

# Killing His Bear

*A Winter Tragedy With Three Actors*

By Stephen Crane

In a field of snow some green pines huddled together and sang in quavers as the wind whirled among the gullies and ridges. Icicles dangled from the trees' beards, and fine dusts of snow lay upon their brows. On the ridge-top a dismal choir of hemlocks crooned over one that had fallen. The dying sun created a dim purple and flame-colored tumult on the horizon's edge and then sank until level crimson beams struck the trees. As the red rays retreated, armies of shadows stole forward. A gray, ponderous stillness came heavily in the steps of the sun. A little man stood under the quavering pines. He was muffled to the nose in fur and wool, and a hideous cap was pulled tightly over his ears. His cold and impatient feet had stamped a small platform of hard snow beneath him. A black-barreled rifle lay in the hollow of his arm. His eyes, watery from incessant glaring, swept over the snowfields in front of him. His body felt numb and bloodless, and soft curses came forth and froze on the icy wind. The shadows crept about his feet until he was merely a blurred blackness, with keen eyes.

Off over the ridges, through the tangled sounds of night, came the yell of a hound on the trail. It pierced the ears of the little man and made his blood swim in his veins. His eyes eagerly plunged at the wall of thickets across the stone field, but he moved not a finger or foot. Save his eyes, he was frozen to a statue. The cry of the hound grew louder and louder, then passed away to a faint yelp, then still louder. At first it had a strange vindictiveness and bloodthirstiness in it. Then it grew mournful as the wailing of a lost thing, as, perhaps, the dog gained on a fleeing bear. A hound, as he nears large game, has the griefs of the world on his shoulders, and his baying tells of the approach of death. He is sorry he came.

The long yells thrilled the little man. His eyes gleamed and grew small, and his body stiffened to intense alertness. The trees kept up their crooning, and the light in the west faded to a dull red splash, but the little man's fancy was fixed on the panting, foam-spattered hound, cantering with his hot nose to the ground in the rear of the bear, which runs as easily and as swiftly as a rabbit, through brush, timber, and swale. Swift pictures of himself in a thousand attitudes under a thousand combinations of circumstances, killing a thousand bears, passed panoramically through him.

The yell of the hound grew until it smote the little man like a call to battle. He leaned forward, and the second finger of his right hand played a low, nervous pat-pat on the trigger of his rifle. The baying grew fierce and bloodcurdling for a moment, then the dog seemed to turn directly toward the little man, and the notes again grew wailing and mournful. It was a hot trail.

The little man, with nerves tingling and blood throbbing, remained in the shadows like a fantastic bronze figure with jeweled eyes swaying sharply in its head. Occasionally he thought he could hear the branches of the bushes in front swish together. Then silence would come again.

The hound breasted the crest of the ridge, a third of a mile away, and suddenly his full-toned cry rolled over the tangled thickets to the little man. The bear must be very near. The little man kept so still and listened so tremendously that he could hear his blood surge in his veins. All at once he heard a swish-swish in the bushes. His rifle was at his shoulder and he sighted uncertainly along the front of the thicket. The swish of the bushes grew louder. In the rear the hound was mourning over a warm scent.

The thicket opened and a great bear, indistinct and vague in the shadows, bounded into the little man's view and came terrifically across the open snowfield. The little man stood like an

image. The bear did not shamble nor wobble; there was no awkwardness in his gait; he ran like a frightened kitten. It would be an endless chase for the lithe-limbed hound in the rear.

On he came, directly toward the little man. The animal heard only the crying behind him. He knew nothing of the thing with death in its hands standing motionless in the shadows before him.

Slowly the little man changed his aim until it rested where the head of the approaching shadowy mass must be. It was a wee motion, made with steady nerves and a soundless swaying of the rifle barrel; but the bear heard, or saw, and knew. The animal whirled swiftly and started in a new direction with an amazing burst of speed. Its side was toward the little man now. His rifle barrel was searching swiftly over the dark shape. Under the foreshoulder was the place. A chance to pierce the heart, sever an artery, or pass through the lungs. The little man saw swirling fur over his gun barrel. The earth faded to nothing. Only space and the game, the aim and the hunter. Mad emotions, powerful to rock worlds, hurled through the little man, but did not shake his tiniest nerve.

When the rifle cracked, it shook his soul to a profound depth. Creation rocked and the bear stumbled.

The little man sprang forward with a roar. He scrambled hastily in the bear's track. The splash of red, now dim, threw a faint, timid beam of a kindred shade on the snow. The little man bounded in the air.

"Hit!" he yelled, and ran on. Some hundreds of yards forward he came to a dead bear with his nose in the snow. Blood was oozing from a wound under the shoulder, and the snow about was sprinkled with blood. A mad froth lay in the animal's open mouth, and his limbs were twisted from agony.

The little man yelled again and sprang forward, waving his hat as if he were leading the cheering of thousands. He ran up and kicked the ribs of the bear. Upon his face was the smile of the successful lover.