

The She-Wolf

The Yukon territory of northern Canada – just east of Alaska. 1900. It was gold country, and men streamed over this frozen land in search of wealth, heedless of the dangers. One danger came from the cold – a cold beyond the understanding of southern men. Another danger came from violent living things residing in the unforgiving forest – above all, the wolves.

Dark spruce forest frowned on either side the frozen waterway. A vast silence reigned over the land. The land itself was a desolation – lifeless, without movement, so lone and cold that the spirit of it was not even that of sadness. It was the Wild, the savage, frozen-hearted north land Wild.

But there was life abroad in the land – and defiant. Down the frozen waterway toiled a string of wolfish dogs. Leather harness was on the dogs, and leather traces attached them to a sled which dragged along behind.

In advance of the dogs, on wide snowshoes, toiled a man. At the rear of the sled toiled a second man. Their bodies were covered with fur and soft-tanned leather. Eyelashes and cheeks and lips were so coated with the crystals from their frozen breath that their faces were not discernible. They travelled on without speech. At the fall of darkness, they swung the dogs into a cluster of spruce trees on the edge of the waterway and made a camp.

"Henry," said Bill, munching with deliberation the beans he was eating, "did you happen to notice the way them dogs kicked up when I was a-feedin' 'em?"

"They did cut up more'n usual," Henry acknowledged.

"How many dogs 've we got, Henry?"

"Six."

"Well, Henry . . ." Bill went on , "I took six fish out of the bag. I gave one fish to each dog, an', Henry, I was one fish short. One Ear didn't get no fish. I come back to the bag afterward an' got 'm his fish."

"There's only six now," Henry said.

"I saw the other one run off across the snow," Bill announced with cool positiveness.

"I saw seven." Henry wiped his mouth with the back of hand and said, "then you're thinkin' as it was -- "

A long wailing cry, fiercely sad, from somewhere in the darkness, had interrupted him. He stopped to listen to it, then he finished his sentence with a wave of his hand toward the sound of the cry, " -- one of *them*?"

Bill nodded.

Cry after cry, and answering cries, were turning the silence into a bedlam. The dogs betrayed their fear by huddling together-- and so close to the fire that their hair was scorched by the heat.

Bill pointed toward the wall of darkness that pressed about them from every side. And then full into the firelight, with a

stealthy, sidelong movement, glided a doglike animal. It moved with commingled mistrust and daring, cautiously observing the men, its attention fixed on the dogs. One Ear strained toward the intruder and whined with eagerness.

"That fool One Ear don't seem scairt much," Bill said in a low tone.

"It's a *she-wolf*," Henry whispered back. She's the decoy for the pack. She draws out the dog an' then all the rest pitches in an' eats 'm up."

It was large for a wolf, its gaunt frame advertising the lines of an animal that was among the largest of its kind. "It stands pretty close to two feet an' a half at the shoulders," Henry commented. "An' I'll bet it ain't far from five feet long."

"Kind of strange color for a wolf," was Bill's criticism. "Never seen a red wolf before. Looks almost cinnamon to me."

The animal was certainly not cinnamon-colored. Its coat was the true wolf-coat. The dominant color was gray, and yet there *was* to it a faint reddish hue.

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They camped early that night. Three dogs could not drag the sled so fast nor for so long hours as could six, and they were showing unmistakable signs of playing out. And the men went early to bed, Bill first seeing to it that the dogs were tied out of gnawing-reach of one another.

The next day began well. They had lost no dogs in the night, and their spritswere fairly light until, at mid-day, they overturned

the sled on a bad piece of trail. It was an awkward mix-up. The sled was upside down and jammed between a tree-trunk and a huge rock, and they were forced to unharness the dogs in order to straighten out the tangle.

The two men were bent over the sled and trying to right it, when Henry observed One Ear sidling away. Suddenly he broke into a run across the snow, his traces trailing behind him. And there, out in the snow of their back-track, was the she-wolf waiting for him. He tried to sniff noses with her, but she retreated playfully and coyly. Every advance on his part was accompanied by a corresponding retreat on her part. Step by step she was luring him away from the security of his human companionship.

Too late, One Ear learned his mistake.

Before they saw the cause, the two men saw him turn and start to run back toward them. Then, approaching at right angles to the trail and cutting off his retreat, they saw a dozen wolves, lean and gray, bounding across the snow. On the instant, the she-wolf's coyness and playfulness disappeared. With a snarl she sprang upon One Ear.

"Where are you goin'?" Henry suddenly demanded, laying his hand on his partner's arm.

Bill shook it off. "I won't stand it," he said. "They ain't a-goin' to get any more of our dogs if I can help it!" Gun in hand, he plunged into the underbrush that lined the side of the trail.

"Say, Bill!" Henry called after him. "Be careful! Don't take no chances!" Henry sat down on the sled and watched. There was nothing else for him to do.

All too quickly – far more quickly than he had expected – it happened. He heard a shot, then two shots in rapid succession, and he knew that Bill's ammunition was gone. Then he heard a great outcry of snarls and yelps. He recognized One Ear's yell of pain and terror, and he heard a wolf-cry that bespoke a stricken animal. And that was all. Silence settled down again over the lonely land.

He sat for a long while upon the sled. There was no need for him to go and see what had happened. At last he arose in a weary manner, as though all the resilience had gone out of his body, and proceeded to fasten the dogs to the sled. He passed a rope over his shoulder – a man-trace – and pulled with the dogs.

He did not go far. At the first hint of darkness, he hastened to make a camp, and he saw to it that he had a generous supply of firewood. He fed the dogs, cooked and ate his supper, and made his bed close to the fire.

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Morning came, but for the first time the light of day failed to scatter the wolves. They remained in a circle about him and his fire, displaying an arrogance of possession that shook his courage born of the morning light.

The night was a repetition of the night before, save that the need for sleep was becoming overpowering; and at last he gave into it. He dreamed. It seemed to him that he was in Fort McGurry, and that the fort was besieged by wolves. And then, so strange was the dream, there was a crash. The door was burst open. He could see the wolves flooding into the big living-room of the fort.

With the bursting of the door, the noise of their howling had increased tremendously.

And then he awoke to find the howling real. There was a great snarling and yelping. The wolves were rushing him. They were all about him and upon him. The teeth of one had closed upon his arm. Instinctively, he leaped into the fire, and as he leaped, he felt the sharp slash of teeth that tore through the flesh of his leg. Then began a fire-fight. His stout mittens temporarily protected his hands, and he scooped live coals into the air in all directions, until the camp-fire took on the semblance of a volcano.

But it could not last long. His face was blistering in the heat; his eyebrows and lashes were singed off, and the heat was becoming unbearable to his feet. With a flaming brand in each hand, he sprang to the edge of the fire. The wolves had been driven back. But his two dogs were missing, and he well knew that they had served as a course in the protracted meal which had begun days before with Fatty, the last course of which would likely be himself in the days to follow.

When he awakened from another doze, only a little later, though it seemed hours to him, a mysterious change had taken place, and he was shocked wider awake. Something had happened. The wolves were gone. There remained only the trampled snow to show how closely they had pressed him. Sleep was welling up and gripping him again, his head was sinking down upon his knees, when he roused with a sudden start.

There were cries of men, the churn of sleds, the creaking of harnesses, and the eager whimpering of straining dogs. Four sleds pulled in from the river bed to the camp among the trees.

Half a dozen men were about the man who crouched near the dying fire. They were shaking and prodding him into consciousness. He looked at them like a drunken man and maundered in strange, sleepy speech:

"Red *she-wolf*. . . . Come in with the dogs at feedin' time. . . . First she ate the dog-food. . . . Then she ate the dogs. . . . An' after that she ate Bill. . . ." "Say, you lemme alone. . . . I'm jes' plumb tuckered out. . . . Good night, everybody."

And even as they eased him down upon the blankets, his snores were rising on the frosty air. But there was another sound. Far and faint it was, in the remote distance – the cry of the hungry wolf-pack as it took the trail of other meat than the man it had just missed.

It was the she wolf who had first caught the sound of men's voices, and the whining of the sled dogs. And it was the she wolf who was the first to spring away from the cornered man in his circle of dying flame.

Running at the forefront of the pack was a large grey wolf, one of its several leaders. It was *he* who directed the pack's course on the heels of the she wolf. She dropped in alongside by him, as though it were her appointed position, and took the pace of the pack. On her other side ran a gaunt old wolf, grizzled and marked with the scars of many battles. He ran always on her *right* side. The fact that he had but one eye – and that the left eye – might account for this.

They ran many miles that day; they ran throught the night; and the next day found them still running.

Then they came upon moose. It was a big bull they first found. He stamped them into the snow in the wallowing struggle, but he was foredoomed, and he went down with the she wolf tearing savagely at his throat, and with other teeth fixed everywhere upon him, devouring him alive before ever his last struggle ceased or his last damage had been wrought.

The famine was over.