

ON A MOUNTAIN TRAIL

By Harry Perry Robinson

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WE had no warning. It was as if they had deliberately lain in ambush for us at the turn in the trail. They seemed suddenly and silently to rise on all sides of the sleigh at once.

It is not often that the gray timber-wolves, or "black wolves," as the mountaineers call them, are seen hunting in packs, though the animal is plentiful enough among the foot-hills of the Rockies. As a general rule they are met with singly or in pairs. At the end of a long and severe winter, however, they sometimes come together in bands of fifteen or twenty; and every old mountaineer has a tale to tell perhaps of his own narrow escape from one of their fierce packs, perhaps of some friend of his who started one day in winter to travel alone from camp to camp, and whose clean-picked bones were found beside the trail long afterward.

It was in February, and we, Gates and myself, were driving from Livingston, Montana, to Gulch City, fifty miles away, with a load of camp supplies—a barrel of flour and some bacon, coffee, and beans; a blanket or two, and some dynamite (or "giant powder," as the miners call it) for blasting; a few picks and shovels, and other odds and ends. We had started at daybreak. By five o'clock in the evening, with some ten miles more to travel, the worst of the trail was passed. There had been little snow that winter, so that even in the gulches and on the bottoms the exposed ground was barely covered; while, on the steep slopes, snow had almost entirely disappeared, leaving only ragged patches of white under overhanging boughs, and a thin coating of ice in the inequalities of the hard, frost-bound trail, making a treacherous footing for the horses' hoofs.

The first forty miles of the road had lain entirely over hills—zigzagging up one side of a mountain only to zigzag down the other—with the dense growth of pine and tamarack and cedar on both sides, wreathed here and there in mist. But at last we were clear of the foot-hills and reached the level. The tall forest trees gave place to a wilderness of thick underbrush, lying black in the evening air, and the horses swung contentedly from the steep grade into the level trail, where at last they could let their legs move freely in a trot.

Hardly had they settled into their stride, however, when both animals shied violently to the left side of the trail. A moment later they plunged back to the right side so suddenly as almost to throw me off into the brush.

Then, out of the earth and the shadow of the bushes, the grim, dark forms seemed to rise on all sides of us. There was not a sound—not a snap nor a

snarl; but in the gathering twilight of the February evening, we saw them moving noiselessly over the thin coat of snow which covered the ground. In the uncertain light, and moving as rapidly as we did, it was impossible to guess how many they were. An animal which was one moment in plain sight, running abreast of the horses, would, the next moment, be lost in the shadow of the bushes, while two more dark, silent forms would edge up to take its place. So, on both sides of us, they kept appearing and disappearing. In the rear, half a dozen jostled one another to push up nearer to the flying sleigh—a black mass that filled the whole width of the trail. Behind those again, others, less clearly visible, crossed and recrossed the roadway from side to side. They might be twenty in all—or thirty—or forty. It was impossible to tell.

For a minute I did not think of danger. The individual wolf is the most skulking and cowardly of animals, and only by some such experience as we had that night does a hunter learn that wolves can be dangerous. But soon the stories of the old mountaineers came crowding into my mind, as the horses, terrified and snorting, plunged wildly along the narrow trail, while the ghost-like forms glided patiently alongside -appearing, disappearing, and reappearing. The silent pertinacity with which, apparently making no effort, they kept pace beside the flying horses was horrible. Even a howl or a yelp or a growl would have been a relief. But not so much as the sound of their footfalls on the snow was to be heard.

At the first sight of the wolves, I had drawn my revolver from the leather case in which it hung suspended from my belt. Gates, handling the reins, was entirely occupied with the horses; but I knew, without need of words, that he saw our pursuers and understood the peril as well as I.

“Have you your gun?” I shouted in his ear.

A negative shake of the head was all the answer. So we must trust to the six cartridges in my revolver.

“How many wolves are there, do you suppose?” again I called.

Again he shook his head, as if to say that he could not guess.

So the minutes passed and we swept on, rising and falling and swaying with the inequalities in the trail. The dark forms, growing more indistinct each minute, were hanging doggedly to the sleigh.

Suddenly I became aware that a wolf was almost at my elbow: its head was on a level with my waist as I sat in the low sleigh. In the darkness I could plainly see the white teeth, and the dim circle of the eyes. I hardly had to lean over at all to place the muzzle of the revolver within a foot of the great round head before I fired. I saw the black form roll over and over in the snow as we went by. Simultaneously, two other shadowy shapes that had been running abreast of the horses, in advance of the animal that was shot, dropped back; and looking over my shoulder I could see them throw themselves upon their

wounded fellow. As the sea-gulls, following in the wake of a vessel in mid-ocean, swoop from all directions upon some floating scrap that has been thrown overboard, so from both sides of the trail the dark figures rushed together into one struggling mass behind the sleigh; and for the first time we heard them snapping and snarling at one another, as they tore their comrade to pieces.

The horses appeared to know that in some way a gleam of hope had come. They ceased plunging and seemed to throw all their energies into putting as wide a space as possible between them and the yelping pack behind.

How long would the respite be? Seconds passed until half a minute had gone. Then a minute. Could it be that they had left us, that the horrible race was over?

But even as the hope was forming itself in my mind, I became aware of a dim, gray thing moving beside me. A moment later another appeared, close by the horses' heads, and behind us the trail was again full of the jostling pack.

It was terrible beyond expression, the utter noiselessness with which they resumed their places—apparently tireless; keeping pace with the racing horses without a sign of effort; patient as fate itself. Have you ever been on a fast steamship—say a “P. and O.”* boat in Indian waters where the sea is transparent—and, leaning over the stern, watched a shark following the vessel? If so, you remember how, hour after hour and day after day, the dark, vaguely outlined body, not more distinct than the shadow of a cloud upon the waves, stayed, motionless to all appearance, just so many feet aft in the ship's wake, no matter how fast she moved. To me, and I think to everyone who has seen it, that silent, persistent, haunting presence is the very embodiment of ruthlessness and untiring cruelty. There, in the twilight and shadow, was the same silence, the same indistinctness, the same awing impression of motionless speed, the same horror of the inevitable, in that pursuit by the wolves.

But soon their tactics changed. Either they had grown bolder, or the wolf they had eaten among them had put a keener edge upon their appetites. There were now four or five of the ghostlike forms moving abreast of the horses on my side of the sleigh alone. On the other side more were visible. They were now closing in upon us, with determination. Suddenly I saw one make a spring at the throat of the off horse, and, missing his aim, fall back. The horses had been terrified before; from that moment they lost all control of themselves. neither the driver's voice nor his hands upon the reins had any influence upon them as they tore wildly down the narrow path between the bushes, snorting, throwing their heads from side to side, and breaking now and again into short, shrill neighs of terror. The breath from their nostrils and the steam from their bodies made a white cloud in the wintry night air, almost enveloping them and us, and at times blotting out of sight the wolves beneath.

But the pack was again closing in. In front of all, I could see one running under the very noses of the horses, keeping just beyond the reach of their hoofs, and evidently waiting for the right moment to make a final leap at their throats. Leaning forward, and steadying my aim as well as I could in the rocking sleigh, I fired full at the whole dark mass in front. Apparently the ball passed harmlessly through them, but in an instant all had vanished—behind and into the bushes—as a swarm of flies vanish at the waving of a handkerchief. Only for a second, however, and one after another they were back again.

A second shot, fired again at random into the mass, was more successful; and once more we saw them drop back and crowd together in the trail behind us while the snapping and snarling grew fainter as the horses plunged on.

Half of the last ten miles had now been traveled, and five miles more would bring us to Gulch City and security. The excitement of that race was unspeakable: the narrow lane of the trail lying white ahead of us and behind us between the dark borders of the brush, seen fitfully through the stream from the maddened horses.

But the respite this time was shorter than before. Once more our relentless foes gathered round us, silently, one by one. The wolves seemed to know as well as we, that time was short and escape lay not far away; for hardly had the pack settled in their places round us before I saw one animal throw himself recklessly at the horses' throats. There was a sudden mad rearing up of both the horses, a wild, despairing neigh, a short yelp from the wolf's throat, and the dark form that had seemed to hang for a moment, leech-like, to the chest of one of our brave beasts was beaten down under the hoofs.

The others did not wait even for the sleigh to pass, but leaped upon the struggling form even as the runners were upon it. In my excitement I did a foolish thing. Leaning over, and thrusting my revolver almost against the skins of the fierce brutes, I fired two shots in quick succession. They had their effect, I know, for I saw one of the dark figures throw itself convulsively out of the mass into the brush, where others sprang upon it, and a death-cry went up in the night air. But we could ill spare the ammunition.

This idea evidently occurred to Gates. Leaning suddenly toward me, but with his eyes fixed on the horses and the road ahead, he called:

“How many shots have you left?”

“Only one.”

“Not even one apiece for us?”

And I knew that he was in earnest. I knew also that he was right; that it would be better to die so, than to be torn to pieces by that snarling, hungry crew.

But it was too late now. Five shots out of the six were spent, and twenty minutes yet must pass before we could reach the camp. And even while these few words were being said the pack was close upon us again. Fiercer now, and more determined than ever to make an end of it, they crowded around. One even flung himself at the low side of the sleigh to snap at me, and his teeth caught for a moment in the sleeve of my coat as I struck him on the head with the clenched hand holding the pistol. On both sides, too, they jostled each other, to reach the flying horses, and I knew that in a few seconds more I must sacrifice the last cartridge in my revolver.

As a forlorn hope I snatched the buffalo-robe which lay on Gates' knees, and threw it to them. But they hardly stopped to tear it to pieces. There was more satisfying food in the sleigh. And they closed around the horses again.

For the first time Gates turned to look at me.

"Jack!" he called excitedly, "the giant powder!"

For a moment I did not grasp his meaning. Seeing my indecision he shouted again:

"The giant powder, Jack!"

Then it came to me. Thrusting the pistol into its case, I scrambled over into the rear part of the sleigh, and as I did so the wolves that were following behind fell back a few feet. Hastily fumbling among the various supplies, I found the old sack in which the sticks of dynamite were wrapped, and with them the small package of caps and fuse. Taking three of the sticks, I tied them tightly together with my handkerchief and, quickly fitting the end of an inch of fuse—for, in this case, the shorter the piece the better—into a cap, I thrust the latter into the center of the three sticks. I was still at work, when a sudden swing of the sleigh and a cry from Gates warned me that something was the matter. The horses were plunging violently, and as the near horse reared I saw that a wolf had leaped upon its withers and was clinging, with its teeth apparently in the side of the horse's neck. In their terror, the horses had stopped, and were actually backing us into the brush. Something had to be done, and with some vague hope, I fired the last shot from the revolver into the dark circle which already surrounded the plunging horses. The shot had its effect, for one of the brutes leaped into the air with a yelp and fell backward into the bushes. The horse, too, sprang suddenly forward, and the wolf that was clinging to it fell to the ground and was trampled under the hoofs. In an instant, those of the pack that had not already flung themselves upon the wounded animal in the bushes, rushed upon this one that was lying lifeless or stunned from the horses' feet; and once more, for a few seconds, we had breathing space, and the sleigh sped along through the keen air, our enemies snarling and quarreling behind us.

But the last shot was spent!

Turning my attention again to the giant powder, I fixed the cap and fuse more firmly in their place, and taking off my belt wound that tightly round the whole. Round that again I wrapped one of the old sacks, and tearing off my coat made an extra covering of that, knotting the sleeves tightly on the outside, that the ravenous teeth might be delayed in tearing the bundle apart. Crouching down in the sleigh, I lighted a match, and, as I did so, I saw that the wolves were upon us again, apparently as numerous and as tireless as ever. The match went out; and a second. Crouching lower still, I made a barricade against the wind with anything I could lay my hands on in the sleigh, and at last a dull red spark caught the end of the fuse.

The pack was already crowding round the terrified horses, which, it seemed to me, were almost worn out, and moved more heavily than heretofore. And how slowly the fuse burned! Nursing it carefully with my hands, I blew upon the spark and kept it glowing as it ate its way slowly into the cotton. Why had I not made it shorter? Every moment I expected to feel the sudden jolt which told that the wolves had pulled down one of the horses and that the end had come!

At last the dull red glow had almost reached the end of the cap. A few seconds more and it would explode. Thrusting the bundle hastily into another sack, forgetting even the wolves in my terror lest it should explode in my hands, I threw it with all my force into the midst of the moving forms abreast of the horses.

The beasts flung themselves upon it, and as we swept by, the whole pack was again collected into a struggling, snarling heap beside the trail. We were sweeping round a curve in the road, and before the horses had taken a dozen strides, the brush shut out the path behind us and the wolves.

A moment later and the air and the earth shook around us. I was still standing, clutching the low side of the sleigh, and the concussion threw me upon my face. The report was not the crash of a cannon nor the sharp noise of gunpowder, but a dull, heavy roar like an instantaneous clap of distant thunder. The stillness that followed was intense, but I thought that I heard, from the direction where the wolves had been, one broken, muffled howl.

What had been the effect of it? Both Gates and myself leaned forward and with voice and hand urged the horses on. When would those grim, gray, ruthless forms disappear? The seconds passed; minute followed minute, and the horses, breathing painfully, labored on over the level trail. With every yard traveled, hope grew stronger, until leaning over again I said to Gates:

“I don’t believe they’re coming, Charlie.”

But his only reply was a shake of the reins and another word to the horses.

Then suddenly there came a twinkle of light in the distance. The brush fell away from the trail and the white expanse of the clearing of Gulch City was before us.

For a distance of fifty yards, at a point about a mile and a half north of Gulch City, the old Livingston trail had to be abandoned. It would have been more labor to repair it than to clear a new pathway through the brush. And when I left that part of the country two years afterward, the packers would still turn out of their way for a minute to look at "Giant Hole," and to kick up out of the weeds and brush that had grown around it the skull or part of the skeleton of a wolf.

*Penisular and Oriental