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THE PIONEERS

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THIS BOOK, THESE STORIES

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SOMETHING LOST

June

THIS was far up in the mountains and still the great peaks climbed, thrusting up and thinning to the bare bones of rock above the timber-line. The high upland valley was lost among them, an irregular pocket caught in the soaring immensity, rimmed by the timeless rock, its glints of meadow green shading into the darker green of forest where it broke into the downward slopes. The figure of the man by the stream near the upper end of the valley, where the water slowed from its rush down the rocks, was unbelievably small in the vastness. He stood stooped by a sandbar where the riffles swung and died in a pool and the slant sunlight flashed on the worn tin in his hands and his shoulders rocked as his arms moved in a circular motion.

The motion stopped and the man bent his head farther to peer into the pan in his hands and the dull gleaming of the flakes there was reflected in the pale hazel irises of his eyes. He straightened and nodded his head in slow satisfaction. He studied the sandbar and the pool where the water slipped into apparent stillness and the silt of years had settled to the bottom. He raised his head and looked at the untouched wilderness about him. The valley lay open around him, a half-mile wide and a mile long, its level floor cut by the swinging course of the stream. At its head the mountain wall rose steeply in huge broken steps that the stream took in rushes and falls as it drove down from the endless snow in the far upper reaches of rock. Along the valley sides the slopes climbed, tree-dotted and thicket-entangled, to stop against the enduring stone, on the near side against a high sharp ridge, on the opposite side against a vast rock buttress towering out to a tremendous cliff edge. Between the ridge and the buttress the valley entrance swept out to open parkland that dropped abruptly into jack pine forest covering the downward slopes and divided by the deepening gorge of the stream as it sought the lower levels. And beyond the ground rose again, rising in ridge upon ridge to the high eastward mountain barrier.

The man nodded his head again in slow satisfaction and the sun shone warm on the broad flat planes of his face beneath the wide squared brim of his hat. He took a leather pouch from a pocket and eased the flakes into it. He strode across the carpet of wild flowers bordering the stream and bent to pick up the trailing lead rope of the grazing burro. By the slope of the near valley side, where a thickening stand of spruce and juniper fringed the valley floor, he stopped and pulled the rifle and axe and short shovel from under the tie ropes and unfastened the pack and picketed the burro on a twenty-foot rope length. He selected a fallen tree, angling up, the upper end wedged in a crotch of another tree. Using this as his ridgepole, he began building his shelter. He shed his jacket and sweat darkened the faded brown of his shirt as his short broad body swung in steady rhythm and the axe blade bit into the springy wood.

Across the meadow green, across the wild-flower carpet and the stream, half a mile across the stretching expanse of valley floor and two hundred yards up the opposite slope where bare rock jutted over a flat ledge, the great bear lay and watched the man. It lay limp on the ledge in the warm slant sun, hind legs sprawled back, front legs stretched forward with the big head, broad and dished to the muzzle, resting on the rock between them. A light breeze ruffled through the short brown fur made ragged by the remaining long still unshed hairs touched with silver on the tips. Its small far-sighted eyes followed the man's every move among the distant trees.

Eighty-odd miles away, over the mountain barrier to the east, where a ragged collection of rude log cabins and tents straggled along the side of an almost dry stream bed, men worked at their wooden cradles and sluice boxes and grumbled to themselves and each other. The showings of colour that had drawn them there to stake their claims were dwindling. In the oblong tarpaulin-roofed shack that served as store and bar other men spoke of the one who had left, quietly, speaking to no one, abandoning his slow half-worked claim to disappear with his burro into the high distances to the west. Their talk was tainted with envious wondering. They argued with each

other in edged monotonies. Unrest and disappointment crawled through the mining camp.

Far up in his valley, as the midnight stars wheeled in their slow course, the man stirred on his bed of spruce boughs and sat up, suddenly alert. The embers of the fire outside the open end of his shelter had faded to a dull glow that meant nothing to the moonless dark under the trees. He heard the burro moving restlessly on its shortened picket rope. In the following silence he felt a familiar prickling on the back of his neck as the short hairs there stiffened in response to some instinct beyond reach of the mind. His right hand moved and took the rifle and he was leaning forward to rise when he heard the burro scream and lunge to the end of the rope. He leaped to his feet and stood in the open end of the shelter, baffled by the unrelenting blackness of the night. Gradually he could make out the darker shapes of the trees. He went cautiously toward the burro and found it half choked by the taut rope. He spoke softly and it pushed against him and together they stood in a silence that lived and breathed around them. There was not a single separate discernible sound, yet the prickling persisted on his neck and the flesh of the burro quivered against him. The prickling died and the burro quieted and they stood in an empty silence. The man returned to the fire and piled wood on it and kneeled to blow until flames sprang and a circle of firelight fought back the dark. He shifted the burro closer to the circle before he lay again on his spruce bed.

In the morning the man found the tracks. Those of the forefeet were nearly seven inches wide and nine long, those of the hind feet eight inches wide and fourteen long. The claw marks of all five toes on each were plain. Apprehension crept along the man's spine. His hands tightened on the rifle. The tracks led in a circle around his camp and close in by the shelter and again by the place where the burro had first been picketed. He crawled inside his shelter to the low diminishing end where his meagre supplies, depleted by weeks of wandering, were cached behind a barrier of short logs. He took a handful of cartridges and dropped them into a jacket pocket. Outside again, he strode off, steady and unhurried, following the tracks away.

They led him across the stream below the pool and across the level of the valley. He lost them on the edge of a field of slide rock near the lower end of the valley. He skirted the field and could find no further trace. He turned back and began a thorough circuit of the valley.

He found signs in many places, old tracks caked where the ground had dried and fresher tracks in soft ground. He found three rubbing trees with bark worn thin and high up, higher than he could reach, gashes where the bark had been torn open crosswise by big gripping jaws. He found the trail angling up the far slope to the ledge. It was hard-packed by years of use by generations of animals reaching back into the dim past, so packed that the imprints of the big claws were all but invisible scratches on the hard surface. Approaching the ledge, he saw the wide and narrowing crevice behind it leading back to blackness under the overhanging rock. No light could penetrate the inner dark depth. He dropped silently back down the trail fifty yards and crouched behind a big stone and shouted and there was no response except the jeering call of a jay. He shouted again and waited. At last he strode down the trail and across the valley. In a few moments he was stooped by the pool, his arms moving in circular motion as the sun glinted on the pan in his hands. But now he looked up at regular intervals and scanned the expanse all around him and the rifle lay within quick reach not more than a yard from his steady hands.

Out of the valley, eight miles around the jagged sweep of the vast rock buttress that towered above the opposite slope, out where the forest of jack pine below the edging parkland flowed unbroken down to the shore of a small lake, the great bear lay in a patch of sunlight on the soft needle carpet. Already it had forgotten the man and the burro. They were new sights, new scents, never before known, tucked away now in the reservoir of experience and would remain untouched until a fresh encounter summoned remembrance into being. They had been seen and smelled and investigated in the caution of the night and dismissed. There was no challenge in them for the bear to understand.

A marten drifted down the trunk of a nearby tree, stretching

its small pointed head outward to stare intently at the bear. The scratch of the small claws in the bark was barely audible a few feet away, yet the bear's head rose. The marten scurried back up the tree. The big head dropped and the bear, full-fed and lazy, drowsed in the sunlight. The tree shadows moved slowly and crept to engulf the bear and it rose and padded softly on through the forest. It was obeying its own instinctive calendar of habit, moving on the periodic four-day feeding march that took it out of the valley on a wide swing and return through the thirty-seven miles of its mountain-bound range.

July

The man strode up the stretch of parkland that edged the forest and led to the valley entrance. The late afternoon sun was full in his face. Behind him the burro trotted obediently, weighted by the big pack, whose new canvas covering gleamed white in the sunlight. Where the parkland levelled to enter the valley he stopped and turned to look back the way he had come, down the long rolling forested slope sliced by the stream gorge and up and over the first high ridge beyond. Satisfied at last that no one followed, he turned again and led the burro up the valley and across the green carpet to his camp in the spruce and juniper fringe. Everything there was as he had left it eight days before. But in the soft ground by the pool he found the big five-toed tracks crossing the stream toward his camp and going back again. He looked across the valley and up. The steep sideslope curving to the high rock buttress was splendid in the late sunlight and the overhanging rock and the ledge two hundred yards above the valley floor shone rust-red and grey against the green around them. A hawk floated in the air above the scattered clinging trees. There was no other sign of life. He strode back to his camp and began unpacking the burro.

Far to the eastward, over the mountain barrier, where the rude cabins and tents marred the bank of the stream bed, men talked to the keeper of the tarpaulined store and bar, worrying again the worn questions of four days about the one who had

returned with his burro and bought supplies and shaken bright flakes out of a leather pouch in payment and disappeared again into the western heights. Already the legend was growing. He had made a rich strike. He was scooping dust out of rich silt pockets by the handful. He had unlimited wealth in dust and nuggets cached in his mountain hideout. The voice of a lean man with narrow hatchet face gashed by a thin-lipped mouth was tinged with bitterness as he told of his failure in following the boot and hoofmark traces into the mountains. A trail that well hidden must have been deliberately cloaked to cover its destination. The talk warmed and eyes glittered and the store-keeper did good business over his hewn-log bar.

Twice in the night the man awoke, alert and rising to sitting position on his bed of boughs. There was no sound beyond the barrier of logs with which he had closed the open end of his shelter except an occasional soft movement of the burro in the narrow high-poled enclosure he had built for it. In the morning there were no new tracks. It was the same the next night and the next and early during the night after that thunder echoed through the mountains and lightning laced down through the peaks and enough rain fell in the valley to dampen the ground and renew it for fresh writings by any living thing that walked it. In the morning the man took the rifle and made another thorough circuit of the valley. He found no fresh signs, no five-toed tracks except what remained of the old after the erasing action of the rain. But in the moist sand by the stream where it eddied around rolled rocks well below the pool, he found other tracks, split-hooved, deeply indented. He studied these a long moment. He followed them along the stream and when they faded into the firm sod he kept on down the valley. His stride, long for the length of his legs, gnawed steadily into distance.

Half an hour later he was skirting the vast rock buttress, pausing often to scan the sweep of slope opening below him. He was well around, out of sight of the valley entrance, when he saw the elk, three of them, more than a mile away, on the edge of the parkland that slipped abruptly into the jack pine forest. Patient and steady, he began the long approach, angling down the slope to put the light wind directly in his face.

Far ahead where the forest dipped into a deep ravine, a thin column of smoke floated upward from the inside hollow of the shattered stump of a long dead pine. The slow fire, legacy of the lightning, glowed faintly as it ate into the punklike wood. It edged through a split in the old bark and little flames began to flicker along the side of the stump. It worked down and began to creep through the carpet of brown needles. It crept to the tiny outstretched dried twigs of the branch ends of a fallen tree and moved hungrily along them, reaching for the more solid wood.

The man was on his hands and knees, lifting the rifle carefully and setting it down gently with each forward movement of his right hand. He crawled to the top of a slight rise and lay flat to peer over. He was within rifle-shot of the elk. He eased the gun forward and let the sights sink down on the closest of the three. It stood quartering away from him and he aimed a bit behind and below the high foreshoulder and squeezed the trigger. He saw his elk leap a fraction of a second before the others and the three of them swirl and melt like sudden swift shifting shadows into the forest. He rose and went forward and followed. He was well in among the trees when he found the first blood drops, spattered and dark from internal bleeding. He lengthened his stride to follow the trace deeper into the forest. Forty minutes later, winded from climbing over and around down timber, he jumped the wounded elk out of a bushed hollow and his bullet, fired almost without aiming in the instant reflex of long experience, broke the animal's neck as it strove with flagging strength to leap away.

Down the slope, farther into the thick of the forest, the great bear prowled, sniffing for rotted logs among a tangle of fallen trees. It heard the second shot, faint yet distinct, a sound foreign and unknown. The big body stopped moving and the big head, unacquainted with fear in any form, rose and turned toward the sound. The bear waited, listening, then the head lowered and the long straight foreclaws sank into the outer shell of a log and, seeming without effort, ripped it open. The tongue, surprisingly small in the big mouth, licked quickly at

the scurrying insects and slowed to take the sluggish wriggling white grubs.

The man worked steadily with his knife, quartering the elk carcass. He had already bled and dressed it. He lifted one of the forequarters, testing the weight, and set it aside. He began to cut poles on which to hang the remaining quarters until he could return with the burro. The small of his back ached from bending over and he straightened to rest it, and as his head came up he caught the first faint tang in the air. His body stiffened and the tiny premonitions running through him tightened into awareness. Smoke. Smoke drifting over the forest ceiling and filtering down fine tendrils that could elude the eye but not the nose.

The man stood motionless, testing the breeze. It stirred gently, barely whispering through the branches above him. Disregarding the rest of the meat, he hoisted the one forequarter to a shoulder and steadied it with one hand and took the rifle with the other. He started at a right angle to the direction of the breeze, straight up the slope, the shortest path to the edge of the forest and the open parkland. Steadily he hammered on and the breeze freshened and talked in the branches and smoke began weaving among the tree trunks from the left. He angled toward the right, still climbing, and the smoke thickened, seeming to come from ahead as well as from the left, and at last he stopped, listening between the laboured rush of his own breathing. The breeze strengthened and was a wind sighing high overhead and faint and far he could hear, not so much heard as sensed, the sullen roar of the racing fire. Around him he could fairly feel the hurrying of panic, the small life of the forest moving, unseen but known, past him down the slope. A deer bounded out of the smoke and saw him and swerved and was gone. He lowered his shoulder and the meat slid to the ground and without hesitation he turned and struck down the slope.

The smoke thickened and the light dimmed strangely and the roar rose until it was clearly audible and a high crackling breaking over it, and in a short while he was running, using his free hand to help him vault fallen logs, stumbling often and driving downward. The ground levelled and the trees ended