WHITE FANG PART I CHAPTER I--THE TRAIL OF THE MEAT Dark spruce forest frowned on either side the frozen waterway. The trees had been stripped by a recent wind of their white covering of frost, and they seemed to lean towards each other, black and ominous, in the fading light. A vast silence reigned over the land. The land itself was a desolation, lifeless, without m
ovement, so lone and cold that the spirit of it was not even that of sadness. There was a hint in it of laughter, but of a laughter more terrible than any sadness--a laughter that was mirthless as the smile of the sphinx, a laughter cold as the frost and partaking of the grimness of infallibility. It was the masterful and incommunicable wisdom of eternity laughing at the futility of t
ife and the effort of life. It was the Wild, the savage, frozen-hearted Northland Wild. But there was life, abroad in the land and defiant. Down the frozen waterway toiled a string of wolfish dogs. Their bristly fur was rimed with frost. Their breath froze in the air as it left their mouths, spouting forth in spumes of vapour that settled upon the hair of their bodies and formed into cr
ystals of frost. Leather harness was on the dogs, and leather traces attached them to a sled which dragged along behind. The sled was without runners. It was made of stout birch-bark, and its full surface rested on the snow. The front end of the sled was turned up, like a scroll, in order to force down and under the bore of soft snow that surged like a wave before it. On the s
led, securely lashed, was a long and narrow oblong box. There were other things on the sled--blankets, an axe, and a coffee-pot and frying-pan; but prominent, occupying most of the space, was the long and narrow oblong box. In advance of the dogs, on wide snowshoes, toiled a man. At the rear of the sled toiled a second man. On the sled, in the box, lay a third man whos
e toil was over,--a man whom the Wild had conquered and beaten down until he would never move nor struggle again. It is not the way of the Wild to like movement. Life is an offence to it, for life is movement; and the Wild aims always to destroy movement. It freezes the water to prevent it running to the sea; it drives the sap out of the trees till they are frozen to their mighty
hearts; and most ferociously and terribly of all does the Wild harry and crush into submission man--man who is the most restless of life, ever in revolt against the dictum that all movement must in the end come to the cessation of movement. But at front and rear, unawed and indomitable, toiled the two men who were not yet dead. Their bodies were covered with fur and sof
t-tanned leather. Eyelashes and cheeks and lips were so coated with the crystals from their frozen breath that their faces were not discernible. This gave them the seeming of ghostly masques, undertakers in a spectral world at the funeral of some ghost. But under it all they were men, penetrating the land of desolation and mockery and silence, puny adventurers bent on col
ossal adventure, pitting themselves against the might of a world as remote and alien and pulseless as the abysses of space. They travelled on without speech, saving their breath for the work of their bodies. On every side was the silence, pressing upon them with a tangible presence. It affected their minds as the many atmospheres of deep water affect the body of the diver
. It crushed them with the weight of unending vastness and unalterable decree. It crushed them into the remotest recesses of their own minds, pressing out of them, like juices from the grape, all the false ardours and exaltations and undue self-values of the human soul, until they perceived themselves finite and small, specks and motes, moving with weak cunning and little
wisdom amidst the play and inter-play of the great blind elements and forces. An hour went by, and a second hour. The pale light of the short sunless day was beginning to fade, when a faint far cry arose on the still air. It soared upward with a swift rush, till it reached its topmost note, where it persisted, palpitant and tense, and then slowly died away. It might have been a l
ost soul wailing, had it not been invested with a certain sad fierceness and hungry eagerness. The front man turned his head until his eyes met the eyes of the man behind. And then, across the narrow oblong box, each nodded to the other. A second cry arose, piercing the silence with needle-like shrillness. Both men located the sound. It was to the rear, somewhere in the
snow expanse they had just traversed. A third and answering cry arose, also to the rear and to the left of the second cry. "They're after us, Bill," said the man at the front. His voice sounded hoarse and unreal, and he had spoken with apparent effort. "Meat is scarce," answered his comrade. "I ain't seen a rabbit sign for days." Thereafter they spoke no more, though their ear
s were keen for the hunting-cries that continued to rise behind them. 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. The coffin, at the side of the fire, served for seat and table. The wolf-dogs, clustered on the far side of the fire, snarled and bickered among themselves, but evinced no inclination to str
ay off into the darkness. "Seems to me, Henry, they're stayin' remarkable close to camp," Bill commented. Henry, squatting over the fire and settling the pot of coffee with a piece of ice, nodded. Nor did he speak till he had taken his seat on the coffin and begun to eat. "They know where their hides is safe," he said. "They'd sooner eat grub than be grub. They're pretty wise, t
hem dogs." Bill shook his head. "Oh, I don't know." His comrade looked at him curiously. "First time I ever heard you say anything about their not bein' wise." "Henry," said the other, 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 stopped for a moment, in order that his words might gain greater significance. "As I was sayin', Henry, we've got six dogs. I took six fish out of the bag. I gave one fish to each dog, an', Henry, I was one fish short." "You counted wrong." "We've got six dogs," the other reiterated dispassionately. "I took out si
x fish. One Ear didn't get no fish. I came back to the bag afterward an' got 'm his fish." "We've only got six dogs," Henry said. "Henry," Bill went on. "I won't say they was all dogs, but there was seven of 'm that got fish." Henry stopped eating to glance across the fire and count the dogs. "There's only six now," he said. "I saw the other one run off across the snow," Bill anno
unced with cool positiveness. "I saw seven." Henry looked at him commiseratingly, and said, "I'll be almighty glad when this trip's over." "What d'ye mean by that?" Bill demanded. "I mean that this load of ourn is gettin' on your nerves, an' that you're beginnin' to see things." "I thought of that," Bill answered gravely. "An' so, when I saw it run off across the snow, I looked in
the snow an' saw its tracks. Then I counted the dogs an' there was still six of 'em. The tracks is there in the snow now. D'ye want to look at 'em? I'll show 'em to you." Henry did not reply, but munched on in silence, until, the meal finished, he topped it with a final cup of coffee. He wiped his mouth with the back of his hand and said: "Then you're thinkin' as it was--" A long w
ailing 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. "I'd a blame sight sooner think that than anything else. You noticed yourself the row the dogs made." Cry after cry, and answering cries, were turning the sile
nce into a bedlam. From every side the cries arose, and the dogs betrayed their fear by huddling together and so close to the fire that their hair was scorched by the heat. Bill threw on more wood, before lighting his pipe. "I'm thinking you're down in the mouth some," Henry said. "Henry, I was
a-thinkin' what a blame sight luckier he is than you an' me'll ever be." He indicated the third person by a downward thrust of the thumb to the box on which they sat. "You an' me, Henry, when we die, we'll be lucky if we get enough stones over our carcases to keep the dogs off of us." "But we ain't got people an' money an' all the rest, like him," Henry rejoined. "Long-distanc
e funerals is somethin' you an' me can't exactly afford." "What gets me, Henry, is what a chap like this, that's a lord or something in his own country, and that's never had to bother about grub nor blankets; why he comes a-buttin' round the Godforsaken ends of the earth--that's what I can't exactly see." "He might have lived to a ripe old age if he'd stayed at home," Henry ag
reed. Bill opened his mouth to speak, but changed his mind. Instead, he pointed towards the wall of darkness that pressed about them from every side. There was no suggestion of form in the utter blackness; only could be seen a pair of eyes gleaming like live coals. Henry indicated with his head a second pair, and a third. A circle of the gleaming eyes had drawn about thei
r camp. Now and again a pair of eyes moved, or disappeared to appear again a moment later. The unrest of the dogs had been increasing, and they stampeded, in a surge of sudden fear, to the near side of the fire, cringing and crawling about the legs of the men. In the scramble one of the dogs had been overturned on the edge of the fire, and it had yelped with pain and frig
ht as the smell of its singed coat possessed the air. The commotion caused the circle of eyes to shift restlessly for a moment and even to withdraw a bit, but it settled down again as th e dogs became quiet. "Henry, it's a blame misfortune to be out of ammunition." Bill had finished his pipe and was helping his companion to spread the bed of fur and blanket upon the spru
ce boughs which he had laid over the snow before supper. Henry grunted, and began unlacing his mocassins. "How man y cartridges did you say you had left?" he asked. "Three," ca me the answer. "An' I wisht 'twas three hund red. Then I'd sho w 'em what for, damn 'em!" He shook his fist angrily at the gleaming eyes, and began securely to prop his moccasins before t
he fire. "An' I wisht this cold snap'd break," he went on. "It's ben fifty below for two weeks now. An' I wisht I'd never start ed on this trip, Henry. I don't like the looks of it. I don't feel right, somehow. An' while I'm wi shin', I wisht the trip was over an' done with, an' you an' me a-sittin' by the f ire in Fort McGurry just about now an' playing c
ribbage--that's what I wisht." Henry gru nte d and crawled into bed. As he dozed off he was aroused by his comrade's voice. "Say, He nry, that oth er one that come in an' go t a fish--why didn't the dogs pitch into it? That's what's botherin' me." "You' re b otherin' too much, Bill," came the sleepy re
sponse. "You was never like this before. You jes' shut up now, an' go to sleep, an' you'll be all hunkydory in the mornin'. Y our stoma ch's sour, that's wha t's botherin' you." The men slept, breathing heavily, side by side, under the one covering. The fire died down, and t
he gleaming eyes drew closer the circle the y had flung about the camp. The dogs clustered together in fear, now and again snarling menacin gly as a pa ir of eyes drew close. Once their uproar became so loud that Bill wo ke up. He got out of bed carefully, so as not to
disturb the sleep of his comrade, and threw m ore w ood on the fire. As it began to flame up, the circle of eyes drew far th er back. He g lanced casually a t the hudd lin g dogs. He rubbed his eyes and looked at them more sharply. The n he cr awled back into the blankets. "Henry," he said.
Oh, Henry." Henry groaned as he passed from sle e p to waking, and demanded, "What's wrong now?" "Nothin'," c ame the a nswer; "only there's seven of 'em again. I just cou nt ed." Henry acknowledged receipt of the information with a gr u nt t hat slid into a snore as he drifted back into sleep.
. In the morning it was Henry who awoke first a nd routed his companion out of bed. Daylight was yet three h ours away, though it was al ready s ix o'clo ck; and in the da rkness Hen ry went about preparing breakfast, while Bill rolled the blanke t s and made the sled ready for lashing. "Say, Henr
y," he asked suddenly, "how many dogs did you say we had?" "Six." "Wrong," Bill proclaimed triumphantly. "S even again?" Henry q u eried. "No, five; one's gon e." "The hell!" Henry crie d in wrath, leaving the cooking to come and count the dogs. "You're right, Bill," he concl uded. "Fatty's gone." "An' he went like greased li
ghtnin' once he got started. Couldn't 've seen ' m for smoke." "No chance at all," Henry concluded. "They je s' swallow ed 'm ali ve. I bet he was yelpin' as he went down their thro ats , dam n 'em!" "H e always was a fool dog," said Bill. "But no fool dog ought t o be fool enough to go off an' commit suicide that
way." He looked over the remainder of the team wi th a speculative eye that summed up instantly the sa lient tra its of eac h a nimal. "I bet none of th e ot h ers would do it." "Cou ldn 't dri ve 'e m away from the fire with a club." Bill agreed. "I always did th ink there was somethin' wrong with Fatty anyway." A
nd this was the epitaph of a dead dog on the Northland trail--less scant than the epitaph of many anothe r do g, of m any a ma n. CHAPTER II-- THE SHE-WOLF Break fast ea ten and the slim camp-outfit lashed to the sled, the men turned their backs on the cheery fire and launched out i
nto the darkness. At once began to rise the cries that were fiercely sad--cries that called throug h the d arkness and col d to one ano the r and answe r ed back. Convers ation c eased. Daylight came at nine o'clock. At m idday the sky to the south warmed to rose-colour, and m
arked where the bulge of the earth interven ed b e tween the meridian sun and the north ern world. But the rose-co lou r swiftly fad ed. T he grey light of day that remained lasted u ntil three o'clock, when it, too, faded, a n d th e pall of the Arctic night descended upon the
lone and silent land. As darkness came o n, the hunting-cries to right an d left an d rear drew closer--so close that more tha n once they sent s urges of fear through the t oiling dogs, t hrowing them into short-lived p anics. At the conclusion of one such panic,
when he and Henry had got the dog s back in the traces, Bill said: "I wish t they' d strike game somew heres, an ' g o aw ay an' leav e us alone." "They d o get o n the nerves horrible," Henry symp at hised. They spoke no more until camp w
as made. Henry was bending over and add ing ice to the babbling pot of bea ns when he was start le d by t he sound of a blow, a n excla mation from Bill, and a sha rp snarling cry of pain from among the dogs.
He straightened up in time to see a dim form disappearing across the sn ow i nto the s h elter of the dar k. Then h e saw Bill. sta nding amid the dogs, half tri umphant, half crestfallen, in one hand a stout cl
ub, in the other the tail and part of the body of a sun-cured salmon. "It g ot h al f of it," h e announce d; "but I got a whack at it jes ' the same. D'ye hear it s queal?" "What'd it look like?" Henry asked. "Couldn
't see. But it had four legs an' a mouth a n' hair an' looked like any dog ." "Must be a tame w olf, I reckon." " it's dam ned tame, whatever it is, co mi n' in here at feedin' time an' gettin' its whack
of fish." That night, when sup per was finished and they sa t on th e oblon g box and p ulle d at their p ipes, th e circl e of gleaming eyes drew in e ven closer than before. "I wisht th
ey'd spring up a bunch of moose or something, an' go aw ay an' lea ve us alo ne , " Bi ll said. H enry gr un ted with an intonation that was not all sympathy, and for a qua
rter of an hour they sat on in silence, H enry st a rin g a t th e fire , an d Bi ll at the circ le o f e yes that bu rned in the darkne s s just beyond the fireli
ght. "I wisht we was pullin' int o McGurry right now, " he bega n aga in. " Sh ut up your wis hin' and your cro akin' " He nry burst out angrily. "Your sto mach's sour. That's what's ailin' y
ou. Swallow a spoonful of sody , an' you'll s w eeten up wond erful an' be mo re pleasant co rning Henr y was aroused by fervid blasphem
y that proceeded from the mouth of Bill. Henry pro pped himself up on an elbow a nd looked to s mpany." In the m nding among the dogs beside the replenished fire, hi
s arms raised in objurgation, his face distorted with p as sion. "Hello!" Henry called. "What's up now?" "Fro e e his comrade sta swer. "No." "I tell y ou yes." Henry leaped out of the blan
kets and to the dogs. He counted th em with care, and then j oined his partner in cur sing the power o f the Wild that h g' s gone," came the a n her dog. "Frog was the s trongest dog of the bunch," Bill pronou
nced finally. "An' he was no fool dog nei ther," Henry added. And so wa s recorded the sec ond e pitaph in two da ys. A gloomy bre ad robbed them of ano t h e fo ur remaining dogs were har nessed to the sled. The day was a repetition
of the days that had gone before. The m en toiled without speech acros s th e f ace of the frozen w orld. T he si lence was unbroken sav akfas t was eaten, and t hat, unseen, hung upon their r ear. With the coming of night in the mid-after
noon, the cries sounded closer as the purs uers dre w i n ac cording to their custom ; and the do gs grew exci ted an d frightened, and we r e by th e cries of their purs ue rs, t panics that tangled the traces and further depr
essed the two men. "There, that'll fix you fool c r itte rs," Bill said with sa tisfacti on the t nig ht, ct at c ompletion of his tas k. H en ry left the cooking to come and see. Not only ha
d his partner tied the dogs up, but he had tied th em, after the India n fashi on, with stick s. Abo ut the ne ck of e ach dog he had fa stened a leather thong. To this, and so close to the n
eck that the dog could not get his teeth to it, he ha d tied a stout stick to ur or fi ve feet in length. T he other end of th e stick , in turn, was made f ast to a stake in the ground by means of a leather tho
ng. The dog was unable to gnaw through t he leath er at his own end of the s tick. T he st ick preven ted him fr om g etting at the leather that fasten ed the o ther end. Henry nodded his head approvingly.
"It's the only contraption that'll ever hold O ne Ear," he said. "He can gnaw throu gh leath er as cle an as a knif e an' jes' about half as q uick. They all'll be here in the mornin' hunkydor
y." "You jes' bet they will," Bill affirmed. "If on e of 'em' turns up mi ssin', I'l l go w ithout my coffee." "They o kill," Henry remarked at bed-time, indicating the
gleaming circle that hemmed them in. "If we co ul d put a couple of sh ots into 'em, th ey'd be more respectful. They c ome clo ser every night. Get e firelight out of your eyes an' look hard--there! Did
you see that one?" For some time the two me n amused the m mselves with watching the moveme nt of va g ue forms on the edge of the firelight. By look ing closely a n d steadily at where a pair of eyes burned in the da
rkness, the form of the animal would slowly ta k e shape. They could even see these forms move at times. A sou nd a mong the dogs attracted the men's att ention. One Ear was utter i ng quick, eager whines, lunging at the length of h
s stick toward the darkness, and desisting now and again i n order to make frantic attacks on the stick w ith his teeth. " Look at that, Bill." H enry whi s pered. Full into the firelight, with a stealthy, sidelong movemen
t, glided a doglike animal. It moved with commingl ed mis tru st and daring, cautiously ob serving the men, its attention fixed on the dogs. O ne Ear strained the fu ll length of the stick toward th e intru der and whined with eagerness. "That fool One Ear do
n't seem scairt much," Bill said in a low tone. "It's a s h e-wolf," Henry whispered back, "a n' that accounts for Fatty an' Frog. She's the decoy for the pack. She draws out the dog an' t h en all the rest pitches in an' eats 'm up." The fire crackled
. A log fell apart with a loud spluttering noise. At the sound of it the strange animal leaped back i nto the darkness. "Henry , I'm a-thinkin'," Bill announ ced. "Thinkin' what?" "I'm a-thinkin' t hat was the one I lambasted with the club." "Ain't the slightest
doubt in the world," was Henry's response. "An' right he re I want to remark," Bill went on, "th at that animal's familyari ty wit h campfires is suspiciou s an' immoral." "It knows for certain more'n a self-respectin' wolf ought to know," Henry agreed.
"A wolf that knows enough to come in with the dogs at feedin' time has had experiences." "Ol' Villan had a dog once that run aw ay wit h th e w olves ," Bill cogitates aloud. " I ought to know. I shot it out of the pa ck in a moose pasture over 'on Little Stick. An' Ol' Villan cried like a bab
y. Hadn't seen it for three years, he said. Ben with the wolves all that time." "I reckon you've called the tu rn, Bill. That wolf's a d og, an' it's eat en f ish many's the tim e from the hand of man ." "An if I get a chance at it, that wol f that's a dog'll be jes' meat," Bill declared. "We can't afford to lose no
more animals." "But you've only got three cartridges," Henr y objected. "I'll wait for a dead sure shot," ornin g Henry rene wed the fire a nd co oked b reakfast to the accompaniment of his partner's snoring. " You was sleepin' jes' too comfortable for anything," Henry told
him, as he routed him out for breakfa st. "I hadn't the heart to rouse you." Bill began to eat sleepily. He n oticed that h is cu p was em pty and s tarted to reac h for the pot. But the pot was beyond arm's length and beside Henry. "Say, Henry," he chided gently, "ain't you forgot somethi
n'?" Henry looked about with great care shook his head. Bill held up the emp ty cup. "Yo u don't ge t no coffee," He n ry anno un ced. "Ain't run out?" Bill asked anxiously. "Nop e." "Ain't thi n kin' it'll hurt my digestion?" "Nope." A flush
of angry blood pervaded Bill's face. "Then s jes' warm an' anxious I am to be he arin' you ex pl ain your self," he said. "Spanker's g one," H e nry answer re signed to misfortune Bill turned his head, and f
rom where he sat counted the dogs. "How'd it happen?" he asked apathetically. Henry shrugge d his shoul ders. "Don't know. Unless One Ear gnawed 'm loose. He ed." "The darned cuss." Bill spoke gravely and slowly, with no
hint of the anger that was raging within. "Jes' because he co uldn't chew himself loose, he chews Sp anker loos e." "Well, Spanker's troubles is over anyway; I guess h e's digested by this time an' cavortin' o ver the landscape in the bellies of twenty different wolves," was
Henry's epitaph on this, the latest lost dog. "Have some coffee, Bil l." But Bill shook his head. "Go on," Henry pleaded, e levating the pot. Bill shoved his cup aside. "I' ll be ding- dong-danged if I do. I said I wouldn't if ary dog turned up missin', an' I won't." "It's darn good coffee," Henry said
enticingly. But Bill was stubborn, and he ate a dry breakfast washed d own with mumbled curses at One Ear for th ad played. "I'll tie 'em up out of reach of each other to-n ight," Bill said, as they took the trail. They h ad travelled little more than a hundred yards, when Henry, who was in fron
t, bent down and picked up something with which his snowshoe had col lided. It was dark, and he could not see it, but he r ecognised it by the t ouc h. He flung it back, s o that it struck the sled and bounced along until it fetched up on Bill's snowshoes. "Mebbe you'll need that in your business,"
Henry said. Bill uttered an exclamation. It was all that was left of Spanker- -the stick with which he had been tied . " T hey ate 'm hide an' a ll," Bill announced. "The st ick 's as clean as a whistle. They've at e the leather offen both ends. They're damn hungry, Henry, an' they'll have yo
u an' me guessin' before this trip's over." Henry laughed defiantly. "I ain't been trailed this way by wolves be fo re , but I've gone throug h a whole lot worse an' k e pt m y health. Takes more'n a handful of m pesky critters to do for yours truly, Bill, my son." "I don't know, I don'
t know," Bill muttered ominously. "Well, you'll know all right wh en we pull into McGurry." "I ain't feeli n ' special enthusiasti c," B ill persisted. "You' r e off colour, that's what's the matt er with y ou," Henry dogmatised. "What you need is quinine, an' I'm goin'
to dose you up stiff as soon as we make McGurry." Bill grunted hi s disagreement with the diagno sis , and lap sed in to sil ence. The day wa s like all the days. Light came at nine o'clock. At twelve o'clock the southern horizon was warmed by t
he unseen sun; and then began the cold grey of afternoon that wou ld remain for days. The n's futile effort to appear, that Bill sli pped the rifle from under the sled-lashings and said: "You keep right o
n, Henry, I'm goin' to see what I can see." "You'd better stick by the sl ed." I ght ed over the dogs, an ' t her e's no tellin' what might happe n. " "Who's croaking now?" Bill demanded triumphantly. Henry made no r
eply, and plodded on alone, though often he cast anxious glances ba ck into the grey solitude wh ere h is partner had disappeared. An hou r lat er, t aking advantage of the cut-o ffs around which the sled had to go, Bill arrived. "They're scattered an' r
angin' along wide," he said: "keeping up with us an' lookin' for game a t the same time. You see th ey're sure of us, only they know the y've got to wait to get us. In the meantime they're willin' to pick up anything eatable that comes han
dy." "You mean they think they're sure of us," Henry objected pointedly. But Bill ignored him. "I se en some of them. They're pretty thin. The y ain't had a bite in week s I reckon, outside of Fatty an' Frog an' Spanker; an' there's so many of 'em
that that didn't go far. They're remarkable thin. Their ribs is like wash-bo ards, an' their stomachs is right up against their backbones. Th ey're pretty desperate, I can tell y ou. They'll be goin' mad, yet, an' then watch out." A few minutes la
ter, Henry, who was now travelling behind the sled, emitted a low , warnin g whistle. Bill turned and looked, the n q uietl y stopped the dogs. To the rear, from ar ound the last bend and plainly into view, on th e very tr ail they had just covered, trotted a furry, slinking form. Its nose was t
o the trail, and it trotted with a peculiar, sliding, effortless gait. Whe n they h a lted, it halted, throwing up its head and regarding them steadily with nostrils that twitched as it caught and studied t h e scent of them. "It's the she-wolf," Bill answered. The dogs had lain down in th
e snow, and he walked past them to join his partner in the sled. Togethe r they watched the strange animal that had p ursued them for da ys and that had a lready accomplished the destruction of half t heir dog-team. After a searching scrutiny, the animal trotted forward a few s
teps. This it repeated several times, till it was a short hundred yards away. It p a used, used up close by a clump of spr uce trees, and wi th sight and scent studie d the outfit of the watching men. It loo k e d at them in a strangely wistful way, after the manner of a dog; but in its wistfuln
ess there was none of the dog affection. It was a wistfulness bred of hunger, as cru el as its own fangs, as merciles s as the frost itself. It was large for a wolf, its gaunt fr am e advertising the lines of an anim al that was among the largest of its kind. "Stands pretty close to two feet an' a half at t
he shoulders," Henry commented. "An' I'll bet it ain't far from five feet long." "Kind of stra nge colour for a wolf," was Bill's criticis m. "I ne ver seen a red wolf before. Loo ks almo st cinnamon to me." The animal was cer tainly not cinnamon-coloured. Its coat was the true wolf-coat. The dominant colour was grey,
and yet there was to it a faint reddish hue--a hue that was baffling, that appeared and disapp eared, that was more like an illusion of t he vis ion, n g hints and glints of a vague redness of colour not classifiable in terms of ordinary experience.
"Looks for all the world like a big husky sled-dog," Bill said. "I wouldn't be s'prised to see it wag its tail." "Hello, you husky!" he called. " Come here, you whatever-your-name -is." "Ain't a bit scairt of you," Henry lau ghed. Bill waved his hand at it threateningly and shouted loudly; but the animal betrayed no fear. Th
e only change in it that they could notice was an accession of alertness. It still regarded t hem with the merciless wistfulness of hu nger. They were meat, and it was hung ry; and it would like to go in and eat t hem if it dared. "Look here, Henry," Bill said, unconsciously lowering his voice to a whisper beca
use of what he imitated. "We've got three cartridges. But it's a dead shot. Couldn't miss it. It's got away with three of our dogs, an' w e oughter put a stop to it. Wh at d'ye say?" Henry nodded his conse nt. Bill cautiously slipped the gun from under the sled-lashing. The gun was on the way to his sh
oulder, but it never got there. For in that instant the she-wolf leaped sidewise from the trail into the cl ump of spruce trees and disap peared. The two men lo oked at each other. Henry whis tled long and comprehendingly. "I might have knowed it," Bill chided himself aloud as he replaced the g
un. "Of course a wolf that knows enough to come in with the dogs at feedin' time, 'd know all about shooting- irons. I tell you right now, H enry, that critter's the cause of all our trouble. We'd have six dogs at the present time, 'stead of three, if it wasn't for her. An' I tell you right n
ow, Henry, I'm goin' to get her. She's too smart to be shot in the open. But I'm goin' to lay for her. I'll bushwhack her a s sure as my name is Bill." "You nee dn't stray off too far in doin' it," his p artner admonished. "If that pack ever starts to jump you, them three cartridges'd be wuth no more'n three whoops in hell.
Them animals is damn hungry, an' once they start in, they'll sure get you, Bill." They camped early that night. Three do g s could not drag the sled so fast nor for so long hours as could six, and they were showing u n mistakable signs of playing out. And the men went early to bed, Bill first seeing to it that the dogs were tied out of gnawin
g-reach of one another. But the wolves were growing bolder, and the men were aroused more than once from their s leep. So near did the wolves approach, that the dogs became frantic with terror, and it was necessary to replenish the fire from time to time in order to keep the adventurous marauders at safer distance. "I've hearn sailors talk of shark
s followin' a ship," Bill remarked, as he crawled back into the blankets after one such replenishing of the fire. "Well, t hem wolves is land sharks. They know their business better'n we do, an' they ain't a-holdin' our trail this way for their health. They're goin' to get us. They're sure goin' to get us, Henry." "They've half got you a'ready, a-talkin' like that," Henry retor
ted sharply. "A man's half licked when he says he is. An' you're half eaten from the way you're goin' on about it." "They've got away with better men than you an' me," Bill answered. "Oh, shet up your croakin'. You make me all-fired tired." Henry roll ed over angrily on his side, but was surprised that Bill made no similar display of temper. This was not Bill's way, fo
r he was easily angered by sharp words. Henry thought long over it before he went to sleep, and as his eyelids fluttered down and he dozed off, the thought in his mind was: "There's no mistakin' it, Bill's almighty blue. I'll have to cheer him up to-morrow." CHAPTER III--THE HUNGER CRY The day began auspiciously. They had lost no dogs during the night, and they swung
out upon the trail and into the silence, the darkness, and the cold with spirits that were fairly light. Bill seemed to have forgotten his forebodings of the previous night, and even waxed facetious with the dogs when, at midday, 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 r
ock, 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. "Here, you, One Ear!" he cried, straightening up and turning around on the dog. But One Ear 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. As he neared her, he became suddenly cautious. He slowed down to an alert and mincing walk and then stopped. He regarded her carefully and dubiously, yet desirefully. She seemed to smile at him, showing her teeth in an ingratiating rather than a menacing way. She moved toward him a few steps, playfully, and then h
alted. One Ear drew near to her, still alert and cautious, his tail and ears in the air, his head held high. 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. Once, as though a warning had
in vague ways flitted through his intelligence, he turned his head and looked back at the overturned sled, at his team-mates, and at the two men who were calling to him. But whatever idea was forming in his mind, was dissipated by the she-wolf, who advanced upon him, sniffed noses with him for a fleeting instant, and then resumed her coy retreat before his renewed adva
nces. In the meantime, Bill had bethought himself of the rifle. But it was jammed beneath the overturned sled, and by the time Henry had helped him to right the load, One Ear and the she-wolf were too close together and the distance too great to risk a shot. Too late One Ear learned his mistake. Before they saw the cause, the two men saw him turn and start to run back tow
ard them. Then, approaching at right angles to the trail and cutting off his retreat they saw a dozen wolves, lean and grey, bounding across the snow. On the instant, the she- wolf's coyness and playfulness disappeared. With a snarl she sprang upon One Ear. He thrust her off with his shoulder, and, his retreat cut off and still intent on regaining the sled, he altered his cours
e in an attempt to circle around to it. More wolves were appearing every moment and joining in the chase. The she-wolf was one leap behind One Ear and holding her own. "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 h
and, he plunged into the underbrush that lined the side of the trail. His intention was apparent enough. Taking the sled as the centre of the circle that One Ear was making, Bill planned to tap that circle at a point in advance of the pursuit. With his rifle, in the broad daylight, it might be possible for him to awe the wolves and save the dog. "Say, Bill!" Henry called after him. "B
e careful! Don't take no chances!" Henry sat down on the sled and watched. There was nothing else for him to do. Bill had already gone from sight; but now and again, appearing and disappearing amongst the underbrush and the scattered clumps of spruce, could be seen One Ear. Henry judged his case to be hopeless. The dog was thoroughly alive to its danger, but it was
running on the outer circle while the wolf-pack was running on the inner and shorter circle. It was vain to think of One Ear so outdistancing his pursuers as to be able to cut across their circle in advance of them and to regain the sled. The different lines were rapidly approaching a point. Somewhere out there in the snow, screened from his sight by trees and thickets, Henry
knew that the wolf-pack, One Ear, and Bill were coming together. 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 recognised One Ear's yell of pain and terror, and he heard a wolf-cry that bespoke a str
icken animal. And that was all. The snarls ceased. The yelping died away. 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. He knew it as though it had taken place before his eyes. Once, he roused with a start and hastily got the axe out from underneath the lashings. But for s
ome time longer he sat and brooded, the two remaining dogs crouching and trembling at his feet. 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 mak
e 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. But he was not destined to enjoy that bed. Before his eyes closed the wolves had drawn too near for safety. It no longer required an effort of the vision to see them. They were all about him and the fire, in a narrow circle, and
he could see them plainly in the firelight lying down, sitting up, crawling forward on their bellies, or slinking back and forth. They even slept. Here and there he could see one curled up in the snow like a dog, taking the sleep that was now denied himself. He kept the fire brightly blazing, for he knew that it alone intervened between the flesh of his body and their hungry fangs
. His two dogs stayed close by him, one on either side, leaning against him for protection, crying and whimpering, and at times snarling desperately when a wolf approached a little closer than usual. At such moments, when his dogs snarled, the whole circle would be agitated, the wolves coming to their feet and pressing tentatively forward, a chorus of snarls and eager yel
ps rising about him. Then the circle would lie down again, and here and there a wolf would resume its broken nap. But this circle had a continuous tendency to draw in upon him. Bit by bit, an inch at a time, with here a wolf bellying forward, and there a wolf bellying forward, the circle would narrow until the brutes were almost within springing distance. Then he would seize
brands from the fire and hurl them into the pack. A hasty drawing back always resulted, accompanied by angry yelps and frightened snarls when a well-aimed brand struck and scorched a too daring animal. Morning found the man haggard and worn, wide-eyed from want of sleep. He cooked breakfast in the darkness, and at nine o'clock, when, with the coming of daylight, t
he wolf-pack drew back, he set about the task he had planned through the long hours of the night. Chopping down young saplings, he made them cross-bars of a scaffold by lashing them high up to the trunks of standing trees. Using the sled-lashing for a heaving rope, and with the aid of the dogs, he hoisted the coffin to the top of the scaffold. "They got Bill, an' they may
get me, but they'll sure never get you, young man," he said, addressing the dead body in its tree-sepulchre. Then he took the trail, the lightened sled bounding along behind the willing dogs; for they, too, knew that safety lay open in the gaining of Fort McGurry. The wolves were now more open in their pursuit, trotting sedately behind and ranging along on either side, their r
ed tongues lolling out, their lean sides showing the undulating ribs with every movement. They were very lean, mere skin-bags stretched over bony frames, with strings for muscles--so lean that Henry found it in his mind to marvel that they still kept their feet and did not collapse forthright in the snow. He did not dare travel until dark. At midday, not only did the sun warm t