

THE NIGHT OF THE WOLVES

By Robert D. Culp

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“**L**isten!”

Tom stopped eating and looked at his big brother. “Listen to what?” he asked. “The coyotes yapping? We hear ’em every night.”

“No, wait,” said Rob. “It wasn’t a coyote.”

The big clock in the front room ticked steadily. Outside the winter air was still. The snow covering the ranch seemed to enforce the silence. The yips of coyotes carried down from the north range beneath the evening stars. Though it was still early December, this winter of 1904 was already established as one of the worst on record.

Rob looked from his brother to his mother. “There. Hear it?” A high-pitched moan drifted down from the north.

“Another one, Rob,” whispered Tom. “There’s two of ’em.”

“There will be more than two,” said his mother quietly. She looked across the big kitchen table. “I wish your father were back.”

“What is it, Mom?” asked Rob.

“Wolves. We used to hear them when we first came here, but it’s been ten years since we heard the last one.”

The howls came again, a great number this time. Every wolf chose a different note. The wail rose and fell like a siren warning of danger to the ranches of the broad, grassy park.

“The coyotes have stopped yapping,” observed Rob. “Are they afraid of the wolves?”

“They always quiet down when the wolves howl,” said his mother.

“I’ll bet they’re afraid, said Tom. “It sounds spooky. When will Dad be back?”

“Not for two or three more days. He and Mr. Hagerman have some business in Denver after they sell the steers.”

“What happened to the wolves that used to be here, Mom?” asked Rob.

“The ranchers killed them or ran them off. Your father and Mr. Hagerman once spent three days out trailing a pack of wolves.”

Rob wrinkled his nose as he tried to picture the men slogging along behind the howling wolves. He shuddered as the wailing of the pack came in from the night.

“If they killed ’em all, where did these come from?”

His mother smiled. “Perhaps they’ve been driven off their regular run by some other ranchers. They could have come over the pass from the north.”

Rob listened to the strange chorus of the wolves. “Why are the wolves any worse than the coyotes?” he asked. “Dad doesn’t spend days chasing the coyotes.”

“Wolves are much more dangerous. Coyotes might kill a stray calf or a sick cow, but the wolves will kill even the strongest cattle. They might kill a dozen of your best cattle in one night.”

The door flew open and in came a young cowhand, his heavy sheepskin coat turned up against the cold.

“Do you hear them, Mrs. Denton?” he asked excitedly.

“It’s a pack of wolves, Jim,” answered Rob quickly. “Aren’t you glad now that you didn’t go with the others to sell the steers?”

“We’ve got to go stop ’em,” said Tom. “Mom says they’ll kill the cattle.”

His mother laughed. “I don’t think you need to rush out tonight. Tomorrow you may go out and see if you can pick up their trail. Some of the men from the ranches north of here may already be after them. Your father should be back Monday. Then you can have a real wolf hunt.”

They sat in the big, warm kitchen until late that night, listening to the howling wolves and talking excitedly about searching for the wolves the next day.

The morning sky was clear. The low winter sun reflecting from the snow caused Rob to squint until his eyes were narrow slits. He strained to spot Jim in the valley below. They had been riding north for two hours and were in the midst of the winter range.

“Easy, Punkin.” Rob patted the little golden horse’s neck. The horse blew loudly, emitting a plume of vapor from his nostrils.

“Can you see him, Tom?”

“No, but don’t worry about Jim,” answered Tom. “Look for wolves. I want to spot them before Jim does.” Tom scanned the dark pines along the ridge to the west.

“You’ll never find them that way. Look for tracks in the snow. Mom says they’re huge. Twice as big as coyote’s.”

“All right, Rob. You look for tracks, I’ll look for wolves. Let’s get going. Jim’s probably already reached Jefferson Creek.”

“I hope he builds a fire while he’s waiting. I want a hot lunch.”

Rob's horse led the way, picking a path along the wind-scoured bare places as much as possible. When a drift blocked the way, Punkin plunged ahead with short hops, using his powerful hind legs to do the work. Pigeon, Tom's short, black pony, had more trouble. By following where Punkin had broken the crust, however, he was able to keep up.

"I'm glad Jim sent us this way," said Tom. "We'd have never made it through the deep stuff in the bottoms."

Rob nodded his agreement, and halted Punkin on a high spot. He considered the deep snow which hid the dried grass. "I can see why Dad decided to sell more steers this late. It's better to sell them now than have them starve."

"Rob, do you really think this is the worst winter ever?"

Rob wrinkled his nose. "I doubt it. It's the most snow I've ever seen, but how do we know what it was like before we were here?"

"We know one thing," said Tom. "Mom says there were lots of wolves."

At this Rob turned and looked along the ridge to the left. He stiffened and pointed without saying a word. The large gray wolf stared back from the edge of pines.

His coat was thick and smooth. The longer hairs on his back were tipped with black. The dark markings came down onto his forehead, and curved across his chest in streaks. The mottled gray gave way to a pure white undercoat. His throat and cheeks were white. His upturned muzzle had a light ridge of gray on top.

"You see him, Tom?"

Tom let out his breath with a rush. "I told you, Rob. If you still want to find tracks, go up there where he's standing."

Rob ignored his brother's comment. "Look for the others," he said softly. "They should all be together."

There was a movement in the trees. A smaller, almost all white wolf appeared. Then Rob saw a dark shadow moving higher up the ridge. "They're all along there, Tom. Watching us!"

"Have they been following us, Rob?"

"It looks like it."

"Are they just curious, like coyotes?"

"I hope so. But they're sure scary."

"Come on, Rob. Let's go meet Jim."

They moved ahead as before. Now they were anxious to reach the meeting place. The wolves followed them openly. Usually two or three were in sight at once.

"That big gray is the leader, Tom," said Rob after a while. "He looks bigger than the others, and he's always out in front."

"How many do you think there are?"

“I know eight of them well enough to name them. I don’t know, twelve or fourteen?”

“At least. I know the big gray leader, and the white one that’s always right behind him. And the two blacks that stay up in the trees. But I can’t tell the difference in all those grays trailing behind. Do they look skinny to you, Rob?”

“Skinny and hungry. The winter’s been hard for them, too. That leader looks healthy enough. Man, is he big.”

They topped a ridge and looked down on Jefferson Creek. With some relief Rob pointed to a wisp of blue smoke. As the horses plunged down the slope, Rob yelled to Jim.

Jim came out from the trees and stared up at them. He carried a rifle loosely in his right hand.

Rob slowed Punkin and turned to look back. The large gray wolf stood silhouetted against the sky. His ears stretched forward and his graceful muzzle tested the air. Then silently he turned and disappeared behind the hill.

It was growing dark when they got back to the ranch house. All afternoon they had searched the ridge. Rob and Tom had led Jim to the tracks of the wolf pack. They had followed them through the trees for miles but the wolves kept out of sight.

“Mom, it was just as if they knew what Jim’s rifle was,” said Rob.

“That’s right,” said Tom. “We didn’t have a chance of catching them in that deep snow. Punkin and Pigeon are worn out.”

“But when Tom and I were by ourselves, they came right out in the open,” broke in Rob. “Once the leader came so close I could have hit him with a snowball.”

“It’s very likely they do know what a rifle is,” agreed their mother. “They’ve probably been chased off by the ranchers where they lived. That may be why they’re so hungry-looking now. They haven’t been able to stop long enough to hunt.”

“Can’t we go back with Jim tonight, Mom?” asked Rob.

“Of course not. He’s not going to be hunting wolves. He’ll just stay with cattle and keep the wolves away.”

After dinner they went out into the dark with Jim. Rob and Tom sat on the corral fence as he saddled a fresh horse.

“Won’t you be scared, Jim?” asked Tom.

“We could keep you company,” said Rob.

“You heard your mother. I’d be glad to have you along, but it’d get cold and boring. I won’t see any wolves. You don’t think they’ll come near my rifle, do you?”

“Anyway, your horses are worn out. I’d spend all my time worrying about you if you weren’t on your own horses. Tomorrow we’ll go down to the Hagerman’s and see

if any of the hands want to go looking for wolves.” With a wave, Jim rode off to the north where again the coyotes were yipping at the stars.

It grew late and the coyotes were still at it. Rob and Tom delayed going to bed. They listened in vain for the howl of the wolves. Finally, to postpone bedtime a little longer, they went to the barn to check on Punkin and Pigeon.

“I’ll bet they just kept on going south,” said Rob, running the currycomb over Punkin.

“Maybe they went back where they came from,” suggested Tom.

Before Rob could reply, the leader wolf answered all their questions with a blood chilling howl.

“That’s south! And close, Tom.”

“At the Hagerman’s?”

“Not even that far. Our calves!”

Rob stood frozen, his heart thudding heavily. A chorus of howls rose from the creek bottom.

“That’s at the pens, Tom. We’ve got to go!”

They leaped on bareback and urged Punkin and Pigeon out of the barn. They galloped down the trail toward the fenced pasture along the creek between the Denton and Hagerman ranches. There, in relative safety, were the young heifers, the spring calves, and other livestock that couldn’t be left to roam the winter range. There, too, were Rob and Tom’s own calves, given to them that summer.

Rob gritted his teeth against the cold wind as they raced through the dark. He hunched forward, pressing his face into Punkin’s mane. He glanced back at Tom as the howls sounded closer.

“Careful, Tom. Hang on. We can scare ’em off.”

Rob pulled Punkin to a halt on the rise above the sheds, pens, and mountains of hay that marked the near end of the fenced pasture.

“Where are they, Rob?” called Tom.

They looked in the direction of the hoarse howls. The white snow on the hill glowed brightly, broken only by an occasional black splotch of bushes.

“They’re not in the pasture yet,” said Rob with obvious relief. “Come on, let’s get down there and head them off.”

They rode to a position between the pasture and the wolves.

Rob sat uneasily on his horse just outside the pasture. He looked at the dark form of his brother beside him, then back up the slope. The wolves had ceased their howling.

“Have they gone, Rob?” asked Tom in a whisper.

“Hush. Look. To the right” Rob pointed to a pair of shadows gliding down the snow-covered hill.

“Yell, Tom!” Rob gave a whoop, and stretched high, waving his hat.

Abruptly the shadows froze. A shiver ran down Rob’s back as he recognized the large form of the leader. With a snarl, the big wolf advanced.

“He’s not afraid of us!”

For a moment Rob was terrified. Then he whooped again and thumped Punkin with his heels. The little horse leaped straight for the wolf. With a series of sharp barks, the wolf turned and loped down the slope to the south end of the pens.

“He’s going, Rob,” sang out Tom.

“Look at the others following,” yelled Rob. The pack of wolves seemed to float from the hilltop, down across the white space.

A horrible thought came to Rob. “They’re not running away. They’re going around us into the pasture.”

“Come on, Rob. Let’s get in there.”

Rob slid to the snow and struggled to open the gate. His frozen fingers fumbled at the wire loops.

“Hurry, Rob.”

A last tug popped the loop off. Rob dragged the gate open and Tom galloped through.

“Careful. Wait for me,” called Rob as he vaulted back onto Punkin. But his brother was far ahead.

A wave of snarls and growls rose from beyond the pens as Rob approached.

“Tom, get back,” screamed Rob when he saw his brother confronting the wolf pack.

“Help me, Rob. They’re after our calves.” Tom was between the wolves and the pen full of bawling calves. Pigeon whinnied in terror. The wolves seemed as tall as Tom on his pony.

“Get away!” “Hah!” “Hah!” whooped Rob as his horse clattered over the frozen ground. He waved his hat as Punkin skidded to a halt beside the pony. The wolves scattered into the night, then closed in again, more fiercely than before.

“We can’t stop them,” cried Tom. “We can’t let them have our calves.”

“Tom, we’ve got to get out of here. They’re starving. They’ll kill us, too.”

“Look out, Rob!”

A snarling shadow hurtled across the snow. Rob turned Punkin and met the wolf before it reached Tom. The golden horse reared frantically, striking out with his hoofs. Rob clung desperately to keep from sliding from the horse’s back. He felt the

wolf slam into the side of his horse. His hat was snatched from his hand as he lashed out at the attacker.

A sharp crack split the air. Another. Then another. The shots echoed through the night. With yelps and whines the wolves disappeared into the dark.

“Tom, are you all right?”

“Sure, Rob. How about you?”

“I’m fine. Who’s doing the shooting?”

“Boys?” called a voice from the hill.

“Mom!”

They rushed to the gate where their mother stood holding one of their father’s rifles.

“How did you know to come?” asked Tom.

“I came out as soon as the wolves started howling. I saw you two ride off like a pair of madmen. So I got the rifle and followed.”

“Gee, Mom, didn’t you think we could handle it?” asked Rob. At this, all three doubled up in relieved laughter.

Just beyond the pens they found the still, gray body of a wolf. Rob stretched it out and looked at it.

“Look how skinny it is, Mom,” he said. “I’m glad it’s not the big, gray leader.”

“They tried to kill your calves, and still you like them?”

“He’s beautiful, Mom. A brave leader. He’s something to see, out in front of the pack.” Rob looked at his mother. “Where will they go? There are ranches everywhere. They’ll be hunted and chased until they’re all gone.”

His mother nodded. She picked up Rob’s hat, looked at the teeth marks in the brim, and handed it to him. Then Rob, Tom, and their mother walked up the hill with Punkin and Pigeon trailing behind.