection of men for so many generations that this habit has died from the breeds. The wild creatures, however, still retain it. If indeed the ram should detect danger for the flock, there was no conceivable refuge for them, so there could have been no conscious intelligence behind the act. It was obviously a long-remembered instinct. Any of the fleet-footed hunters of the wild could overtake them, and the slaying was easy even for a little lynx, biting sure and true.

No one knew this fact any better than Running Feet, the coyote, emerging from the brushy thickets of the hillside in late afternoon. His second name was Coward—cowardice was part of the curse that Manitou had put upon him—but even a seasonal fawn would be brave enough to attack a sheep. It might be, approaching in the shelter of the thickets, he could get close enough to the flock to steal a lamb or ewe from its flanks.

It was not that he had forgotten the shepherd dogs that kept watch, or the herder with his gun. Running Feet was never able to forget things like these. Part of his curse was a far-reaching and calculating intelligence almost equal to that of a dog, a trait that would have been a tremendous advantage if he had been blessed with courage to go with it, but which to a coward meant only realization of a thousand dangers to make life a torment. He understood perfectly what displeasing treatment would be his if the dogs came upon him at the killing. Not even Broken Fang, the puma, can always protect himself against the onslaught of the Barking One on guard over the flocks. He is fast as lightning and as terrible as the she-wolves at the lair mouth. And Running Feet knew quite well the deadly qualities of the glittering stick that the herder carried in the hollow of his arm.

To-day, however, there was only one dog, and he worked on the far side of the flock. The herder rested under a tree; if Running Feet kept to the shelter of the brush, there was nothing to fear from him. True, he would be obliged to dip out into the open to seize one of the lambs, but if fortune only permitted them to lie close enough to the edge of the thicket, he could do it without danger. Fortune wasn't usually good to Running Feet; but to-day perhaps his luck had turned. And at that point in his wolfine thoughts he made out the figure of Spot, in tireless vigil on the highest point of the rock pile.

It was too good to be true. The distance was full two hundred yards from the herder; the dog was equally distant. The brush went clear to the base of the rocks; one or two little leaps into the open would put him within killing range. Then one or two slashing bites with his white fangs,—and *that* would complete a perfect afternoon.

Running Feet looked the ground over carefully. He didn't want to make any avoidable mistakes. It might be that the young ram would dash down and into the flock at the first sight of him, and although he could overtake any domestic sheep in a short run, it might necessitate a chase into the clearing and some danger from the herder's rifle. The wise course was to circle about the promontory, keeping as close as possible to the shadow of the thicket, and advance up the trail between Spot and his flock.

The wind was right, the shadows were long and strange, and even Running Feet the coward could see no chance of failure. He crept slowly from the thicket, a gray shadow few wilderness eyes were keen enough to see. His white fangs gleamed, the blood leaped in his veins. He made the stalk with complete success: Hugh had not been able to tell what living form had stirred the thicket at the base of Spot's lookout. And then the gray killer came bounding up the rocky trail.

Hugh saw him then. It was only a gray glimpse: by no possible chance could he have found a target for his rifle. The distance was far, the coyote's body half-obsured. He had only one thought: that Spot was doomed beyond any power of his to save him. Already, it seemed to him, he had developed a real affection for the self-reliant, spirited ram; and he had a sense of acute personal loss as he read its doom. To lose the brave leader of the flock in his first day of service! No event in his life had ever caused more regret.

No instruments may measure the speed of the human mind in a second of crisis. The glimpse of the charging coyote was of infinitesimal duration, yet Hugh had time in plenty for an overpowering wave of regret and rage. The time he lacked, however, was that for muscular response. There was none whatever to raise his rifle and take aim.

And at that instant his regrets were cut short. He suddenly shouted with delight. Spot was not to die so tamely,—in the fangs of Running Feet. All at once the young ram snapped about in the trail, making no attempt whatever to flee into the thickets on the other side of the rock pile. And he lowered his head in a posture of defense.

For long seconds he stood motionless, statuesque, his horns ready for the coyote's onslaught. There was something masterful, noble about the posture,

not at all to be expected in the timid and defenseless domestic sheep. And the coyote drew up short in the trail.

The other sheep had sprung up, by now, and were crowding away from the rock pile: the dog sprang forward, barking, at the other side of the flock. Hugh stood waiting for a chance to aim his weapon. And still the tableau on the rocks remained unchanged: the young ram with lowered head, the coyote—his blood turning to milk inside of him—on the trail.

Hugh's astonishment was nothing compared to the coyote's own. He had expected flight, panic,—anything on earth except an actual attitude of self-defense. Just for a moment he stood motionless, snarling, trying to find courage to attack. But not for nothing had Manitou put his curse upon him.

All at once it came to him that he had made a mistake. There was something familiar about the sturdy figure, the lowered head, the curling horns. He remembered certain passes in the High Rockies,—and various trim, horned creatures that might occasionally be met there. Even Broken Fang did not care to meet these people on a narrow trail,—and Running Feet remembered with some haste that he had an appointment on the other side of the hill.

At that instant Hugh shot. The distance was far; the bullet whizzed hot along Running Feet's shoulder. He didn't wait for a second shot. He turned and fled at the fastest pace he knew. And with the air whizzing past him he wholly missed the curious words that the herder uttered,—the strange remark that he made to Spot, still standing defiantly with lowered horns on the trail.

“Good Lord, Spot,” he cried, “you're not just a sheep. Sure as I live, you're a——” But he didn't finish telling what Spot was. Perhaps he didn't know; and the ideas that were glowing dimly in his brain did not yet take the form of a concrete thought. But more likely his attention was merely called away. For at that instant he saw his camp-tender advancing slowly up the trail.

CHAPTER XI

Hugh Gaylord had, like all men, experienced some rather violent surprises in his time. They had been coming exceptionally thick and fast since he had come to Smoky Land. His changed attitude toward life and his behavior in regard to the flocks had been amazing experiences in themselves. He had just experienced a rather violent shock on beholding the warlike behavior of Spot. The previous night he had been through the unusual experience of finding the body of a murdered man in a tent. But he suddenly realized that he was facing the most amazing situation of all.

Death, after all, in some manner or other comes to all living creatures. Hugh had no real reason for amazement at that still form in the herder's tent. He was ready to confess he didn't know a great deal about sheep: possibly Spot's episode with the coyote would not have so surprised a more experienced herder. But now he felt as if a number of his preconceived ideas had been violently knocked out of him, and that is always dumbfounding. His camp-tender was not a Mexican, nor yet a laboring man of a certain type, but a girl.

He had seen some thousands of girls in his life, yet he found himself staring at the slim form on the horse as if he were gazing upon a miracle of nature. Every experience of the past few days might have been in some manner expected and he had only reacted because of qualities within himself; his experiences with Broken Fang and the coyote were wholly fitting in this wild, mountainous land, but he had never dreamed but that he had left all womankind a thousand miles behind him. This was a man's land, not a place for the tender flesh of girls. This was the home of savage beasts, a region of dark forests and forbidding peaks, never a land of gentleness and ease such as women should know. He realized with a start that evidently his good manners had been left behind him also, for he was gazing at her in open-mouthed astonishment.

If the girl on the horse had been an Indian squaw, even an aged and wrinkled frontiersman's dame, he would have felt that the axis of the world still stood at the proper angle. But this girl was white, in spite of her tan and the high color—not put on with a rabbit's foot—in her cheeks. She was young, not more than twenty-two at most. And strangest of all she was pretty past all denial.

Hugh felt as if there must be some mistake. Perhaps in these lonely days in the hills he had lost the power of discrimination. He hadn't seen a girl for endless weeks—centuries they seemed to him—and he had heard that such isolation affects the point of view. The girl might be white; by a long chance she might even be young; but by no possible circumstance had she a right to be pretty. Beauty dwelt in far cities, in gentle lands and distant, not in these rugged mountains. Yet the truth of his first observation became ever more apparent.

He steadied himself, closed his mouth, and tried to stand at his ease. The girl swung down from the horse. That motion, graceful as the leap of a deer, explained in a measure the mystery. It revealed a suppleness, a strength and liveness of body such as might stand the test of existence even on the frontier.

Hugh noted that she was a slender girl, rather tall, that she wore a soft felt hat over her chestnut hair, and that she had dark eyes under rather marvelous brows. Hugh was no amateur in regard to women. Now that he had regained his self-control he made a swift and unerring appraisal; yet found his amazement deepening at every instant. There was a freshness, an appeal about her slight figure, suggesting perfect health and superb physical development rather than weakness, and he was not blind to the gentleness and breeding in her soft features.

She seemed perfectly composed, wholly at ease. In her simplicity she found no embarrassment under his frank gaze. "Where's Dan?" she asked.

Hugh straightened, somewhat startled. He had expected some sort of a formal greeting, a few words in apology or introduction, not this straight-out, uncompromising "Where's Dan?" It seemed to him she acted somewhat suspicious of him, also.

She had, he observed, a well-bred voice. She spoke in clear, level tones that pleased his ear. The voice was wholly lacking in affectation, but it was simply brimming and vibrant with health and high spirits. Hugh noticed something else, too, and smiled inwardly. He couldn't remember ever having been spoken to in just that way before. The level, impersonal tone implied an insurmountable social barrier between them. It was a somewhat similar tone, he remembered, to that in which he had occasionally spoken to a servant. In this case he obviously was the inferior.

He paused and reflected as to the whereabouts of Dan. The truth came to him in a moment. Dan of course referred to his predecessor. "He's dead," Hugh answered simply.

For the instant he was frightened. It occurred to him, when the words had gone too far to recall, that he should have been gentler. He might have prepared the girl, in some degree, for the shock. He didn't want her to faint. But if he had expected any hysteria or excitement he was doomed to a fresh surprise. She opened her eyes; and it seemed to Hugh that she closed her lips—in a fine, hard line—just for an instant. "Dead?" she repeated slowly. "Killed—or did he just die?"

"He was killed," Hugh answered in the straightforward way of one on a witness stand. "I found him dead in his tent. He'd been shot. The black dog was shot too."

"And who are you?"

Hugh wasn't exactly accustomed to this straight-out sort of questioning, but he mustered his faculties and made his answers. "Gaylord—Hugh Gaylord," he said simply. "And if you want me to I'll tell you all I know of this affair."

"Perhaps that would be the best plan," she agreed.

"I came over to the camp—to borrow something. I was with another chap—an Indian, Pete. We found this poor beggar dead. Pete started with him into the settlements to-day. It's a wonder you didn't meet him on the trail."

"He probably took the other fork, heading toward Seven Mile. I came up from Horse Creek."

As Hugh didn't know the two places apart, or what they represented, this information did not clear matters up for him to any great extent. "He left me here," Hugh went on, "and as I didn't have anything in particular to do—I took care of the sheep—until you could hire a regular herder."

The girl looked puzzled but made no immediate reply. "And you're not an experienced herder?"

"No. I've never worked—I've never worked at it before."

"Then how did you know what to do?"

"I didn't know. I let 'em do what they wanted to, and followed along."

Then the girl laughed,—for the first time. It was a tinkling, musical sound, inexpressibly girlish, and Hugh laughed boyishly himself. It was their first real moment of understanding; and it seemed to Hugh that a new impulse, a curious sense of impending events, a new stir and vitality had been born in the air. He might have wondered at the freshness and happiness in his own laugh, as much as in hers. It was an hour of miracles.

“You couldn’t have done better—and I needn’t tell you that you’ve probably saved me—and my father—hundreds of dollars. The coyotes and the wolves would have been busy all night and to-day. I’d be glad enough to pay you well for this time you’ve spent—and give you a steady job if you want it.”

She spoke perfectly naturally, and Hugh knew that his torn and soiled clothes and his unshaven face had done their work. Obviously she never guessed his true position. He wondered how she explained his presence in the hills and his reasons for staying with the sheep.

She did have her own theories, but they were far indeed from the truth. Her mind leaped at once to what seemed to her the most plausible explanation,—that Hugh was a humble white man, friend of Pete’s, possibly a laborer out of work, or a hungry wanderer from the East. He had taken the herder’s place in hopes of securing a permanent position when the camp-tender returned.

“Before I decide to stay,” Hugh replied steadily, “I’d like to know a few things.”

“We’ll pay you two dollars a day—and furnish you with supplies,” she assured him soberly.

Hugh did not smile. After all, the wage was an important consideration. The girl was evidently a partner with her father in this sheep-raising venture, and possibly for the sake of economy but probably because of the acute shortage of labor (Hugh had not forgotten the Indian’s words) had worked as camp-tender herself. Her perfect health, her strong, lithe body, a skill with horses and a wholesome scarcity of nonsense in her disposition had enabled her to fill the position well and in all probability to enjoy it.

Hugh studied her face with growing interest. In his sphere of life girls did not drive trains of pack horses into the rugged hills, do a man’s work in the open, have dealings with uneducated herders, and still laugh like silver bells.

She wore, he noticed, a rather heavy revolver slung at her hip. Her hand was small and shapely, but it was also brown and firm. They would make, Hugh thought, a rather dangerous combination. The eyes, wide apart and bright, looked unusually healthy and clear, and Hugh imagined that they could see quite straight over revolver sights. The man understood why she had been able to ply her occupation in safety. Woe to the herder that would presume upon their isolation!

“Labor is scarce, I suppose?” Hugh asked. What he was really trying to find out was how long this position of sheep herder would be thrust upon

him. He had yielded himself to enough folly for one day, and he had no intention of committing himself to a position as sheep herder for the rest of his natural life. As soon as they could find a substitute,—but Hugh didn't finish the sentence. He suddenly realized that thence on he had no plans.

The girl looked up, rather sober of face. “*Good* labor is very scarce,” she agreed honestly. “But we can't pay more than two dollars a day. You see—you're inexperienced.”

Secretly he thought that she was *bluffing*, that she would pay a much higher price to retain him as shepherd of the flock. But he didn't voice the thought. “Two dollars a day is all right,” he said. “That wasn't what I was going to ask you. There's some other things I want to know—that I feel I have a right to know. That man was murdered, and the guide thought it was because of a fight between the sheepmen and cattlemen. I don't care to have some one come up here and find me murdered, too.”

The girl seemed distressed. It was the first time since their meeting that she seemed to lack words. Then she looked up fearlessly.

“I wish I could tell you differently,” she said. “A sheep woman has no right to be honest, in these days. The Indian told you the truth. Dan was murdered, not for personal reasons, but because the cattlemen—a little, evil group of them—want to destroy this flock of sheep—just why I'll tell you later. And that's the chance you must take.”

“It's a real chance?”

Again she flinched. “They seem to be willing to go to any lengths to beat us.”

“But it's a chance worth taking,” he said with a sudden lightness of heart. “I'll keep the job for a while at least.”

He watched her face as he spoke, and he saw the light—as unmistakable as the dawn that he had seen come over the mountains—grow in her face. It was reward enough. The joy that he got out of the work itself was henceforth simply clear profit; for another motive—one that had just come into his life—justified beyond all question the expenditure of his time and the chance of death.

He didn't try to explain the matter to his own satisfaction. He only knew that he felt a great and resistless desire to help this straight young mountain girl in her venture, to take sides with her against the monstrous odds that opposed her. He had committed himself: he noticed with an inward laugh that the girl had not promised even to attempt to get another herder to take his place. And he felt vaguely and secretly glad.

The two of them started to drive the white flocks back to the camp.

CHAPTER XII

As the stars emerged and the little mountain wind sprang up and crept forth in its never-ending explorations of the thickets, the shepherdess explained all things to Hugh's satisfaction. But first there was supper: a meal the like of which he had never tasted before.

The girl cooked it. Hugh watched her, her swift, graceful motions, the ease and strength with which she went about her tasks, and he found an unlooked-for delight in the sight. She had brought fresh stores; and the meal—from Hugh's suddenly rejuvenated point of view—was more nearly a banquet. Were there not new potatoes, roasted in the ashes, flapjacks with syrup, a fresh, white-breasted grouse that she had beheaded with her pistol on the way out, and for dessert dried apples stewed to a succulency and tenderness that passed all description? Hugh had eaten some thousands of meals in his time. He had dined in the most famous cafés and restaurants of Europe, he had been at pretentious dinner parties. Yet he couldn't remember ever experiencing the simple and healthy zest for food, the sheer delight of eating, the amazing appetite that had come upon him now. No meal in his whole life had ever tasted so good or satisfied him more.

In the first place he had done a man's work. For the first time in recent years his body actually demanded food: plenty of it and soon, for he had missed his lunch; besides, he had that inner peace and satisfaction of a day's work completed. Then its very preparation made it appetizing,—the slim, sure hands of the girl, her brown arms flashing, the fragrant wood smoke, the long, impressive vista of the Rockies behind the camp.

After supper he helped her wash the camp dishes; then cut fir boughs for her bed that was to be situated nearly a quarter of a mile away, across the meadow. The idea of being afraid of him seemingly didn't even occur to her. She would have slept out the same way had he been from any other class of men, and Hugh could understand how his predecessors had respected her heavy revolver. Then there was a quiet hour with his new-found friend, his pipe,—and the girl telling her story in the fire's glow.

"My father's name is Crowson—Ezra Crowson," she began in the direct mountain way. "And mine—out here we don't bother with last names—is Alice Crowson. You don't have to call me Miss, Mr. Gaylord——"

"And by the same token," he replied, "my first name is Hugh."

“Then Hugh——”

“Then Alice——” And they laughed across the fire. It had become quite easy to laugh at simple, wholesome pleasantries. Yet there was no familiarity here. Alice had told the truth: last names take time; and time, in the West, is precious. Names were designations of people, rather than people the representatives of names. Names didn’t matter and people did.

“Dan called me Alice too,” she went on, suddenly remembering to remind Hugh that he was in the same class, as far as privileges went, with his predecessors. “My father lives down at a place called Horse Creek—and unlike many sheepmen in the West, his whole capital is tied up in this one flock. He isn’t a big sheepman—only a little one. That is what makes it so important that we win.

“He bought the stock from an old friend to whom he had loaned everything he had—and it was either take the sheep or lose everything. He wasn’t an experienced sheepman. Otherwise he wouldn’t have come here—where Landy Fargo and his gang control everything. You see, Hugh, they are cattlemen—managers—and they’re part owners, too—for a number of rich men in the East. For years and years they’ve had everything their own way in regard to the range.

“Maybe, if you’re an Eastern man, you don’t understand about range. The Western stock business depends on having acres and acres of open land for the stock to run in through spring, summer, and fall, feeding them just in winter. The land is either privately owned, public domain, school lands or government national forest: in this case it is—except for this big track we have been using—public domain. Of course the sheepmen had just as much right to it as the cattlemen, but because they wanted to keep all the range for themselves, they’ve driven off every man who tried to run sheep in Smoky Land.

“Oh, it was easy to do. Sometimes they did it just by threatening, sometimes by poisoning the stock, and *sometimes*——”

Hugh leaned forward. “By killing the herders?”

“Yes.” The girl’s lips set tight. “I didn’t know they would go that far, but Fargo’s got a new right-hand man now—a Mexican named José. He’s used to killing—he learned it in the South—and I haven’t a bit of doubt but that he shot Dan last night. Perhaps they’ve killed before, but before it was always open warfare, at least. They’ve always won—and for all I see they’ll win now.

“You see, as far as public domain is concerned, they’ve got a certain right to oppose the sheepmen. They were the first here, and cattle won’t feed

after sheep. But in this case there's a wide track—almost a whole township—through the center of Smoky Land that isn't public domain but belongs to an old woman down at Boise. It is the best sheep range in the State, and father found out that the cattlemen weren't renting it. The old woman had tried to rent it to them, but they wouldn't take it. We found out why, later. They were using it without paying for it—and they thought that giving any money to this helpless old woman was just throwing it away. Incidentally it was all she had, and because there are no mills here, it is practically valueless except for range.

“Father thought that by renting it, the cattlemen would leave him alone. They had all the public domain; and in this way, there couldn't be any particle of doubt about his being in his rights, both lawfully and from the customs of the range. The rent for it—for a term of years—cost him what little money he had left.

“We've been at war ever since. We've got to hang on—it's ruin for father if he quits. If the cattlemen would take the lease off our hands—as is only fair—we might ship off the flock and get out without losing everything; but they won't do it. They'd sooner shoot and kill our herders. If you hadn't come along when you did last night—hundreds of sheep would be dead today from the coyotes and cougars. I'm two days early myself—the flock would be practically wiped out before the date I was expected to arrive. They have intimidated or bought up all the labor in the region so we can't get help—that partly is the reason why I'm doing this work.

“It's got down now to a simple matter of holding on—for a few months more. In October we start the sheep down—we'll be nearer the settlements and the protection of law. Besides, a lot of the public domain becomes National Forest on the same date—by an act of Congress—and then there will be a big force of forest rangers here to protect us. If we can stay, and fight them off, and protect the flock until that time—we've won. But I'm almost tired of trying.”

Her voice dropped from tone to tone, then ceased. The silence of the wilderness was left. Hugh glanced across the glowing coals, haunted by the girl's beauty, wondering at the flood of new emotions that swept over him. “I suppose—if I hadn't happened along—you'd not know where to look for another herder,” he suggested.

She nodded slowly. “It would have pretty near been the end.”

“And what if I should decide—to stay here clear through the summer, clear to the time to take the flocks down to the lower levels.”

She looked up, a strange, brooding concern in her face. “I don’t know that I have a right to ask you,” she said slowly. “This isn’t play, Hugh—it seems so natural to call you that. One man already has been killed. I don’t know that I have a right to ask you to risk your life. But father is old—and he had such high hopes—and it means so much. No, I can’t ask you to stay.”

He leaned forward, more earnestness in his face than had ever dwelt there before. “But what if I wanted to stay—clear to the end?”

A curious luster was in her eyes. “I wouldn’t dare believe it—and I wouldn’t understand.”

“And I’m not sure that I understand, either,” he told her. “But my days have never been much use to me before. It’s the first time I’ve ever had a chance to do something—not only for myself but somebody else—the first time I’ve really had an opening—to do something worth while.”

She thought she understood. She knew the West—this mountain girl—and she knew a certain unfortunate breed of men that often come wandering down its long trails. Mostly they come from the busy cities in the East: human derelicts, men who have broken and failed in the struggle for existence. Sometimes they come looking for new opportunities, sometimes they are merely tramps, the wanderlust in their veins, more than often they are men of good families who have sunk to the lowest levels of life. She marked his well-bred speech, and she thought she knew his type. Her keen eyes saw the deep lines in his face, his bloodshot eyes, and she didn’t understand how Dan’s supply of whisky had been left intact. Possibly Hugh had failed to find it!

Perhaps he would want to go on, in a few more days; yet she couldn’t banish the hope that he was of different stuff than most of his kind. “If you did stay—and help us out—we’d make it right with you in the end,” she promised. No longer was she the employer, speaking from the heights. Her tone was almost pleading. “Perhaps you could buy a share in the business—and get a fresh start in life.”

He suddenly got up and found a curious satisfaction in swinging mighty blows with the axe at the fir log Dan had used for fuel. It acted as a relief valve for emotions that he felt would soon get away from him. He looked up, smiling boyishly. “I’ll stay—to the end,” he promised. “But Lord knows—I don’t know anything about sheep.”

“And you give me fresh heart.”

Thus they made a pact in the firelight, and they had a few moments of sheer joy as she gave him simple directions as to how to take care of the flock, when to salt them, and how to direct their feeding. “And while you’re

telling me these things,” the man said, “for Heaven’s sake tell me about Spot.”

“Of course you mean the yearling ram——” Hugh nodded. “You must have learned a lot about sheep in one day—or you’d never have noticed him. Spot *is* a mystery—has been since he was born. And what has he been doing to-day?”

Hugh narrated with much enthusiasm the encounter between the flock leader and the coyote, so interested in the story itself that he quite failed to wonder and be amazed at his own unlooked-for lightness of heart, his buoyant spirits.

“It’s typical of Spot,” the girl said at the end. “Perhaps you’ve noticed that he’s oversized—taller and stronger than the rest?”

“Yes——”

“If it hadn’t been for that, he would have likely been lamb stew long ago. He was exceptionally large at birth, and father had him retained partly because he was interested in his unusual coloring, and partly because he thought that his extra size would give him value as a ram. He endeared himself to the herder, and this year—he’s a yearling ram but he’s not yet mature—father let him run with the flock. None of us know what to make of him.”

They got up, built the fire high so that its glow went out over the flock, and tried to get another glimpse of him. They found him easily enough, at the very foremost of the band, his brown color in vivid contrast to the whiteness of the ewes. And in finding him Alice made another, less pleasing discovery.

Hugh didn’t understand at first. He saw that she was making some kind of a count, first leisurely, then in frantic haste. A troubled look came into her fresh face. Once more she verified the count, then turned to him with a rueful smile.

“My day’s work is not yet over,” she said slowly.

“Why not?” he demanded.

“One of the markers—one of sixteen black ewes—is missing. Do you know what that means?”

“Good Heavens—that you’ve got to go out—in this dark forest—to look for him?”

“The ninety and nine,” she quoted, still with the same, inscrutable smile. “But it isn’t just one, Hugh. You see, sheep keep relatively the same position in the flock. Of course it might be just a single disaster—a coyote snatching

her from the flanks—but ordinarily when one of the black sheep is gone, it means that a hundred or so others have gone with her. I can't take the chance."

His own face grew mournful. "You see—what a good herder I am. Lose a hundred sheep the first day."

"It happens to the best of herders."

"Then why can't I go out to look for them—and let you stay here? That's what I'm going to do."

"No. You must stay here. You don't know sheep yet, Hugh, and likely you don't know these mountains. The band of them is somewhere through the stretch you fed over to-day—and I would know just how and where to look for them. At night with no dog—the dog must stay here with you—you wouldn't be able to drive them. I even have to go on foot, so I can climb down into the steep canyons and go through the brush. It's part of the life of the camp-tender."

"But you won't go—in this darkness——"

"I'll wait till the moon rises. Besides, I know this Smoky Land from end to end. So don't be afraid for me."

They stood silent by the leaping flame. The sheep lay quiet, the shepherd dog slept at Hugh's feet. And subtly stealing into their consciousness above the sound of the leaping flame they heard the voice of the forest, mysterious and profound,—the little sounds of the wind in the thicket, the rustling of leaves, the hushed footfall of the wild creatures. Into that darkness Alice would venture for her lost sheep. Hugh felt a strange weight of dread.

Above the far mountains the clouds gleamed with the first beams of the rising moon.

CHAPTER XIII

In that momentous twilight that brought Hugh Gaylord to the sheep camp for the first time, there was unfamiliar traffic on the brown, pine-needle trail that wound down to the meadows from the darkening forest. There was the sound of a footfall not often heard. And one can imagine the lesser forest people—the little gnawing folk that have underground lairs and to whom the ferns are a beautiful, tropical forest—gazing up with bright eyes to see who came.

Perhaps at first they thought it was merely one of the hunters: a great creature of claw or fang such as a wolf or cougar. This was the hour when the beasts of prey started forth to hunt, and it was true that the step had a stealthy, hushed quality of one who does not care to have his presence known. It can be understood why a little gopher, so fat of cheeks that he gave the impression of being afflicted with mumps, lay rather close and still among his tree roots until the creature got past. He didn't care to feel a puma claw impaling him as a fishhook impales a worm.

The gopher has not particularly acute vision, so this traveler on the pine-needle trail was to remain ever a mystery to him. He was aware of a tall, dark form that glided softly and departed; and life became the same puzzling grayness that it had been before. A chipmunk, however—like a little patch of light and shadow against a brown tree trunk—could see much better. And he lay very still, only his eyes busy, until he found out the truth.

The passer-by was only a man, after all, such a creature as usually did not take the trouble to hunt chipmunks. Still he felt afraid, and it is extremely doubtful that the small-sized, always addled brain in his miniature skull could tell him why. The truth was that in that stealing figure there was something terribly suggestive of the beasts of prey themselves, creatures that—more than often—did devote unwelcome attentions to chipmunks. The man crept through the forest with the same caution. His eyes were strange and glowing like those of the lynx as it climbs through the branches. And over him—an aura too dim and obscure for the blunt senses of human beings—hung an essence with which the wilderness creatures are only too familiar: that ancient lust and fever that comes to Broken Fang when he strikes down his prey.

He was shivering all over; and it was to be remembered that the wolf—in certain dread moments at the end of the chase—shivered the same way. One would have been given cause to wonder what stress, what dreadful events had occurred beyond the edge of the meadow that had caused this queer inebriation.

But as strong drink dies in the body, the fever seemed to fall away from him as he made turn after turn in the trail. He stooped now, rather than crouched, his footfall had a fumbling, heavy, dragging quality that was not at all like the stealth it had possessed at first. The surface lights passed from his dark eyes, leaving them somewhat languorous and lifeless. The lines of his face were of inordinate fatigue; he no longer trembled in excitement, and for all the heat of the July night he felt cold.

José Mertos was no stranger to the blood-madness. It had been upon him plenty of times in his own land, and he had shivered and exulted with it beneath far southern stars. Yet it never grew old to him. Its rapture seemed ever greater. But unfortunately, when it died, it left disquieting pictures in his brain. They always took the fine edge from his satisfaction after a particularly skilful affair such as this had been. He was a tried hand in such work, innured to wickedness, yet he still retained the same troublesome tendency toward after-images that had spoiled his sleep, one night and another, in the past.

At present he couldn't forget the ludicrous look of bewilderment with which Dan the herder had received the rifle shot. It was only a thing to laugh at, to tell as a good joke when he sat with his employer, yet he found no pleasure in thinking of it now. The herder had simply looked amazed,—not afraid, not awed by the Gates of Darkness that had rushed up to him, nothing at all but deeply bewildered and unbelieving. He hadn't seemed to realize that José had shot him, that even as the blank expression of astonishment had come upon his face the lead ball had forced a passage through his breast. Perhaps he died too quickly for any sort of realization. And José could not forget the queer swaying and staggering with which he fell back upon his tree-bough pallet,—just as if he were drunk and falling into bed.

The pictures came in a series, one after another. First this falling, then the glimpse of the still form on the fir boughs. The black shepherd dog had come bounding toward him, and José had drawn his pistol for this work. It was just as good at close range. And he remembered with amazing clearness how the light had died, slowly and unmistakably, in the dog's eyes. He had watched the sheep for the last time.

Even now José didn't understand how he had missed the other, larger shepherd dog. He had shot, the animal had rocked down, he had looked back once to the dead herder in the tent (perhaps to see how *he* was taking this slaughter of his pets) and when he had turned his eyes again, the animal had risen and was fleeing from him about the flank of the flock. The cur was wounded, anyway: perhaps the injury was severe enough to end his life before the morning. His watch of the sheep was surely done. And Landy Fargo—the man who even now waited for his report—would find the whole matter to his satisfaction.

A few minutes later José came to the thicket where he had left his horse; then he headed on down the trail. Through the night hours he rode. Not in one chance out of a thousand would the murder be discovered before Alice Crowson returned, three days later, but he didn't care to take that thousandth chance. It might be embarrassing—considering his past record—to explain his presence near the murder. "If you can't buy him over and things *do* get to the shooting stage," Landy Fargo had said, "no one will find the stiff for three days. You'll be miles away by then, the flock'll be torn to pieces, and we'll be settin' pretty. It's the safest deal you were ever in."

The destruction of the flock, José considered, was not his business. His work was done and the sooner he got out of the immediate vicinity the better it would be for him. He spurred the horse into a slow, easy gallop.

The moon came up, falling dimly upon his burnished skin. It would be no longer possible to mistake his race. He was even darker than Pete, the Indian, his eyes were like jet, his lips were thin and dark and cruel. But he rode well. He seemed to hang almost limp in the saddle, utterly without effort, and the long miles sped beneath him.

But the night was almost done when he came to Landy Fargo's house on the lower waters of Silver Creek. Fargo himself was dozing in a great chair in his stuffy living room, waiting for his envoy to return.

There were several noticeable features about this room. The principal one was its dirt. The floors were stained, the carpets soiled, the corners cluttered with rubbish of all kinds; the window glass was so spotted that it did not let the moonlight in, and the soft light lingered—like an unwelcome ghost—against the windowpane. The effect that wise interior decorators try to obtain in furnishing—that in which the pieces, not holding the eye in themselves, give an atmosphere, a sense of unity—was quite lacking here. The mantel was clustered with gaudy ornaments, the chairs were tawdry, cheap pictures covered the walls. But yet the room reflected the

individuality of the man in the chair. He was just as cheaply gaudy, just as unclean as the room itself.

He got up, and it was to be seen that he had a rather formidable physique. He had imposing muscles, stocky legs, and it was wholly possible that before prosperity had come upon him he had been an agile, muscular cattleman. But the gaze left his heavy frame and was held by the unmistakable brutality of his face. There was none of the fine-edged cruelty—that with which a puma pats and plays his prey to death—that was to be seen in the swarthy face of José. He was blunt, dull; his savagery was that of the bulldog,—heavy lips closed over strong teeth, little lurid eyes looking out from under heavy brows.

José rolled a cigarette, lighted it, drew its smoke into his vitals, then lolled in one of the chairs. Fargo watched him with hard eyes, not a little admiring. Most of his understrappers did not come into his presence with this same ease and self-possession. He was used to seeing men cower before him. He had learned to look for a certain cringing and servility, and many a time when it was lacking he forced it with his heavy, flailing fists. But José was different. It might not be healthy to strike José. They met eyes to eyes.

“Well?” Fargo demanded.

He was somewhat anxious about the verdict. This had been no child’s play,—what José had been sent to do. It was really a new departure for the little clique that he headed. There had been deaths before, open riding and fast shooting, but deliberate and premeditated killing had never been necessary. Slumber hadn’t come easily to him to-night. And now he didn’t like to be kept waiting.

“Well, what?” José answered. “You mean—what luck?”

“That’s it.” Fargo uttered a short syllable of a laugh. “What luck?”

“I said I’d do it, didn’t I, if he didn’t come around? Well, I’ve done it. There’s nobody watchin’ them sheep to-night.” And thus it was to be seen that José had lived long enough among Americans to acquire the vernacular. Only a hint of the Latin, a softening of consonants, remained in his tone.

Fargo uttered a short sigh of relief. “Clean job, eh?”

“All except the big dog. Killed the black one. Wounded the shepherd—think he’ll kick in before morning.”

Fargo leaned back in his chair. “Then there’s nothin’ to it. I guess that’ll show ’em, eh, José?” He fell to boasting. “I guess that makes it plain that when I say get out, I mean get out. You know I told that devil this was his last warning—told him myself what would happen to him if he didn’t switch

over to us—and I guess he got what he wanted. But I'm sorry you missed the dog. He might keep away a lot of cats and coyotes that would otherwise be busy for the next few days."

"He's wounded—don't think he can." José breathed an oath in his own tongue. "But I don't see what it's all about. Crowson had that tract rented _____"

"You don't, eh?" Fargo stiffened. "I don't know it's necessary that you see what it's all about. That happens to be my business—and don't go making any mistake about that. But I'll explain it a little better. I've been told—by the men that own the herds with me—to keep out sheepmen at all cost. That one piece of range that Crowson rented has been worth ten thousand a year to us. Do you think we're goin' to let that slip out of our hands for a bunch of measly sheep?"

"But why didn't you have enough sense to rent that tract yourself?"

"Because we're trying to make a clean-up out of this deal, that's why. Who'd ever dream that old hag would ever find a renter—and as long as we were gettin' it free, what was the use? We've been here a long time—if this flock prospered there'd be more of 'em come in—and where'd be our monopoly of the range then? You know that our policy has always been to squeeze out the little fellow—cattle as well as sheep. We've got to set an example with this flock of Crowson's—and to have 'em all get killed—in a few days—or even part of 'em, is going to discourage any more sheepmen coming into a cattle country. You don't know cattlemen, José, or you wouldn't question. Just the same—the job's only half done. A shepherd dog, wounded or not, 'll stay to fight to the last inch of hair on his body, especially that big devil of Crowson's. And he sure can bluff out the coyotes."

José discarded his cigarette, and lit a fresh one. "Well, say what's to be done," he said. "I'm not goin' back after that other dog."

"I'm not tellin' you to, either. Your job is to stay away from there." Fargo suddenly leaned forward, his eyes burning. "You know what I'd like to see?" he whispered. "I'd like to have that Crowson girl ride up there in a day or two and find every one of those damned woollies—every one, not three or four hundred of 'em—dead and rotting in the grass. Then people'd know this was a cattle country. Since we've gone as far as we have, the thing to do is to go all the way. And we might work it yet."

José's face showed that he was interested. "Poison?" he asked.

"You can't never tell about poison. Sheep are queer critters. When they're well fed they'll shy of anything that tastes queer. Think again——"

“The only other way’s rifles—and that would take a carload of shells. But I tell you—the coyotes will slash a lot of ’em and run the rest to death.”

“Maybe—and maybe not. A coyote don’t run sheep. They kill all they can, and then start to eatin’. Of course there’s exceptions. It takes a dog to slash a hundred of ’em in one night—and run the rest——”

And at that instant his words were drowned out. A strange, formidable cry reached them from behind the house: a long, far-carrying chorus of savage voices. It rang shockingly loud in the silent darkness. It was a symphony of prolonged, deep bays,—a sound as terrifying and menacing as any voice of the wilderness. And an evil glitter came into Fargo’s eyes.

The explosion of sound, blaring out so suddenly in the stillness, had startled José; but he caught himself at once. The cry ceased, the stillness fell again. “Your pack of bear dogs!” he exclaimed.

“Yes. It was as if they heard us talkin’ about sheep. It’s like they was tryin’ to tell us what to do.”

It was true. It might have been the voice of an evil genius, prompting their vicious designs. Fargo was a superstitious man, and now he was tingling all over with hatred and malice, inspired to the depths of his wicked being by the cry in the darkness.

“Yes,” he whispered. “My pack of bear dogs—ten of ’em, savage as wolves—and not to be afraid of no wounded shepherd dog, and tearin’ to pieces any one that tries to stop ’em. They’ve told us how to solve our problem. And I don’t see why I didn’t think of ’em before.”

CHAPTER XIV

It didn't take Fargo long to perfect his plans. As the dawn emerged he talked them over with the Mexican, José, and the latter was ready with any little suggestions that did not occur to his chief. And the gray, soft, mysterious light of early morning came into that conference—through the stained and cobwebbed windowpane—and found a darkness it could not alleviate.

As they talked, the very atmosphere of the room seemed to change. It was tense, poignant as if with the remembered lusts and passions of an earlier, more savage world. The little sounds of a room in which two men talk together—the stir of moving bodies, the creak of furniture, the soft whisper of easy breathing seemed lacking here. Both were motionless as two serpents that lay in their sunbaths on their ledges, and thus an insidious stillness dropped down in the little intervals between their sentences.

The almost total absence of motion on the part of those two conspirators could not have been ignored. It implied only one thing: that their thoughts were so commanding and engrossing that even the almost unconscious movements of the body were suspended. What motion there was, was mostly only the deepening of the lines on their dark faces.

This tenseness, this silence, these submerged passions pointed to but one end. And the crime would not be outside the pale of the laws of man alone, but the basic laws of the forest as well. The feast of death was to take place after all,—the same delight of which Broken Fang, the puma, was even then dreaming beside the sheep camp on the far headwaters of Silver Creek. But men, not wild beasts, were to be the debauchers.

"It's the simplest way yet," Fargo had whispered. The veins stood out in his brutal hands. "That pack of mine are devils—there's no other word for 'em—and once they get goin', they'd sweep through that flock of woollies like lightning. You've heard of sheep-killin' dogs before——"

"Yes—but your dogs ain't never been sheep killers," the Mexican protested.

"What of that? They can learn fast enough. They'd tear a man to pieces just as quick if I didn't keep 'em chained. I don't see why I didn't teach 'em long ago—they'd be worth a thousand coyotes for keepin' this country clear of sheep. Maybe you don't know about sheep-killing dogs. You might not

have heard that in the sheep country in the East one dog that once got the habit will spoil the business for miles around. You see, José, most animals don't kill more than they need; it's an instinct with 'em, for if they did they'd pay for it by going hungry later. Nature has a way of teachin' the wild varmints what to do. But dogs have been domesticated so long that they've forgotten most of their instincts, and once they get started, once the killin' fever gets a hold of 'em, they don't know when to quit. There's many a dog that has slashed a hundred sheep in one night—jumpin' from one to another, tearing out one throat after another, and runnin' the rest till they die. It's kind of a madness that gets a hold of 'em once they get started. True, my dogs ain't ever got the habit, but one taste will teach 'em. And they're half-wild already, as any man well knows who seen 'em tear that little black cub-bear to pieces last week. Just tore him to little scraps of black fur."

Fargo leaned back in his chair and laughed. The sound burst out suddenly above the even murmur of his talk, and it was no less terrible to hear than the bay of the pack a few minutes before. It was a wild, harsh sound,—and African travelers might have been given cause to remember the hyenas, laughing on the sun-baked hills. It pleased him to recall that scene in the forest beyond the creek, in which his pack of dogs had killed the cub. It moved him in unlovely, dark ways. The little bear had been a clumsy, furry, amiable little creature—representing what is perhaps the most lovable breed of all the wild animals—and the pack had made short and terrible work of him.

"There's ten of 'em," Fargo went on, "and there ain't no one to guard the flock. That one big shepherd dog would last quick—he wouldn't be able to bluff off them hounds of mine like he could bluff coyotes. And then they'd have the time of their lives—the time of their lives."

"You mean—take 'em and sick 'em on?" José asked.

"I've got a better way than that. Of course one of us will have to take 'em and show 'em the way until they get on the track of the flock, and of course that one will have to be me. I'm the only living man that can handle 'em—you remember the night that old Ben got out and how he pretty near killed that little cowman from Naptha. There's a little medicine I've got to give 'em before I go, and that means—for you to take a little ride over to Newt Hillguard's."

José half-closed his eyes. He had begun to understand.

"I've always cussed at Newt for keepin' that little band of Shropshires in his back lot, but I'm glad now he didn't get rid of them," Fargo went on. "You're to bring back a sheep in your saddle—a lamb 'll do, or any old ewe

he was about to slaughter. Then, after we get through here, all I'll have to do is start up the old Horse Creek trail with that pack of dogs. It'll be a couple of hours before I can get started, and it'll take till dark to get to the sheep camp, but dark's the best time for a sheep-killin' dog to work, anyhow. The sheep are bunched together, and it doesn't take so much runnin'. And I got to be on hand to call 'em back and round 'em up when they're done."

The face of the Mexican was suddenly crafty. "I suppose wantin' to see the fun hasn't anything to do with your goin'?" he suggested.

Fargo laughed again. "I'm not sayin' it won't be worth watching," he agreed. "But you know I can always round 'em up with my whistle. José—to-night will see the end of the sheep business for time to come."

They went about their preparations. They ate their breakfast in the unsavory kitchen, then José rode off to the ranch where Newt Hillguard kept his little flock of thirty Shropshires. There was no particular good in making full explanation to Newt. He was a cattleman surely, his little flock was just a diversion with him, but he might not take fondly to any plan that would make sheep killers out of Fargo's pack of dogs. Some night they might escape from their yard and visit his own little flock. "The boys say they're tired of beef and want a mutton blow-out," José explained, "and I'm sent over here to supply it. Will you sell me one of them sheep of yours?"

"Seems funny to me," Newt returned, "that gang of Fargo's wantin' mutton. But I suppose I can sell you one."

"Any old ewe'll do," José went on. "We don't want 'em to like it so well they'll want it often. The one you can sell me cheapest. We'll want it alive, too, 'cause we ain't goin' to have him for a day or two. And once I've got to pack him on the horse, maybe I'd better take a lamb."

The money changed hands, Newt gave in exchange a few pounds of living flesh that blatted feebly and struggled in José's arms—with a strange, frantic terror—as if in premonition of its doom. The lips of the man set in a straight, cruel line, and he rode with an unjustified swiftness back to Fargo's house.

There was only one element of mercy in the unmentionable scene that followed in the little, tightly fenced enclosure behind Fargo's house. None whatever dwelt in the drawn faces of the men, or in the savage, white-fanged creatures that leaped so fiercely at the picket fence as the men approached. But the time, at least, was swift. It went almost too fast for Fargo's liking.

There was only a single second of strange and dreadful clamor within the enclosure, a glimpse of white in the ravening circle of browns and blacks, a smear of red and a faint cry that the men strained to hear but which

was lost in the baying of the dogs. The pack had been given its lesson. Fargo foresaw in their glaring eyes—as they came rushing back to the palings again—the success of his plan.

“Get inside the house and shut the door,” he commanded. “I can’t answer for this blood-thirsty crowd. And do it quick.”

For Fargo knew that the sooner he got started the more successful would be his undertaking. He didn’t want their wild excitement to have a chance to die down. The great hounds saw his gun in his arms, a pungent stain of red was still upon their fangs, and they seemed to know that rapturous events were in store for them. The Mexican withdrew, Fargo unlatched the gate of the enclosure, and the animals leaped forth around him. In a moment he had swung on his horse; and followed by the crying pack galloped up the trail.

He rather hoped he would meet no pedestrian on the trail. He had never seen his dogs in such a savage mood, and he began to doubt his own ability to control them. There could be no doubt about the effectiveness of the medicine he had administered. The hunting lust was upon them as never before. And perhaps his eager spirit, his own madness went into them, and excited them all the more.

It was a long, hard ride before he came to that pine-clad heart of Smoky Land which Crowson had rented for a sheep range. He had been able to lope only a small part of the way: the trails were too narrow and steep. The dogs ran more silently now; yet with noticeable eagerness. During the long, still afternoon they were grimly patient, and they skulked like wolfine ghosts through the growing shadows of the twilight.

But their excitement began to return to them as the dark came down. It was the hunting hour: everywhere through the forests the beasts of prey were emerging from their lairs. The hounds were domestic animals, but some of the old wilderness madness revived when the wind came whispering its breathless messages through the trees. Their blood seemed to turn to fire. Time and time again Fargo had to utter the shrill whistle that called them to heel,—a signal that he had laboriously taught them and which they now seemed to be forgetting.

Fargo knew these mountains end to end, and he did not often mistake the trails. But soon after nightfall the conviction grew upon him that he was taking much too long to reach the sheep camp. Besides, the mountains didn’t lie in just their proper places. The tall top of Grizzly Peak was too far to the right to suit him. He knew perfectly that he was within a very few miles of the camp, yet he chafed under the delay. And the darkness steadily deepened, dimming the landmarks by which he kept his directions.

He headed on, at first irritated, then apprehensive, finally wrathful and savage. He began to fear that possibly he would have to wait until dawn for the work. The dogs, however, were growing constantly more excited and harder to control.

The last grayness faded into the gloom, and Fargo could hardly see the trail. But he was a mountain man, and he knew what to do. In the last dim glimpses of late twilight the peaks had begun to wheel around where he wanted them to be, and he knew that the camp was now only three or four miles distant at most. And the proper course was to sit down, rest, and wait for the moon to rise. Then he could locate his landmarks, start down the ridge to the river, then up its banks to the camp.

He thought that as far as human beings went, he had the mountains all to himself. He supposed that in the camp—now certainly nearing—a dead herder lay face buried in his tree-bough pallet; but Fargo was not the kind of man to whom such a fact as this preys on the mind. He did not dream that the body had already been found, that the herd was guarded, and that even now the daughter of his enemy was waiting for this same moon,—to start forth to find the missing members of the flock.

Fargo watched the silver glint in the sky; he saw the white disk roll forth. The light grew, it leaped down between the trees, it worked nebulous magic on the floor of the forest, it enchanted the whole wilderness world. He located his peaks. And all at once he knew his exact position,—scarcely three miles from the camp and squarely across the ridge.

He got up and started on with the great hounds. At first they were curiously silent and alert. They did not frisk and run as in the first hour on the trail, and to a casual eye their excitement had died within them. For the moment they seemed perfectly under control. Yet Fargo watched them, wondering. They were moving with a peculiar stealth, and once the man caught the unmistakable glare of their yellow-green wolfine eyes in the moonlight.

At that instant Ben, the old pack leader, spoke in the silence. It was a sharp bay, and momentarily every dog stood lifeless. And then with a wild cry they darted into the shadows.

Fargo whistled frantically, but the pack didn't seem to hear. Their loud and savage bays obscured all sound. Oaths fell from the man's lips—sounds scarcely less savage than the bay of the dogs themselves—and at first he could see nothing but failure for his scheme.

It might be, however, that they were right and he was wrong. The dogs were not heading toward the sheep camp. But it was wholly possible that the

flock had fed out far that day, had found another drinking place, and thus had not returned to the vicinity of Silver Creek; and the hounds were already on their trail. This theory had to include the death of the wounded shepherd dog, for the first instinct of the animal likely would have been to keep the flock near the tent of his dead master.

His own course was clear. He would cross the ridge to the camp, try to locate the flock, and then attempt to collect his hounds and bring them to it. He believed that if they were on a false scent they would return to him soon.

But the moon looked down and saw that their instincts had told them true. They had crossed the tracks that the flock had made on the outward feeding from the camp that day: they had only to follow it, circle about where Spot, the flock leader, had led, and find the sheep where they had bedded down at night. Yet they seemed to know that certain sport was in store for them before ever they made the long loop around to the sheep camp. For somewhere between was huddled a little group of a hundred stragglers,—the band that Hugh had lost during the day's grazing and which even now Alice had gone forth to find.

CHAPTER XV

Like a song soaring over the camp fire, clear and wonderfully sweet in the hushed and tremulous darkness, Alice's laugh had been her only good-by to Hugh. He hadn't approved of this night journey after the lost sheep. He was new to the mountains, yet he had sensed a vague and whispered menace in the dark forest into which the trail would lead her. He had protested to the last instant; he wanted to go himself, and he had felt a weight of apprehension and concern that she could not explain away. The very breathlessness in the air was in some way sinister; the light patches of moonlight in the big timber only accentuated its mystery, only darkened—by light of contrast—the gloom of the thickets. Yet her only answer had been a laugh.

It was true that the laugh was not really one of mirth. She felt no fear, but she was not amused at his. Rather she had laughed in simple and undeniable joy, and she didn't quite know its source. It was a little gratifying that this bronzed, well-bred man should be anxious about her. It touched her more than she was ready to admit, even to herself. Yet she really thought that his concern was unjustified.

She knew these mountains. She felt that in some measure at least she had mastered them. She could shoot straight with her pistol: if indeed Broken Fang—the great cougar that had begun to display a rather disquieting arrogance in the presence of men—should find and follow her trail, she had full confidence that the fire from her six pistol cartridges would frighten him away. She had lived long enough in the mountains to know that rare and few are the wild animals that will even menace human beings. The coyotes were abject cowards, the ordinary run of cougars—although sometimes given to trailing a night wanderer for long and unpleasant hours on the mountain trails—always seemed to lack courage to attack, and the wolves would not have their pack strength until the winter. The wolf pack in the snow, she knew perfectly, was not a thing to trifle with. But the gray creatures were living singly now, or in pairs, and starvation had not yet come upon them. In these days of full feeding they were scarcely braver than the coyotes. It seems to be true that any animal that hunts in packs or groups acquires a ferocity, a wild and frenzied courage not possessed by the lone hunter. Partly it is a matter of mob psychology, partly a sense of resistless strength,—but its reality naturalists are unable to deny. It can be seen even in the swarms of

miniature ants that—with appalling ferocity—will attack the greatest creatures of the wild. But there were no packs here. The moonlit aisles were safe.

Yet she did not want to go. It was as if the voice of reason within her—the voice that urged her forth—were obscured by the incorporeal voices that spoke in her inner being. One was that of the forest, and it spoke in warning. “Come not on to my darkened trails,” it might have said. “They are thine in the daylight hours, but at night they belong to the beasts. This is the time of talon and fang, and thy flesh is tender. I am old and wise, but also I am new, with the newness of the young world. And my spirit is Death.” And the other voice was that of the ruddy camp fire behind her. “Stay, stay, stay,” it crackled. “Here is thy hearth and thy heart. Stay, tender one.”

As the shadows encroached and the firelight grew ever more dim, she found herself looking back—again and again—to the bright blaze. To-night it was home, and these forest trails were dark and silent. She entered the forest, but ever she saw its cheering gleam between the trees,—a bright haven of refuge where Danger could not come. She didn’t entirely understand. She had ventured forth into the forests at night before, but never with such regret.

She could still see the form of Hugh seated beside the fire; and the sight moved her strangely. But she would not admit—even to herself—that part of the appeal of that bright circle of light was due to his presence. It had never seemed so dear, so much like home before, but it could not be because of the straight, manly form that abode there. Was he not just a lowly sheep herder, a weakling whose metal had been proven false in the crucible of life? What did he mean to her: just an employee that would soon pass on to other occupations. Yet she had felt wholly secure and comforted beside his fire. She remembered the play of his shoulders as he had hewed the fir log; and she found herself longing for his protection now. Yet what right had she to think that this weakened city man would be a fort in time of stress? She was of the mountain strain, and unlike many of her city cousins she did not accept the fact of his masculinity alone as being a tower of strength. Such dangers as did abide in the Smoky Land forest were no respecters of the males of the species: strength and courage alone must be tried and proven. Hugh had failed in life, she thought; why should he not also fail in courage and strength? The mountain women do not love weak men. They are down to realities, life is a constant battle for existence, and they want a warrior—whether gentleman or not—beside them through the long, dangerous hours of night. Hers were the mountain standards. And what could she expect from Hugh?

She headed into the forest, and she saw the light of the camp fire wink out behind her. It left her singularly alone. A vague depression came upon her, an uneasiness that she could not name or place. There was a sense of utter isolation never felt before. The feel of her pistol butt in her pocket—her belt had been packed among the supplies—reassured her. Then she hastened on, down the moonlit trail.

The forest was never so mysterious. The moonlight had struck away all sense of familiarity. The silver patches between the trees were of fairyland, the dusk of the shadowed thicket was incredibly black; even the changeless pines, majestic and inscrutable emblems of the wilderness, were like great, nebulous ghosts of giants. The woodland was full of ghosts: fleet-footed phantoms that sped along the trail before her, ghostly shadows that leaped behind; little, feeble ghosts of noises that couldn't be real, and ghostly messages in the wind that whimpered and cried in the distant thickets. Yet she could not feel the wind's breath on her face. Rather the forest was breathless, tense, vaguely sinister as never before.

Steep was the trail she took, and ever the silence seemed to deepen. She kept watch ahead for the flock, pale white in the moonlight. She found herself listening closely for any sound that might indicate their position, either the faint bleat of the ewes or the triumph cries of such beasts of prey that had killed from their numbers. But while she did not hear these things, the silence was full of other, lesser sounds. All the creatures of the forest were stirring in their night occupations, and so deep and unfathomable was the stillness that it seemed to her that she could discern their each little motion. Sometimes it was the distant tread of the deer in the buckbush. No rains had fallen since April; the brush was dead and dry as she had never before seen it, and even the stalking folk made a misstep occasionally. She heard the Little People stirring in the leaves; once a gopher, once a porcupine rattled his quills with a pretended fierceness a short distance off the trail, and once a lynx mewed like a domestic cat behind her.

She hastened on. She turned into a little valley that she knew,—a place the mouth of which was obscured by brush and in which a wing of the flock might have been easily lost. And then she found the white band, bedded down for the night.

There had been casualties earlier in the evening, but mostly the beasts of prey had not yet found them. She started to drive them the long three miles back to camp.

Still the moonlight worked its conjurations in the forest; and she felt a growing discomfiture. At first she laid it to nerves. She had been tired after

the day's ride, and perhaps the long walk after the sheep had overtaxed her already exhausted body. The sense of oppression, of distant and unfamiliar peril in the forests about her grew ever more pronounced. She tried in vain to hurry the sheep. Never, it seemed to her, had they moved so slowly. The first mile took interminable ages, the second was too long for belief. No luxury, no achievement by which women usually gauge happiness could mean so much to her to-night as that little bright circle in the distant camp over which Hugh stood guard.

She was on the last mile by now, and she kept straining to see the first gleam of the camp fire through the trees. Perhaps all her apprehension had been but fancy, after all. It was only a little way farther—scarcely a mile—and the adventure would soon be over. The forest was oddly hushed and breathless.

And at that instant a strange cry came tingling up to her through the unfathomable depths of forest. It was such a sound as does not catch the consciousness immediately, beginning too dim and faint even to recognize as sound, and at first she found herself doubting its reality. The least rustle of the thickets beside her, the faintest stir of the distant wind drowned it out. Yet with such gradual encroachments as the hour hand makes on the face of the watch, it swelled and grew until all disbelief was dead, and all other sensation transcended.

The deep silence of the primeval forest alone had enabled her to detect it at first, but its quality of obscurity slowly passed away. Soon she had begun to have some idea of the quality of its tones. It was slowly, steadily gaining, and the only inference could be that whatsoever made the sound was coming toward her at an incredible pace,—something that ran behind her and cried out in bestial savagery.

A frantic flood of thoughts swept over her: blind hopes that the cool depths of her subconsciousness refused to accept. Perhaps the cries were of some wilderness hunter on the trail of deer,—a trail that closely coincided with her own. In a moment it would be just a thing to laugh at and forget. But even her own prayers, her own unquenchable spirit of optimism could not make the truth untrue. The grim fact slowly grew and strengthened that whatever ran behind her was on her own trail, that she was being remorselessly hunted through the still aisles of the forest.

The wild cries were louder now, evolving from vague and distant rumblings to prolonged and savage bays, ferocious as any wilderness cry she had ever heard. It sounded like a *pack*,—that terrible organization that knows no fear and against which not even the stately elk can stand. The cries

had a strange exultant quality, a sense of power, and at the same time the hunting lust that can be discerned in the yell of the wolf pack in their first strength of autumn. Yet this was no autumn. The leaves were yet unfallen. The wolves were still mated, or else ran in pairs. And a great fear began to creep like a poison through her veins.

And ever the chorus grew louder, swelling into a veritable thunder that seemed to shudder, with long, undulating waves of sound, through the hushed air. It seemed to her that she heard the distant pound of running feet on the trail. And now she no longer gave thought to what these hunters might be. It no longer mattered. She only knew that some new and terrible peril was leaping forth upon her, a ferocious enemy that would contest her effort to reach the safety of the fire. The sheep broke into a run, and sobbing she sped after them.

CHAPTER XVI

Landy Fargo tried to approach the sheep camp with some caution. It was an instinctive effort: he had not the slightest idea that the lone human occupant of the little meadow could waken from his deep sleep to hear him. Nevertheless, Fargo didn't believe in taking unnecessary chances. He rode slowly, trying to avoid the whip of dry brush against the horse's body. Yet it was to be noticed that the coyotes, lingering hungrily at the flanks of the flock, slipped from the trail when he was still two hundred yards distant.

The thickets were unusually dry: they cracked and popped as the horse passed through. Miniature explosions of popping twig and crackling brush followed every step of the horse.

Still there was no one to hear him. The forest was breathless. And all at once, through a rift in the underbrush, he saw the gleam of Hugh's camp fire.

For an instant Fargo's human faculties simply and utterly deserted him; and he stood gaping like a beast at the guttering flame. A strange little shiver of cold and fear crept over him. He had expected only moonlight and silence, perhaps the bedded sheep unwatched and a heap of gray ashes, but a herder's well-mended fire had not had a place in his calculations at all. Twenty-four hours had passed since the murder, and yet the flame still flickered like a soul that could not pass. Was it a ghost fire: was the shapeless shadow that he thought he could make out beside it the specter of one who had risen from Death to watch the sheep? The sight went straight home to his dark superstitions.

Just for a moment he sat motionless in the saddle; then he started to turn back. His eyes bulged ever so slightly. And then a great cold seemed to come down, stab, and transfix him.

For a voice spoke from the camp. It came clear and strong into the darkness where he waited. "Who's there?" some one asked.

Except for his sudden gusty breathing, Fargo made no sound in reply. He started to turn his horse.

"If you don't answer, I'll think it's a coyote and shoot," the voice came again. "I give you till I count three——"

Fargo had won his point by *bluffing* many times, he had known how to call the bluffs of other men; but he had no delusions about the hard, quiet

voice that came out to him from the fireside. Very plainly the man meant what he said. But at least it wasn't Dan the herder who had risen and spoken. The tones and words were not the melodious utterances of the Italian laborer who had been Hugh's predecessor. The only other explanation that occurred to Fargo was that the murder had been discovered, and the man who had called him was an officer of the law who had been put on guard.

Fargo instantly decided it would not be wise to attempt to disobey these summons. Like most wrongdoers he had an abject horror and fear of the law, and the moment was of the greatest terror he had ever known. Yet he dared not turn and flee. In his panic he was unable to remember that not in one chance out of a hundred could a bullet find him in the darkness. For all he knew the man at the fire was already staring at him through his sights, and possibly the whole camp was surrounded by the officers. His mouth felt dry, his hands numb as he rode out into the circle of firelight.

And then his fear changed in a moment to devastating rage. The form was revealed quite clearly now: simply that of a lowly sheep herder in soiled clothes and with unshaven face. Had José lied about the murder? Yet this man was not Dan, the herder. There was nothing to believe but that Crowson had already discovered the crime and had hired a substitute.

There was nothing to fear here. His arrogance swept back to him and his eyes leaped savagely over the trim form that now had risen to greet him. It was a slender figure, the kind he could hammer to paste beneath his flailing fists. He swung down from the saddle, once more feeling himself completely master of the situation.

"What do you mean?" he demanded savagely, "hollerin' out and threatenin' me that way."

Hugh looked at him, considering just what he had meant. And perhaps his lips drew up in a faint smile. If there was one thing his experience with the sheep had taught him, it was to smile: smile at misfortune, smile at the little, everyday comedy of life,—and smile with real amusement at such storming, bullying men as this. But it was true that a moment before he had not been in the humor for mirth. He had known at once that the step in the darkness was not that of the coyote, or any of the hunters of the wild. It was a horse, and its rider could kill from a distance: perhaps it was the same foe that had crept into camp the previous night and had murdered Dan. His voice—he remembered with a strange, inward pleasure—had sounded level and clear; but nevertheless a wholly justified apprehension had been upon him. He had been entirely at a disadvantage. He made a fair target beside the

leaping flame and he could not see his enemy at all. And he was still somewhat white about the lips as he stood up.

And if Fargo had only remained silent, Hugh would have been willing to have welcomed him at his fire. The loneliness of the wild places was already upon him, and any stranger that walked those darkened hills might have found shelter in his own tent. And this was the man who—a few days before—had been inwardly proud that he never made chance acquaintances, that he never accepted another for friendship or discourse except through the channels of his own social plane. It wasn't being done by the men he knew: to arrive at any comradeship without first a correct introduction and then a certain amount of preliminary. How great had been the change! Yet in this case the man was obviously unfriendly; and Hugh slowly stiffened beneath his angry gaze.

“What do you mean by it?” the man demanded. “Hollerin' out?”

“Why, I meant——” Hugh replied, in a perfectly casual tone, “exactly what I said. That I'd shoot if you didn't reveal yourself. I'm against coyotes, wild or human. And what are you doing here?”

Fargo noted with some amazement that the tables had been—as if by a magician's magic—instantly turned about; and that he himself was no longer the inquisitor. He bristled, furious that this lowly herder should not instantly yield to his own superiority. Yet he suddenly remembered certain little facts that tended to restrain him. The man was in his rights: and perhaps it was best to have some explanation for his presence on the night following a murder.

“Don't go making any inferences you'll regret later,” he warned. “I'm bear huntin'—got a pack of dogs out there somewhere, and they got away from me.” He stepped one pace nearer. “And I want you to know I'm not expectin' any back talk from such as you. All I'd have to do was to say the word, and old Crowson would fire you in a minute.”

“You're one of his friends, are you?” Hugh asked easily.

“He'll do what I say—don't you mind about that.”

“Then perhaps”—Hugh struggled an instant and caught at a name that Alice had spoken—“you're José Mertos.”

Fargo started—hardly perceptibly—and caught himself at once. “Do I look like a Mexican?” he demanded.

“Just a bit stout for a Mexican,” Hugh went on appraisingly. He didn't know why, but a slow anger had begun to take hold of him. “Then maybe you're—Fargo.”

“And what if I am?”

The eyes of the two men met, and Hugh saw the bulldog lips drawing back over the strong teeth. The lids half-dropped over his own eyes, and he stood as if deep in thought.

He had been a little afraid, at first. Even now he was not blind to the evident strength of the formidable body, the huge fists, the brutal jaws. Yet—he suddenly knew to his vast amazement—these things no longer mattered. Instinctively he knew that he was face to face with a mortal foe; but he felt a miraculous trust in his own strength.

“I know something about Landy Fargo,” Hugh answered quietly. “He’s not the man I let sit by my fire. And the sooner you get away I think the better it will be.”

Fargo glared, and there ensued a half-second of strained silence, of curious immobility on the part of them both. The fire blazed beside them, the shadows leaped and danced, far away the moon gleamed on the white peaks of the Rockies. The whole forest world was wrapped in impenetrable silence. Fargo snarled, then started to turn.

And at that instant each of them forgot—for a little while—each other’s presence. They stood wholly silent, scarcely breathing,—listening as men listen when life itself is at stake. From far away in the still forest—in the direction that Alice had gone—both of them heard the faint, savage bay of the hounds.

No human being, at that distance, could mistake the cry. The pack was hunting. It was running its game. And from the wild excitement and exultation of the clamoring voices, it was plain that the trail was hot, that the hounds were almost upon their prey.

Hugh suddenly turned his eyes to Fargo, trying to interpret the strange, exultant look in his brutal face. His own eyes narrowed. Then he started,—a strange convulsive jerk that no man had ever seen in him before. It was an instinctive recoil at a great dread and horror that suddenly swept over him. There had been no time for thought. It was as if a voice had spoken, instantly and clear, and had told him the real character of that wild hunt in the darkness.

For he had heard, infinitely dim but sharp as a needle prick through almost a mile of silent forest, the explosion of Alice’s pistol. Some great danger was upon her and her little flock; even now, perhaps, she was fighting for her life. It was a moment of crisis not alone for her but for him: the time in which his metal would be tried in the fire. He knew, surely as if a voice had told him, that there were no seconds to waste.

“No,” he said clearly, “I believe you’d better stay here. I’ll take your horse.”

There was no time to catch and saddle Alice’s animal, feeding at the edge of the meadow. There was no tone of request in the words. He had simply given an order: with his very life he would see that it was obeyed.

“You will, will you?” Fargo howled. “We’ll see about that——”

Hugh reached for the reins, and it seemed to him that Fargo’s hand was fumbling at his hip. That in itself didn’t matter. Hugh only knew that he wanted the horse and that nothing must stand in the way. Fargo was shouting, his dark mouth was open. And Hugh lashed out with his fist, aiming straight for the savage lips.

He struck with all his strength, scarcely in rage but just as a means to an end. He had never fought before, yet the blow came unerringly and with terrific power. There could be only one result to such a blow as that. He dimly heard Fargo grunt—like a beast as it falls below the butcher’s stroke—then saw him reel and fall. He started to swing into the saddle.

It was better, he thought, that this man remain unconscious until he returned. He didn’t forget that he was still shepherd of the flocks and that Fargo was an enemy. Some great test lay before him, and the fewer his foes the better. He leaped down—like a cougar springing from his ambush—and struck once with each fist into the soggy, brutal face.

They were terrific blows, but expedience, rather than cruelty, was the motive behind them. Hugh did not even wonder at himself. He swung lightly on to the horse and lashed it to a gallop.

CHAPTER XVII

These were not wolves. This fact dawned upon Alice Crowson, running her little flock at top speed toward the camp, before ever she saw their savage forms burst forth from the thickets behind and even before she discerned the twitch and leap of their shadows in the distant stretch of moonlit canyon. Only in the starving time of winter had wolves approached with such terrible fearlessness and frenzy. Nor was the cry that long, strange running song of the wolf pack. She knew their breed. They were enormous hounds: such a savage pack as might have started forth from some awful Underworld of fable.

And it would have been better were they wolves. Not for nothing has man waged immemorial centuries of warfare, not only upon wolves but on the great felines as well. They have been taught a wholesome respect for the tall breed that has come to dominate the earth, and much hunger and madness must be upon them before they will dare raise fang or claw against him. But it is not this way with dogs. They have lived among men since the first days of the cave dwellers; they have found men out; they have been willing slaves and faithful servants, and once the impulse comes to attack, there is no ingenerate barrier of instincts to hold them back.

Alice glanced behind, and the Little People that watch with such bright eyes all the dramas of the forest heard her utter an unfamiliar sound. It sprang instinctively to her lips. "Hugh!" she cried to that beetling silence. "Help me, Hugh." Yet she knew that she cried in vain. She was still more than half a mile from the camp; and Hugh could not hear her, and he could not save.

For the pack had revealed itself. There was a stretch behind her almost bare of underbrush; the great trees laid shadows across it like iron bars across the windows of a cell, and shapeless black shadows were leaping across it. There was a countless number of them, and they seemed to be overtaking her with heart-breaking rapidity. Instantly she knew that she could not hope to reach the camp before they would be upon her.

She must not permit herself to lag behind. Her place was with the sheep. The savage hounds were on their track, and her one hope was that her presence, with the aid of the pistol, might hold them off until she could head the helpless band into the camp. She tried to blind her eyes to another, more

dreadful, possibility. This was no time to admit it into her thoughts. But surely, surely they would not attack *her*. Dogs always barked and menaced, but they rarely really attacked human beings. Yet the thought kept creeping back, haunting her, filling her—in those little seconds of stress in which the pack leaped nearer—with an unnamable horror. It couldn't be that they were so frantic that they would tear her down in order to get at their prey. Fate did not have that in store for her at least,—their cruel fangs at her tender flesh, their leaping, frenzied bodies lingering just an instant beside her, then racing on after the terrified sheep.

It occurred to her that there might be time, even yet, to spring up a tree and leave the sheep to their fate. Yet was not she the shepherdess, the guardian of the flock? But she saw the issue clearly, and her eyes glanced about for some tree with branches low enough where she could climb to safety. But already that chance was lost. She was in a region of open forest—great trees standing one by one with branches starting fully fifty feet above ground—and even now the dogs were at her heels.

She swung about, she saw their huge, dark forms in the moonlight. No man could look into their yellow-green eyes and doubt the madness that was upon them. The pack seemed to divide, some of them closed in, the others circled about and arrested the flight of the sheep. They drew up, wholly enclosed by the savage ring. And Alice reached for her pistol.

Through its long years that forest had never beheld a stranger scene: the huddled band of white sheep, the girl—the eternal shepherdess of the wilderness—standing guard over them, the savage pack in its grim circle. Over it all abided the mystery of the moon, and ranged about were the tall, impassive pines. The high range behind was a sweep of incredible beauty. But just an instant the tableau endured. It broke, the enchanted immobility of the forms gave way to lightning movement, the shadows leaped—met—sprung apart with the sense of infinite motion, the whole scene was in an instant the wild confusion and stress of a nightmare. The hounds sprang toward the sheep.

Alice screamed, cried out, then fired her pistol. Her aim was none too good the first shot. Her terror cost her the steadiness of her hand. Yet at once she recalled the dreadful fact that the only shells she carried were in her pistol, her reserve supply having been packed among her camp supplies, and she must not waste one. But the leaping dogs were an almost impossible target: her second shot succeeded only in scratching along the shoulder of Old Ben, the pack leader, arousing his savagery all the more.

The sheep were dying now. Already the scene was one of unspeakable carnage. Yet it was true that the full madness of the feast of death was not yet upon them. They lingered to worry their dead before springing to a fresh victim. And such times gave Alice her only feeble chance to use her pistol.

The third shot went true: the dog fell kicking in the dry pine needles. Two of the others, maddened by the sight of the death struggle, sprang with revolting fury upon his defenseless body. She fired at them, sobbing when she saw she missed again. It was her fourth shot; and only two remained.

A pistol has never the power of a rifle. It lacks the ability to shock and stun, and, worse, has nothing of its deadly accuracy. And it was all too plain that she had not succeeded in terrifying the pack. Still they plunged at the sheep, avoiding only those that were crowded about her knees, and their fury was increasing with every instant. Every breath saw more of their domestic instincts fall away from them, giving way to the deadly passions of the wild.

She fired the fifth time, and once more she shot true. The dog died in the pine needles. Then she heard the pistol's sharp sound again.

Then, at the darkest thought of all, a sob caught at her lips. Perhaps she should not have fired that last, little remaining pistol ball. For she looked and saw that a new madness, a more terrible ferocity had come upon the pack.

Perhaps it was just that they were launching full upon the feast of death at last. Perhaps the sheep died too tamely, and in their pack strength they were swept with new desires. The pungent smell of blood, the shots, the casualties in their own ranks, and the sight of this slight, sobbing figure in the middle of the white band filled their canine brains with fury and their veins with lust. Their excitement was at the highest pitch: and she raised her voice in a frantic scream for help.

For her eyes had dropped down to Ben, the terrible leader of the pack; and his glowing eyes were no longer fixed upon the sheep. Instead he was crouched, snarling,—just out of leaping range in front of her; and white foam was at his fangs. And then he came creeping toward her, across the blood-stained pine needles.

Out of the corner of her eyes she saw other black forms, all of them snarling, all of them stealing along the flanks of the little flock in her direction. There was no defense. The last cartridge in her little pistol had been spent. Regret, infinitely bitter, seized her at the realization that the last shot should have been saved for her own moment of ultimate need.

Darting down the narrow game trail, Hugh Gaylord sped in the direction of the shots. In all the forest dramas that the pines had looked down upon—the lightning flight of the deer before the wolf pack, the elk speeding madly with the lynx at his flanks—they had never seen a more desperate ride, a wilder race. He had lashed the horse into the fastest pace it knew: not loping, not running easily, but a frantic run to burst open the heart and force the jets of blood through the walls of the veins. Hugh was riding for Alice's life, and the least fraction of the last second might hold the issue.

He had only one thought and one prayer: that he could arrive in time. He scarcely tried to guide the horse. He left it to the animal's instincts to keep to the trail. It was only a little moonlit serpent between walls of brush or through the open tree-lanes; it had treacherous turns, and here and there great logs had fallen across it, yet the reins hung loose and he flailed at the animal's side with the strap ends. He didn't know when a low-hanging limb of a tree would crush his skull, when the horse would trip and hurl him to his death. These things simply did not matter. They scarcely entered his mind.

All thoughts of self, even realization of self-identity was gone from him: he was simply the rescuer, speeding to give aid. He suddenly knew—in a blinding flash of light—that in this undertaking not even his own life mattered a hair. If she had been a stranger to him, even the lowliest herdsman, Hugh Gaylord would still have raced to give aid. The Old Colonel had not been mistaken in his judgment of Hugh's basic metal, and he would have stood, bravely and strongly, this elemental test of manhood. But this was more. The forest was shadowed, the trail was dark, yet Hugh saw more clearly than ever before. Life and death were not the only issues now. All of infinity, it seemed to him, hung in the balance; and no inward doubts, no voice of reason could make it less.

In one instant he realized that Alice was in her own being his life and death, his heaven and hell, his spirit and his world and his stars. She called him through the night, and as long as life dwelt in his body he would fight toward her. Her hands reached out to him, and he would grasp them boldly across the yawning chasm. Danger, death, travail and pain were but gifts to give, freely, with never a regret. The way was dark, but an inward light had come to him.

He heard the second shot, then the third and the fourth. He sped on. The clamor of the pack seemed just at hand. Sharp and piercing above it the last shot reached him. And then there was a long delay, a grim silence that seemed to tear him to pieces with horror. Was the fight over? Did she

already lie still? The pack, also, was ominously silent, snarling rather than baying. The pistol was empty,—and Hugh guessed the truth.

To Alice, in that forest nightmare of terror, the last hope seemed gone. The great hounds were creeping toward her, strangely wolfine in their stealth, and it seemed to her that their muscles were gathering to leap. She alone stood in the way of the gratification of their lust. Was not the death-feast waiting, with only her frail body and her pistol, oddly silent, to stand between? Besides, their madness was at its height.

“Hold firm,” a voice kept pleading in her ears. It was the voice of her own being, an inner knowledge that she must still look straight into those lurid eyes. She must not yield herself to terror. To turn, to waver but an instant meant that those white fangs would flash toward her throat. And now the last little vestige of her dominance over them was spent.

She couldn't hold them at bay any more. Ever they were escaping her, they were crouching lower, their fangs were bared and gleaming. And she had thrown away the last, grim chance that her pistol had afforded. No shot remained to put her forever beyond the ravening circle's power to harm. The last gate of mercy was irremediably closed.

She was no longer aware of her own screams—scream after scream that soared and throbbed and died in the silence. They carried far, and they wakened strange conjectures in the dark minds of the coyotes, skulking on a distant trail. The prey was at bay, then, the coyotes knew,—the dog pack was at the kill, and, they trembled and shivered themselves with passion. Hugh heard the sounds, and they were like strangling cords about his throat.

The sounds seemed only to further madden the dogs. There was nothing for them to fear—the pistol was silent, the tall, erect form among the sheep had not the strength of the least of them. She stood so slight, so appalled, no more to be feared than one of the ewes that now lay so silent, its whiteness so streaked and stained with red, in the pine needles. Her fate could be the same as that of the lamb, thrown by Fargo to their kennels.

The moment of silence and waiting was almost at an end. In an instant dreadful activity would return to those tense figures, just as when they had attacked the sheep. One little breath remained. Her faltering hands clasped at her breast, as if to shield it.

And then her dull, terror-dimmed eyes saw a strange thing. At first there was only disbelief, then amazement, then a rapturous flood of hope. For the fierce eyes of the dogs were no longer upon her. It was as if they had forgotten her existence, but rather that their attentions had been fixed and held by something beyond the wall of thickets. They were gazing beyond

her, and all of them were growling, uneasily, deep in their throats. And at last, in the little interludes between her screams, she heard the wild hoofbeats of the approaching horse.

Hugh swept up to her, not daring to fire at first. The dogs were too near to her for that. He sprang with incredible strength from the horse's back, and the butt of his rifle swung high. And there was a strange, half-strangled shriek of a dying hound as the blow struck home.

And that was the first blow of a mighty battle—a fierce conflict to the death that may—for all human beings may know—be cave talk among the beasts until the forests grow old and die. The rifle butt, reinforced with iron, withstood the force of the shock, and he swung it down again. Hugh fought with the fury of a wild creature himself, and behind it was the high purpose and the inner strength that has made man the ruler and master of the earth. But it lasted only a moment. For a time that seemed interminable the animals leaped at the tall figure among them, their fangs tore his flesh and his clothes, and he swung his weapon back and forth like a battle-ax of old. But he was the master, he was of the dominant breed, and more than anything else in the face of this crisis he was not afraid. And the coward that dwells just under the skins of such beasts as these came forth and claimed them.

They broke and fled, one by one, and many were those that lay with broken backs at his feet. The first law of the forest is that it is better to run away than to die; but now they were out of striking range he opened fire upon them with his rifle, and with amazing, deadly accuracy. The air was full of their dying screams. No longer would the pack chase the black bear through the ridges. Their strength was broken and Fargo's plan had failed.

But the moment meant more than this. To Alice it was deliverance in the last instant of despair. Now she lay fainting among the fallen, but Hugh, bleeding and triumphant, saw that she was uninjured. To Hugh it was almost a justification of life itself. He knew the joy of victory, the glory of strength.

And Hugh's strength was still upon him when, after certain hours were done, he came back to the prone body of Fargo—consciousness only half returned to it—beside the dying fire at the sheep camp. He had been sleeping peacefully and was not easy to waken.

“You can have your horse now,” Hugh had said, when at last he gained the man's attention. He spoke quite clearly and distinctly, and all matters returned to Fargo's consciousness with a rush. “And, of course, you can

have your dogs, too. There's quite a little heap of them for you back there in the forest."

It seemed to Fargo, when he went to look, that only a laugh followed him out of the firelight. It was to haunt him for months, that laugh. There *was* quite a heap of them,—an impotent heap that Fargo stood by clear into the dawn, strange fumes of rage and hatred in his brain. The buzzards dropped down one by one to see what had interested him.

CHAPTER XVIII

The summer days dragged by, one by one, until they were all gone. Moons waxed and waned, annual plants budded, flowered, and died, the glossy green of the pine needles changed to a dusky blue; and all of these things were as they should be. There was, however, one important and disastrous omission. No rain had fallen since April.

It was bad for all the forest in general and very bad for certain people in particular. Of course, the little underground folk, such as the digger squirrels and gophers, didn't particularly care. Their small stomachs seemed to be lined with fur; and the dryer the brushwood the easier they could gnaw it. Old Urson, the porcupine, might have found this arid season quite to his liking. But it was more than possible that he didn't even know it hadn't rained. For Urson is ever lost in a strange apathy, a mental stupor, and life must be to him an inscrutable mystery without head or tail. He is guileless and stupid and so slow that even a cub-bear can overtake him (although clumsy little Woof, because of certain removable decorations on Urson's back, would not care to do it a second time) and one of his only two advantages is an utter indifference to the water supply. He can get along very well on the moisture in the tree limbs on which he browses. His other advantage is, of course, a convertible-armor arrangement that he uses for a back. One minute, and Urson looks sleek and almost as handsome as, say, a dromedary seen through the wrong end of a telescope. The next, and he becomes a formidable bundle of bristling spines, a veritable burr that is most painful to touch.

Of course the poison people did not care. They could swim on demand, of course, but they were not fond of water. If rain came any time during the following winter it would be soon enough for them. They lay in heavy sleep on the rock ledges where the heat waves danced. It isn't wise, however, to put one's trust in that slumber and go climbing over those sun-blasted rocks with unprotected ankles. A rattlesnake may look dead as last year's leaves, he may lie so still that even the buzzard—in the sky—is deceived, and yet he can spring straight out of his dark, wicked dreams and bury his hypodermic needles, filled with as deadly a poison as a scientist can concoct in his laboratory, in the exact spot of man's flesh he chooses. The heat waves danced and spiraled in the air, the rocks grew too hot to touch, and still the

serpents lay in their heat trance, wholly content. And lastly, the buzzards had no complaint with the drought.

For disaster to the forest creatures always means triumph to the buzzards. They are the undertakers, the followers of the dead. If *all* the streams and *all* the springs should dry up, the buzzards would be in their glory. There is a legend, passed down from mother to fledgling among them, that long ago such a drought did happen, and that is what the ancient birds think about when they soar so endlessly in the sky. And there is a prophecy that some time such an hour of glory will come again.

But the deer found poor feeding. The grass was dry as dust, the leaves crinkly and crisp, their favorite saltlicks were hard, dry mud. Most of the springs were dried up, the lesser tributaries of Silver Creek were only successions of stagnant pools in which the silver people were already dying and turning white bellies to the sun. The grubs that the old black bear loved were dried to little flakes, like grease spots, on the dead logs; and the berries withered and dropped off before they ever ripened. The wolves ran their game, and since in the hot, stifling days exhaustion came quickly to their prey, perhaps they benefited, rather than suffered, from the drought. But these gray hunters can always be expected to benefit. "Mercy from Cold-Eye is the season that betrays the wolf," is one of those strange maxims among the forest people, and it needs, like most of the forest sayings, a certain amount of interpretation. Cold-Eye is the forest name for the rattlesnake, and no man who has seen the evil diamonds in his head can doubt that it is a good one. And mercy is the one thing that can never be expected from the rattler. It is the same as saying that it will be a snowy day in July when the wolf cannot turn the most far-spread disaster to his own account. Everything always turns out all right for the gray rangers. And maybe that is the reason why, in spite of endless centuries of warfare with men, they still fill the autumn woods with their songs.

But Broken Fang, the great tawny king of the pumas, and all his lithe and deadly younger brethren almost starved to death. Their whole hunting success depended on a noiseless stalk upon a breed of creatures with ears sharp enough to hear the predatory beetles utter their kill screams in the air, and even the feline cushioned feet could not step with silence in the dry brush. At first there was only gnawing hunger and distemper, then frantic ferocity, and finally almost a madness wherein blue lights dwelt ever in their eyes and agonized convulsions came to the muscles of their throats. Even the porcupines heard them come in time to climb out to the end of the tree limbs, and by the middle of September Broken Fang was ready and willing

to lie in ambush a whole night for the sake of a chipmunk that might venture forth from its nest.

The instinct of all the creatures was to climb ever higher,—into the far, lovely grass slopes of the high peaks. In these places the melting snow, the colder nights and days, the moisture-laden winds that swept across them removed, in some degree, the effect of drought. The rains would certainly come in October, but it began to look as if, unless better hunting were found in these high realms, the starving felines could not survive the few weeks that remained. But there were good prospects in these high trails. Dwelling in the wastes of sliderock and snow field, feeding on the grass slopes and scaling the loftiest cliffs, lived the very monarchs of the mountains, creatures that weighed up to two hundred and fifty pounds, and who even in these starving times were tender and fat.

They were the mountain sheep. Far above timber line, in the land where the great snow banks endured through the centuries, these hardy creatures lived and died and had their being: the finest game, the richest trophies, perhaps the most interesting wild animals in all North American fauna. Here old Surefoot and Argali, the two greatest of the bighorn rams, fought their battles in the fall. There were no heavy thickets for ambush, but Broken Fang could find niches and sharp turns in the trail where he could wait for the ewes to wander by.

Because they had a strong man and a faithful dog to care for them, Crowson's flock of domestic sheep weathered the drought with little discomfort. It was true that the herbage was dry and tasteless, but the sheep are a breed that has learned to fare well where cattle would die. They nibbled the leaves and twigs; Hugh led them to the greenest glens, the richest meadows, and his weekly change of camp site found them ever higher on the range where the effects of drought were less. And in the last days of September they were so high that the old leader of the bighorn flock could look down and see these tame brethren, like moving fields of snow, on the slopes beneath.

These days had been good to Hugh. Every one had been a fresh delight, every night had fallen to find a greater strength and a higher peace in his spirit. Was not this his destiny? Had he not come to his Lost Land, after many years of wandering on dark and unknown trails? Could his home be elsewhere than on these rugged mountains, the shadow of the forest upon him, and the green glades lying in the beauty of the moon? All his life, it seemed to him, his spirit had gone groping—here and there—for something it could never find; and here, behind the flocks, it had found it at last.

He loved the long days of wandering, the nights of vigil, the cool camps in the forest shadow, the little daily adventures that were all part of the eternal war that the powers of the wilderness waged upon the dominance and works of man. Sometimes these took the form of a wolf, striking like a gray shadow from a clump of underbrush and making his kill before Hugh could raise his weapon, sometimes the measured stalk of a cougar on the fold. The fight was never done. Never the night descended but that the age-old battle cry of the wild—the howl of a wolf or a scream of a cougar in the gloom—would come soaring, eerie and wild past all telling, to his ears. And more than once the leaping flame of his camp was the center of a circle of fire,—twin disks, here and there, wherever the eyes might fall.

The inanimate wild itself menaced the flock. It wasn't easy to find watering places in these days of drought. There were deep glens—box canyons the mountaineers call them—into which stray bands from the flock would wander and be unable to find the way out. Sometimes arms of the brush thickets cut them off from their fellows, and these were the times when Running Feet and his savage companions were in their glory. Hugh found an ever-increasing delight in testing his own strength and skill against the sinister forces of the wild. It was his joy to give the flock the best possible care: keeping down its casualties, choosing the best feeding grounds, and protecting them from panic or excitement. And as the result of his vigilance, few of his sheep died of sickness, and the lambs grew like weeds.

“You know, Hugh,” the girl told him one day, “you are a wonderful herder. We owe you more than we can ever pay.”

No praise had ever meant so much. “I have to be a good one,” the man replied, glowing. “I have to make up for the years I've wasted. Besides—it seems to come naturally to me.”

He had never spoken a truer word. It seemed to him that this was his ordained place,—behind the flocks as they fed through the forest.

He liked the long still nights in which he knew the solace of the fire, and the whispering and the mystery that crept to him from the forest. He felt that he had lost all love of pretentious things. His standards were true at last, and the little, simple joys that came to him now meant more than all the luxury of his former life. His pipe—no longer tasting of varnish but cool and sweet—his simple meals, the little triumphs of his day's work, his refreshing rest after the day's fatigue gave him unmeasured joy. He had the lasting satisfaction of work well done, of time profitably spent. Already, he reflected, he had some hundred dollars to show his friends in the Greenwood

Club! But that famous organization seemed infinitely distant now. It was as if it had never been real: that all his days he had roamed behind the sheep.

Strangely, he no longer even missed the old days. The love of strong drink was gone from his body. He didn't look a great deal like the man that the Old Colonel had sent forth from the Greenwood Club. His hands and face had been brown before, now they were almost as dark as those of Pete, his late guide. A fast walk over the ridges did not fatigue him now. He was lean and hard as hickory, the muscles rippled under his toughened skin, the sweet, mountain air rushed deep in his lungs. It was almost recreation: never in his old life had he known the buoyancy, the tireless strength, the simple joy of living vibrant and alive in every nerve. There was a curious change in his eyes, too. The little blood-splotches had quite gone from the whites, and they were a firm, pale blue. The corneas looked slightly more hard and bright, and the lines that dissipation had enscribed were almost gone.

"Go for two weeks," the Old Colonel had said. "And Lord knows—it might make a man of you."

Two weeks! Three months had already passed, and whether Alice knew it or not, that remote possibility that the Old Colonel had hoped for had already come true. Hugh had done a man's work: the degree had been won. For the law that was true in the earth's young days is true to-day; it endures when scorn has spent itself and false pride is humbled: that by toil and conflict alone shall men find their place, their honor, and their happiness. Hugh knew now, as he watched his sheep, that this was the world of the warrior, not the weakling; of those who gave, not those who took; of those who stood firm and endured, not those who broke and fled from the crash of armor.

He did not doubt but that he had already been forgotten by the members of the Greenwood Club. Three months had he been gone: another played his hand at poker, another occupied his favorite seat in the club dining room. But of course they would forget him! There was no comradeship of arms, no mutual memories of trial and strife and conquest to hold them close to him. He had supposed that he had known them intimately, their natures and their souls, but now he realized that they had been but strangers, after all. Living an artificial life, he had seen only exteriors. He had flattered himself—in his subconscious mind rather than conscious—that they were close and lasting friends. Now he knew that only the fire of conflict and stress can weld a lasting friendship between man and man. Friendship is too dear and precious a thing to find in soft ways. That, like all of the other rewards of life, goes only to the warrior.

He was forgotten: the night life of the club whirled on without him. The talk was the same, the lights glittered as ever, the crowds thronged through the streets without, the same round of gaieties made its lifeless and eternal circuit. By a strange paradox he suddenly knew that if he were remembered at all, it was by those who had shared with him in his debauches. And after all they had been the most vital part of his old life. They were the thing most worth while. At least he had *lived* then, he had known basic exultations and passions, he had not been soft and dead. There had been stress, wakefulness, vitality. Perhaps their pleasure lay in the fact that they had *simulated* life. But by the other clubmen, men he had laughed with and talked to, he was simply one who had been and passed on.

He was stirred to the depths of his being by the contrast here. He laughed at the thought that he might ever be forgotten by the companion beside him now,—the great shepherd dog that muzzled his hands. Had they not fought on the same side in battle? Had they not faced the same enemies, known the same stress, felt the same pinch of cold in the crisp dawns and the same cheering warmth of the fire? Had they not gone together into still and sinister glens after the lost sheep? They had braved the dangers, they had endured the storms, they had fought the same fight for the same reward,—the joy of living and of service. Here was one of whom he did not know merely the exterior. He felt the animal's heart pounding against his own body, and he knew its strength and its courage. Its fidelity, its love, its true and noble worth could not be put into words. And here was a friend, as long as blood stirred in his veins, who would be faithful.

No artificial lights glittered in these mountains. Rather Hugh knew those known to the shepherds who watched the sky for a sign in olden days,—the peace of the stars and the glory of the moon. The only talk was such as he and the shepherd dog had together, the complaint of the sheep, and the voices of the forest about him. The crowds were far, the gaieties were known at last as the dreams they really were, and in their place was the silence, the inner peace, the joy of conquest, and the white sheep, feeding in the shadow of the high peaks. He was far and alone, but he was content.

But Hugh was not entirely forgotten. Even now the Old Colonel sat in his chair in the lounging room, his factory-tied tie at an angle at his collar, his hands folded, his eyes seeing out and beyond the city that stretched about him. And to him, at least, Hugh was still a reality. Even if he were dead—slain in some great stress in those far Rockies—he was more vital and alive in the Colonel's eye than he had ever been before. Had he won, or had he failed? Was he standing straight or had he fallen? Had he gone down, or

even now was he sitting, redeemed and recreated, beside his camp fire in the Land of Mighty Men?

CHAPTER XIX

Beyond all other joys and compensations for these three months in Smoky Land, there remained—a subject for humble thanks to the skies—the comradeship of Alice. Every day it made the struggle more worth while, his happiness more complete.

She made periodical trips to his camps, bringing food for himself and salt for his sheep, and assisting him as he moved the flock from range to range. He counted the days of her absence, and the nights that she sat beside his fire simply opened a new world to him. They had a thousand things to tell each other: Hugh's little victories over coyotes and cougars, the new tricks of Spot the flock leader, some little faithfulness on the part of Shep, the dog, and their exultation at the passing of the days. For if they passed the present month in safety, if Fargo and his gang did not rout them before October first, the victory was won.

She cooked his meals and mended some of the holes in his soiled clothing, and her laugh rang with the bells of fairyland over their silent camp. They had serious moments in which—with far-reaching intimacy—they told each other their own secret thoughts and philosophies of life—sober talk such as was never heard in the rooms of the Greenwood Club. For the first time in his life Hugh had really known self-expression. The inmost springs of his nature flowed forth. And he was constantly amazed and delighted by the girl's ideas and points of view. There was nothing particularly modern about them. In fact, Hugh thought that they had passed from the earth in his grandmother's time. Of course they were trite, perhaps they could have been proven ridiculous by the logic of a realist, and the only reason she had for them was the impulse of her own conscience; yet Hugh found himself staring at her as if she were a being from another planet. But Hugh's amazement was due to his own lack of knowledge of the heart of humanity. He would have been surprised to know that ninety out of every hundred girls, east and west and south and north, had the same illogical conscience, the same high heart, the same ideals. Although he would have tumbled over backward if any one had told him so, Hugh just hadn't been around. He had known but one little circle, and heretofore he hadn't been able to see outside it.

Alice was girlish, spontaneous, unaffected to the last degree. Sometimes they romped and raced like children about their camp fire. They exulted over

their meals, they told high secrets, they tingled and thrilled in the mystery of the nights. She had a businesslike, matter-of-fact way in going about her tasks that delighted the man past words. She was as clean and sweet and unspoiled as the mountain flowers that grew about her,—but wholly able to take care of herself. As she camped beside the flocks her pistol was always in reach of her hand. And the very ideas that Hugh so loved in her simply filled his nights with horror.

Of course it was ridiculous,—but the thoughts of lovers often are. And he did love her, with all the earnestness of his wakened being, with a growing, breathless love that seemed natural as living. The point was passed, long ago, wherein he could doubt that fact. And now he didn't even have self-wonder that he should have come to these mountain realms and loved a mountain girl. It seemed simply his own inevitable destiny.

And he was humble and fearful as a callow boy about the whole thing. Nothing of his herdsman's life would have been so amusing to the members of the Greenwood Club as this. For Hugh had known women in plenty; he had been an eligible in a circle where eligibles were scarce, and these clubmen thought that his last delusion in regard to them was gone. He had been husband-hunted,—and the deer that has been stalked by a cougar no longer sees beauty in the lights of its eyes! But now his old arrogance and sophistication had fallen away from him. He searched frantically and in vain for qualities within himself by which he might hope to deserve this girl's love.

Had he not been a waster, a slacker from the works of men? Had he anything in general or particular because of which he might expect a girl to love him? The things on which he used to pride himself had been suddenly revealed as so much dust in his hands—inherited wealth, social distinction, an influential ancestry. Here, he rightly concluded, these three things were not worth the powder to blow them up. He did remember, with some pride, that he had a certain amount of physical strength. Already that had been of use to Alice, and the time might come wherein it would be of use again. He was a fairly able sheepman, and he had already earned over a hundred dollars. But he felt like a peasant, offering his heart to the queen of the realm. It got down to a serious matter that as yet he did not feel that he had justified his own existence, that he had established himself in the great world of men and toil, and that he had not yet been purged by the fires of trial and stress, and redeemed in battle.

He mourned her when she left to bring supplies, and welcomed her with the abandon of a child when she came back to him. In the early nights, in the fire's glow, dreams of her were ever with him, filling him with strange,

happy glowings and warm little quivers of delight. But his love for her did not make him forget his sheep. The great test by which his metal was tried lay in his degree of success as herder of the flocks.

Never did he get away from a haunting feeling that here—beside the white sheep—he was face to face with life at last. Here, not in his cities, were the realities, the essentials of life: the feeding flock, the shelter, the circle of firelight into which the powers of the wilderness dared not stalk. Fresh and fresh he felt the age-old appeal of the soil, the love of the throbbing earth, the inner warmth, an undying and wondrous communion with nature. He waged his war against the forces of the wild, and the sense of destiny fulfilled was ever with him. And why not,—for were men strangers to the sheep? Could their ancient acquaintance be forgotten in a few little centuries of exile in cities? Had they not been out—through the long course of the ages—under the same stars, felt the same winds, endured the same dangers? In the first dawn of civilization, dim and far away through the mists of the past, the herdsman cared for his sheep in the green pastures,—and it was in the blood.

Sometimes this old acquaintance was recalled to Hugh in dreams. There was one dream in particular that came to him night after night. It never seemed to vary, and its spell always endured a few moments after waking. So real it was, so vivid, it was almost as if it had been some actual experience in his own life, rather than a remembered vista from the immeasurable past. He always seemed to be sitting, half-dozing, before a fire,—a fire not greatly different from that which burned before him in reality. It was always so red, so cheering, that the love of it seemed to shiver his heart to pieces. The forest always stretched about him, silent, mysterious, sinister past all words. And there were always the sheep.

Always, in his dream, he guarded the sheep. It was a matter of life itself. And Death was always waiting for him the instant he relaxed his vigilance. It was not an easy passing, a swift crossing to a happy, bright, quiet land from which he might return and whisper in the night. It was always darkness and cold and pain, and most of all it was fear. The sheep were white in the same moon, the same stars were in the sky. But the tent was absent. Such a thing was without his bourn of thought. In the darkness he dared not leave the fire to seek shelter from the rain. And as he dozed he sat in a somewhat different position,—usually leaning forward, his hands locked behind his head. And in the summer nights the hair on his arms drained off the rain.

Shep was still beside him, and the communion between them was even more close than in life. They seemed almost like brothers, rather than master and servant. A peace that was almost rapture abided in their companionship.

And it was necessary that Shep remain awake while he himself dozed. But the dog's outline was vaguely different. The ears were always pointed and erect, the tail was not so lifted, and sometimes when Hugh caught a sudden glimpse of him out of the corner of his eye, a swift wave of icy terror swept over him. The dog was like Cry-in-the-night,—that was it! He was gray and white-fanged just like the wolves themselves.

Even the wind—the air—was different. It was full of smells that stirred the flesh, and hushed little sounds to freeze the blood with dread. It was vibrant and shuddering and alive, and the world had not yet begun to grow old. And he always felt an overwhelming pride in his own strength. His arms—curiously long and quite black with hair—could crush the ribs of Cry-in-the-night like an eggshell. His chest was huge, his legs were knotted and gigantic, and when he saw his reflection in the water of the spring, the hairy growth was long and matted about his throat. And clearest of all the dream was the ring of deadly shadows that ever encroached upon the space of firelight, and the strange twin lights that ever glowed from their depths.

Two and two, everywhere he looked. They always glowed hungrily, and their watch was never done. Curious blue-green and yellow disks of fire, close together and glowing ever in the darkness. Sometimes he would open his lips and shout,—and for an instant they would draw back. They were afraid of that wild cry of his, but they were more afraid of the flint dagger that lay at his side. Ah, they died quickly—with a scream and a howl—when the Death Flint went into them. It was a good thing to see, but it also filled the heart with fear. He laughed and exulted when he remembered how it was even quicker in its stroke than the leap of a wolf.—But most of all the watchful circle feared the camp fire. They could not rub the wood and strike the flame: in this he was master, ruler and monarch of the earth! Cry-in-the-night might kill him in a fair fight, but still he could not build a fire. The dreamer always felt a great wave of exultation.

One night he dreamed that the fire burned almost down, and the circle drew close. He wakened from his doze and shouted at them none too soon. And a strange, wild cry from his own lips wakened Hugh, in the sheep camp of the twentieth century, from his dream. He had cried out in his sleep,—a hoarse, wild, savage cry that left him curiously awed. And the coyote that had crept close to the flank of the flock slipped quickly back into the forest.

Hugh got up, stood a moment in the gleam of the late September moon, then piled more wood upon the fire. The circle of twin lights was a reality to-night. The days of drought had brought ever more of the wild hunters about his flock, and almost anywhere he looked he saw their luminous eyes, two by two, as they waited in the darkness. He glanced down—but a rifle,

not a dagger of flint, lay at his side. He looked out over the flock, instinctively counting up his markers. Most of the sheep were asleep, but one—the greatest of them all—stood erect, with lowered horns, as if on guard. It was Spot the yearling ram, and his horns looked oddly large in the soft light of the moon.

“Spot, old boy,” the man said, “I believe you’ve got memories too. I believe you’ve been dreaming—just as I have.”

CHAPTER XX

Dreams, dreams! Spot, the young ram, waking or sleeping, never escaped from them. They came to him through the long, still hours of night, they disturbed his sleep in the mid-afternoon rest when the flock sought the deep shade, he knew them even in the hours of grazing. They were so plain, so real that they seemed more like memories,—events that had transpired before he came to lead Crowson's flock.

Yet his damming was not the least in doubt. Crowson himself knew Spot's full record as far as his own immediate life was concerned. He had been born in the lower foothills,—the first lamb of the season. And his mother had died to give him birth.

Such casualties do not happen often among the domestic sheep. There were a few such losses each year, usually due to an unnatural delivery, but in this case there was a simpler explanation. Little Spot was oversized; in a remote way that Crowson could not quite identify, he differed in outline from any other lamb in the flock. The same divergence could still be noticed now as Spot reached his second autumn.

“Good Lord,” Crowson had said, when he marked the lamb's coloring and size. “Here's a little devil that would be worth watching if his ewe were just alive to keep him fed. I'd like to see just what kind of a ram he'd grow to be.”

He supposed that Spot would die; a motherless lamb in western flocks can't be counted on to survive. But in this case Spot obviously had other plans. Before the end of his first day he had attached himself—with an instinct that was seemingly miraculous—to the largest, strongest ewe in the flock, one whose own lamb had died. Crowson himself fastened the skin of the dead lamb on his back until the ewe gave him her breast.

It was as if he already knew his destiny and needed full-feeding and rich milk to attain it. Spot grew fast. And in the castration and docking season little Spot was spared,—just to see what kind of a white-rumped, miscolored, heavy-headed ram he would grow to be.

And almost from the first day he had had those strange, haunting dreams. Mostly they were thrilling, breath-taking, joyous dreams, but sometimes they were simply nightmares. The earliest one of all, perhaps, concerned some sort of a terrible enemy that always seemed to be menacing

him from above. It was something that could drop with the speed of a waterfall leaping down a cliff, or the morning light chasing the shadows down a snow-capped peak as the sun came up. Spot knew that it had cruel talons that could lift him in the air and carry him to a fearful land of cold and darkness whence he would never return. The sheep do not ordinarily watch the skies—the range of their eyes is downward—and thus the only way to mark Swift Wing’s approach was to see his shadow on the crags. And once when the shadow of a lazy buzzard flicked across the meadow—a sight unnoticed by the other lambs—Spot’s little heart choked with terror, and he tried to squirm under the ewe’s body.

Cliffs, waterfalls, snow-capped peaks! What did little Spot know of them? He was born on the lower foothills, and from the highest camp where Hugh drove the flock the peaks were still far aloft, glittering in the sun. Yet Spot knew them. In his dreams he knew exactly how the waters broke, gleamed, and roared as they dropped from ledge to ledge; he knew the feel of the firm snow under his hoofs, the glory of the sun from the topmost spire of the highest peak, the touch of the cold crags as he lay in the sun.

His dreams were ever so much more real to him than his realities: the band of patient ewes, the firelight of the herder, the slow grazing over the wide stretches of green grass. In fact, Spot put no trust in camp fires and herders. The herder, he felt in the depths of his heart, should be eyed with suspicion. This strange, forked breed was no companion of his. He couldn’t get away from a feeling of strangeness and unfamiliarity with the scenes of his birth, as if he had wandered away from home and didn’t know the way back. He was lost and lonesome and unhappy, and he had been cheated from some glorious heritage that was rightly his.

He couldn’t get used to the slow movements of the ewes and the other lambs. His muscles seemed to itch and burn when he was idle. He wanted to run, to dash up the rocky cliffs; and yet he dared not leave the flock. The gregarious instinct among sheep is too well ingenerated for that. Once weaned, he spent his surplus energies in running back and forth across the front of the band, ever longing for the lost land from which he had strayed.

In his dreams he always left the meadows far behind him. Even the forest itself was left too, and he was set free and joyful in a more familiar land: a place of jagged cliffs and sliderock, narrow passes and steep precipices, great rock crevices and snow-capped peaks. It was true that some of his band accompanied him. But they were all taller, all stronger, all active as himself. And a great blood-brother—whose word was immutable law in the pass—was always in the lead. It seemed, dim and deeply hidden from him, that he himself was ordained—when his full strength was upon him—

to lead that band in their wild adventures over the cliffs and stretch his own irrevocable law over the ranges. But that was far off. In his dreams he was merely one of the dark-colored band, marked with white even as himself; and the leader had tremendous, curling horns of which even Lurk-in-the-trail, the cougar, could rightly be afraid.

Such games they had in his dreams, such breath-taking adventures and wild leapings from crevice to crevice, from ledge to ledge. Sometimes it seemed to him that he would climb and climb, as a star climbs in the sky, to the loftiest pinnacle of the highest peak from which the whole mountain world would spread in glory below him, and the setting sun would throw its red glow over him. The longing for his lost land was with him every waking moment. He loved his dreams: his reality seemed absent of all delight. He was always sorry to waken. Deep, insatiable longings and vague unhappiness filled his days.

It was a perfectly natural development that in his second year—even although he had not yet reached full maturity—he should obtain the leadership of the flock. The other sheep sensed his self-reliance even though they could not share in it, and even the old ewes followed him with entire simplicity and trust. He seemed to have had the advantage of some stern sort of an education that they did not have, and almost unaided by the herder he led them to the choicest feeding grounds. He was brave when they were afraid; he sensed danger when they were blind and deaf; and most of all he had the spirit of kings. But they could not follow where he would have liked to lead them. And because of the eternal instinct toward gregariousness, he had to stay back with them. It would have been easy for him to whip past the dog, gaining quickly the high passes where such beasts as Cry-in-the-night could scarcely follow. But the others could not keep pace.

The dreams were always real and lifelike, but one night in late September they swept him with unutterable vividness. The flock had bedded down at the highest camp in the range: Crowson's holdings ended in the fringe of timber immediately above them. And all at once he leaped straight out of his dream into wakefulness.

He was trembling all over with excitement; his blood simply racing in his veins. The night throbbed, his heart swelled as if it would burst. At first he only saw the moonlight, fragile and silvery, over the sleeping sheep. He raised his head.

One of the wilderness traits that even the domestic sheep have not altogether lost is the ability to stand absolutely motionless until human eyes get tired of watching. Not a hair twitched on the young ram. It was such a

posture as his followers had often seen in him when the flock was menaced by some approaching beast of prey; yet Spot was not thinking of enemies now. And all at once a wild flood of ecstasy passed through his frame.

Out of the darkness of the ridge certain living forms came stealing one by one, as silently as stealing shadows. A wonderful and noble monarch—to whom even the wolf made obeisance—was first in the file,—just as Spot had known. Others, even smaller than himself, brought up the rear. And then Spot knew the truth.

He knew that his dream was coming true.

CHAPTER XXI

All the dreams by which Spot knew of his lost heritage were realities to old Argali, leader of a band of wild mountain sheep, or bighorn, that had their craggy home in the high ranges of the Upper Salmon Mountains. The winged danger that fell from the clouds to menace the young lambs was not a memory to him: it was just an unavoidable detail of his life. Perhaps it was more familiar to the ewes, whose lambs were the lights of their souls, but old Argali had become rather indifferent to it years before. For the winged death was simply the great golden eagle who had his eyrie on a high ledge.

He had known in his own life the joys that Spot had dreamed about and missed: the wild runs, the leaping from ledge to ledge, the rough games, the glory of the sunset on the high peaks. In his own time he had stood on the high pinnacles and let the last red glow of the sun fall over him. He had known the strife, the danger, the exultation, and his flock would follow him wherever he chose to go.

There was no more magnificent creature in the whole mountain world than he. To Hugh, who had never seen a mountain sheep, his coloring would have recalled but one creature on earth,—Spot himself. He had massive horns that could strike with resistless might, sturdy legs and little clinging hoofs that could scale the face of a precipice. A lone wolf wouldn't have cared to meet old Argali on a narrow trail. Only Broken Fang himself had prowess enough to conquer him in a fair fight,—and Broken Fang usually hunted in the woods far, far below Argali's range.

But the bighorn ram had memories also; and it was because of them that he took the narrow trail down into the valleys this mid-September night. The wind—a soft little breath that had stolen up from the hills where the flock fled—had brought him a message; and it carried him back to an autumn night of two seasons before, recalling certain stirring events that had occurred upon a distant mountain side.

It was wholly possible that Bill Elkins, a herder who the following spring had gone over to Fargo and his gang, could remember that night also. But he had no real knowledge of the strange mountain drama that had taken place. His only recollection of it concerned a long and weary climb after a little band of strays that had wandered from the main band of domestic sheep and which a wolf had chased far into the distant mountains.

He did not know of the dramatic meeting that had taken place on a far-away crag that was the lower limit of Argali's range. It was the last days of the rut,—the season that was just now beginning. The old ram had been down from his high places looking for salt, and at first he had been just a little alarmed by the sight of the little band of all-white ewes fleeing so madly toward him. But understanding had come soon. He realized that these ewes were his own people,—cousins far remote and yet females of his own breed. They were sheep, even as he himself. Their wool was full of alien smells, they were awkward and slow and helpless, their bodies were fat where they should have been trim, yet they were his own kind.

The fact that he had considerable of a harem already did not matter here: for the old ram—like all of his brethren—was an incorrigible polygamist. Were not the fall days almost done? It was the autumnal madness, and a wilderness mating had come to pass before the moon had set.

And Spot had been the child of that union,—conceived in the far ranges that were his native land. But the strong ewe that was his mother did not follow her lord into his high trails, after all. Bill Elkins had come, Argali and his band had fled, and by driving the runaway sheep back to the flock the little bighorn—born the following spring—was to be cheated of his heritage.

All these memories swept the old flock leader as he came stealing through the forest shadows in response to that stirring message in the wind. He came out into the moonlit meadow; he lifted high his magnificent horns. And the wilderness gods—kind at last to this man of cities who had given his heart to the wilderness—wakened Hugh in time to behold the sight.

It was such a scene that the memory ever cherishes, a mystery and a delight through all of life. In all that breadth of forest there was no picture more wonderful, no forest drama that went more deeply into the mysteries of the wild. He felt as if the mountains had opened their secret heart to him at last. He scarcely moved in his blankets lest the charm should break.

He didn't know why he was so awed. It was as if the centuries had rolled back and had given him a glimpse of the young world,—when the holy communion of men and nature still endured. He sensed the immutable enforcement of great laws,—perhaps one instant's half-darkened glimpse of the whole, unfathomable scheme of existence. And he was moved to the depths of his being by the sheer beauty and wonder of the scene.

The moonlight was a miracle in itself. It enchanted the meadows, it filled the open forest with gliding ghosts, it turned to snow the great, sleeping flock. The brush thickets were a mystery, a darkness that passed

understanding. And at the edge of the forest stood the bighorns, forms in marble, noble past all words.

Yet it could endure but a moment more. Even now the great ram had begun to grow suspicious. The firelight cast a faint red glamor, and Argali eyed it with suspicion. There were unfamiliar smells in the air too: one that remotely suggested Cry-in-the-night and the other that he had experienced when Bill Elkins had come to drive back his ewes. He turned silently, starting to slip away.

But at that instant Spot—the yearling ram that had led the domestic flock—leaped forward as a meteor leaps in the sky. He knew this breed that had come down from the fastnesses. They were of his lost land, and even now they were turning back to the crags of which he had dreamed. Hugh saw the motion, gasped once in the depths of wonder, and sprang to his feet. The dog barked and raced about the flank of the flock.

Hugh cried out. Swept with wonder and tingling in every nerve, he couldn't suppress the utterance. He saw old Argali pause with lowered horns as Spot raced toward him. His little flock stood statuesque for a single instant, as if they were waiting for him to join them. These were Spot's people: in the moonlight there was no difference between them and the other bighorn yearlings. Hugh understood now why Spot had differed from the domestic sheep. And Shep raced—jealous as ever for the integrity of the flock—to cut off Spot's flight.

And for the first time in his career with the sheep Hugh broke his trust. His business, too, was to keep the flock together, to help the dog round up the truants and the strays. Yet the promptings of his own spirit bade otherwise. He had repatriated himself, he had come to his lost land, and was such a right to be denied the bighorn that had led the flock? Spot's place was in the rough crags and the high trails, snow sweep and precipice and the ruddy glow of sunset, not feeding with the domestic sheep. He knew that Alice would understand.

“Come back, Shep,” he called into the stillness. The dog turned, hesitated, then, faithful servant that he was, came trotting back. Spot overtook the flock and the forest closed behind him. The bighorn ram had come into his heritage.

CHAPTER XXII

José Mertos, when he came at Fargo's bidding, looked exactly the same as always. He seemed to have partaken of the changeless quality of the desert where he was born. His lips were thin, his face impassive, his dark eyes somber as ever. Fargo himself, however, had undergone certain transformations. He was not quite so boastful as usual, nor so arrogant. He looked as if some especially effective medicine had been administered to him. It was plain, however, that the dose had not been entirely to his liking. There were little angry glowings in his eyes that seemed never entirely to fade out.

Anger had always come quickly to Fargo, but it isn't good for the spirit to have it remain indefinitely. It cuts deep lines in the face and fills the eyeballs with ugly little blood vessels, and it makes the hands shake and the heart burn. It also swells the little sacks under the eyes, a thing that is never pleasant to see. It was plain that certain events had recently occurred that Fargo had not yet forgotten, but which had incited a strange hunger within himself that must be satiated with something quite different from bread. And as the days glided past the more fierce the hunger became.

It was true that he remembered only Hugh's first blow,—that which had stretched him flat upon his back. The feel of the earth throughout one's length has a tremendous medicinal value in itself to some men, and in others it wakens a madness that is considerably worse than that which comes upon Broken Fang at the fall of darkness. And there had been at least two other blows when he was stretched out unconscious. One of them had temporarily closed his eye. The other had left a purple bruise about his lips. This was enough in itself. Men did not strike Landy Fargo down and have many months to boast of it. At least that was what he told himself time after time, in the long nights that he sat alone. The meeting with Hugh in which his horse had been returned to him had been scarcely less odious.

Fargo remembered how Hugh—with his bleeding arm—had motioned for him to go, and how at the same time his hard, bright eyes had been watching for any offensive motion on the part of Fargo. But courage to attack simply would not come to him. And in the morning light, burning with hatred and passion, he had ridden back to his home.

The affair in regard to the flocks was no longer merely a business proposition. It had its personal side now. It seemed to him that its completion was the only desire he had left. He hated the browsing sheep, he hated Crowson and Crowson's daughter, but most of all he hated Hugh. There was the man who had defeated all his plans. It was Hugh's fists that had knocked him to the earth and that had lashed into his face as he lay unconscious. Night after night, week after week, he had sat—savage as one of his own hounds—staring into the fire. The flames had leaped: and he knew that some time in their lurid glow they would show him his course of action. His only wish was to make payment.

The time in which he might strike was almost up. October—when the detachment of forest rangers would take over the district and protect such lawful industries as Crowson's—was almost at hand. The thought seemed to drive him insane. And one night, when September was almost done, inspiration came to him.

A cowman had come in, complaining of the drought. The streams where his cattle fed were drying up. "Never seen the woods so dry in all my days," the man had said. "Just like tinder. And already most of the cattle have crossed over Eagle Ridge into the Bear Canyon country."

It was enough. He had given Fargo his hint. Certain orders had been dispatched: to drive all the remaining herds into the same region,—a district far from Crowson's range in Smoky Land. And then he had sent for José.

The Mexican was the one man on whom Fargo felt he might rely. José had no ridiculous limits as to conduct, no notch of brutality and crime above which he would not go. The cowboys who worked for him, however, weren't of the same metal. They were faithful enough in a good open-and-shut fight, fair warfare between the cattlemen and sheepmen. They were willing to take any decent risk, and their rancor against the "woollies" was bitter enough for general purposes. Partly it was a matter of mob psychology, partly because they thought their own jobs and prospects depended upon the range being kept open for the cattle herds. But these cowmen were rather inclined to play too fair; and cold and premeditated murder was not, among them, being done. The deadly desert man, however, had no such compunctions. He had been the logical man to send for after that last talk with Dan the herder. And he was the logical man now.

Fargo had already drawn his maps. In his own broken handwriting he indicated the various ranges and the larger streams that flowed between them. Fargo knew the passes of Smoky Land. And the two men went over them with singular care as to detail, with infinite patience such as they had

never given to any of their lesser projects. They discussed the directions of the prevailing winds, the “lay” of the canyons, even the location of the most impassable thickets. It took the whole night and many glasses of burning liquor to perfect their plans.

“It must start, you see, in the Bear Canyon country,” Fargo said at last. “And nothing in the world that I see—considering how long it will take to send word—can stop it.”

José agreed. “Just you and I do the work?” he asked.

“Yes. The others can’t be trusted. But remember—I’m paying you the limit—a whole year’s pay for a night’s work. A thousand dollars—don’t forget.”

José’s eyes showed that he had not forgotten. “It’ll take fast horses,” he said. “We don’t want to get caught ourselves.”

“No danger of that; but there’ll be plenty of riding to do, as you say. It’s a straight-out course—and to-morrow night we go.”

To-morrow night! To Hugh and Alice, in the distant sheep camp, it meant almost the end of Fargo’s menace. Another day and another night thereafter, and September would be gone: the forest rangers would come riding into Smoky Land to establish their headquarters. The days of lawlessness would be over. And the man and the girl were exultant as two children as the fire’s glow spread its glamor over them.

“We’re going to win, Hugh,” she told him. “They’ve had weeks to strike, and they haven’t struck, and I think we’re safe. And it means so much.”

But Hugh shook his head. “It’s true that they haven’t struck,” he agreed, “and yet I can’t believe we’re safe. You didn’t see Fargo’s face as he turned to go that night. I don’t think he could forget. But if they just hold off a few days more——”

If he had owned the flocks himself, Hugh couldn’t have been happier at the thoughts of victory. There had been nothing easy or soft about the project of the sheep. He had given his own nerve and sinew, he had fought a tireless battle, and nothing in his life had ever mattered so much. It was the first real test and undertaking of his manhood: besides, it was all for Alice. Victory was at hand; and surely fate would not cheat them now. They had already started the flocks downward, following one of the tributaries of Silver Creek where there was still enough water for the flock. Early in October he would take them to a certain well-watered pasture on the lower slopes. In the meantime the rangers would come to his aid.

Suddenly he reached out and took her little, hard, brown hand in his. It yielded to his palm, and just for an instant he touched it to his cheek. Yet he didn't look into her eyes. He was fearful—to the depths of his being—of the expression that might be read in them.

“Alice, it's been a good fight,” he said simply. “And ever since the world began—when a good fight has been fought—it's the soldier's right to make certain requests—that he never had the right or the courage to make before.”

She nodded, and slowly he released her hand.

“No matter if he's just a humble peasant,” the man went on, “if he's given all that he has to give, he has a right to make those requests. And although the queen laughs in scorn, at least she can't resent them—or order him beheaded.”

“I don't think she could be scornful—if the peasant has given—everything he has.”

“I don't think it would be quite fair either—although, of course, he might ask for things that she couldn't grant. And that, perhaps, will be the way it is with me.”

She looked up, a strange mist and glory in her eyes. “What do you mean, Hugh?”

He heard the crackle of the fire, the stir of the wind behind her, the soft complaint of the sheep, stirring in their sleep, but most of all he discerned the music, the unutterable loveliness in her tones. “I mean that when this fight is won—I'm going to put my petitions to the queen.”

CHAPTER XXIII

In the still midday, desperate and half-mad with hunger, Broken Fang, the cougar, came stealing along a narrow pass in the high ranges of Smoky Land. He hadn't had a great deal of success with the mountain creatures. The previous day he had caught a little pika on the sliderock; once a mountain grouse had failed to detect him lying like a tawny piece of crag beside a pass, but the great bighorn themselves had mostly been able to keep out of his way.

In the first place he was under the great disadvantage of fighting in the enemy's country. The cougars are never quite at home in the high mountains. They are essentially a lowland people, and they have no love for the fields of glittering snow. They need trees in which to hide, brush thickets to wait in till the deer graze near by. The narrow passes, the rugged precipices, and the high knife-edge trails were the natural habitats of the wild sheep, but Broken Fang liked better walking. Besides, he didn't know the country.

If one supposes that animals do not have to learn the geographical nature of a hunting ground before they are really adept in it, it is wholly plain that he has never followed the tracks of a pack of strange wolves in a new land. By knowing all the trails, the bighorn were able to avoid the traps that Broken Fang so laboriously set. More than once, after a weary half-day's wait, he would find to his chagrin that the sure-footed sheep had been watching him—chuckling no doubt among themselves—from a nearby promontory. They knew how to see him before he saw them, and in a fair chase he was simply out of the running. If his luck didn't change soon, it seemed very likely that the buzzards would have a large heap of poorly upholstered bones to pick clean.

But to-night—as September days rolled to their mellow end—he had fresh hopes. For the wind had come and brought him good news. The flock was feeding on a little grass slope just in front.

Broken Fang felt that it was almost his last chance, and he intended to make the most of it. But desperate as he was, he kept his hunting cunning. This would indicate that certain of the beasts have even better nerve control than their superiors, human beings,—for a starving man would have been unlikely to go about his hunting with the same stealth and caution. He crept

slowly forward, his nerves singing wild melodies within him. And stealing from above, he soon caught sight of the flock.

Some of them were feeding; Argali, Spot, and one or two of the other young rams were lying down. Broken Fang's glaring eyes encompassed the whole scene, and with the swiftness and accuracy of a general, he mapped out his plan of attack. No naturalist explains by what swift avenues of intelligence he made his plans. Animals cannot reason. Instinct alone is severely taxed to account for all the wiles and astuteness of the wild creatures. But if this were instinct, it served him even better than intelligence.

It was true that his prey was out of leaping range of his trail. Yet for all that his heart throbbed with rapture. A jagged cliff approached within a few feet of them from the opposite side, and one détour would bring him close enough to strike. Best of all, he could leap at them from above.

The wind was right, the animals were not suspecting danger. He crept slowly about to the shelter of the opposite pass, then began to creep stealthily toward the sheep.

He didn't see how he could miss, particularly the yearling ram that lay nearest the cliff. He was a newcomer in the band, and he wouldn't be so wary as the others. It was a simple matter of stealing quietly over a ledge of rock, where there were no dry twigs to break beneath his feet, then to spring down with outstretched talons and open jaws. Already he was within a hundred feet. Their pungent smell was a madness in his nerves. Nearer—ever nearer—and now they were just below him. He had sunk so low against the crag that he looked more like a great tawny serpent than a feline. His tail twitched at its very tip as he crept on,—a few feet more. The whole realm was hung with that tense silence of the high mountains, a stillness wherein not even a wind whispers and the heart pounds like a drum in the breast.

This was not a coyote to be frightened away by an attitude of defense. If once the great puma launched forth in his spring, no power on earth could save the young ram. It seemed as if Spot were to lose his heritage already.

Broken Fang knew this crag. He had made a kill of one of its little people a day or two before. He had always had only scorn for these lesser folk,—the scurrying gophers, the timid rabbits, and the furry pikas in the rocks. Yet at that instant he was to receive a taste of their might. A shrill shriek suddenly split open the silence,—just in front of his head.

After all it was only a miniature sound, really little more than a high-pitched squeak. Yet in that unfathomable silence it cracked like a rifle. In one second of thought Broken Fang would have identified the sound, would

have kept his poise, and a moment later would have sprung with fatal power into the flock of sheep. Yet that second of thought did not come in time. The impulse to his muscles, the sudden explosion of his tightly drawn nerves had the speed of light itself.

It was only a little pika—a rock rabbit, as the mountaineers call them,—such as the puma had killed the day before. It would have been surpassing poetic justice for it to have been the mate of the small, gray creature that had died so recently in his talons, squealing for the mother of his litter to come back to him. And his sharp squeal was just enough, and no more, to put high explosives under the sheep hunt.

The cougar's nerves had been pitched to the highest key, and the muscular reaction to that shrill sound could not be restrained. His paw lashed out: the little rodent leaped from beneath it. And at the same instant he snarled.

Few living creatures can strike in silence. One of them is the mighty elephant, most intellectual and, of course, majestic of all the beasts. This jungle king can lunge out with a resistless force and still keep the tremendous silence of the sphinx. But the stallion screams when he strikes with his lashing hoofs. The elk bellows, and even the venerable, dignified old bear has a savage growl at his lips as he slashes his terrible paws at his foe. The pent-up passions do not find sufficient escape in the blow itself, and a vocal utterance usually accompanies it. As Broken Fang struck at the rodent, his short, terrible snarl rang through the still air.

The sheep needed no further warning. They sprang forward as if the sound had been a great hand that hurled them, without an instant's delay. Broken Fang caught himself then, snarled and sprang among them; but he was a mere fraction of an instant too late.

The flock was divided—Argali and some of the ewes and immature rams circled about and dashed up the rocks at one side. The others—Spot and two young ewes—were cut off from this avenue of escape, and headed down the steep wall of the mountain. The way of the bighorn is the climbing trail—to flee to the heights where the ordinary run of hunters cannot follow. But Spot was obliged to take another course.

Broken Fang leaped after him. At first he ran only in anger and frenzy, for his instincts told him plainly and surely that it is usually the height of folly for a cougar to attempt to overtake the hoofed creatures in an open chase. But he had been cheated too many times; and his self-control had fallen further from him than the bottom of the gorge. The sheep raced on lightly, easily, and Broken Fang filled the canyons with his snarls.

But in a moment of vain pursuit a certain knowledge came to him. These sheep were headed down into his own country,—into the land of forest and thicket where he could hunt to an advantage. The thing to do was to continue the chase, prevent them from circling back, and who knows what glory might be his in the still, tree-clad ridges below him.

The chase of Spot and his bighorn ewes down into the greenwood was not the only stir of life in the midday silence of Smoky Land. At the same hour the hoofbeats of a running horse carried far through the dusky thickets of a certain great ridge to the east,—a place that divided Crowson's range from the old Bear Canyon country. A man rode lightly in the saddle: and his dark skin revealed him as an alien in this northern land. José Mertos was riding on orders, and he came swiftly. There was work for him to-day.

He seemed to know just what to do. From time to time he scanned the horizon as if searching for a landmark. Then he turned off the trail through the heavy timber. The forest constantly grew more brushy, his advance ever more difficult. And at last he came to the mouth of a great, still canyon.

Very swiftly he went to work. And if it had not been for the curious intentness of his eyes, an unexplainable nervousness in his motions, one would have thought that he was merely making a camp. He collected a little pile of dry bark and pushed a few brown pine needles under it. Then he broke off some of the brittle branches of the underbrush. These were piled on too; and a match flashed in his hand.

Just a moment he stood, waiting until the flame—a yellow hungry little tongue that a slap of the hand could extinguish—crept like a serpent into the little heap of dead bark. He saw it grow and climb till, with a sudden leap, it sprang into the dry branches that he had broken off. And from there it was only one leap to the brittle brush of the shrubbery of the thicket.

José smiled then, a little, dim curling of his thin lips over his gleaming teeth. And he did not smile often. An event had to be very cruel and hurt some one very badly to waken mirth in him. And now there was no answering echo of simple pleasure in his dark eyes. Rather the fire that he had ignited had crept into them also: the pupils were oddly contracted and bright as points of steel. He seemed somewhat breathless, too, stirred to the depths with a madness unknown even to the wild creatures.

There is no more wholesome emotion on earth than the love for the open fire. It was the first friend, and its comradeship and protection are remembered from the immeasurable past. And there is no madness that is so

devastating and terrible as that of incendiarism. José was not, ordinarily, a man given to excesses. But the fire madness was upon him now.

A fiendish light was in his eyes, a ghastly drawing distorted his features. His motions were less careful and patient. He laughed harshly, then swung on to his horse. He headed up the canyon, swooped off his horse's back, and lighted another fire. The crackle of the first conflagration had already grown to a menacing roar behind him.

A quarter of a mile farther he lighted the third fire, and then the fourth. It was not to be just a sporadic brush fire, with open lanes between. It was to be a veritable wall of flame. It was the forest fire in its full sense, sweeping swiftly and immutably over hill and valley, through thicket and open forest, and leaving only ugly sticks and black ashes in its wake. The flame pounced upon the trees. The dusky branches caught, the red demon mounted higher, and already the spaces between his first few starting fires were closing up.

But still José did not cease. For five miles across the canyons he rode—in a great crescent—stopping ever to light his fires. And when that ride was done, he turned his mount back through Smoky Land, toward a certain canyon that was a gateway out of the region to high mountains where the fire could not go. He had other work to do.

CHAPTER XXIV

The sheep were taking their midday rest, and Hugh and Alice exchanged certain confidences as they kept watch over them, sitting side by side on a dead log. Always, it seemed to them, they had more to tell each other than time would possibly permit. There was only one thing, it seemed to Hugh, that they didn't talk of: his real station in life before he came to Smoky Land. He had never told her of his wealth, of the Old Colonel sitting in the club. For once in his life his credentials were his own manhood and his own personality, and he wanted no others. It was the test, and no irrelevant matters must enter in.

And all at once he paused in the middle of a sentence, staring curiously at the ground. The shadow of their figures in the sunlight was no longer to be seen.

“Good Lord, Alice,” he exclaimed. “What's happened to the sun?”

They both looked up at once. And they found it without difficulty. But it was not that potent orb that the long summer days had taught them to respect. It was a feeble sun, a mere red disk in the strange, gray-blue sky.

“Clouds?” Hugh asked. A queer little stir went over his body. It was as if instinct—not yet dead but only blunted in human beings—had spoken within his being, giving him knowledge that his conscious self had not yet grasped. He was angry with himself for the tone. He had tried to keep all urgency out of it, and yet it seemed so breathless, so charged with dread.

“No,” the girl answered clearly. “It's smoke.”

They were silent a breath. Both of them were testing the direction of the wind. Both of them knew at the same instant that their whole world depended largely upon this. It was not blowing hard at present, yet there was wind enough to sweep the fire through the tree-tops. And, more than anything, they remembered the parched and inflammable condition of the woods and brush.

Both of them discovered the truth the same instant. “We're right in its track,” Hugh said.

They waited a long time, hardly speaking. The sky slowly thickened with smoke. They saw it rising, in great billowing clouds, toward Bear Canyon. Listening closely, they heard—at the vague frontier of hearing—the distant crackle of the fire.

All doubt was past. The time for delay was spent. That age-old terror of the wilderness, the forest fire, was sweeping toward them. It was yet distant and they had no inkling of its true origin. And as they listened, the first of the vanguard of fleeing wild creatures—a full-grown buck with magnificent horns and soft eyes—swept past them at top speed.

“You see, Hugh, don’t you?” she said rather quietly. “The whole valley seems to be afire, and we’ve got to run before it. There’s no way to hold it off——”

“But won’t the rangers see the smoke and come?”

“They couldn’t come in time. Besides, the high range hides it from the settlements. Unless a gale starts up—or accidents happen—we can drive the sheep out before it. As yet there’s no need to leave the sheep.”

“Of course not,” Hugh agreed. “We can’t leave the sheep.”

The girl looked up, a wonderful luster in her dark eyes. She was a mountain girl, inured to the terror of the flaming forest, and it was natural that she should retain perfect self-control. But she found herself wondering at this tenderfoot, this man of cities. There is no greater test of the spirit than that slow, remorseless advance of the wall of flame. The sight calls forth dreadful memories from the labyrinthal depths of the germ plasm; it chokes up the heart with cold blood and distills a poison in the nerves, yet he seemed as free from panic as she herself. And he was also the eternal shepherd. He would not leave the sheep.

“We pass the camp on the walk and I’ll get the horses,” she explained quickly. “It will be hard to control the flock if the fire gets much nearer. And I’ll try to take time to snatch a little food to keep us going through the night.”

“And your father’s lease—it’s all lost?”

“No. The grass will come up after the winter rains. If it were just a top fire the underbrush would be even heavier.” She turned to the shepherd dog, who now stood gazing, as if entranced, toward the billowing wall of smoke behind them. “Get ’em up, Shep, old boy. We’ve got to start.”

The dog obeyed; they began to drive the flocks in the direction of the foothills. It was hard work for all three to control them. In the first place they missed the guidance of Spot,—gone some days before to join his people. Besides, they were all uneasy and at the very verge of panic from the increasing sound of the fire behind them.

They reached the camp, and Alice left her place to secure the horses. One of them, her own riding bay, came quickly to her hand, but the pack

horses were not to be seen. The only explanation was that while her own animal, true to his trust, had remained for his rider to come, the others—terrorized by the fire—had fled in the direction of the foothills. They were hobbled, surely, but by striking down with both fore feet at once, horses learn to make good time even with hobbles. It was not a great disaster, yet it cut down—to an appreciable degree—their chances of saving the flock. It was more difficult for them to keep the flock closely bunched. And both of them knew, and neither of them spoke of it, that in case of the “accidents” that all mountaineers learn—some time in their lives—to expect, it hurt their own chances of getting out alive. Because it impeded his ease of motion, Hugh left his rifle in camp, depending on the pistol at his belt for any emergencies that might arise.

The long afternoon drew to twilight. The fire slowly gained. It came with a rush up the ridges, a veritable charge that drove the wild beasts before it, but it crept like a snail as it descended. The crackle was no longer just a whisper in the air to be drowned out by the slightest sound. It had swollen until it filled the forest, and it had begun to have a strange, roaring quality that fire fighters learn to dread. It meant but one thing: an all-consuming forest and brush fire in which great sheets of flame spring from tree to tree, wherein no living thing may survive. Already a pronounced heat was in the air. The twilight did not fall soft and cool as usual. Worst of all, the wind had begun to increase.

They didn't pause to eat. The girl shared with him the little food she had snatched from the tent—a handful of jerked venison and a few pieces of bread—and they ate it on the march. As the dog worked near her, she slipped scraps of the dried meat into his mouth. This was no time to neglect Shep. The success of their flight depended on his strength and skill.

The shadows lengthened, the sun declined and set, and an ominous glare spread over the sky behind them. And the impression began to grow on both of them that the sheep were constantly more hard to control. They kept dipping into the little glens and draws on each side of their valley; they bunched uneasily, then spread out into little scurrying groups. Their sense of unity seemed lost, and more than once only a quick word, a sharp command, a swift dash about the flanks of the flock kept them from a panic. They did not keep the even gait by which sheep usually move. Sometimes they ran and sometimes stopped, milling.

“I don't understand,” Alice told Hugh, in an instant when they were within speaking range of each other. “Sheep usually know what to do better than their herders. And it looks as if they'd run straight away from the fire.”

It was true. Even the domestic sheep have not lost all their powers of instinct, and every herder knows that this inner knowledge is often more to be relied upon than his own intelligence. The flocks usually know what is best for them. And many a time a wise and experienced herder will come racing his flocks down from the higher levels just in time to escape a blizzard—without a word of forecast from the weather man. He has simply followed the sheep who in turn have obeyed their own instincts. And Hugh, too, found himself wondering why the flocks seemed so reluctant to flee down into the valley. It was true that their course led them to a narrow pass, bound on each side by steep cliffs and impassable walls of brush, but the flock could pass through with ease. It looked to him as if the sheep did not themselves know where they wished to go, but were undeniably uneasy and vacillating. The thought haunted Hugh, returning again and again, and filling him with a vague discomfort and dread.

There would be light to travel by to-night. The glare in the sky behind them ever brightened, and the eyes kept seeking it with an irresistible apprehension. It cast a red glow over the whole forest world. The warm color deepened as the night encroached upon the twilight, and all semblance of reality faded from the land. It was as if it had been dipped in red wine. The great trees were incarnadine, the canyons swam in red vapor, even the sheep had red wool. No longer was this the green and lovely mountain realm they had known. Rather it was an inferno of mythology, an underworld lighted by sulphurous fires.

From time to time, through the long afternoon, they beheld the march of the wild creatures. All manner of the forest people passed them, sometimes in little groups, sometimes one by one. Often the deer sped by, seemingly almost flying in the long tree-lanes; once a coyote ran yapping, his fur singed by the fire, and once a great bull elk stalked soberly past. He seemed to give no thought to the man that walked behind the sheep,—the same form that had terrorized him that summer day beside the spring. Once a porcupine rattled his quills on a nearby hillside, and far away the brush crinkled and popped as a cougar passed through. And now—in the early night—a magnificent grizzly—that ancient and mystic nobleman of the forest—ambled past him at an awkward run.

But he was no longer gray. The red radiance was upon him, too. Hugh watched him, but for once the sheep paid him no heed. The terror behind them left no room for their usual fears. And the bear slowly reduced his pace to a walk and then stopped altogether.

Hugh couldn't have told why he kept his eyes upon the old bear with such entranced attention. For an instant he forgot his task, the dreadful

beauty of the fire-lighted forest, and even Alice, riding back and forth on her horse. He seemed to know that from this shaggy forest creature he was to receive a sign that must not be ignored or missed. “The wild folk show the way,” is one of the oldest maxims of the forest, and Hugh had learned his lesson. He was the shepherd, but also he was the forester. And the simple faith, the humbleness, the sure and inner knowledge of the Indian had come to him at last.

The bear seemed distressed. For a moment he stood quite still, then turned his great head this way and that. And then he turned back, running at top speed, toward the fire.

Even before his senses made verification, Hugh knew beyond all question what the sign betokened. While he took one breath he stood strangely silent and bowed, the lines of his face graven deep, his eyes darkened with shadows. Then he straightened. The eyes cleared and looked out straight. The lips set, the muscles seemed to gather and bunch beneath his brown skin,—as if for some crucial test.

Strength was upon him. The dog circled by, seemed to sense it, and paused for an instant at his feet. Hugh listened. The air was charged full with the roar of the fire behind, but there was a new sound too. And far ahead a gray haze lay over the trees.

He signaled to the girl, then motioned toward it. He watched her face, and a great weight came upon his heart when he read in her expression the fact that she also had discerned the truth.

“We can’t go on,” he said simply. “There’s a fire in front, too.”

CHAPTER XXV

In the glow of the fire, and speaking just loud enough to be heard above its roar, Alice and Hugh made swift appraisal of their situation. It was not easy to be calm, to hold the body in subjugation to the brain in that death valley, between two walls of flame. Yet the calm strength of the wilderness itself seemed to be in their thews.

“Wait, wait,” the girl whispered. “Every second is precious—but give me time to think. I know this country, and I’ve got to remember how the canyons lie.”

Hugh stood silent, and endless hours seemed to go by before the girl had marshalled all her memories of the geographical nature of Smoky Land. In reality, her thoughts came quickly and surely.

“There’s only one way,” she told him at last, “and that’s only a chance. It depends on how far the fire has advanced behind us. We might ride out through the old Dark Canyon, back from the camp at Two Pines.”

“Alice, the fire has already swept it——”

“I don’t think so. The canyon is deep, and the fire hasn’t got down into it. We must run for it—and if we get through to safety we can ride to a ’phone on the old Lost River road. Then we can ’phone to the ranger station, and they may be able to rush men in time to save some of the forest.”

“But that wouldn’t save the flock——”

“No. We can’t think of that, Hugh—any more. We’ve done what we could. We’ll try to get the dog to follow us, and save him——”

“Then don’t wait any longer,” he urged her. “And kill the horse if need be.” His hands, a single instant, groped toward hers. “Good-by——”

“Good-by?” she questioned; and for the first time a sob caught at her throat. “What do you mean? Get up behind me. It’s the only chance——”

Her eyes leaped to his face,—for the sight of a little weakness, a little sign of breaking strength. It was pale, even under the angry glow of the fire, but it seemed graven of white stone. “No,” he answered clearly. “No, Alice—just one of us must go——”

“Then I’ll stay too. I won’t go alone.”

“Listen!” His voice, ringing out in command above the roar of the flames, held her and silenced her. “You’re wasting precious seconds. The

only way you can help is to ride—fast as the horse can run—and try to send rangers to make a last stand in the canyon, and maybe help me out with the sheep. The horse couldn't make good time with both of us; it would just mean that both of us would die, caught between those two fires. One of us has got to stay here and try the best he can to head the sheep back in the direction that we've come—to follow you through the canyon. The wind might change—the fire might not be able to work down at once to the canyon floor—and we might all get through.”

“There's no hope of that. It means death for you—that's all it means. And there's plenty of time for both of us if you'd just leave the sheep. Oh, please——”

She looked down in desperate appeal, and she knew her answer when she found a strange little ghost of a smile at his white lips. “But a good herder—doesn't leave his sheep,” he told her soberly. The tone was perfectly simple, wholly sincere, utterly free from emotionalism or self-pity. Yet it thrilled and moved her to the depths of her being.

She understood. At last she knew this man who stood before her. Perhaps with this knowledge there came an understanding of the whole great race of men,—the breed that has waged war with the powers of the wilderness, who have driven back the beast and plowed the fields, established a protectorate over the wild creatures, and followed the flocks at the dusky edge of the forest. No longer was she the employer and he the servant. She was simply the woman, sick at heart with fear for the man she loved. And he was the man: one of a breed that has ever been willing to die for an ideal. To her, the sheep no longer mattered. She only knew that the wall of fire was creeping toward this man, this tall, straight-eyed companion that held her heart. Yet she knew in the depths of her own heart that she could not turn him from his resolve, that she could not make him break his trust. She had longed to find strength in him, the strength of the mountains and the pines, the basic strength that has made men the rulers of the earth, and now she had found it,—only to have it break her heart.

The captain who stayed with his ship when his children at his hearth wept for his return, the soldier in his trench for an ideal that few women, in their heart of hearts, can really understand, and this shepherd, willing to stand the test of fire to save his flocks were simply three of one breed. Nor did they greatly differ from the whole race of men from which they sprung. They were only obeying the immutable laws of their own beings. They could not break trust with themselves.

They didn't know why. It was as blind faith as that which will make a mother—a woman useful to the earth—give her life to save her crying infant—not through love, not through a sense of duty, but just from the inexorable command of the soul. Common sense and the voice of reason go unheard: and only instinct, blind and cruel, remains. No human being would blame Hugh for leaving his flock to the terror of the flame. Yet he was a man, one of the Breed, and he had no power to disobey the promptings of his own spirit.

Yet out of her tearful eyes, Alice saw in Hugh's stand the heaven-sent impulse that has brought the world up from the darkness. She understood old wars, the martyrdom of peoples. Vision had come to her, and throughout the world she saw men's works and heard women's tears. She could see the Viking, leaving the white arms of his woman and following western stars; the frontiersman, striking out from his beloved hearth to seek new dominions; the blood-stained paths of armies; the builder, stretching his bridges across roaring rivers and his railroads into uncharted lands. Through the long roll of the ages she saw the shepherd on the rugged hills, alone and wondering and full of thoughts, watching his sheep.

The man he had been—the waster and the egotist—was wholly gone now. Only the shepherd remained. Hugh saw himself as he really was,—just a pawn by which Destiny works out vast and invisible schemes of its own. His life didn't matter here. His love for this girl beside him pulled at his heart, but the laws within him could not be disobeyed. He was only the shepherd, and here—a milling, panic-stricken band—were his sheep.

“Way round,” he ordered the dog, and the girl helped him keep the control of the animals until he had started to turn them. And just for a moment he took her hands, two little, hard brown hands that were clasped about his heart.

“Good-by, Alice,” he said quietly. “Don't blame me for staying—and forgive me. All my life has been wasted, and now I've got a chance to pay the debt. You don't know what it means——”

But yet she understood this personal reason too. His manhood was at the test; and even if he should fall, at last, victim to those hungry flames, his life would have been vindicated—beyond all the powers of Destiny to accuse him. He lifted her hands to his lips and kissed them again and again.

“Maybe there won't be time to put my petitions to the queen,” he told her soberly. “But I want you to know what they were to be. I love you, Alice. Never doubt it—never forget it. And it's my right—to tell you at last.”

“And I love you, Hugh,” she answered clearly. He heard her without exultation, rather only with a great and inward peace, as if this were his ordained fate, his destiny fulfilled. He swung toward her, their lips met. And she rode away toward the advancing wall of flame.

CHAPTER XXVI

Landy Fargo was not of a mind to have his plan go wrong, so he had given particular care to its details. He didn't want to take even the slightest chance of failure. Not probabilities alone mattered at a time like this: he must consider the remotest possibilities also. And he had not forgotten the pass through the Dark Canyon.

"They may try to drive the sheep out that way," he had said, "and if they get there before eight o'clock, they may make it. By eight at most, I should think, the fire'll get into it—and then of course they're blocked—penned in tight. And we don't want to forget the 'phone line on the old Lost River road—we don't want 'em to get to that and send for help until every pass is blocked. If they leave the sheep and try to ride out, they'll take that way—and that's why I don't want you to fire it earlier in a special trip. I want you to puncture the horse and the man. You can do it—I've seen you shoot too many times to think you can't. All you have to do is wait on the trail. The plan's only half done if that tenderfoot gets out alive—and that's the surest way to prevent it, and a way there won't be no doubt about later. And if you want to spare the girl, all right—but keep her there until the pass is closed."

Nothing could be plainer. José waited on the trail. The fire madness still branded—like fire itself—his face; and he found an evil exultation in watching the slow sweep of the flames behind him. But he didn't intend to wait too long. He didn't want to take any chances on being trapped himself. The way of the forest fire is the way of the wind, and no man can always predict accurately where it will go. Besides, he was just at the mouth of the canyon and had a long ride himself to safety.

The Mexican found nothing to his displeasure in the work. The pay was good, and there had been a certain, savage rapture in aiding in the destruction of the forest and its people. But the work before him now promised best of all. It was just straight shooting and clean killing, and he had been well educated for such work as this. He had known the deserts, the hot battles of his own land; his eyes were true and his hand steady. Best of all, the interview with the girl afforded pleasing conjectures. José had not often operated among women. His eyes were lurid with a fire of different source from the red glamor that was over all the land.

It was eight o'clock, and the fire was only a little behind time. Fargo had estimated with really astonishing accuracy. Already the flames played on the ridges at each side, the tall trees caught, flashed, swayed and fell, and the fiery wall was slowly working down into the canyon's depths. Once there, no passing could be made. He couldn't wait much longer. Fargo would have to forego the detailed report of how Hugh lurched and fell from the saddle at the rifle report. José had to think of his own safety.

And at that instant he flattened in the trail. The butt-plate of his rifle nestled against his shoulder. Of course it might be just the footfall of the running elk, fleeing in terror before the fire, but this possibility died quickly. Before ever the rider came in sight, he recognized the sound as the hoofbeats of a racing horse. Thus he was to have his pleasure, after all.

No deer, quietly grazing toward the thicket where the puma lay crouched, no blind gopher, venturing forth from his burrow in the icy gaze of a rattler stretched still and lifeless in the moonlight, ever sped so straight and unsuspecting into an ambush as Alice, riding toward the shadowed mouth of the canyon. A little gleam of hope had returned to her, for she saw that the fire advanced but slowly from the ridge above the canyon, and that she could not only ride to safety but that there was some hope, at least, of Hugh driving his flocks through in time. True, a long ride still remained before her, but even the longest chance was worth praying for. And even as the prayers rose, sweet and appealing, from her lips, José saw her speeding horse through his rifle sights.

His finger was perfectly steady as he pressed back against the trigger. Except for one little telltale curl of his lips, his dark face was impassive. The rifle cracked, a little dart of flame that was scarcely distinguishable in the eerie and terrible glow of the fire spat from the muzzle and the horse shot forward with a strange effect of diving into the dead pine needles. There was no need to shoot twice. The noble heart of the animal was pierced through with the wicked lead. He had done his last service—willingly and well—and what need had he of a more eloquent epitaph?

Alice was fairly hurled through the air, and it seemed an incredible thing that human flesh should endure such a fall and yet retain life. She shot down into a heavy clump of brush a few feet in front of the head of the dead horse. No second rider followed. Fargo's enemy had evidently stayed with his sheep. And for a moment José thought the rest of his own anticipated pleasure would be lacking too: the girl lay very still and curiously huddled in the dry brush.

José sped forward, but in a moment he saw that she was not seriously hurt. The thicket had broken the force of her fall, and although she was unconscious, deep scratches at her throat and arms were her only visible wounds. Once more a flood of dark conjectures returned to him. It would be pleasant, he thought, to have a short chat with her when she wakened,—a grim, exciting little talk at the threshold of the flame. The meeting possessed all kinds of possibilities.

At that instant he saw the pistol that swung at her belt, and he remembered Fargo's word to take no chances. He took hold of her shoulders: and he liked the touch of her warm flesh in his hands. Very softly he drew her to a young tree, letting her half-recline with her shoulders against its trunk. And at the first glance it would have seemed that he was only trying to make her comfortable. The real truth could only be determined when he drew her hands back around the slender trunk and tied them fast.

Hugh had not heard the shot that had killed the horse. The distance was not far and in the silent summer nights he would have heard the sharp sound with ease, but to-night the forest was full of the roar of the fire. And perhaps his senses had already lost some of their acuteness. It seemed to him that a curious stupor was stealing over him, a sadness and a despair that he could not fight off.

In the first place he was terribly fatigued. As the moments had passed, one by one with a dreadful slowness that only men in the peril of death may know, the chances for his escape seemed ever less. The fire steadily encroached upon him, the heat increased, the red glow over the wilderness brightened until the world no longer seemed that into which he was born. And now the sheep had begun to "balk," refusing to be driven. It was a development that a more experienced herder might have expected and dreaded, and it always means that the spirit of the flock is broken. The animals refused to move, standing like forms in stone with legs braced and heads down, and it was a sign that the dread spirit of the wilderness was about to claim its own. When the sheep despair of saving themselves, the herder knows that the end is very near indeed.

They would run forward a little way as the dog barked at their heels, but would halt at once. Hugh could not urge them on at all. The fire swept ever nearer. There seemed no use of further effort now: he couldn't save the flock. And the crudest thing of all was that the shot had gone unheard,—and he could not even turn his strength to the aid of Alice.

And just for an instant Hugh shook off his weight of despair to wonder at the dog. The animal was standing motionless—almost like a bird dog at the point—one foot lifted, ears alert, staring away into the thickets whither Alice had gone. He seemed to have forgotten the sheep. The firelight bathed him, finding a curious reflection in the garnet glare in his eyes. He swung about to eye the sheep and as quickly returned to his rapt contemplation of the forest in front of the flock. And to Hugh it might have seemed that a grim and savage battle was being waged in the dim depths of the faithful creature's soul. He seemed to be torn between two great impulses. One of them was his ancient trust,—to stay and guard the sheep. The other would lead him into the forest ahead.

He was growling now, with a savagery that Hugh had never seen in him before. He turned to his master with a look that was to haunt the man even in those wild moments following, in which he would make his last effort to drive the flock on to safety,—an expression of wistful and unutterable appeal. And then he raced away—just as on a summer day he had sped when one of the lambs had been menaced by Running Feet—into the deep thickets beyond.

A strange and tragic blankness came into Hugh's face. The lips seemed to waver, the firm set of the jaw weakened,—just for an instant. Despair was upon him. Seemingly the forest had beaten him down and broken him at last. Blow after blow, disaster upon disaster, until the spirit broke beneath them.

“So you've deserted me, old Shep,” he said simply. “So you're fleeing to save yourself.”

For was he not taking the same path that Alice had taken, heading for the deep canyon where perhaps the fire had not yet crept and the pass was open? The blow went deep to Hugh. He was down at last to the elements of life—with death, a stern reality, even now stretching dreadful arms toward him—and it is not good in such moments to have an ancient and beloved trust betrayed. The fight was lost: no honor remained except to go down with the ship.

But Hugh hadn't understood. A pin-prick through the air, Shep had heard the crack of José's rifle. This in itself would not have been enough to call him from his post of duty with the flocks. But through the air came even clearer messages: mysterious vibrations such as only the lower creatures of the earth—closer to the heart of things than their proud masters—could receive. No man may tell in what language those messages were sent, by what impulse they came tingling through the still forest to him, and by what

law within himself he made his answer. But it was always the way of the great shepherd dog to hasten to the aid of those of his flock who were in peril. Perhaps in his heart of hearts this slim, tall mistress of his—one whose word must never be disobeyed—was also just one of his wards, in whose service his life was merely a pawn. But in the secret ways of the wilderness he knew of her distress, and had sped to give help.

CHAPTER XXVII

While José Mertos had been riding, Landy Fargo had been busy, too. It wasn't enough just to order things done, and later to learn of their accomplishment. In the hand, more than the brain, lies the gratification of vengeance; and Fargo didn't intend to miss this satisfaction. Riding swiftly, he had lighted the circle of fires in front of the sheep flock.

Exultation was upon him when he saw the red, greedy flames creeping into the trees. It was his long-awaited moment. By no conceivable circumstances could the flock and its shepherd escape. He had prepared for every emergency, blockaded every pass.

The blows that Hugh had dealt him were paid for at last. His dog-pack been laid low, in a still, ugly, curious heap—but there would be other silent ones before this night was done. And there would be less of beauty in these still forms than in those of his slain pets. Everything was square at last. His brutal lips leered and his eyes burned.

When his last fire was ignited, he stopped for a moment of exultation. The red terror was sweeping into the trees, faster than he had ever dreamed. Even now his enemies were enclosed in a prison of fiery walls from which they never could escape. "I've got you," he cried in triumph. "You thought you could trample on me and get away with it, but I've shown you." He lifted his powerful hand. "I've crushed you—like that."

His brutal fingers closed. His fiery eyes glowed with self-worship. "With this hand," he exulted, in half-insane rapture. "This is the hand that crushed you—no one else's. You thought you could stand against it, but it's smashed you at last."

He waited a little while more, fascinated by the lightning advance of the fire. The brush and trees were particularly heavy in this glade—and the red tongues swept forward with startling rapidity. He hadn't much time to linger further. It was always best to play safe—and take no chances on this demon of fire. Yet he stayed, thrilled and fascinated by his handiwork.

All at once a crackle behind him caused him to glance quickly over his shoulder. He saw to his terror that a little arm of the fire had spread here, too. He whirled his horse, then with a savage oath lashed down with his quirt.

Yet plenty of time remained, by riding swiftly, to save himself. There was no need for fear. He would go straight to his home, and from its windows he could watch the progress of the fire. Yet the crackle behind him got on his nerves, and he struck his horse again.

And this second blow was a serious mistake. The horse was already running at a swift pace down the narrow trail. There is a limit to the speed a horse can run with safety in the Idaho mountains, and that limit was already reached. Beyond that point comes only panic and blind frenzy. The horse leaped forward to the wildest pace it knew.

The sweat leaped from Fargo's dark brow, and slowly his self-mastery came back to him. There was no need of this wild flight. He had plenty of time. He started to check the horse.

But at that instant the sinister forces of the wild—always lurking in ambush for such as Fargo—saw their chance. And the forest-demons do not need mighty weapons. Their agents are the Little Things, the covert trivialities that few men notice. In this case the resistless force that overwhelmed him was only a furry, half-blind creature of the dust—a rodent such as ordinarily Fargo would press his heel upon and crush.

The rodent had been enlarging his winter home, and he had dug away some of the earth from under the trail. The horse was running too wildly to be careful, his hoof broke through the little shelf of dirt, and he tripped and hurled headlong.

To the rodent, the disaster meant further hours of toil—digging tirelessly till his rooms were clean again. Through some incredible chance—perhaps because the great god Manitou had saved him for further work—the horse was uninjured, and soon regained his feet. But Fargo was hurled to the earth as the horse fell, and he only knew a great darkness that transcended and smothered him.

As if they were trying to restore his nervous forces for some great ordeal, the forest gods granted him a full hour of peaceful, restful slumber. But it was doubtful mercy. At the end of that hour they laughed—a sound not greatly different from the crackle of a great fire, and began to call him into consciousness.

First they brought evil dreams, and Fargo started and murmured in his sleep, tossing a little on his bed of pine needles. His look of triumph was gone from his brutal features now. Instead, there was a curious drawing and strain—and for all the sudden heat of the early night, cold drops on his brow. Still his eyes wouldn't open. He fought hard, and his quivering body rustled the dead leaves.

Curious streaks of light slashed before his eyeballs now—all colors, and they filled him with horror. But slowly remembrance returned to him. He had set the fire, and now it was time to ride away. He mustn't get caught in his own trap. He rallied all the powers of his spirit and fought for consciousness.

And the forest-demons decided to grant it to him. It was not in accord with their plans that he should lie insensible throughout all the entertainment they had provided for him. So they not only permitted him to waken, but as a final favor they bestowed upon him a super-consciousness—a fine keying of every nerve and an added sensitiveness to his flesh. It was their final beneficence, and they gave it freely. Fargo opened his starting eyes.

His first thought was of flight, and therefore of his horse. But the animal, knowing of old the fear of fire, had sped on down the trail. Fargo was alone. He had to run for it, then, before it was too late. . . . He sat up, shuddering.

It occurred to him then that the fall had bewildered him as to his directions. At the first glance he beheld the fire, but it was in front of him instead of behind where he had left it. It was curious to be so turned around—and he looked over his shoulder, intending to mark the best trail to safety. And then Landy Fargo's throat convulsed and his breath came out in a scream.

The fiery wall was behind him, too, leaping toward him with a deadly and terrible ferocity. The trees flamed like great torches, swayed and fell; the brush was a wall of fire. The conflagration had made a great half circle, just as he had planned, converging to the left of him.

But to his right the fiery barrier was nearest of all. He didn't have to turn to know that. Its crackle was just in his ear. And then he leaped to his feet with a wild, blasphemous cry.

A little peninsula of fire had crept out from the burning brush to his right, and had paused—in grim speculation—beside something hard and strong that it found resting in the pine needles. It was Fargo's hand—the hand in which he had exulted such a little time before, and which had set the flame. As if in gratitude, the red tongue licked at its brown skin.

Full knowledge came to Fargo then. All about him raged the fire, pressing ever closer. He was helpless—powerless to aid himself as the Shropshire lamb that he had thrown, so many weeks ago, among his hounds. His own handiwork had turned against him, and the vengeance of the wilderness was complete.

CHAPTER XXVIII

The face before her seemed only part of her dark dreams as Alice wakened from her unconsciousness. She hoped in an instant to waken into the world of reality she had always known, not this abyss with its red glare and creeping tongues of flame. She couldn't understand why her arms felt so numb and why they didn't answer the command of her nerves.

No moment of Alice's life had ever been more fearful, more fraught with despair, than that in which her full consciousness returned to her. The fire's glow was more lurid and terrifying than ever. The flame itself was nearer: already it had crept almost to the bottom of the glen. The way was still open, but a few moments would see it closed. Yet all these things were apart from her and infinitely remote. The only reality in her life, now that her dreams were done, was the intent face of her captor.

The red radiance was upon it, and all semblance of humanity seemed gone. Rather it seemed the face of some dreadful inmate of an Inferno. The glow was in his dark eyes too: they were too close to hers for her to mistake this fact. They smouldered, like the dead trees where the flame had swept. Her throat convulsed, and a high, far-carrying, piercing scream shuddered out above the roar of the fire.

But it was cut off as from beneath a blade. She had summoned all the strength of her will and spirit. After all, it was only wasted strength to scream. There were none to hear her in these fire-swept forests. When the pack of hounds had been about her, she had still retained a dim and flickering hope that Hugh would come to her aid, but she had no such hope now. She knew that stern, unbending man who watched the sheep. All her tears, all her prayers could never move him: he would linger, still at his post, till the insatiable tongues of fire licked at his breast. She was only the woman, but Hugh watched the sheep! Besides, the thing to do was to show this dark man before her that even if this was the moment of her death she would show no fear.

And this was no easy thing. Only because she was of the mountains, because the spirit that dwells in the forest, the rugged places, the wilderness primeval dwelt also in her, was she able to effect it at all.

"Don't be afraid," the man was saying. "You ain't goin' to be hurt. I'm goin' to let you go in plenty of time. In the first place, I've got to get out the

same way myself.”

She could believe this, at least. She saw that he kept close watch of the fire as it crept down toward the floor of the canyon.

Her eyes looked straight into his. Yet the fear crept at her heart—for indeed he intended to let her go, none but the most dreadful reason occurred to her why she should be tied. And in truth, the spirit of Landy Fargo was far distant now. José knew perfectly that before she could reach a 'phone and men be secured to battle at this last stand against the fire, the hungry little tongues would have already encompassed the canyon. He only knew that he was shivering strangely, and that he was not yet ready to let her go. “Untie my hands,” she commanded.

“I will—quick enough. I just thought we'd talk a while first. It ain't often I get to talk to a pretty girl like you——”

There in the path of the advancing flame the words were ineffably strange and terrible to the girl,—like some demoniac torture of a shadow world. “And you're not going to have a chance now,” she told him clearly. “If you want to leave me here in the track of the fire, it's in your power to do it—but it won't make me bend to you, or plead with you, or treat you any different than I've ever treated you.”

The man stiffened. She saw the gleam of his teeth through his thin lips. “Don't be too sure. I was told to let you go, but nothin's goin' to happen to me if I don't. Your position ain't what it used to be, Alice, and maybe I'm a different kind of man than you're used to. I come from a different race. And maybe you'd better try to be a little more polite.”

“And I can only tell you this,” she went on as if she had not heard. “If you do leave me here, if you put one indignity to me above what you've already put by tying me up and making me listen to your talk, you'll pay for it. I'm just as sure of that as I am that I'm alive.”

And the man might have listened in vain for any waver, any note of doubt in her tone. She spoke as if in infallible prophecy.

“Who's goin' to do it?” the man demanded. “Who's goin' to find out?”

“It will be found out. You'll pay, whether I live or not. It seems—almost as if vengeance is coming to you soon—right away. I can't tell you how I know. I only tell you to let me go.

“You're from the desert, José, and not the mountains, and maybe the desert lets debts go unpaid,” she went on, in a clear free tone of inspiration. “But I know these forests. It seems to me I know them now—better than I ever did before. One more insult—and I tell you you'll pay.”

But José laughed. Just a little, harsh note of scorn fell from his lips. He was a mountain man, but in his passion and frenzy his wilderness knowledge had deserted him. He did not heed her words. And he bent to press his lips to hers.

And at that instant the thicket behind them parted as a terrible avenger leaped through. It was not his first leap in vengeance. Many times, in his years of service, he had sprung with magnificent ferocity at the throat of a wolf that menaced the white sheep in his care. But never before had he sprung so true, with such shattering power and dreadful fury. White fangs that could carry a lamb as tenderly as the arms of a shepherdess flashed in the firelight.

Just as she had said, the wilderness had spoken. One of the guardians of the flock had swept to her aid. Because he was in defense of his own, obeying the laws of his inmost being, his blow had the might not only of the wilderness but of that high power that has waged war with the wilderness, tamed its passions, subjugated its peoples. No man may say if love for this tall shepherdess was a factor too. Without its impulse, the lesser creatures do not often unleash their fury against man. Shep the dog had come because it was his duty and his destiny, and he sprang like a tigress through the air.

The great shepherd dog struck like a wolf, aiming straight for the throat. José had no time to ward off the blow. His back was to the thicket. He didn't even see it come. Gleaming fangs tore once at his dark flesh.

Then for an instant there was only the red fire and the red sky, with the wilderness bathed in their glow between. The dog had dropped silently to his four feet and was crouched, waiting to see if another blow were needed. The girl's face seemed bereft of all life. And that which had been a man was only a huddled heap in the pine needles, dark and strange and impotent as the dust. Red fire and red sky, and now a scarlet fountain, playing softly with ever decreasing impulses, on the parched earth.

Shep had avenged the insult. And in paying the debt the pair of hands that might have untied the bonds that held Alice in the path of the fire were stilled.

CHAPTER XXIX

Almost in a breath Shep's ferocity passed away. He eyed the still form for a sign of life, but quickly the fierce yellow lights died from his eyes. The avenger, the remorseless slayer was gone, and just the shepherd, rare comrade and fellow guardian of the flocks, remained. His tail wagged in friendship, the stiff hairs began to lie down at the animal's shoulders. And he looked up in inarticulate appeal to the girl's face.

"It's no use, old boy," the girl told him. "I'm tied fast and I can't go with you. And—yes—the fire is coming."

She told the truth. It had still a long way to go before it encompassed the floor of the draw, but it was steadily, remorselessly drawing nearer. The dog whined softly.

The girl shook her head. "I can't go, old boy," she repeated. "We're lost—you and I and your master, too. You've helped us all you can."

The animal seemed to understand. A great, brooding sorrow came into his intelligent eyes. Here was the third of them that had given his all for the sheep, one who had stayed for his work when his swift legs and sure instincts could have saved him from the fire; and when all is said and done, mostly for the same reason that Hugh had stayed with his sheep,—because it was the inner law of the breed from which he sprung. He was the shepherd dog, and he had fulfilled his obligation even to the death. Many of his breed before him had done as much. Many would come after—humble, unlauded—and obey to the inevitable end the same laws. The high schemes of the Universe were dimly before her eyes.

The dog barked again, then encircled the tree and licked softly at her hands. It occurred to the girl that she might try to make her position plain to the dog, urging him to bring his master to her aid. Yet she couldn't gesture with her pinioned arms, and the understanding of Shep did not go out to words alone. She couldn't write a note to fasten to the dog's collar. "Help me, Shep," she pleaded. "Go and get help." The dog whined again, and she felt his warm tongue at her palm. "Can you hear me, Shep? Can't you understand?"

As if in obedience, the dog turned and sped away. But in this last fearful hour she could not make herself accept even this shadow of a hope. Besides, Hugh was probably already dead or hemmed in by the two converging

crescents of fire. She found herself wishing that the dog had stayed. He would be company for her in that last awful moment just before the shadow would drop down for good and all. She found herself dreaming that if he had only stayed, perhaps his kindly fangs would play—just one little time—at her throat, saving her from the final agony. He had always understood so well: perhaps he would have helped her cheat those stealing tongues of red that ever crept nearer. She couldn't reach the pistol at her waist to cheat them herself. At least, she might have partaken of Shep's own great spirit of strength.

She was alone and afraid at the dark frontier of death. There was no help, no mercy from the flames: the shadows hovered close. She wished she had stayed with Hugh. Death and its agony would not seem so fearful then, in the shelter of his arms. Now his kiss was cold upon her lips; but with their love to sustain them they could have faced bravely their remorseless doom. Smoke drifted around her. Most of it was carried up and away, yet perhaps it would bring merciful unconsciousness before the flames should creep up to her.

Running at top speed, Shep circled around the flock to Hugh's side. The man was standing up to receive him. He had seen his speeding form a long way off through the dim clouds of smoke: the only creature that moved in the whole breadth of the forest. The sheep themselves were making no further effort to flee from the flames. Far or near, the wall had encircled them; and they stood as if stricken dead, heads close to the ground.

"Great God, Shep!" the man cried. "Have you come back to see it through with me?"

And a light that had no kinship with the dreadful glare of the fire flashed to the man's face. Shep was returning to his flocks. He had kept faith, after all. He was only a dog, yet to Hugh his fidelity was a clear, bright shaft of light in an impenetrable darkness. No scales of earth could measure the difference that it made to him.

Yet Shep did not come to nestle in his strong arms. Memories were flashing over him, and he remembered a morning, months ago, when one of his wards had been in danger and he himself had been powerless to save. A lamb had fallen into the torrent, and his master had gone quickly to his aid. When he was within a few feet of Hugh he paused, barking, then ran a little way back.

"What is it, Shep?" the man asked. "What do you want me to do?"

The dog barked louder, running forward again and pausing to see if his master followed. Hugh gazed at him with widening eyes. At first it did not even occur to him that Alice was in distress. He supposed that she had fled to safety long since. Yet the dog was frenzied in his eagerness, just as in times past when some beast of prey had menaced one of the sheep. And Hugh remembered that never once had the dog urged him forward without cause.

“What is it, old man?” he cried. “There’s no way out. Let’s stay with the sheep—and see it through.”

But still the animal entreated. The fire raged and roared, burning slowly on the descents, leaping with incredible fury as it mounted the ridges, advancing steadily down the floor of the valley. East, west, south and north,—everywhere a wall of flame. There was no way out. Yet he could not doubt the urgency of this appeal. And all at once the instinct came to answer it.

Perhaps it was because of his abiding faith in the animal’s intelligence, perhaps just that in this final hour he knew that any miracle might come to pass. He sprang up, and he didn’t try to keep up with the dog at a walking pace. He ran from the first step.

The dead logs across the trail, the hills and steeps, the narrow passes between the walls of brush did not check his pace at all. The air surged into his lungs in great sobs, his muscles ached and burned as if the flames had already reached them. He knew—by token of a clear voice within himself—that he was running for a *life*—one that was very dear to him and must be saved at all cost.

Her arms still pinioned, Alice sat waiting for the end. It was hard to be brave in the ever-nearing presence of the flames. If there had been a cheering word from one she loved, one touch of a friendly hand, the moments would not seem so terrible and long. But she was helpless and alone, and all hope of aid was gone.

The way out of the fire trap was irremediably closed. True, there was a territory of large extent behind her not yet burned over, and she knew that if Hugh and his flock still lived they were in that space. In all directions raged the fire, and now the flames had stretched their terrible barrier clear across the little canyon in which she was a prisoner. Even if by some miracle her arms should be freed she could not escape. No human being could pass that flaming wall in front and yet live. Because she was in the deepest part of the canyon, its shadowed mouth where it met the broader canyon of Silver

Creek, the fire had not yet burned down to her, but by no thousandth chance could this last little space of forest be spared. A few moments or many: the issue was unmistakable in the end. If the fire continued its present slow advance, perhaps the fevered cycle of her blood might be repeated many times; but at any instant a falling pine top from the flaming forest above might catch the tree against which she was bound and bring the end. There was only one thing left to pray for, now. There was still the fond wish that by some miracle the passing might come swiftly, that her soul might wing its way swift and free, not struggling from a pain-racked body, out of this dreadful land of glaring sky and glaring fire. Perhaps the out trail might be level and easy, after all.

Her thoughts no longer held quite true. Strange fancies swept her; and back of them was the clear, rational, unconfused voice of hope that perhaps these portended an unconsciousness that would spare her the cruelty of the end. The night must be far advanced by now, she thought. Uncounted centuries had come and dragged away since Hugh had pressed his lips to hers and she had ridden into the greenwood. The heat of the fire above her grew steadily fiercer, and she saw with a strange sorrow that the little mountain flowers—hardy, lovely things that had weathered the drought—were withered and dying. The smoke poured in billowing storms across the mouth of the canyon. The bark of the tree felt scorching hot against her bare arms. And still the frightful glare of the sky lighted up, as if in dreadful enchantment, the little space of unburned forest where she was confined.

And now the jaws of the flame were closing behind her. Only a little island was left, and any instant the faint night wind would blow the red tongues into the thicket beside her. It was the end. Perhaps the smoke—rarely unbearably dense, rangers know, even at the very edge of the forest fire—might bring unconsciousness after all. She felt herself drifting.

Sobbing words were at her lips. “Be merciful,” she pleaded to the Powers of whom mercy is the eternal spirit. “Don’t make it last any longer! Let me go to sleep——” Yet no ear, it seemed to her, could hear her above the frightful roar of the fire. And even her arms were bound so that she could not stretch them up in supplication.

And it was as if her prayer had been heard. At least she was not to endure the end in loneliness. A sharp, high bark pierced through the angry crackle and roar of the fire, and Shep leaped to her side. Only a narrow path remained between the two converging walls of flame behind her: a dreadful place of blasting heat and blinding smoke and darting flame tongues, yet the dog had sprung through like a winged creature. Behind him, still brave and strong and enduring, came his master.

He also sprang bravely through the closing barrier of flame. A great spirit of undying strength was on him, and the red arms reached for him in vain. He swung to her side, a dim, strange figure that at first seemed only a figment of fancy born in her prayers. He did not speak to her. Only strangled sobs were at his lips. His white-bladed hunting knife flashed at her bonds.

He snatched off his coat, wrapping it in one motion about her head and shoulders. He knew how those fire tongues he had just passed through would receive her tresses. And then she felt muscular arms go around her. As lightly and as strongly as if on the wings of Death itself he lifted her to his breast. He sprang forward with all his strength. And the three of them fought their way back—through the gates of peril—to the last remaining island in the sea of flame.

CHAPTER XXX

It was more than a reprieve,—the little hour that they would have together before their own island was submerged. They were three shepherds, and in their united strength they were not so fearful of such stars as would be borne into their sky. Here was comradeship instead of loneliness, courage instead of terror, and the deathless joy of love instead of despair.

They went, the three of them, back to the motionless flock. In the first place the sheep were fairly in the center of the space of unburned forest—a brushy hollow where the smoke was least—moving just enough to keep halfway between the steadily advancing fire up-wind and the slow-creeping backfire in the opposite direction. Besides, they were shepherds, and in their own hearts they felt a blind but undeniable satisfaction in being with the flocks at the end.

José and his employer had done their work well. In any direction their victims chose to look the forest was swept with fire. And in the ruby glare the resistless march of the flames was a strange and awful thing to watch. Sweeping fast up the ridges, creeping with almost imperceptible progress down the glades, leaping with indescribable ferocity through the green branches of the ancient trees, slashing through a brush wall and crossing in one pounce the streams and the trails. This last hour was one of weird and terrible beauty, at least. The three of them stood beside the silent flocks, quietly waiting for their fate.

There was no use in trying to drive the sheep. There was no place for them to go. True, to the right and left of the flock the flame-wall was slightly more distant than to the front and rear, but it was as impassable one place as another. Besides, the sheep themselves refused to be driven. They too were quietly waiting for the end.

“One more hour,” Hugh whispered. His arms went about her, silently and strongly, as if to shelter her. “It can’t be over an hour more. And then we go—some place—together.”

The girl shivered in his arms. “I wish it would come soon. It hurts—to breathe.”

It was so. The heated air tortured the lungs. There was none of the cool delight that usually precedes the hour of dawn in the mountain realms. Above them the pines stood in their dark watch: silent, somber, noble

sentries of the wilderness. But for all their venerable years and their great strength, they could not stand against the enemy that menaced them now. The red tongues would sweep through them, they would shudder and fall, and only black trunks, dismal and ugly, would remain when the red scourge had passed.

The girl suddenly turned entreating eyes to his. There was only the dark shadow of fear in them now, none of the mad panic they had had in the nearby canyon. "Listen, Hugh," she whispered, just in his ear. "I have one thing to ask—the hardest thing of all."

Hugh flinched—ever so slightly—and an immeasurable dread came into his face. "Tell me what it is. I think I know."

"It's going to be hard because—you love me. And you do, don't you? I can't be brave if you don't. I want to keep remembering it——"

He nodded, gravely. No words were needed to assure her. This strong shepherd could only speak truth at a time like this.

"But we're mountain people—and you know it will be the best. And it's because you love me—that I know you'll do it for me. To spare me—and then yourself. I'd have done it back there if my hands hadn't been tied."

He understood. Her hand stole around him and touched the butt of his pistol. For a long breath he waged an inward battle, and he called on all the powers of his spirit to give him strength. But it was true that they were of the mountains; and they saw issues straight. This was no hour for emotionalism and folly. The flames swept nearer; but with one press of his finger on the revolver trigger he could save this girl he loved the final horror of a fiery death. One shock, one sweep through the darkness, and then peace: not the slow agony of the enfolding flames. He could not do better service. He was the shepherd still.

"Yes," he promised. "I'll do it—at the end of the hour. And the dog too."

It was only fair to include the dog. He was one of the triumvirate. He had kept faith, he had stood the test. The moments were born, passed and died. The tall trees caught, flamed, and fell. The smoke clouds gathered, enfolding the three of them, and passed on.

They were nearly blind from the wood smoke, the heat had become almost too much for living flesh to bear. There was no need of waiting longer, perhaps to fall into unconsciousness from the smoke and then to waken to feel the flames licking at the flesh. The wall of fire was still nearly a mile distant to the west, but its march was swift. Hugh's terror had gone, and he found himself longing for such cool peace as would follow the third revolver shot.

The girl's lips pressed his. She knew the progress of his thoughts. "There's no use of waiting any longer," she said unwaveringly. "Let me be the first."

"The dog first," he told her. He couldn't get away from an all-engrossing desire to keep her with him to the end, and to spring out of life with his hands in hers. Perhaps it would be kinder to spare her the sight of Shep's death—yet his spirit lacked the strength.

"The dog first," the girl repeated. "And don't—wait—any more."

The dog's appealing eyes were upon them. Their own spirit—that of immortality itself which only men seem to possess—had pervaded him, and the dark eyes seemed unafraid. To the beasts, death is a darkness and a fear; but Shep knew that these two masters would have only mercy and kindness for him. Hugh's hand reached back for the revolver.

But the forest gods had not written that Shep should die so soon. The drama of the flaming forest was not yet over. An interlude strange and startling past all words; three figures—vivid in outline and bathed in the fire's glow—came speeding toward them from the thickets to the east. A gasp of wonder fell from Hugh's lips as he beheld them.

Two of the forms were unfamiliar, but one of them was known and beloved of old. Hugh couldn't mistake the trim figure, the curved undeveloped horns of the first of the three. No break appeared in the fiery wall toward the east, yet Spot—his own unmistakable form and his wool unsinged—ran steadily toward them in plain sight of all three. It was as if he had returned from the shadow world, a ghostly savior in the hour when his old followers hovered at the gulf of death. A great wave of hope swept the man's frame.

But in an instant he saw the explanation. Spot and his ewes had not come unaccompanied. A tawny form loped swiftly behind them. It was Broken Fang, the monarch of the cougars, and he had simply driven the three bighorn down into his own hunting ground at last.

"If there's a way in, there must be a way out," Hugh spoke sharply. "Stand still, so the cougar'll come in range."

Suddenly he seemed to know that in some invisible and secret way that he could not trace, the whole issue of life and death had centered down to his war with Broken Fang. He couldn't have told why. Dimly he knew that after days and hours of desperate pursuit, following still the ancient herd-instinct and perhaps impelled by the memories of certain crises, when he had run with the domestic sheep, Spot had come here for protection from the tawny creature that threatened him. After that desperate foe was conquered,

he would pay his debt to Hugh,—not through conscious impulse but by the mandates of some great law of the wilderness and life that no man may name or read. Hugh drew his revolver, but its bullet was not for Shep. And the three of them crouched low, waiting for the cat to come in range.

He gave no thought to the fact that a pistol is usually a futile weapon indeed against such a mighty, strong-lived animal as a great cougar. He knew by the animal's frantic leaps that he was desperate with hunger, stark mad from the long chase that had never seemed to end, and frenzied, perhaps, by the fire. The felines do not often chase their game in open pursuit; but in his madness he had forgotten his hunting cunning. He saw the motionless flock and came at a charge.

Spot hurried around the flank of the flock and, watching the cougar's advance, Hugh was wholly blind to the fact that every one of those three thousand sheep lifted their lowered heads. The cougar came almost straight toward him, as fast as an African lion in the charge. He had emerged from the brush only a little more than a hundred yards distant, and half of the space between had already been crossed. But still Hugh held his fire. He knew that only at a point-blank range would the little pistol bullet stop that wild charge.

And the calm, sure strength of the wilderness itself came down and sustained him during the stress and fury of the attack. His face was impassive, his hands steady as bars of steel, his eyes were narrow and bright and clear. He raised the revolver. He glanced coolly down its sights. And he fired for the first time when the great cat was hardly forty feet away.

The bullet sped true, inflicting a mortal wound, and the great beast recoiled. But the shocking power of the lead was not enough to destroy wholly the mighty engine of life in Broken Fang's body. He snarled once in fury and sprang forward again. But it was not the hunting charge now. It was the blind, savage rush of a wounded animal, ready to fight to the death.

Again Hugh shot with amazing accuracy, and again the cat went down. But the impetus of his fury could not be overcome. He leaped forward, and the third bullet was a complete miss. The fourth, following quickly upon it, inflicted a flesh wound but halted him not at all. And he crashed down once more at the fifth.

But even then the vital, surging life in the creature still lingered. He came creeping forward, fangs gleaming, long talons bared. An instant more Hugh waited, standing straight and motionless. Only one bullet remained, and no risks must be taken with that. Shep—who had rushed about the flock at Spot's approach—came charging to his master's aid.

One long second dragged away, with a curious effect of silence and immeasurable suspense. It was such a picture that might never be effaced from the memory: the suddenly awakened sheep, the approaching forest fire, the motionless figures, the snarling, creeping feline, and the red glow as of the abyss over all. The creature paused—scarcely ten feet distant—and gathered himself for a final spring. Hugh fired his last bullet.

There was one strange instant more in which the bunched muscles relaxed and the great body wilted in the pine needles. The dog leaped upon it, but it was already impotent. A strength such as but rarely comes to man had held Hugh's hand steady; and the shot had made a clean passage through the creature's brain.

Broken Fang's trail of rapine and carnage had come to an end at last. He typified all that was most deadly and terrible in the wilderness, and he had fallen in fair battle with the breed whose strength—in such regions where they venture—has conquered the wilderness. He was a forest monarch; but his foe was the shepherd. Talon and fang and supple strength had not been availing.

He would linger no more about the white flocks, and the Little People along the game trails had seen him steal by for the last time. No more would the deer know his long, shuddering scream as the night came down. He lay as if fallen in battle against the flocks,—a token of man's dominance of the wild.

Hugh turned from him to find a strange stir and excitement among the sheep. It seemed to him that in those invisible ways no man may trace, a knowledge and a message was being passed from one to another; and a new hope and spirit was sweeping the flock. There was no concerted movement as yet. Still the sheep stood motionless, but their heads were raised. The only moving forms were those of Spot and his ewes, running along the flank of the flock. And suddenly Spot turned back in the direction that he had come.

And every animal in that flock of three thousand leaped after him in pursuit. The whole expanse of white lurched forward like an avalanche starting from the high peaks. Hugh cried out in irrepressible wonder, and thrill after thrill coursed like electricity through his frame. An unspeakable rapture flooded his being; and he whirled about to find a white flame—no less miraculous than this sudden sweeping-forward of the flocks—mounting in Alice's face. The dog raced forward, barking.

By instinct rather than reason the shepherds understood. Their old leader had for the moment at least returned to the sheep; they rallied as instinctively as soldiers at the sight of their beloved general, and they were

ready to follow him even into the flame. It made no difference that he was leading straight toward the flaming wall to the east, a dreadful region where the fire raged fiercely and whence without his leadership they would have been afraid to go. They ran as if with renewed spirit.

Perhaps they remembered him of old and gave him their trust. Perhaps he brought them word of some new hope that lay even in the jaws of death. Swiftly the flock fell into its old formation, the strongest in front, every black marker in its place. They swept like a foam-covered sheet of water into the red dusk of the distant forest.

“Come!” Hugh shouted. “Spot’s showing us the way.”

CHAPTER XXXI

“The Little People show the way,” was the saying of a more credulous race in an older West; and Hugh knew its truth at last. This was no blind lead,—the westward course of the bighorn ram in the van of the sheep flock. He led them straight to a pass that only the wild creatures knew, a course already taken by such of the animals as had been trapped between the converging walls of flame and through which Broken Fang had pursued him. The instincts of the lesser folk had served when Hugh’s own conscious intelligence and knowledge had failed.

After a half-mile’s wild run Spot turned into a narrow-mouthed canyon, leading in a long course clear to the high peaks. A creek had flowed through it in some past age and carved its banks, but through some geological catastrophe its waters were diverted and only a dry bed of stones remained. Half-hidden by heavy brush thickets, neither Fargo nor Alice had ever dreamed of its existence: it was just one of many unknown gorges in the unlimited mountain spaces of the American West. Spot—perhaps wholly unaware of the fire—had sped down it before the pursuit of Broken Fang, and now that his enemy was slain he was simply taking the same course back to his own people in the mountains.

The flame had not yet crept down its rocky, barren walls. It was such a place as the rattlesnakes love, but not a feeding ground for sheep; and the little herbage that grew between its boulders had not offered a swift passage for the fire. The flames raged above them on each side, but the fiery walls had not yet converged and made the impassable barrier on which Fargo had counted. And Spot’s whole flock sped behind him into its sheltering depths.

They were none too soon. Within a few minutes the advancing tide of flame would have covered its mouth if indeed it had not crept down over the steep walls into the canyon floor itself. But the straight road to safety was open at last. Far beyond, leading him like a star, Spot could see the glorious white peaks of his home. The domestic sheep could not follow him all the distance, yet the way was clear and safe for them completely beyond the outer reaches of the fire. And all that Hugh and Alice had to do—with Shep running and barking with joy beside them—was to follow the white flocks.

The lesser folk had shown the way,—just as many times before in the long roll of the ages. No man could have followed Spot out from the terror

of the fire that night and still thought—in monstrous arrogance—that the wild things of the world were created only for his own blood-lust and his own pleasure. The comradeship of men and beasts is of ancient origin, and its utility is not yet gone. The bighorn ram—exiled by birth among strangers and lost to his brethren once more because of the cougar’s hunting—was headed back to his own snow-capped peaks—and Hugh and Alice and the surging flocks had simply followed his lead. And the way he had shown was that of life and safety when all other paths were closed.

Just before the dawn broke, Hugh and Alice stood behind the flock, safe and far from the ravages of the fire. Already Spot and his two ewes had sped up a precipitate trail—where, because of the steep rocks and the interference of Shep, the domestic sheep could not follow—and now all three thousand of them were quietly grazing at the very foot of the high mountains. And no man may say whether or not—like the lame child of Hamlin town—they gazed with wistful eyes toward the misty mountain realms where their leader had gone. They had been of the mountains too, when the world was young, and perhaps they found themselves longing for the steep ways and the hard days and the fierce delights that constitute the lives of those mountain monarchs, the bighorn sheep.

The dawn grew in the east. The white peaks glowed and gleamed. And the girl’s brown hand crept into Hugh’s.

“Did you know,” she asked him, whispering, “that we’ve won? That we’re safe, after all? The rangers are probably already on the way to fight the fire, and we’ve nothing more to fear.”

He turned to her, and they had a moment of laughter in which they rejoiced at each other’s appearance. Their clothes were torn and half burned away; the man’s eyebrows and lashes were singed; and their skins were smudged with soot. But the perils and the stress had left no weight upon their spirits. They were blistered, hungry, desperately fatigued, but they were gloriously happy and triumphant.

“We’ve won,” he echoed. “A few fatalities—but not enough to count.” He had engaged in much folly in his time, but it was to be said of Hugh that he wasted no emotion or maudlin words over the dead body of José in the burning brush behind. “And we can get Fargo too—on a charge of arson, at least. There will be some way to handle him. And the only thing left to talk about is you and I.”

“Shep, too,” she reminded him soberly.

The man glanced down into the loving brown eyes of the shepherd dog. He also was dirty and disheveled,—a shocking thing to be seen in a

drawing-room but beloved past all utterance here. "Heaven forgive me, Shep, for forgetting you," the man cried, dropping to his knees. He was quite sober as he held the dog a long moment in his strong arms. His bronzed face was intent. It was enough reward for Shep. His master released him, and he circled round the two of them, barking in mad joy.

And after all they attended to Shep's destinies very swiftly. No wealth on earth could take him from them. And because their thought was clear and their understanding great, they did not even consider banishing him to a life of ease,—a chimney corner where he might doze away the days. Shep was of the world of toil; until his noble spirit departed from his body he would still have his guard of honor over the sheep. He would still know the hard labor, the long grinding hours, the nervous sleep in the firelight beloved of long ago, and perhaps—for reward—a plain meal and a caress at the end of the day.

"And if you're going to stay with Shep," the girl went on, her eyes averted, "it means—that you're going to stay with the sheep?"

He smiled strangely. "Could I ever leave them, Alice?" He groped for words, but none had ever been invented that could reveal the sudden, moving impulses of his soul. "I can't tell you how much it has all meant—how much it will mean in the future. Don't you see, Alice—that this is my rightful place? With the sheep? In the wilderness? I couldn't go—even if you sent me away, I'd have to go into the sheep business on my own account."

"That's right—you could. You could raise money——"

He suddenly laughed,—in sheer delight. His wealth—forgotten in the great vaults in an Eastern city—would be of use to him, after all. In a few breathless sentences he told her of his past life, his wasted days, and his regeneration. They would fill the hills with the feeding flocks, these two. Still they would know the comradeship of the camp fire, the night wind whispering through the secret places. It was their heritage, and they would not forego it. They were the shepherds, and this was their destiny.

"And if we're both going to have old Shep, and both follow the flocks—there's another consideration, too," Hugh went on. "Maybe it's too much to ask. But the soldier has seen *some* service; and he can't restrain himself any longer. We've got to have each other, too."

A strong man's love looked out to her from his eyes, and his face was sober and wistful with entreaty. There was just one instant in which the whole world hung suspended over a pit of darkness. And then, with a glad little cry, she stole into his arms.

“Each other—always,” she told him. “Oh, shepherd of my heart!”

And perhaps the spirit of the Old Colonel—sitting in the Greenwood Club and dreaming of the mountain realms he loved—came wandering over peak and plain and saw these two, their arms about each other and their eyes lighted with fond dreams—and swiftly stole back to make its report to its master. And thereupon the old man smiled in his half-doze, wondering at the mighty ways of worlds and men,—and the calm spirit of the flocks, grazing in the forest.

THE END

Transcriber’s Notes:

Archaic spellings and hyphenation have been retained. Obvious punctuation and typesetting errors have been corrected without note. Where multiple spellings were found, majority use has been employed.

[The end of *Shepherds of the Wild* by Edison Marshall]