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Title: The Black Wolf Pack

Author: Daniel Carter Beard

Release date: July 19, 2007 [eBook #22109]

Language: English

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*** START OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK THE BLACK WOLF PACK ***

THE BLACK WOLF PACK

BY

DAN BEARD

NATIONAL SCOUT COMMISSIONER, B.S.A.

ILLUSTRATED

CHARLES SCRIBNER'S SONS
NEW YORK



It was a shadowy figure yet it

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[iv]

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DEDICATED TO

[v]

BELMORE AND FRED

(BELMORE BROWNE)

(FREDERICK K. VREELAND)

NO BETTER WILDERNESS MEN EVER
WORE MOCCASINS

PREFACE

[vii]

After numerous visits to a number of remote and unfrequented places in the Rocky Mountains, from Wyoming to Alberta, the writer was deeply impressed with the awesome mystery of the wilderness and the weird legends he heard around the camp fires, while the bigness of the things he saw was photographed on his brain so distinctly and permanently as to act as a compelling force causing him, aye, almost forcing him to write about it.

When the spell came upon him, like the Ancient Mariner, he needs must tell the story, and thus the tale of the Black Wolf Pack was written with no thought, at the time, of publishing the narrative, but primarily for the real enjoyment the author derived from writing it, and also for the entertainment of the author's family and intimate friends.

The tale, however, pleased the members of the Editorial Board of the Boy Scouts of America, and Mr. Franklin K. Mathews, Chief Scout Librarian, asked permission to have it edited for the Scout Magazine, which request was cheerfully granted.

[viii]

The author hereby freely and cheerfully acknowledges the useful changes and practical suggestions injected into the story by his friend and associate, Mr. Irving Crump, Editor of Boys' Life, in which magazine the Black Wolf Pack, in somewhat abbreviated form, first appeared.

DAN BEARD.

Flushing,
June 1st, 1922.

ILLUSTRATIONS

[ix]

It was a shadowy figure yet it moved

Frontispiece

The eagle screamed, descended like a thunderbolt ... and struck
the bull

36

More than once while I clung to the chance projection ... I

The Black Wolf Pack

[1]

CHAPTER I

It was a terrible shock to me (said the Scoutmaster as he fingered a beaded buckskin bag). Old Blink Broosmore was responsible. It was a malicious thing for him to do. He meant it to be mean, too,—wanted to hurt me,—to wound my feelings and make me ashamed. And all because he nursed a grudge against dad—I mean Mr. Crawford.

It started because of that defective spark-plug in the engine of the roadster. Strange what a tiny thing such as a crack in a porcelain jacket around an old spark-plug can do in the way of changing the course of a fellow's whole life.

My last period in the afternoon at high school was a study period and I cut it because I had several things to do down town. I hurried home and took the roadster, and on my way out mother—I mean Mrs. Crawford—gave me an armful of books to return to the library and a list of errands she wanted me to do. While motoring down town I noticed that one cylinder was missing occasionally and I told myself I would change that spark-plug as soon as I got home.

[2]

I made all the stops I had planned and even drove around to the church because I wanted to look in at the parish house where some of my scouts (I was the assistant scoutmaster of Troop 6, of Marlborough) were putting up decorations for the very first Fathers and Sons dinner ever given which we were to have on Washington's birthday. That was in 1911.

As I was leaving I looked at my new wrist watch and discovered that it was a quarter of five.

"Just in time to catch dad and drive him home from the office," I said to myself, for I knew that he left the office of his big paper-mill down at the docks at five o'clock.

[3]

I jumped into the car and bowled along down Spring Street and the Front Street hill and arrived at the mill office at exactly five. Dad wasn't in sight so I decided to turn around and wait for him at the curb. That is how the trouble started. I got part way around on the hill when that cylinder began missing a lot and next thing I knew the motor stalled and there was I with my car crosswise on the hill, blocking traffic—and traffic is heavy on Front Street hill about five o'clock, because all the mills are rushing their trucks down to the piers with the last loads of merchandise before the down-river boats leave, at six o'clock.

In about two minutes I was holding up a line of trucks a block long and those drivers were saying a lot of things that were not very complimentary to me and not printed in Sunday-school papers. And old Blink Broosmore was right up at the head of the line with a truck load of cases from the box factory and the look on his face was about as ugly as a mud turtle's. Then, to make matters worse, my starter wouldn't work at the critical moment, and I had to get out to crank the engine. What a howl of indignation went up from those stalled truck drivers! I felt like a bad two-cent piece in a drawer full of five-dollar gold pieces. Guess my face was red behind my ears.

[4]

And then old Blink made the unkindest remark of all—no, he didn't make it to me; he just yelled it out to a couple of other truck-drivers.

"That's what happens with these make-believe dudes," he shouted. "That's the kid old Skin Flint Crawford took out of an orphan asylum. He's a kid that old Crawford took up with because he was too mean t' have t' Lord bless him with one o' his own. That's straight, fellers. I was Crawford's gardener when it happened an'—"

Old Blink stopped and got red and then white, and I could see the other truck men looking uncomfortable. I looked up and there was Dad Crawford on the curb boring holes into Blink with those cold gray eyes of his and looking as white as marble. No one said a word. It seemed as if the whole street became hushed and silent. I got the car around to the curb somehow and dad got in and the line of trucks trundled by with every driver looking straight ahead and some of them grinning nervously and apparently feeling mighty uncomfortable.

[5]

But that wasn't a patch to the way I felt, and I could see by the lack of color and set expression of dad's face and the way he stared straight ahead of him without saying a word that he was feeling very unhappy about it too. There was something behind it all—something that raised in my mind vague doubts and very unpleasant thoughts.

Dad never spoke a word all the way home, and, needless to say, I did not either—I couldn't; my whole world seemed to have been turned upside down in the space of half an hour. Was it true that I was not Donald Crawford? Was it possible that Alexander Crawford, this fine, big, broad-shouldered, kindly man beside me was not my real father? Was it a fact that that noble, generous, happy woman whom I called mamma was not my mother at all? Each of those questions took shape in my mind and each was like a stab in the heart, for Blink Broosmore had answered them all, and Alexander Crawford, though he must know how anxious I was to have Blink denied, did not speak to refute him.

[6]

We rolled up the drive and dad stepped out, still silent, but he did smile wistfully at me as he closed the car door.

"Put it away, Don, and hurry in for dinner," he said and I felt certain I detected a break in his voice. I felt sorry—sorry for him and sorry for myself, and as I put the car in the garage, I had a hard time trying to see things clearly; my eyes would get blurred and a lump would get into my throat in spite of me.

As I dressed for dinner I felt half dazed. I hardly realized what I was doing, and I had to stop and pull myself together before I started downstairs to the dining room, for I knew if I did not have myself well in hand I would blubber like a big chump.

[7]

Mother and dad were waiting for me and I could see by mother's sad expression and the troubled look in her eyes that dad had told her of the whole occurrence. And that only added to my unhappiness because I felt for a certainty that all that Blink Broosmore had shouted must be true.

For the first time in my memory dad forgot to say grace, and none of us ate with any apparent relish and none of us tried to make conversation. It was a painful sort of a meal and I wanted to have it over with as soon as I could. It seemed hours before Nora cleared the table and served dad's demi-tasse.

I guess I then looked him full in the eyes for the first time since the occurrence on Front Street.

"That was a very unkind thing for Blink Broosmore to do," said dad, and I knew by the firmness and evenness of his voice that he had gained full control of his feelings.

[8]

"Is—is—oh, did he tell the truth, dad?" I gulped helplessly and for the life of me I could not keep back the tears.

"Unfortunately, Donald, there is just enough truth in it to make it hurt," said dad and I could see mother wince as if she had been struck, and turn away her face.

"They why—why? Oh! who am I?" I cried, for the whole thing had completely unnerved me.

"Don dear, we do not know to a certainty," said mother struggling with her emotions.

"But now that you are partly aware of the situation, I think there is a way you can find out, at least as much as we know," said dad, getting up and going into the library.

Through the doorway I could see him fumbling at the safe that he kept there beside the desk. Presently he drew out a battered and dented red tin box and a bundle of papers. These he brought into the dining room and laid on the table. Then he drew up a chair, cleared his throat, rather loudly it seemed to me, and began.

[9]

"Don, we always wanted a child, and why the Lord never blessed us with one of our own we do not know. Anyway, we wanted one so badly that we decided to adopt one. That was seventeen years ago, wasn't it, mother?"

Mother nodded.

"Doctor Raymond, the physician at the county institution, knew our desires and, being an old friend of the family, he volunteered to find us a good healthy baby that we could adopt and call our own. Not a week later you appeared on the scene. Dr. Raymond told us that a wagon drawn by a raw-boned horse, and loaded with household goods, drew up to the orphanage and a tired and worn-out looking old lady got out with a lusty year old child in one arm and this box and these papers under the other.

"At the office of the asylum she explained how she and her husband were moving from a Connecticut town to a little farm they had bought in Pennsylvania. Somewhere at a crossroad near Derby, Connecticut, they had found the baby and this box and bundle of papers in a basket under a bush with a card attached to the basket requesting that the finder adopt and take care of the baby.

[10]

"Of course, they could not pass the infant by, but the woman explained that they were too poor and too old to adopt the child so they had gone miles out of their way to find an orphanage and leave the baby there, along with the box and papers.

"When Dr. Raymond heard the story and saw you, for you were the baby, he got me on the telephone and told me all about you. And that night he brought you here, and you were such a chubby, bright, interesting little fellow that mother and I fell in love with you immediately and decided to adopt you, which we did according to law. So you are our legal child, Don, and all that, although we are not your real parents."

[11]

Somehow that made me feel a little happier. Dad and mother did have a claim on me at least. That was something.

"It was not until after Dr. Raymond had left," went on father, "that mother and I examined the box and papers that had come with you. Here they are."

Dad took up a worn and age-yellowed envelope addressed in a bold hand:

To the Finder

Inside was the following brief message:

TO THE FINDER:—

The mother of this child, Donald Mullen, is dead. I, his father, cannot give him the care he should have. Will you, the finder, adopt him, care for him, and bring him up to be an honest, trustworthy man, and win the eternal gratitude of his dead mother and

DONALD MULLEN,
his father.

"Then my name is—or was Mullen," I exclaimed.

"According to that," said dad softly, "but when you became our son we kept your first name and discarded the family name of course." [12]

"But—but what has become of my father, Donald Mullen?" I asked.

"My boy, we have tried both for your sake and for our own to find out. We have followed up and searched every possible clue and—but wait, here are other papers of interest and after you have read them I will tell you all we have done to locate your real father and afterwards we will talk the whole situation over." As dad was speaking he passed over the battered tin box. On the lid was inscribed the simple lines—

The contents of this box belong to the boy. If you are honest you will see that it comes into his hands at the proper time. If you are dishonest, then God help the boy and God help you!

D. MULLEN.

It was some time before I could make up my mind to force the lid. When I did the first thing that my eyes fell upon was this buckskin bag of unmistakable Indian design, beautifully decorated with bead work and highly colored porcupine quills cunningly worked into a good luck design. As I picked up the bag I saw that it was sealed with wax and to it was attached a card on which was penned: [13]

To my son:—

Here is all the wealth I possess. It isn't much. The bag with its contents was sent to me by my brother, Fay, who is out in the Rockies. He gave it to me to pay my expenses out there to join him. I am leaving it for you. It may help you over some rocky places if it ever gets into your hands, and I trust the good Lord that it does.

Lovingly,
YOUR FATHER.

The bag gave forth the unmistakable clink of gold coins as I dropped it on the table.

That message from my father, whom I had never seen, made my heart heavy and again that lump gathered in my throat, for I could feel the heartaches that the writing of that note must have caused him. I had not the courage to break the seal of the bag and examine its contents. I pushed it aside and took from the box another time-yellowed envelope addressed to [14]

MY SON DONALD

Inside I found the following:

Dear Boy:—

I cannot determine whether I am giving you a mean deal or whether this is all for your good. Your mother, Barbara Parker Mullen, is dead, God bless her! She has been dead now six months. It seems to me like eternity. I have tried to take care of you as she would have cared for you but I am afraid I have lost heart, and my courage, and I am afraid my faith has slipped from me. I fear that I am a broken-spirited failure. The passing of your mother has taken everything from me. I am no longer fit or able to care for you and I must pass you on to someone else and trust your welfare to God. For neither your mother nor I have any relatives left who are able to take care of you.

What will become of you I cannot guess. I can only hope for the best. But by the time you are old enough to read and understand this message you will, I hope, have forgiven me or praised me for my effort to find you a home. [15]

What will become of me I do not know. I have one brother left in the world, Fay Mullen, and he is out in Piute Pass in the Rockies grubbing for gold. I am going out to

join him for I know the only way I can forget my grief and get hold of myself once more is to bury myself in the wilderness.

Fay has sent me a bag of double eagles to pay my expenses west. That is all the money I have in the world. I am not going to use it. I will work my way west and leave the gold for you. It is the least and probably the last that I can do for you.

If, when you read this you have any desires to know who you really are, I will leave you the following information:

Your mother, a wonderful woman, was Barbara Parker of Litchfield, Connecticut, daughter of Judge Arnold Parker of Litchfield, now deceased. I am Donald Mullen, the eldest of three brothers; Fay Mullen is the next of age and Patrick Mullen, the gunsmith of Maiden Lane, New York, is the youngest. We were born in Byron Bridge, Ireland, and we three came to this country after our parents died. You come of an honest, worthwhile people on my side, and of the best American blood on your mother's, Donald, and I ask only that you live an honest, honorable life and have faith in your country and your God, and He will be with you to the end.

Good-bye, boy.

Lovingly,
YOUR FATHER.

I read the letter aloud but I confess that my voice broke toward the end and I choked up until reading was difficult.

For some time after I finished, we three sat in silence. The thoughts and mental pictures of that broken man parting with his baby son seventeen years before made me most unhappy.

Dad broke the silence.

"Well, now you are acquainted with the whole situation, what do you think?"

"I scarcely know what to think," said I. "It does not appear natural for a man to abandon his own son in the manner he did. It seems heartless and cruel. I cannot understand it; yet I wish I could see my poor father. I wonder if he is still alive. Certainly with the information at hand it should not be impossible for me to trace him or some relatives of my mother. Don't you think so?"

"That is what I thought, Don, for when you were three years old I began to wonder about your father's whereabouts. I wanted to meet him and perhaps help him if I could. Do not think that your poor father was cruel, for it is evident that the man was suffering from a nervous breakdown and consequently more or less irresponsible; I think he acted wonderfully well under the circumstances. In order to help him I began a search and for ten years I have had detectives and private individuals following up every possible lead. Yet, with all my efforts, the search has amounted to nothing. Your father's trail ended at a Spokane outfitting store. I could not locate anyone nearer to you than an old maiden great-aunt of your mother's although I have had every clue investigated.

"The only relative of your father's that I could get any information about was his youngest brother, Patrick Mullen, your uncle and a famous gunsmith of Maiden Lane, New York. He is dead now but his reputation for making an exceptionally fine hand-forged gun lives on even today. Patrick Mullen died just before I began my search for your father, but in digging around for facts about him, I learned that he had made a limited number of very fine guns, on each of which he had stamped his full name, 'Patrick Mullen.' Other guns of an inferior quality that he made bore the simple stamp of 'P. Mullen.' The old man was very proud of each 'Patrick Mullen' that he turned out and like the true artist that he was he kept track of each one, sold them only to men he knew and when the owner died he bought the gun back himself so that he always knew its whereabouts.

"In that way all of the 101 'Patrick Mullen's' he made came back to him, save one. There is one of the complete number still missing and no one seems to know where it is. This is more remarkable because the missing gun is a flint-lock rifle of the style of seventy years ago. That gun has always struck me as being a valuable clue in our search, because it is the only rifle ever made by the old gunsmith and I have a feeling that that missing 'Patrick Mullen' may have been given to your father by the brother, and that may account for the fact that among the papers of Patrick Mullen there is no record of its whereabouts; this is in a measure confirmed by the report that the man outfitting at Spokane had a long old-fashioned rifle, and collectors say there used to be an expert in antique arms by the name of Mullen."

The suggestion made me tremendously excited. Beyond a doubt in my mind that missing "Patrick Mullen" was my father's gun. I imagined him parting with everything else save the unique gun his famous brother had made for him. Why he should wish for a flint-lock rifle was an unanswerable question, but someone wanted that sort of a gun or it would not have been made, and my father's letters showed him to be a man of sentiment, and impractical, just the sort of fellow to use a flint-lock when he might just as well have had a modern breech-loading high-power rifle.

"I believe you've hit it, dad. Hot dog!" I exclaimed. "Bet a cookie that that gun does belong to my father and if we can find it we will probably find him too—would not that be bully?"

"I feel the same way too, Don. But finding that missing gun will be as difficult as finding your father. I have searched the country over for it and made a wonderful collection of flint-lock guns, as you see by looking at yonder gun-rack; I have had dozens of arms collectors and detectives looking for guns of that description, but no Patrick Mullen rifle has turned up anywhere. There have, of course, been many false clues and many queer rifles offered to me and I have put a great many thousands of dollars into the search, and my collection of flint-locks is the best in the land, Don. But so far nothing but failures seem to have rewarded my search—no, I'm wrong, there is one man out west—out in the little jerk-water town of Grave Stone, who insists that there is a wild man living in a lonely, almost inaccessible valley in the mountains, who shoots a gun which looks like the one for which I am searching. For a number of years this man of mystery, it seems, has been appearing and reappearing, according to Big Pete Darlinkel, my informant, but even Pete has never got in personal touch with this eccentric hermit. Neither have several detectives I have sent out there for that purpose. The detectives seem to be all right in towns or cities and are undoubtedly brave men, but something out there appears to frighten them and they lose interest the moment they cut the trail of the wild hunter. I begin to think this wild man is a myth, too. Strange, though, that just a week ago I received another letter from Pete Darlinkel. Wait, I'll find it."

[21]

[22]

He returned from the library presently with a letter which he opened and passed over to me. It read:

DEAR MR. CRAWFORD:—

Maybe you hain't interested no more but thet tha' ole Dopped ganger, the Wild Hunter, the spooky old critter, has been seen agin. i wuz on the top of the painted Butte yesterday squinten one i in the valley look'n for elk and look'n up with tother i for Big horn on the mountain, when i staged the old duffer snoop'en along in one of the parks an' he had the same long hair and long rifle he uster have. He sure is a ghost or else he's a nut or an old timer gone locoed. He sends the chills down my backbone every time i sots my eyes on him.

Your obedients sarvent,
BIG PETE.

There was something about that crude letter that stirred me deeply.

Could this strange freak that Big Pete saw from the top of the painted Butte possess that Patrick Mullen rifle? If so did he know anything about the whereabouts of my father? It is not uncommon for people suffering from a mental breakdown to flee to the country or wilderness and there live the life of a recluse, and from my father's last letter it was evident that he had had a nervous breakdown from anxiety and brooding over the loss of my mother, to whom he evidently was devotedly attached. It might, therefore, be possible that this strange, wild man himself was my father, an unpleasant possibility. At any rate, I felt that I could not rest, at least until I discovered to a certainty the name of the maker of the long rifle said to be carried by the wild hunter and I told dad just how I felt about it.

[23]

"I knew you would feel that way, son," said he. "I have often wanted to go west for the very same purpose and I knew that when I told you everything you would want to go too. I intended to lay all the facts before you when you were twenty-one but now that Blink Broosmore has taken it upon himself to inform you and his truck-driving friends of the mystery surrounding your real parentage, I guess it is best you know all there is to be known about the situation. The rest I'll leave to you. In fact, it would please me a great deal if you would run down this last vague clue to see if your father really is still alive. Go, Donald, and God bless you, and take that bag of gold with you, unopened, for it may now stand your father in good stead, and if you do find him, bring him here and I promise you he will never want for a thing, nor will you, my son, for you are still my boy whatever your real parentage may be."

[24]

CHAPTER II

[25]

The stage pulled up in front of a typical western saloon, post office and general store. There was the usual crowd of prospectors, gamblers, cow punchers and trappers assembled to meet the incoming stage. When I scrambled off the top of the old-fashioned coach, and before I had time to shake the alkali dust from my clothes, or moisten my dry and cracked lips, a typical western bully approached me roaring the verses of a song with which he evidently intended to terrify me,

"He blowed into Lanigan swinging a gun
A new one,
A blue one,
A colt's forty-one,
An' swearing
Declaring
Red Rivers 'ud run
Down Alkali Valley,
An' oceans of gore
'ud wash sudden death

[26]

On the sage brush shore,
An' he shot a big hole—"

He got no further with the song. Another man stepped out from the crowd, a very tall, powerful man who would have attracted attention in any garb in any place by his distinguished appearance, who with little ceremony rudely brushed the roughneck to one side, and my instinct told me the handsome stranger could be no other than Big Pete Darlinkel.

My! my! what a man he was! Looked as if he just stepped out of one of Fred Remington's pictures, or Buffalo Bill's Wild West Show, or slipped from between the leaves of a volume of Captain Mayne Reid's "Scalp Hunters"—Big Pete was evidently a hold-over from another age. He would have fitted perfectly and with nicety in a picture of Davy Crockett's men down in old Texas. He seemed, however, perfectly at home in this border town, and I noted that the most hard-boiled and toughest men in the crowd treated him with marked respect and deference. [27]

Pete was a wilderness fop and a dandy, and evidently was as careful of his clothes as a West Point cadet. In dress he affected the old-fashioned picturesque garb of the mountains. His appearance filled me with wonder and admiration; he stood six feet two or three inches in his moccasins, straight as an arrow and lithe as a cat.

His costume consisted of a tunic of dressed deer skin, smoked to the softness of the finest flannels. He wore it belted in at the waist, but open at the breast and throat where it fell back like a sailor's collar into a short cape covering the shoulders. Underneath was the undershirt of dressed fawn skin; his leggins and moccasins were of the same material as his hunting shirt, and on his head he wore a fox skin cap; the fox's head adorned with glass eyes ornamented the front and the tail hung like a drooping plume over the left shoulder.

Big Pete Darlinkel was a blonde, and his golden hair hung in sunny curls upon his massive shoulders; a light mustache, soft yellow beard, with a pair of the deepest, clearest, most innocent baby-like blue eyes, all made a face such as an angel might have after years of exposure to sun and wind. [28]

Not only are Big Pete's revolvers gold mounted, but the shaft of his keen-edged knife is rich with figures, rings, and stars filed from gold coins and set in the horn. The very stock of his long, single-barreled rifle is inlaid like an Arab's gun, and, as for his buckskin hunting suit, it is a mass of embroidery and colored quills from his beaded moccasins to the fringed cape of his shirt.

Big Pete was a dandy, fond of color, fond of display; yet in spite of all this he wore absolutely nothing for decoration alone, but every article of use about his person was ornamented to an oriental degree. Gaudy and rich as his costume was when viewed in detail, as a whole it harmonized not only with Pete, his hair, his complexion, his weapons, but with whatever natural objects surrounded him. [29]

Big Pete also seemed to know me instinctively and approached with a graceful and swinging step; holding out his hand he greeted me in a low, soft, well-modulated voice with, "Howdy, kid; yes, I'm Big Pete and allow you are the tenderfoot dude from New York what wants to shoot big game, an' reckon you'd like to meet the wild mountain man? Well, he's a queer one, I tell you. He's got us all buffaloesd out this-a-way, most of us don't care to meet him close up and we give him wide range when we cut his trail."

That was Big Pete's greeting. Of course, I had not told him of my real interest in this mysterious man of the mountains, only suggesting that I would like to do some big game shooting and see the spooky hunter.

"Well," I answered, "I would like to get a record elk head to take home to dad. As for the mountain wildman, I wish you'd tell me more about him, he is awfully interesting."

"Tell you more? Well, sho, I reckon I can tell you more than most people round these parts for he makes my game park his stampin' grounds every onct in a while, an' let me tell you he hunts some peculiar, he do, he's half man and half wolf—but shucks, I won't spoil the show, you will see how he hunts for yourself if you stay here long. Glory be, but he's got me some bashful and shy. But mosey along and I'll hist yore stuff on this here cayuse while you let them tha' dogs out of their chicken coop boxes. You can cache your dude duds in the Emporium general store over yonder next to Squinty Quinn's saloon, an' then we're off for the hills. I'll yarn about this Wild Hunter while we hit the trail." [30]

An hour spent in Grave Stone gave me an opportunity to wash myself and change my clothes for some that would be more substantial for out-of-door wear, start several letters east telling of my safe arrival, buy the things I had overlooked, store my surplus clothes with the postmaster at the general store, and repack my kit for pony travel. Then, after watching Big Pete skilfully throw the diamond hitch, we were off for the hills and our first camp. I hoped that I was on my way to find my real father and unravel the mystery that surrounded my strange babyhood. But I little guessed what adventures I was to have or the strange things I was to see before my quest was ended. [31]

We traveled fast all the remaining portion of the afternoon and toward evening we made camp and for the first time in my life I slept under the sky. At the end of the fifth day we reached the secret and narrow opening of a big valley or "park" in the midst of a wild tumble of mountains. Big Pete said we would pitch our tent in the park.

"Tha's plenty of signs 'round too an' if we loosen t' dogs p'raps we kin stir up a mountain lion or collar some fresh meat t' start camp with," said he as he slid off his horse and took the leashes off the dogs.

It took us but a short time to arrange our camp, then Big Pete followed by the frisking dogs slipped silently into the woods. He was gone scarcely a quarter of an hour when he reappeared again without the dogs, motioned for me to get my gun and follow him. [32]

"Tha's elk signs all bout," he said, "an' the muts broke away on a fresh trail. Now you an' me'll climb through that draw yonder and hide out on the runway till they drive an elk in gun shot. Come along."

I followed eagerly and presently we had climbed through a thickly grown poplar grove and found a suitable hiding place among the small poplars. We had the wind right and a clear view of most of the open park. Big Pete stooped down and motioned for me to do likewise.

I quietly crouched beside him and waited—waited until my legs were cramped, waited until the dampness from the moss struck through the heavy soles of my tenderfoot shoes and chilled my feet; waited until my arm was so numb that it felt like a piece of lead—then, in spite of the danger of incurring Big Pete's displeasure and in spite of my dread of being thought a dude tenderfoot, I changed my position, rubbed life into my arm and assumed an easier pose. [33]

In front of us was a small lake, deep, dark and unruffled. All around the edge was a natural wharf formed from the gigantic trunks of trees which had fallen for ages into the lake and been washed by wind and waves and forced by winter ice into such regular order and position along the shore that their arrangement looked like the work of men. Back of this wharf and all about was the wilderness of silent wood; a wilderness enclosed by a wall of mountains, whose lofty heads were uplifted far above the soft white clouds that floated in the blue sky overhead and were mirrored in the lake below. An eagle, on apparently immovable wings, soared over the lake in spiral course. As I watched the bird its wings seemed suddenly endowed with life. At the same instant my guide gave a low grunt of warning.

"What is it?" I asked in a whisper, for there was a strange expression in my companion's eyes. [34]

"It's—it's him, so help me!—Keep yer ears open and yer meat-trap shut!" growled Pete.

I did so. The trained ear of the hunter had detected the sound of crackling twigs and swishing branches made by some animals in rapid motion.

"Ah!" I exclaimed, "the dogs. You startled me; I thought it was Indians."

"I wish it was nothing wuss," muttered my guide, as he examined his weapons with a critical eye and loosened the cartridges for his revolvers in his belt to make sure that they would be easy to pluck out.

"Those hain't our dogs, mister," he remarked after he had examined his whole arsenal.

As I again fixed my attention on the noise, in place of the resonant voice of the hounds, I heard nothing but the crackling of branches, with an occasional half-suppressed wolf-like yelp.

Big Pete turned pale and muttered, "It's them for sartin; it's them agin! And I hain't been drinkin', nuther!" [35]

Big Pete Darlinkel remained crouching in exactly the same pose he had first assumed, but his face looked sallow and worn. I marveled. Was this big westerner really awed by the situation we were facing? What disaster impended?

My guide's eyes were fixed upon an opening in the woods and I knew that something would soon bound from that spot. I could hear the crashing of brush and half-suppressed wolf-like yelps, followed by a pause, then a rushing noise, and out leaped as beautiful a bull elk as I had ever seen—in fact the first I had ever seen at close range in his native wilderness. I had only time to take note of his muscular neck, clean cut limbs, his grand branching antlers, and—not my dogs but a pack of *immense black wolves* at his heels before I instinctively brought my gun to my shoulder. But before I could draw a bead Big Pete struck it, knocking the muzzle up.

"Hist!" he exclaimed, pointing to the bird. [36]

The eagle screamed, descended like a thunderbolt and skilfully avoiding the branching antlers, struck the bull, driving one talon into the neck and the other into the back, flapping its huge wings as it tore with its beak at the body of the elk like a trained "*bear coote*."

I was thunderstruck. The evident partnership of the wolves and bird needed explanation and it was not long in coming. A shrill whistle pierced the air, the black wolves immediately ceased to worry the elk, the eagle soared overhead, and for an instant the elk stood confused, then leaped high in the air and fell dead. The next moment I heard the crack of a rifle and saw a puff of blue smoke across the lake.

"That's no ghost," I said, when partly recovered from my astonishment.

"Wait," said Pete laconically.



The eagle screamed, descended like a thunderbolt ... and struck the bull

Not long afterward there was a movement among the wolves and, noiselessly as a panther the figure of a man lithe and youthful in every movement slipped to the side of the dead elk. He made no noise, uttered no word to the fierce black animals that sat with their red tongues hanging from their panting jaws, but without a moment's hesitation whipped out a knife and with a dexterity and skill that brought the color to Big Pete's face, proceeded to take the coat off the wapiti, while the great eagle perched upon the branching antlers. The skin was removed and with equal dexterity all the best parts of the meat were skilfully detached and packed in the green hide, after which, removing a large slice of red flesh, the strange hunter held up one finger. One of the wolves gravely walked up to him, received the morsel, gulped it down and retired. Each in turn was fed, then the great bird flopped on his shoulder and was fed from his hand, and before I could realize what had happened the man, the wolves and the eagle had disappeared, leaving nothing but the dismembered carcass of the elk to remind us of the strange episode.

[37]

CHAPTER III

[38]

To say that the whole spectacle that I had just witnessed startled me would be stating it mildly indeed. The strange appearance of this big, powerful, smooth shaven man in a buckskin hunting costume with a retinue of black wolves and a trained eagle, the mysterious manner of his hunting and his coming and going, aroused in me great interest and curiosity and I could realize the effect it evidently had upon Big Pete's superstitious mind in spite of the fact that the big fellow was accustomed to facing almost any sort of danger. As for me, I could not myself prevent the creeping chills from running down my spine whenever I thought of the wild man.

Could it be possible that this strange, half-wild man of the mountains, this killer, this master of a wolf pack, could be in any way connected with my father? I wondered, and as I wondered I found that a vague fear of this mad man who despite his reputed age seemed as youthful and as agile as a man in his thirties, was gripping me. Perhaps the strangeness of the wilderness park added to my awe, for certainly one could expect almost anything supernatural to happen in the twilight of the forest of giant trees, whose interlacing branches overhead shut out the light of heaven.

[39]

Recovering somewhat from my astonishment and surprise, I realized that what I had witnessed, strange though it appeared, was not a supernatural occurrence. I knew that it was a real gun I had heard, real smoke I had seen, real man, real bird, real elk, and real wolves.

"But, Pete," I exclaimed, as a sudden thought struck me, "what's become of our dogs?"

"Better ask them black fiends up the mountains. I reckon you won't see them tha' hounds of yours agin."

And I never did, but having hunted the wolf with cowboys and having been a witness to their extraordinary biting power, I knew the fate that must necessarily befall a couple of ordinary hounds when overtaken by half a dozen full-grown wolves. On such occasions we do not spend much time in grief over a loss of any kind, "it taint according to mountain law," Pete would say.

[40]

"Reckon we had better swipe some of that elk before the coyotes get at it," growled Pete. "The wild mountainman knows the good parts, but an elk is an elk, and one wild man, even if he is a giant, can't carry off all the good meat, not by a long shot."

"He may come back," I suggested.

"Not he," said Pete. "He's too stuck up for that. When he wants more, them tha' black demons and that voodoo bird of his'n will get 'em for him, and he's a hanging his long legs off'ner a rock some whar smoking a long cigar."

"Dod rot him," growled Pete. "Why couldn't he leave a piece of hide to carry the meat in and the stomach to cook it in? That's the fust time I ever stayed long 'nough to see him collar his meat, though they say he do eat the game raw, but I reckon that's a lie, leastwise he didn't do't this time." [41]

With a good square meal of the locoed hunter's elk under our belts and a rousing camp fire before which to toast our shins, both the big westerner and I felt a little more natural and comfortable, but our conversation turned again to this wild hunter of the mountains.

I could see that the mysterious old man with his wolf pack and eagle aroused almost every possible form of superstition in Big Pete and I confess that I was not free from some of it myself. The guide was certain that the man was either a ghost or a reincarnated devil, and he displayed no uncertain signs of awe.

"I tell you," said Pete, "he's a devil. He's over a hundred years old, for my dad says he seed him, an' an Injun before dad's time told him about him. They are all skeered t' death o' him. An' I don't blame 'em. He's a shore enough hant and them tha' houn's o' his'n is devils in wolf skins. Jumping Gehoosaphats, ef they shed ever cut my trail I reckon I'd just lay right down an' die," and Big Pete actually shuddered at the possibility. [42]

"Why, young feller," he went on, "that ol' man shoots gold bullets out o' a real Patrick Mullen gun."

"A Mullen gun, Pete?" I cried, "how do you know, man; speak for goodness sake!"

"I don't know it's a Patrick Mullen and guess it tain't one 'cause a Patrick Mullen rifle would cost a thousand or more. But the old Injun, Beaver Tail, says, someone told his father and his father told him that et is a Patrick Mullen gun an' is a special make inlaid with gold and silver, an' all ornamented up, an' built for an ol' muzzle-loadin' flint-lock. Now Mullen never made no flint-lock rifles that I hear'n tell of, his specialty be shotguns an' if he made this rifle I'm ganderplucked if I cud tell how this spook got it." [43]

"Unless the wild Hunter might be a relative of old Patrick Mullen," I said, thinking aloud, and gasping at the thought, for the description of the rifle somehow impressed me again with the possibility that this wild man of the mountains might himself be Donald Mullen, and *my own father!*

"Why do you say that, kid?" asked Big Pete with a queer look in his eyes.

"Oh, I don't know, I was just wondering to myself. But what makes you think he's a supernatural being, and, Pete, does this wild loony hunter look at all like me?"

"Super what? Say when did you swallow a dictionary?—Oh, you mean what makes me think he's a devil. No, he don't favor you none," he added with a grin, "he's a *handsome* devil, although he's done terrified every white man, an' Injun, in these parts half t' death, so most of 'ems afeared to come back here at all. Men have gone in the park jest to get this wild man's scalp, but they've done come back scared yaller an' they ain't opened their trap much about him since nuther. They do say he spits fire an' chaws his meat offen the bone an' then cracks the bones like a dog an' swallows it all. They do say, too, that he roars like forty devils with their tails cut off when he gits mad an' some say as when he wants t' git som wha' in a hurry he jest grabs aholt o' the feet o' tha' there thunder bird and she flies off with him and draps him anywha' he asks her to—Nope, I hain't seen none of these things myself but others say they has, an' believe me, I'm plumb cautious when travelin' these parts alone. Howsomever, he hain't yet skeered me 'nough to make my ha'r come out by the roots," said Pete with a yawn. "There, kick that back log over so's the fire can lick at t'other side; now let's turn in." [44]

CHAPTER IV

 [45]

Big Pete and I spent several weeks in our charming little camp at the lower end of the park, for my guide decided that despite the recent presence of the wild hunter, here would be a good place to get a shot at some black-tail deer. In fact we saw signs of those animals all about and my guide was only looking for fresh indication to start out on our last hunt before we made our way deeper into the wilderness.

On the third day of our stay I was returning to camp with my shotgun over my shoulder and a brace of sage grouse in my hand, when I came upon Big Pete in a swail about a mile from camp. He was bending low and examining fresh signs when he saw me.

"Howdy, kid, here's some doin's. Shall we foller him?"

"Of course, Pete; what are we here for, the mountain air?" I answered. [46]

"No," answered Pete, in his deep, low voice, "we're here for game," and off he started, but slowly and with great caution. I felt impatient, but restrained myself, saying nothing and continued to follow my big guide who now moved with the most painstaking care. Not a twig broke beneath his moccasins as with panther-like step and crouching form he led me through a lot of young trees over a rocky place until we struck a small spring with a soft muddy margin. Here Pete came to a sudden halt. I asked him why he did not go on, and he pointed to a ledge of rock that ran up the mountain side diagonally with a flat, natural roadbed on top, graded like a stage road but unlike a traveled road, ending in a bunch of underwood and brush about a hundred yards ahead.

Above the ledge of the rocks was a steep declivity of loose shale sprinkled over with large and small boulders of radically different formations, and in no manner resembling the friable, uncertain bed upon which they rested. [47]

These boulders undoubtedly showed the result of the grinding and polishing of an ancient, slow-moving glacier, but some other force had deposited them in the present position.

"He's in tha'," whispered Pete.

"Who, the wild mountain man?" I asked.

"No," answered my guide, "th' grizzly."

"The what?" I almost shouted.

"Th' grizzly," answered Pete; "what do you think we've been following?"

"Black-tailed deer," I said softly, with my eyes glued on the thicket.

"Well, tenderfoot, here's the trail of that tha' *deer*, and he hain't been gone by here mor'n nor a week ago, nuther."

I looked and there in the soft mud was the print of a foot, a human-looking foot, but for the evenness in the length of the toes and the sharpness and length of the toe nails. Yes, there was another difference, and that was the size. It was the footprint of a savage Hercules, the track of an enormous grizzly bear, and the soft mud that had dripped from the big foot was still undried on the leaves and grass when Pete pointed it out to me. [48]

"Well, Pete, don't forget your promise that I am to have first shot at all big game," I whispered with my best effort at coolness, but my heart was thumping against my ribs at a terrific rate.

"But—why, bless you old man!" I whispered excitedly as I looked at my gun, "I am armed only with a shotgun."

"Tha's all right," replied the big trapper complacently; then, with a quick motion, he whipped out his keen-edged knife and snatching one of my cartridges he severed the shell neatly between the two wads which separated the powder and shot; that is, a wad in each piece of the cartridge was exposed by the cut.

Guided by the faint longitudinal seam where the edges of the colored paper join on the shell, Big Pete carefully fitted the two parts of the cartridge together exactly as they were before being cut apart. Breaking my gun, he slipped the mutilated ammunition into the unchoked barrel. [49]

"Tha'," he grunted, "tha's better than a bullet at short range, an'll tar a hole in old Ephraim big enough to put your arm through."

He cut two more in the same manner, saying, "Be darned kerful not to get excited and put them in your choke barl, or tha' may be trouble."

Hunting a grizzly with a shotgun and bird shot was not my idea of safe sport, but I was too much of a moral coward to acknowledge to Pete that I was frightened. Pete examined his gun, ran his finger over the cartridges in his belt, and went through all the familiar motions which to him were unconscious but always foretold danger ahead.

"You drap on your prayer hinges behind that tha' nigger head," said Pete, "and you will have a dead shot at the brute, an' I'll go up and roll a stone down the mountain side and follow it as fast as I kin, so as to be ready to help you if you need it; but you ought to drap him at first shot at short range. Yer must drap him, yer must or I allow tha'll be a right smart of a scrap here, and don't yer forget it!" [50]

"This is no Christmas turkey shooting, young feller, so look sharp," and with a noiseless tread Pete vanished in the wood, while I with beating heart and bulging eyes watched the thicket at the end of the ledge. I had not long to wait before I heard a blood-curdling yell and then crash! crash! crash! came a big boulder tearing down the mountain side. It reached a point just over the thicket, struck a small pine tree, broke the tree and leaped high into the air, then crashed into the middle of the brush.

Following with giant leaps came Big Pete Darlinkel down the rocky declivity, but I only looked that way for one instant, then my eyes were again fixed on the thicket, and in my excitement I arose to a standing position. There was but a momentary silence after the fall of the boulder before I heard the rustling of sticks and leaves, saw the top of the bushes sway as some heavy body moved beneath, then there appeared a head, and what a head it was! Bigger than all [51]

outdoors! I aimed my gun, but my body swayed and the end of my shotgun described a large circle in the air. I knew that my position was serious, but my nerves played me false.

I had never before faced a grizzly. I heard Big Pete's voice calling to me to drop behind the rock, but I only stood there with a dogged stupidity, trying to aim my gun at a mark which seemed to me as big almost as a barn-door.

I heard Pete give a sudden cry then there was a rattle of stones and dirt on the ledge in front of the mountain of brownish hair that was advancing in sort of side leaps or bounds like a big ball.

The bear came to a sudden stop, and to my horror I saw the form of my friend shoot over the edge of the overhanging rock right in the path of the grizzly. It all flashed through my mind in a moment. Pete in his haste to reach me had lost control of himself and slid with the rolling stones and dirt over the mountain side, a fall of at least twenty-five feet!

[52]

Instantly my nerve returned and I rushed madly up the incline to rescue my companion. I bounded between the branches of some stout saplings, they parted as my body struck them but sprung together again before my leg had cleared the V-shaped opening.

My foot was imprisoned and I fell with a heavy thud on my face. For an instant I was dazed, but even in my dazed state I was fully conscious of Pete's impending peril, and I kicked and struggled blindly to free myself. My gun had been flung from my hand in my fall and was out of my reach. Then to my horror I heard the howl the wolf gives when game is in sight, and even half blind as I was I saw dark, dog-like forms sweep by me; I heard the scream of an eagle; I heard a snarling and yelping, the sounds of a struggle—I ceased to kick, wiped the blood from my eyes and looked ahead.

[53]

There lay Big Pete Darlinkel, dead or unconscious, and within ten feet of him stood the giant bear surrounded by a vicious pack of gaunt red-mouthed wolves. The bear made a rush and a shadow passed over the ground; I heard the sound of a large body rushing swiftly through the air, and an immense eagle struck the bear like a thunderbolt; at the same instant the wolves attacked him from all sides; then there was a whistle keen and clear; the wolves retreated; the bird again soared aloft; the bear made several passes in the air in search of the bird, fell forward again on all fours, rose on its hind legs and killed a wolf with one sweep of its great paw.

The bear now made a dash at the giant leader of the pack, only to fall forward, dead, with its ugly nose across Big Pete's chest.

Then I remembered hearing the crack of a rifle, and knew that the Wild Mountain Man had saved our lives. I tried to rise but found my ankle so badly sprained that I could not stand on it.

[54]

Suddenly a low voice with a hint of an Irish accent said, "Sit down, stranger, while I look to your mate," and I saw the tall lithe figure of a man clothed in buckskin bending over Pete.

"Only stunned, friend," said he, and I heard no more. The blow on my head, combined with the pain from my ankle was too much for me, and now that the danger was over it was a good time to faint, and I took advantage of it.

How long I remained unconscious I do not know, but when my eyes opened again it was night; through the interlacing boughs overhead the stars were shining brightly, my head was neatly bandaged and so was my foot and ankle. I could hear our horses cropping grass near by. I raised my head and there lay Pete; he was alive I knew by his snores that issued from his nose, and we were in our own camp; but—what are those animals by our camp fire? Wolves! gaunt, shaggy wolves!

[55]

I hastily arose to a sitting posture, but my alarm subsided when in the dim light of the fire I could trace the outline of another man's figure, and on a stick close to the stranger's head roosted a giant bird.

Could it be that this wild man of the mountain—possibly my own father—was camping with us?

CHAPTER V

[56]

"Moseyed, by gum! I'll be tarnally tarnashuned if that terri-fa-ca-cious spook hain't pulled out!" was the exclamation that awakened me the morning after our adventure with the bear.

Lazily opening my eyes I gazed a moment at the sun just peeping over the mountain, then closed them again; but when I attempted to change my position a sharp pain in my ankle thoroughly awakened me. Still I lay quiet because it was some time before I could collect my scattered senses and separate in my mind the real incident and the dream phantasms.

The pain in my ankle, the swelled and irritated condition of my nose plainly proved to me that there was no dream about my injuries, but I discovered that my head and leg were neatly bandaged with strips of fine linen. I sat for a while busily collecting the incidents of the past twenty-four hours, arranging them in my mind in their proper order and place. I cut out the dream portion from the realities with very little trouble until I reached the part where I had awakened in the night and had seen the wolves, the eagle and the Wild Hunter. I could not be sure whether that was a dream or reality. Had I seen this strange old man with his eagle and his

[57]

wolf pack beside our camp fire or had I dreamed it? Had this hobgoblin man, who might be my own father, rescued me from death at the claws of the grizzly and bound my wounds for me, or was that but a dream too? Had not Big Pete saved me perhaps and cared for me afterward?

"Pete, old fellow," I said presently, rising to my elbow, "who brought me to camp? Who killed that bear? Who saved our lives?"

"The Wild Hunter," replied Pete gravely. "He bathed my head with some sort of good smelling stuff and, though I am as heavy as a dead buffaler, toted me to camp; he 'lowed that I was all sort of shuk up and a little hazy; he fixed my blanket, then he fotched you in on his shoulders just as if you was a dead antelope, fixed you up with bandages torn from handkerchiefs in your pocket, gave you a drink which you didn't seem to appreciate, but just swallowed like you were asleep, then he laid you out. I had my eye peeled on him but he said nary a word, an' when we wuz both all comfortable he pulled out a long cigar, sot down by the fire and was smoking tha' with his bird and his wolves around him when I went to sleep.

[58]

"He cut his bullets out, as he allus does," muttered Pete a little while later.

"Who cut what bullets?" I asked.

"Whomsoever cud I mean but th' Wild Hunter, and wha's tha' been any bullets lately but in th' b'ar?" queried my companion.

"Yes, of course," I admitted, "but why do you suppose he cut out the bullets?"

"Wal, I reckon tha' might be right scarce and he haster be kinder sparing with them. I calculate you'd like to have a hatful of them balls, leastwise most folks would; cause the Wild Hunter don't use no common low-flung lead for his bullets, no-sir-ree bob-horsefly! Tain't good 'nuff for a high-cock-alorum like him—*he shoots balls of virgin gold!*"

[59]

But I was more interested in what had become of this strange man than in the sort of projectiles rumor said that he used in his gun and so dismissed the subject with a request for further information about our rescuer.

"This morning when I opened my peepers," Pete continued, "I t'ought maybe the Wild Hunter had only gone off on a tramp; but he's done clared out for good, and tuk his wolves and bird with him. I'm some glad he took th' wolves, I don't sorter like the look of their mean eyes; they do say that he is a wolf himself and the head of the pack."

"What's that, Pete? Steady, old man, now let's go slow."

"All right; tha's wha' I mean ter do. 'Cause it hain't a varmint natur' to help men folks, and he done helped us, and no mistake, and left us the bulk of the b'ar too,—only took the claws, teeth and tenderloin or two for himself and pack; that is, if he be a wolf. But we will settle that if your foot will let you walk a bit."

[60]

"How far?" I asked.

"Only over yan way to the first piece of wet ground, and the trail leads down to tha' spring tha', and tha' is quite a right smart bit of muddy swail beyond."

"All right, I'll try it," I exclaimed. But I could not touch my foot on the ground, and it was not until my guide had made me a crutch of a forked branch, padded with a piece of fur, that I was able to go limping along after Big Pete.

We followed the trail left by the Wild Hunter to the spring. The trail after that was plain, even to my inexperienced eyes; and when we reached the muddy spot the print of the moccasined feet and the dog-like tracks of the wolves were distinctly visible.

[61]

But look at Big Pete!

As motionless as a statue, with a solemn face he stoops with a rigid figure pointing to the trail! I hastened to his side and saw that the moccasin prints ceased in the middle of an open, bare, muddy place and beyond were nothing but the dog-like tracks of the wolves.

I looked up and all around; there were no overhanging branches that a man could swing himself upon, no stones that he could leap upon—nothing but the stragglng bunches of ferns; but here in this open spot the Wild Hunter vanished.

We walked back in silence, for I had nothing to say, and Pete did not volunteer any further information.

CHAPTER VI

[62]

To have one's nose all but broken, both eyes blackened and a twisted ankle is a sad misfortune wherever it occurs, but when such a thing happens to a fellow many weary miles from the nearest human habitation and in a howling wilderness it might be considered anything but pleasant. Yet, strange as it may appear, among the most pleasant and precious memories I have stored away in my mind, only to be tapped upon special occasions, is the memory of the glorious

days spent nursing my bruises and lolling around that far-away camp. Sometimes I listened to the quaint yarns of my unique and interesting guide or idly watched the changing colors and effects which the sun and the atmosphere produced on the snow-capped mountains of Darlinkel's Park. I made friends with our little neighbors the rock-chuck, whose home was in the base of the cliff back of the spring, and became intimate with the golden chipmunk and its pretty little black and white cousin, the four-striped chipmunk, both of which were common and remarkably tame about camp.

[63]

Back of the camp in the dark shade of the evergreens there was a bark mound composed entirely of the fragments of the conifera cones, which Pete said was the squirrel's dining room. This mound contained at least four good cart-loads of fragments and all of it was the work of the impudent little blunt-nosed red squirrels, which were plentiful in the woods.

How long it took these small rodents to heap such a mass of material together I was unable to calculate, but the mound was as large as some of the shell heaps made by the ancient oyster-eating men and left by them along our coast from Florida to Maine.

The numerous magpies seemed to be conscious of my admiration of their beautiful piebald plumage and to take every opportunity to show off its iridescent hues to the best advantage in the sunlight.

[64]

Pete evidently thought I was a chap of very low taste, with a great lack of discrimination in the choice of my friends among the forest folk, and he could see no reason for my intimacy with "all th' outlaws and most rascally varmints of the park."

Truth compels me to admit that the pranks of some of my little friends were often mischievous and annoying, but they were also humorous and entertaining and I laughed when the "tallow-head" jay swooped down and snatched a tid-bit from Pete's plate just as he was about to eat it, and when the irate trapper threw his plate at the camp robber it was a charming sight to see a number of birds flutter down to feast upon the scattered food.

The loud-mouthed, self-asserting fly-catcher in the cottonwood tree learned to know my whistle, and whenever I attempted to mimic him he would send back a ringing answer. The charming little lazulii buntings were tamer than the irritating dirty English sparrows at home.

[65]

It was interesting to notice how quickly all our little wild neighbors learned to know that the sound produced by banging on a tin plate meant dough-god and other good things at our camp, and as they came rustling among the grasses or fluttering from bush and trees they showed more fear of each other than they did of Pete and me.

When the myriads of bright stars would twinkle in the blue black sky or the great round-faced moon climb over the mountain tops to see what was doing in the park, the birds and chipmunks were quiet, but then the big pack-rats, with squirrel-like tails, would troop out from their secret caves and invade the camp.

In the gray dawn, while sleeping in a tent, I often awakened to hear something scamper up its steep side and then laughed to see the shadow of a comical little body toboggan down the canvas. Our pocket-knives, compasses and all other small objects were never safe unless securely packed away out of reach of these nocturnal marauders.

[66]

Our conversations around the camp fire evenings were highly interesting too, for Big Pete was a fluent talker with a wealth of stories of the Great West at his tongue's end. Indeed, the story of his family and their migration west was one that fascinated me. His father had been a trapper in the old days; he had done his share of roaming the mountains, prospecting and making his strikes, small and large, fighting Indians and living the strenuous life of the border pioneer. He had found the woman he afterward married unconscious under an overturned wagon of an emigrant train that had been raided by the Indians, and after nursing her back to health in his mining shack, had married her. With money he had worked from the "diggin's" he had acquired, by grants from the government, the beautiful and expansive mountain park where he had planned to develop a ranch. He never went very far with his project, however, for a raiding party of Indians caught him alone in the mountains and his wife found his body pinned to the ground with arrows. The shock of his tragedy killed Big Pete's mother soon after, and the young Peter Darlinkel, then three years old, went to a nearby settlement to be brought up by an uncle and a squaw aunt. Pete became prospector, scout, trapper and hunter, using this beautiful park that became his as a result of the passing of his father, as a private game preserve, so to speak. That is, it was private except for the intrusion of the Wild Hunter and his black wolf pack.

[67]

In a fragmentary way Big Pete told me this story and other interesting tales of this wild western country, but mostly our conversation turned to this old man of the mountains who was such a mystery to everyone, even to Big Pete, but who, despite the lugubrious reputation, had proved a kindly gentleman and a good friend to me.

[68]

There were no visible signs of a change in the weather which had been clear for weeks, and the sky was otherwise clear blue save where the white mares' tails swept across the heavens. But when we sat down to supper that evening I could hear the rumbling of distant thunder. I knew it was thunder for, although the fall of avalanches makes the same noise, avalanches choose the noon time to fall when the sun is hottest and the snows softest. Soon I could see the heads of some dark clouds peering at us over the mountains and before dark the clouds crept over the mountain tops and overcast our sky.

It rained all that night in a fitful manner and came to a stop about four A. M. The wind went down and the air seemed to have lost its vivacity and life; it was a dead atmosphere; we arose from our blankets feeling tired and listless.

While we were eating our breakfast dark clouds again suddenly obscured the heavens and before we had finished the meal big drops of rain set the camp fire spluttering and drove us to the shelter of our tent; then it rained! Lord help us! the water came down in such torrents that on account of the spray we could not see thirty feet; then came hailstones as large as hen's eggs. There was some lightning and thunder, but either the splashing of the water drowned the rumbling or the electric fluid was so far distant that the reports were not loud when they reached us. Suddenly there was a ripping noise, followed by a sort of subdued roar which stampeded our horses from their shelter under a projecting rock and made the earth shudder.

"Earthquake!" I exclaimed.

"Wuss," said Pete, "hit's a landslide."

Instantly a thought went through my brain like a hot bullet and made me shudder.

"Pete," I shouted.

"I'm right hyer, tenderfut, you needn't holler so loud," he answered, and calmly filled his pipe.

I flung myself impulsively on my companion, grasped his big brawny shoulders, and with my face close to his I whispered, "Pete, I believe the slide occurred at the gate."

"Well, hit did sound that-a-way," admitted Pete composedly.

"Pete," I continued, "that butte has caved in on our trail!"

"Wull, tenderfut, we ain't hurt, be we? Tha's plenty of game here fur the tak'n of it and plenty of water, as fine as ever spouted from old Moses' rock, right at hand. If the Mesa's cut our trail we can live well here for a hundred years and not have to chew wolf mutton neither. I don't reckon I can go to York with you just yet," drawled my comrade in a most provokingly imperturbable manner, as he slowly freed himself from my grasp and made for the camp fire, which being to a great extent sheltered by an overhanging rock, was still smouldering in spite of the drenching rain. Raking the ashes until he found a red glowing coal, Pete deftly picked it up and by juggling it from one hand to the other, he conducted the live ember to his pipe-bowl, then he puffed away as calmly as if there was nothing in this world to trouble him.

"If the gate be shut," he resumed, "it will keep out prospectors, tramps and Injuns." With that he went to smoking his red-willow^[1] bark again.

[1] The trappers and Indians made Kil-i-ki-nic, or Kinnikinick, by mixing tobacco with the inside bark of red willow, which is the common name for the red osier of the dogwood family. EDITOR.

But I could not view the situation so complacently, and when the rain had ceased as suddenly as it began, with some difficulty I caught my horse and made my way to the gate, to discover that my worst fears were realized; a large section of the cliff had split off the Mesa and slid down into the narrow gateway completely filling the space and leaving a wall of over one hundred feet of sheer precipice for us to climb before we could escape from our Eden-like prison.

Again a wave of superstitious dread swept over me as I viewed the tightly closed exit, a dread that perhaps after all there was more to Big Pete's superstitions about the Wild Hunter than I dared to admit, else why should that cliff which had stood for thousands of years take this opportunity to split off and choke up the ancient trail?

The longer I questioned myself, the less was my ability to answer. I sat on a stone and for some time was lost in thought. When at length I looked up it was to see Big Pete with folded arms silently gazing at the barricaded exit and the muddy pool of water extending for some distance back of the gateway into the park.

"Well, tenderfut, you was dead right in your judication. The gate air shut sure 'nuff. Our horses ain't likely to take the back trail and leave us, that's sartin."

"Oh, Pete," I exclaimed, "how will we ever get out? Must we spend the remainder of our lives here?"

"It do look as if we'd stop hyer a right smart bit," he admitted, "maybe till this hyer holler between the mountains all fills with water agin like it was onct before, I reckon. Don't you think that we'd better get busy and build a Noah's Ark?"

"Pete, you'd joke if the world came to an end. But seriously I think we might move our camp back to the far end of your park."

CHAPTER VII

One day after we had selected our new camp, I took my rod along and wandered into the wonderful forest of ancient trees. There I seated myself on a log to think over my experience.

Somehow my own trials and ambitions seemed small, trivial and not worth while when I looked upon those grand trees standing silently on guard as they were standing when Columbus was busy smashing a hard-boiled egg to make it stand on end. Yes, naturalists tell us some of these same trees were standing before the New Testament was written and then as now their branches concealed their lofty tops and formed a screen through which the powerful rays of the noon-day sun are filtered, refined and subdued to a dreamy twilight below, a twilight in which the soft green mosses and lace-like ferns thrive into luxuriant growth.

It was so still and quiet in that forest that the silence seemed to hurt my ears and I found myself listening to see if I could not hear the deep dark blue blossoms of the fringed gentians whispering scandals about the flaming Indian paint brushes that flourished in the opening in the woods where the sun's ray could reach and warm the dark earth. As I listened I could not help but speculate a great deal as to the possibilities of the odd old man of this forest being in some way connected with my father's history, but the story of the wolf-man as given to me by my big companion was so varied and so mixed with the superstitions of the Indians and trappers who had come in contact with him, or had seen him and his weird wolf pack roaming the mountains, that I could not in any way take it as the basis for a solution of the problem. [75]

Indeed, the more Big Pete told me the less I believed that this strange and probably mad man could be my father. In truth, the only real clue or even faint reason I had for believing that he owned the missing "Patrick Mullen" was because this gun at a distance seemed to correspond with the description of the Mullen's gun. It was a faint clue indeed and sometimes seemed not worth investigation. Yet when I began to doubt the possibility an unexplained impulse or force kept urging me on to believe that if I but persisted and found an opportunity to examine this gun it would prove to be the one I sought, and if I had a chance to talk to this strange Wild Hunter much of the mystery that surrounded my own babyhood would be cleared up, so I found myself earnestly longing for a real interview with this mysterious creature. [76]

The more I thought of it the more I was inclined to believe that I was on the right track, until at last convinced that this was so, I cried aloud, "I have found him!"

"Who! Who!" queried a startled owl, as it peered down at me from its hiding place in the dense foliage of a cedar far above.

"Never mind who, you old rascal," I laughingly replied, and picking up my fishing-rod I parted the underbrush to start on my way through the wood for some trout, but suddenly halted when I found myself staring into the face of a huge timber wolf. The beast's lips were drawn back displaying its gleaming fangs, its back hair was as erect as the cropped mane of a pony, its mongolian eyes shone green through their narrow slits and its whole attitude seemed to say, "Well, now that you have found me, what do you propose to do?" [77]

Now, boys, do not make any mistake about me, I am not a hero and never posed as one; in truth my timidity at times amounts to cowardice, a fact which I usually keep to myself, but I never was afraid of wolves until I so unexpectedly met this one. It is needless to say that I have no hair on my back, it is as bare as that of any other fellow's, nevertheless, on this occasion I could distinctly feel my bristles rise from the nape of my neck to the end of my spine, just the same as those on the oblique-eyed, shaggy monster whose snapping teeth were so near my face. [78]

Everybody is familiar with the fact that people who have had limbs amputated often complain of pains or itching in the missing members. My missing back hair, the hair which my ancestors lost by the slow process of evolution, the hair which grew on the back of the "missing link," stood on end at the sight of this wolf. However, this fear was but momentary and when my courage returned I lifted my rod case in a threatening manner, and the wolf slunk away as noiselessly as a shadow, and like a shadow faded out of sight in the dim twilight of the ancient forest. When I reached the open land beyond the forest another surprise awaited me.

Surely this is heaven, I thought as I waded knee-deep among the beautiful flowers of the prairie, starting the sharp pin-tailed grouse, prairie chickens and sage grouse from their retreats and sending the meadow-larks skimming away over flowering billows. Reaching an elevation where I could peer beyond the crests of one of the "ground swells" which furrowed the sea of nodding blossoms, I saw through the stems of the plants, a part of the prairie at first concealed from view, and there appeared to be numerous irregular boulders of dark brown stone scattered around among the vegetation, and the boulders were moving! [79]

Careful scrutiny, however, proved them to be not stones but live buffalo. Big Pete had often told me that these animals lived unmolested by him in the park; but when I realized that I was looking at between three and four hundred real buffalo my heart gave a great jump of joy. I tried to view them so as to take in their details, but the apparently shapeless masses of dark reddish brown wool appeared to have none, unless indeed the comical fur trousers with frayed bottoms on their front legs might be called detail.

Even the faces of the beasts were so concealed by masks of knotted wool that at first I could distinguish neither eyes, noses, horns or ears; but in spite of their ragged trousers and their masked faces, the bison are sublime in their mighty strength and ponderous proportions, and as this was the first wild herd I had ever seen and one of the very few, if not the only one, then extant, I viewed them with the keenest interest. [80]

But the scattered bunches of antelope, which I now noticed were dotting the plains around the buffalo, appealed to my love of the beautiful. Knowing that in other localities these charming

little creatures are rapidly being slaughtered and steadily decreasing in numbers and that all attempts to breed them in captivity have so far failed, they at once absorbed my attention to the exclusion of their larger neighbors.

When we moved our camp to the far side of the lake, Big Pete told me that I could find plenty of trout streams beyond the timber belt, and he also informed me that I could there see the walls of the park and satisfy myself that there was but one trail leading into the preserve.

I do not now recall the sort of walls that were pictured in my mind or know what I really expected to see enclosing Darlinkel's Park, but I do know that when I suddenly emerged from the dark forests into the sunlit prairie, the scene which greeted my vision was not the one painted by my imagination. [81]

Before me stretched an open plain surrounded by mountains arising abruptly from a bed of many colored flowers; they were the same ranges whose snow-covered peaks formed a feature of the landscape at the lake and at our first camp.

Here, however, their appearance was different, as different as the dark forest from the open sunlit prairie. The scene at first did not seem real, it had a sort of a drop-curtain effect that was as familiar to me as the row of footlights and gilded boxes, but never did I expect to see those delicate tints, that blue atmosphere, the fresco colored rocks and all the theatrical properties of a drop-curtain duplicated in nature, yet here it was before me, not a detail wanting, even the impossible mammoth bed of gaudy flowers at the foot of the mountain was here and the numerous cascades had not been forgotten. Well, it does seem wonderful to me that unknown theatrical daubers should know so much more of nature than the public for whom they paint. [82]

But, nature is a bolder artist than even the daring scenic painters; in front of me was a prairie of flowers, acres and acres of waving, undulating masses of color; thousands of Arizona wyetha (wild sunflowers) mingled with the brilliant tips of the fire-weed and clumps of odorous and delicately colored horsemint. There were other flowers unfamiliar to me and hundreds of big blossoms of what I took to be a member of the primrose family. It was in this garden that the buffalo and antelope were grazing.

An old buck antelope saw me and I instantly dropped to the ground and was concealed by the flowering vegetation. I wanted to see the home life of these animals, but was disappointed because of the attention I had attracted. When first discovered the does were browsing with heads down and the kids were playing tag with one another, every once in a while spreading the white hair on their rumps and then lowering the "white flag" again, they apparently used it as a Morse signal system of their own. But now they were all alert and facing me; the bucks had seen something and that something had suddenly disappeared. This must be investigated, so they circled round hesitatingly; the apparition might be a foe but still they *must* satisfy their curiosity and discover what it was of which they had had a moment's glimpse and thus they approached nearer and ever nearer to my place of concealment. [83]

Soon, however, I became aware of the fact that the antelope had unaccountably lost all thought of me and were deeply interested in something else which from their actions I concluded to be recognized as an enemy. It was now apparent that if Big Pete did not hunt the prong-horns someone or something else *did* hunt them. [84]

As a bunch broke away from the scattered groups and came in my direction, making great leaps over the prairie, I detected the cause of their panic in the form of a huge eagle which was keeping pace with and flying over the fleeing prong-horns.

The bird was not more than a dozen feet above the animals' backs and in vain did the poor creatures try to distance their pursuer. At length they scattered, each one taking a course of his own. Then the bird did a strange thing. It singled out the largest buck and persistently following him, it came directly towards me and passed within ten feet of my ambush, the broad wings of the antelope's relentless foe casting a dark shadow over the straining muscles of the beautiful animal's back. I was tempted to drive the bird away or shoot at it with my revolver, but the thought that I had seen that bird before restrained me and the fact that it pursued a strong, healthy buck instead of selecting a weaker and more easy prey convinced me that this eagle had been trained to the hunt and was not a wild^[2] bird, for the immutable law that "labor follows the line of least resistance" holds good with all wild creatures. It was not long before I had to use my field glasses to follow the chase and then I discovered that the poor prong-horn was showing signs of fatigue. It had made a grave error in dashing up an incline and the eagle from his position above knew that the time had come to strike and, like a thunderbolt, it fell, striking its hooked talons in the graceful neck of the terror-stricken antelope. [85]

[2] The late Howard Eaton of Wolf, Wyoming, watched an eagle hunt down a prong-horned buck.
—EDITOR.

Hoping to get a nearer view of the last tragedy, I hastened towards the spot and before I was aware of my position, found myself close to the herd of buffalo. I then saw that these beasts being unaccustomed to man, did not fear him, but on the contrary meant to show fight. As I came to a sudden halt the old bulls began to paw the earth, throwing the dirt up over their backs and bellowing with a low vibrating roar that was terror-inspiring. Then they dropped to their knees, rolled on their backs, got up, shook themselves, licked their noses, "rolled up their tails" into stiff curves, put down their heads and came at me. The cows with their hair standing on end like angry elks and bellowing loudly were not behind their lords in aggressiveness and the comical [86]

little calves came bouncing along after their dame.

Was I frightened? That depends upon one's definition of the word. I was not panic-stricken, but to say that I was not *excited* when I saw those animated masses of dark brown wool come roaring and thundering at me would be to make boast that no one who has had a similar experience would believe.

Fortunately, not far behind me was the hollow or gully already mentioned and I bolted over the edge of it. As soon as the bank concealed my person I ran as I never ran before taking a course at right angles to my original one and leeward of the herd, and at last, out of breath, I rolled over in the weeds and lay there panting and straining my ears to hear the snorting beasts. [87]

My chest felt dry, hot and oppressed from forced and labored breathing, and had the buffalo discovered me I do not think I could have run another step. But the big brutes halted at the edge of the bank and seeing no one in sight walked around pawing and throwing up great clouds of dust and in their rage apparently daring me to come forth. Like a small boy when he hears a challenge from a gang of toughs, I decided that I did not want to fight and lay as quiet as possible among the sunflowers until I had regained my breath. When the buffalo wandered back to their original pasture land I, like a coyote, slunk away and consoled myself with the thought that although I had had my run for my money, at least, I had seen the death of the antelope even if I did miss again seeing the Wild Hunter "collar his game," as Big Pete would have called the act of securing it. Besides this I had a real exciting adventure with good red-blooded American animals and learned the lesson that large horned beasts which have not been taught to fear man are exceedingly dangerous to man. [88]

CHAPTER VIII [89]

Rising abruptly from the prairie was a frowning precipice a thousand or more feet high and above and beyond the top of this cliff, the mountains.

When Big Pete told me that his park was "walled in" he told me the mildest sort of truth; the prairie is the bottom of a wide canyon, in fact everything seems to indicate that the whole park had settled, sunk—"taken a drop" of a thousand or more feet; forming what miners would call a fault.

From the glaciers up among the clouds numerous streams of melted ice came dashing down the sides of the mountain range, fanciful cascades leaping without fear from most stupendous heights spreading out in long horse-tail falls over the face of the cliff, doing everything but looking real. At the foot of each of the falls there was a pool of deep water, in one or two instances the pools were smooth basins hollowed out of solid rock in which the water was as transparent as air and but for the millions of air bubbles caused by the falling water every inch of bottom could be plainly seen by an observer at the brink of the pool. [90]

The trout in these basins were almost as colorless as the water itself (the light color of the fish is due to their chameleon-like power of modifying their hue to imitate their surroundings)—this mimicry is so perfect that after looking into one of these stone basins, the rounded smooth sides of which offered no shade or nook where a trout might hide, I was ready to declare the waters uninhabited but no sooner had my brown hackel or professor settled lightly on the surface of the pool than out from among the air bubbles a fish appeared and seized the fly.

My sprained ankle was now so much improved that upon discovering a diagonal fracture in the face of the cliff, which looked as if offering a foot hold, and feeling reckless, I determined to make the effort to scale the wall at this point. [91]

If the giant "fault" is of comparatively recent occurrence, geologically speaking, it seemed reasonable that there would be trout in the streams above the cliff and the memory of the fact that Pete had reported that both Rocky Mountain sheep and goats were up there decided me to attempt to scale the wall by the fracture. It was a long, hard climb and more than once while I clung to the chance projections or dug my fingers into small cracks and looked down upon the backs of some golden eagle sailing in spirals below me, I regretted making the fool-hardy attempt, but when the top was reached and I saw signs of sheep and had a peep at a white object I took to be a goat, I felt repaid for my arduous climb.

The elevated prairie or table-land on which I found myself corresponded in every important particular with the park below; there were the same natural divisions of prairie and forests, the same erratic boulders, but on account of the difference in elevation there was a corresponding difference in plant life, and most interesting of all to me, there were the trout streams. The tablelands above the park were comparatively level in places where the stream ran almost as quietly as a meadow brook, but these level stretches were interrupted at short distance by foaming rapids, jagged rocks and roaring falls. [92]

My angler's instinct told me that the biggest fish lurked in the deep pools, to reach which it was necessary to creep and worm myself over the open flats of sharp stones and patches of heather, but once on the vantage ground the swish of a trout rod sounded there for the first time since the dawn of Creation.



More than once while I clung to the
chance projection ... I regretted
making the fool-hardy attempt

There was an audible splash at my first cast. My, how that reel did sing! Before I realized it, my fish had reached rapid water and taken out a dangerous amount of line; still I dared not check him too severely among the sharp rocks and swift waters, so I ran along the bank, stumbling over stones, but managing to avail myself of every opportunity to wind in the line until I had the satisfaction of seeing enough line on my reel to prepare me for possible sudden dashes and emergencies.

[93]

Ah! that was a glorious fight, and when at last I was able to steer my tired fish into shallow water I saw there were three of them, one lusty trout on each of my three flies. I had no landing net so I gently slid the almost exhausted fish onto a gravel bar and as I did so I experienced one of those delightful thrills which comes to a fellow's lot but once or twice in a life-time. But it was not because I had captured three at a strike, for I have done that before and since, but I thrilled because they were not only a new and strange kind of trout, but they were of the color and sheen of newly minted gold. Never before had any man seen such trout.

I have since been informed that I had blundered on to water inhabited by the rarest of all game fish, the so-called golden trout, which has since been discovered and which scientists declare to be pre-glacier fish left by some accident of nature to exist in a new world in which all their original contemporaries have long been extinct.

[94]

Think of it! Fish which had never seen an artificial fly nor had any family traditions of experiences with them. It is little wonder that they would jump at a brown hackle, a professor or even a gaudy salmon fly. Why they would jump at a chicken feather! They were ready and eager to bite at any sort of bunco game I saw fit to play upon them. They were veritable hayseeds of the trout family, but when they felt the hook in their lips, the wisest trout in the world could not show a craftier nor half as plucky a fight. They would leap from the water like small-mouthed bass and by shaking their heads, try to throw off the hateful hook.

The constant vigorous exercise of leaping water-falls and forging up boiling rapids had developed these sturdy mountaineer trout into prodigies of strength and endurance. Even now my nerves tingle to the tips of my toes as in fancy I hear my reel hum or see the tip of my five ounce split bamboo bend so as to almost form a circle.

[95]

I fished that stream with hands trembling with excitement and had filled my creel with the rare fish before I began to notice other objects of interest. Suddenly I became aware of the presence of two birds hovering over and diving under the cold water. They were evidently feeding on some aquatic creature which my duller senses could not discern.

Although they were the first of the kind that I had ever seen alive, I at once recognized the feathered visitors to be water ouzels. The birds preceded me on my way along the water course towards camp, and were never quiet a minute. They would hop on a rock in mid-stream and bob up and down in a most solemn but comical manner for a moment before plunging fearlessly into the cold white spray of the falls or the swift dashing current, where they would disappear below the surface only to reappear once more on another rock to bob again.

[96]

A ducking did not trouble the ouzels, for as they came out of the water the liquid rolled in crystal drops from their feathers and their plumage was as dry as if it had never been submerged. The wilder and swifter the cold glacier water ran the more the birds seemed to enjoy it.

The nearer I approached the edge of the precipitous walls, enclosing the valley comprising Big Pete's park, the rougher grew the trail, and as I was picking my way I paused to gaze at the distant purple peaks and watch the sun set in that lonely land as if I was witnessing it for the first time. As my eyes roamed over the stupendous distance and unnamed mountains I felt my own puny insignificance, as who has not when confronted with the vastness of nature.

I turned from my view of the sunset to retrace my steps to the valley, and peeping over the top of a large boulder, saw seated upon an inaccessible crag directly in front of me, a gigantic figure of a man clad in a hunter's garb, and he was smoking a long cigar! [97]

When I thought of Big Pete's description of how the Wild Hunter was wont to sit with his long legs dangling from some rock while he smoked one of those unprocurable cigars, and when I realized that the figure before me was fully sixty feet tall, I must confess to experiencing a queer sensation.

It was a shadowy figure yet it moved, arose, held out one hand, and a bird as large as the fabled roc alighted on the wrist of the outstretched hand.

A slight breeze sprang up, the white mists from the valley rolled up the mountainside and drifted away and the man and bird disappeared from view.

It was long after dark when I reached camp and was greeted by my friend and guide with "Gol durn your pictur tenderfut, if it hain't tuk you longer to get a pesky mess of yaller fish than it orter to kill a bar." [98]

"Little wonder," thought I, "that the Wild Hunter used golden bullets in a land where even the fish's scales seemed to be of the same precious metal"; but I said nothing as I sat down to clean my "yaller trout."

CHAPTER IX [99]

It was always interesting to me when I could get Pete's theories and his brand of philosophy on almost any subject and it was my intention that night at supper to lead up to the apparition I had seen on the cliffs that day. With a substantial supper tucked away I was in a better frame of mind to realize that the illusion I had seen was not uncommon in mountain districts. I recalled that I had read of, and seen pictures of, a particular illusion of this nature that is often present in the Hartz Mountains in Germany and I knew full well that the setting sun, the mist and the atmospheric condition had all contributed to throwing a greatly enlarged shadow of the real Wild Hunter onto the screen made by the mist very much as today a motion picture increases the size of the small film image when it is thrown on the movie screen.

I intended to get Big Pete's idea on the subject but I never did for I was not adroit enough to steer the conversation in that direction, for Big Pete seized my first statement and made it a subject for a veritable lecture. [100]

"There was a smashing lot of those trout up there, Pete. Bet I could have brought home all I could have carried if I had been a game hog," I said, as I stirred the fire with a stick and set the coffee pot nearer the flames to warm a second cup.

"You see, tenderfut, it's like this," he said, "when a man goes out to kill a deer for the fun of blood-spilling or to get th' poor critter's head to hang in his shack, he's nothing more than a wolf or butcher; hain't half as good a man as the one who never shot a deer, but goes back home and lies about it. The liar hain't harmed nothin' with his lies. His fairy stories don't hurt game an' they be interesting to the tenderfuts in the States. The real sportsman is the pot-hunter. Yes, that's jist what I mean, a pot-hunter—he's out 'cause the camp kettle is empty, and it's up agin him to fill it or starve. Now then, this fellow is not after blood; nor trophies, nor is he hunting for the market. It's self-preservation with him, that's what it is. He's an animal along with the rest of 'em and he knows he's got jest as much a right to live as tha' have and no more! He's hustling for his living along with the bunch, forcing it from savage nature, and I tell you boy, there is no greater physical pleasure in life than holding old Mother Nature up and just saying to her, 'You've got a living for me, ole' gal, and I'm going to get it.'" [101]

"Such talk pleases the old lady, makes her your friend 'cause she likes your spunk, and because of it she'll give you the wind of a grey wolf, the step of the panther, the strength of the buffalo and the courage of a lion. She is always generous with her favorites. Ah! lad, she kin make your blood dance in your veins, make fire flash from your eyes and give you the steady nerve necessary to face a she-grizzly when she is fightin' for her cubs." [102]

"Why? 'cause you see, you are a grizzly yourself when the camp kettle is empty!" And Big Pete relapsed into silence, turned his attention to his tin platter, examining it carefully, and then with a piece of dough-god, carefully wiped the platter clean and contentedly munched the savory bit.

The reason, that being locked into Big Pete's park in the mountains struck me as being very serious, was because I realized that although the park was extensive it was completely surrounded by a practically unsurmountable barrier of rugged cliffs and mountains negotiable, as far as I knew, not even by the sure-footed mountain sheep and goats which we could occasionally see on the cliffs from the valley floor, but never saw in the park itself. I questioned Big Pete and

found that he did not know of a trail up the cliffs.

"Though," he said, "there must be some sort of a one for that tha' Wild Hunter gits in an' out and brings his wolf pack along too. He knows a trail all right an' ef he knows it why it's up to us to find it, too."

"Maybe we can trail him," I suggested.

"Trail him! Me? With that wolf pack clingin' to his heels? Not while I'm alive!"

That was the last that was said about trailing the Wild Hunter for some time to come, but meanwhile we built a more or less open faced permanent camp and Big Pete initiated me into mysteries of real woodcraft, for it was up to us now to live on the land, so to speak.

Although hard usage had made havoc with my tailormade clothes, neither time nor the elements seemed to affect the personal appearance of my big companion; his buckskin suit was apparently as clean and fresh as it was on the day I first met him. There was no magic in this. Big Pete knew how to clamber all day through a windfall without leaving the greater part of his clothes on the branches, a feat few hunters and no tenderfoot have yet been able to accomplish.

As I have already said, Pete was a dude, but he was what might be called a self-perpetuating dude, who never ran to seed no matter how long he might be separated from the city tailor shops, for Pete was his own tailor, barber and valet, and the wilderness supplied the material for his costume.

In the camp he was as busy as an old housewife, and occupied his leisure time mending, stitching and darning. Many a morning my own toilet consisted of a face wash at the spring, but my guide seldom failed to spend as much time prinking as if he expected distinguished visitors!

Instead of "Tenderfoot," Big Pete now called me "Le-loo," which I understand is Chinook for wolf and I took so much pride in my promotion that I would not have changed clothes with the Prince of Wales; I gloried in my wild, unkempt appearance!

Nevertheless, Big Pete announced that he was the Hy-as-ty-ee (big boss) and he forthwith declared that my costume was unsuitable for the approaching cold weather. There was no disputing that Big Pete was Hy-as-ty-ee and I agreed to wear whatever clothes he should make for me, and can say with no fear of dispute that if that ancient chump, Robinson Crusoe, had had a Big Pete for a partner in place of a man Friday, he would have never made himself his outlandish goatskin clothes and a clumsy umbrella.

From a cache in the rocks Pete brought forth a miscellaneous lot of trappers' stores, bone needles made from the splints of deer's legs, elk's teeth with holes bored through them, and odds and ends of all kinds.

Among his stuff was a supply of salt-petre and alum, and this was evidently the material for which he was searching for he at once preceeded to make a mixture of two parts salt-petre to one of alum and applied the pulverized compound to the fleshy side of the skins, then doubling the raw side of the hides together he rolled them closely and placed the hides in a cool place where they were allowed to remain for several days; when at length unrolled, the skins were still moist.

"Just right, by Gosh," he exclaimed, as he took a dull knife and carefully removed all particles of fat or flesh which here and there adhered to the hide. After this was done to his satisfaction we both took hold and rubbed, and mauled and worked the skins with our hands until the hides were as soft and as pliable as flannel. Thus was the material for my winter clothing prepared.

It took four whole deer-skins to furnish stuff for my buckskin shirt with the beautiful long fringes at the seams; but the whole garment was cut, sewed and finished in a day's time. It was sewed with thread made of sinew.

When it came to making the coat and trousers Big Pete spent a long time in solemn thought before he was ready to begin work on these garments; at length he looked up with a broad smile and cried:

"See here, Le-loo, I have taken a fancy to them 'ere tenderfut pants o' your'n. Off with 'em now an' I'll jist cut out the new ones from the old uns." In vain I pleaded with him to make my trousers like his own; he would not listen to me, he insisted upon having my ragged but stylish knickerbockers to use as a pattern.

CHAPTER X

Big Pete was an expert backwoods tailor, shoemaker and shirtmaker, but these were but few of his accomplishments, not his trade; he was first, last and aways a hunter and scout. No matter what occupation seemed to engage his attention for the time it never interfered with his ability to hear, see or smell.

It was while I was going around camp minus my lower garments that I saw Pete suddenly throw up his head and suspiciously sniff the air, at the same time sharply scanning the windward side of our camp. Living so long with this strange man made me familiar with his actions and

quick to detect anything unusual and I now knew that something of interest had happened. To the windward and close by us was a mound thickly covered with bullberry bushes and underbrush, and so far as could be seen there was nothing suspicious in the appearance of the thicket. Fixing my eyes on Big Pete, I saw a peculiar expression spread over his face which seemed to be half of mirth and half of wonderment, and I immediately knew that his wonderful nose had warned him of the presence of something to the windward.

[109]

Slowly and quietly he laid aside my almost finished breeches and silently stole away. It was only a few minutes before he returned with a very solemn face.

"Doggone my corn shucked bones, Le-loo, we've had a visitor but it got away mighty slick and quick. I hain't detemint yit whether it wa' man er beast er both, er jist a thing wha' might change into 'tother. We'll hafter investigate later. Here git these duds on."

When I put on my new elk-hide knickerbockers with cuffs of dressed buckskin laced around my calves, and my beautiful soft buckskin shirt tucked in at the waist I began to feel like a real Nimrod, but after I added my "Moo-loch-Capo," the shooting jacket with elk-teeth buttons, pulled a pair of shank moccasins over my feet and donned a cap made of lynx skin, I was as happy as a child with its Christmas stocking. It was a really wonderful suit of clothing; the hair of the elk hide was on the outside, and not only made the coat and breeches warmer, but helped to shed the rain. The buttons of the elk-teeth were fastened on with thongs run through holes in their centers, and my coat could be laced up after the fashion of a military overcoat. The elk's teeth served as frogs and loops of rawhide answered for the braid that is used on military coats.

[110]

My shank moccasins were made by first making a cut around each of the hind legs of an elk, at a sufficient distance above the heels to leave hide enough for boot legs and making another cut far enough below the heels to make room for one's feet. The fresh skins when peeled off looked like rude stockings with holes at the toes. The skins were turned wrong side out, and the open toes closed by bringing the lower part, or sole, up over the opening and sewing it there after the manner of a tip to the modern shoe. When this novel foot-gear was dry enough for the purpose, Big Pete ornamented the legs with quaint colored designs made with split porcupine quills colored with dyes which Pete himself had manufactured of roots and barks.

[111]

Dressed in my unique and picturesque costume I stood upright while Pete surveyed me with the pride and satisfaction of one who had done a fine piece of work. I had now little fear of being called a tenderfoot and when I viewed my reflection in the spring I felt quite proud of my appearance.

"Come along now old scout," said Pete viewing me with the pride of an artist, "come along and let me test you on a real trail. I want to see what my teaching has done for you."

Pete led me through the underbrush to a point among the rocks.

"Tha'. A trail begins right under yore nose; let's see what you make of it," he said crisply.

[112]

Down on all fours I crept over the ground and, to my surprise and joy, I found that I could here and there detect a turned leaf the twist of which indicated the direction taken by the party who made the trail. I noticed that the bits of wood, pine cones and sticks scattered around were darker on the parts next to the ground, and it only required simple reasoning for me to conclude that when the dark side was uppermost the object had been recently disturbed and rolled over.

It was a day of great discoveries. I found that what is true of the sticks is equally true of the pebbles and a displaced fragment of stone immediately caught my eyes. With the tenacity of a bloodhound I stuck to my task until I suddenly found myself at the base of the park wall, at the foot of the diagonal fracture in the face of the cliff where I had climbed when I discovered the golden trout. As I have said, the fracture led diagonally up the towering face of the beetling precipice.

[113]

For fear that I might have made some mistake I carefully retraced my steps backward toward the bullberry bushes near the camp. On the back trail I came upon some distinct and obvious footprints in a dusty place, but so deeply interested was I in hidden signs, the slight but tell-tale disturbances of leaf and soil, that I once passed these plainly marked tracks with only a glance and would have done so the second time had not their marked peculiarities accidentally caught my attention.

When examining the trail of this mysterious camp visitor I suddenly realized that in place of moccasin footprints I was following bear tracks, my heart ceased to beat for a moment or two before I could pull myself together and smother the prehensile footed superstitious old savage in me with the practical philosophy of the up-to-date man of today.

Taking a short cut I ran back to the foot of the pass and there, on hands and knees, ascended for a hundred feet or more—the bear steps led up the pass, and yet at the beginning of the trail the feet wore moccasins. This I knew because at one place the foot-mark showed plainly in the gray alkali dust which had accumulated upon a projecting stone a few feet below the ledge. Obviously whoever the visitor was, he had entered and left by this pass. Returning to camp I sat down on a log lost in thought. My reverie was at last broken by the voice of my guide quietly remarking. "Well, Le-loo, what's your judication?"

[114]

"Pete," I said, "that bear walks on its hind-legs; there is not the sign of a forefoot anywhere along the trail. Now this could not be caused by the hind feet obliterating the tracks of the front

feet, because in many places the pass is so steep that the forefeet in reaching out for support would make tracks not overlapped by the hind ones."

"That's true, Le-loo; sartin true. If you live to be a hundred years you'll make as good a trailer as the great Greaser trailer of New Mexico, Dolores Sanchez, or my old friend Bill Hassler, who could follow a six-month-old trail," replied my guide. "But," he continued, "maybe witch-bears do walk on their hind legs same as people." [115]

"Witch be blamed!" I cried impatiently; "this is no four-legged witch nor bear either. That was a man and when he thought he would be followed he put on moccasins made from bears' paws to leave a disguised trail. And moreover I believe that man is none other than the Wild Hunter without his wolf pack. And that pass is the pathway he takes in and out of this park. I'm going to trail him whether you want to or not. Goodbye Pete, I'll come back for you," and picking up my gun and other necessary traps, I prepared to start immediately upon my journey, for I felt that to follow this trail would not only get us out of our park prison but would lead me to the abode of the Wild Hunter, where perhaps I could talk with him and learn some of the things I was so eager to know about my parents. [116]

Big Pete looked at me solemnly for a while, ran over the cartridges in his belt and went through all those familiar unconscious motions which betokened danger ahead, and said, "Le-loo, you are a quare critter; you're not afraid of all the werwolves, medicine ba'rs and ghosts in this world or the next, but tarnally afear'd of live varmints like grizzly bars—one would think you had no religion, but, gosh all hemlock! If you can face a bear-man or a werewolf, even though all the Hy-as Ecutocks of the mountains show fight, I'll be cornfed if I don't stand by ye! Barring the Wild Hunter, I don't know as I ever ran agin a Ecutock yit; that is if he be a Ecutock. Maybe he's a Econe? Yes, I reckon that's what he is," continued Pete reflectively.

"Maybe he is a pine cone," I laughed. Then added, "Whatever he is, he knows the way out of this park of yours and I am going to follow him," I emphatically answered.

"That's howsomever!" exclaimed my guide approvingly; "but," he continued, "the mountains are kivered with snow, while it is still summer down here, so I reckon 'twould be the proper wrinkle for us to pull our things together, have a good feed and a good sleep before we start. White men start off hot-headed and I kinder like their grit, but Injuns stop and sot by the fire an' smoke an' think afore they start on a raid an' I kinder think they be wiser in this than we 'uns, so let's do as the Injuns would do. We can cache most of our stuff and turn the horses loose. Bighorn's mutton is powerful good, but tarnally shy and hung mighty high, an' billygoat is doggoned strong 'nless you know how to cook 'em. Yes, we'll eat an sleep fust an' then his for the land where the Bighorn pasture, the woolywhite goats sleep on the rocks, the whistling marmot blows his danger signal an' the pretty white ptarmigan hides hissself in the snow-banks, the home of the Ecutocks. [117]

"What the thunder is a Ecutock, Pete?" I asked.

"An Injun devil, I reckon you'd call it; it's bad medicine," he answered soberly, and continuing in his former strain, he exclaimed: [118]

"Whar critters like goats, sheeps and rock-chucks kin live, you bet your Hy-as muck-a-muck we kin live too!"

That night I rolled up into my blanket, filled with strange presentiments. Again the question came up: What is the source of the influence that this madman of the mountains, this wild hunter, this leader of the black wolf pack, had on me to impel me to trail him over the mountains? Was it mental telepathy? Could he really be my father? Somehow I felt convinced that soon I would be face to face with the riddle, soon I would know the facts and the truth about my parents. It seemed unthinkable that all these weeks of wilderness travel had been for naught and that the Wild Hunter was nothing but a strange, eccentric old fellow living alone in the mountains and of no interest to me whatsoever.

CHAPTER XI [119]

We made our start at daylight, loaded with all the necessities for a climb over the mountains. The rest of our supplies and equipment we cached, and Big Pete turned our horses loose assuring me that in the spring he would come back and rope them.

The lower trail of the pass was quite well defined and we made famous progress, but the higher we climbed the more difficult the going became and more than once we were forced to pause on a ledge to rest and regain our breath.

On one ledge I got my first really close view of a bighorn sheep, and I became so excited that nothing would do but I must stalk him, despite Big Pete's assurance that the wily old ram would not let me get within gun shot of him in such an exposed area.

I crawled, and wriggled, and twisted over rock and boulders for what to me seemed miles, but always the sheep kept just out of accurate shooting distance ahead of me. It was an exasperating chase, but one cannot live in the mountains for any length of time without paying more or less attention to geology; the mountaineer soon learns that stratified rock, that is rock arranged like [120]

layer cake, resting in a horizontal position on its natural bed, makes travel over its top comparatively easy, but when by the subsidence or upheaval of the earth's crust huge masses of stone have been tilted up edgewise, it is an entirely different proposition.

In this latter case the erosion, or the wearing away, caused by trickling water, frost and snow, sharpens the edge of the rock, as a grindstone does the edge of an ax, and traveling along one of these ridges presents almost the same difficulties that travel along the edge of an upturned ax would do to a microscopic man.

But when a sportsman, for the first time in his life, has succeeded in creeping within range of a grand bighorn ram, and his bullet, speeding true, has badly wounded the game, hardships are forgotten, and if, on account of the miraculous vitality of the mountain sheep, there is danger of losing the quarry, all the inborn instinct of the predaceous beast in man's nature is aroused, and danger is a consideration not to be taken in account. [121]

A hawk in pursuit of a barnyard fowl will follow it into the open door of the farmhouse; the hound in pursuit of the fox cares not for the approaching locomotive—being possessed by the instinct to kill—nothing is of importance to them but the capture of the game in sight. A man following a buck is governed by a like singleness of purpose.

For this reason I was scrambling along the knife-like edge of the ridge, with death in the steep treacherous slide rock on one side, death in the steep green glacier ice on the other side, and torture and wounds under my feet.

But the fever of the chase had possession of me. I had tasted blood and felt the fierce joy of the puma and the wild intoxication of a hunting wolf! [122]

The cruel wounds inflicted by the sharp stones under my feet were unnoticed. Away ahead of me was a moving object; it could use but three legs, but that was one leg more than I had, and the ram had distanced me. After an age of time I reached the rugged, broader footing of the mountain side, and creeping up behind some sheltering rocks again fired at the fleeing ram. With the impact of the bullet the sheep fell headlong down a cliff to a projecting rock thirty feet below, where it lay apparently dead. A moment later it again arose, seemingly as able as ever, and ran along the face of the beetling rock where my eyes, aided by powerful field glasses, could perceive no foothold; then it gave a magnificent leap to a ledge on the opposite side of the narrow canyon and fell dead, out of my reach.

Spent with my long, rough run, I naturally selected the most comfortable seat in which to rest; this chanced to be a cushion of heather-like plants along the side of a fragment of rock which effectually concealed my body from view from the other side of the chasm. Here, on the verge of that impassable canyon, I sat panting and looking at the poor dead creature upon the opposite side; its right front leg was shattered at the shoulder, a bullet had pierced its lungs. Yet, with two fatal wounds and a useless leg, the plucky creature had scaled the face of a cliff which one would think a squirrel would find impossible to traverse and made leaps which might well be considered improbable for a perfectly sound animal. The ram was dead and food for the ravens, and a reaction had taken place in my mind; I felt like a bloody murderer, and hung my head with a sense of guilt. [123]

Presently, becoming conscious of that peculiar guttural noise, used by Big Pete when desiring caution, and looking up I was amazed to see a splendid Indian youth climb down the face of the opposite cliff, throw his arms around the dead ram's neck and burst into deep but subdued lamentation. For the first time I now saw that what I had mistaken for a blood stain on the bighorn's neck was a red collar. [124]

Cautiously producing my field glasses I examined the collar and discovered it to be made of stained porcupine quills cleverly worked on a buckskin band. The field glasses also told me that the boy's shirt was trimmed with the same material, while a duplicate of the sheep's collar formed a band which encircled his head, confining the long black hair and preventing it from falling over his face, but leaving it free to hang down his back to a point below the waist line.

So absorbed was I in this unique spectacle that I carelessly allowed my elbow to dislodge a loose fragment of stone which went clattering down the face of the precipice. This proved to be almost fatal carelessness, for, with a movement as quick as the stroke of a rattlesnake, the lad placed an arrow to the string of a bow and sent the barbed shaft with such force, promptitude and precision that it went through my fur cap, the arrow entangling a bunch of my hair, taking it along with it. [125]

"Squat lower, Le-loo; arrows has been the death of many a man afore you," whispered Big Pete in my ear, but even as he spoke another arrow sang over our crouching bodies, shaving the protecting rock so closely that their plumed tips brushed the dust on our backs.

"Waugh! Good shootin', by gum! I never seed it beat; if he onct sots them black eyes on our hulking carcasses he'll get us yit," muttered my guide, enthusiastically. "He's mighty slender, quick and purty—but so also be a rattlesnake!" he exclaimed, as another arrow slit the sleeve of his wamus as cleanly as if it were cut with a knife.

"For God's sake, stop!" I shouted, in real alarm. The boy paused, but with an arrow still drawn to its head. His eyes flashing, head erect, one moccasined foot on the ram's body, the other braced against the cliff; his short fawn-colored skin shirt clung to his lithe body, and the fringed [126]

edges hung over the dreadful black chasm in front of him. It was a picture to take away one's breath. "Put down your weapon, and we will stand with our hands up," I cried. Slowly the bow was lowered and as slowly Big Pete and I arose, holding our empty hands aloft. "Now, young fellow, tell us your pleasure."

There are a few gray hairs showing at my temples which first made their appearance while I was crouching behind that stone on the edge of the chasm.

To my polite inquiry asking his pleasure, the wild boy made no reply but glanced at us with the utmost contempt when Big Pete went through some gestures in Indian sign language. The lad mutely pointed to the dead sheep, the sight of which seemed to enrage him again, for insensibly his fingers tightened on the bow and the wood began to curve after a manner which sent me ducking behind the sheltering stone again; but Big Pete only folded his arms across his broad chest and looked the boy straight in the eyes. [127]

Never will I forget that picture, the cold, bleak, snow-covered mountains towering above them, the black abyss of Sheol between them; neither would hesitate to take life, neither possessed a fear of death; but with every muscle alert and every nerve alive these two wild things stood facing each other, mutually observing a truce because of—what? Because, in spite of the fighting instinct or, maybe, because of it they both secretly admired each other.

CHAPTER XII [128]

The black chasm which separated us from the trail of the wild hunter was not as formidable a barrier as the unfathomable abyss which separates the reader from what he thinks he would have done had he been in my place, and what really would have been his plan of action.

There were a lot of burning questions which I had privately made up in my mind to propound to the Wild Hunter, or the even wilder medicine bear, upon the occasion of our next meeting. But when the lad was standing before me, with bended bow and flashing eyes, the burning importance of those questions did not appeal to me as forcibly as did the urgent necessity of sheltering my body behind the friendly stone. To be truthful, it must be admitted that the proposed inquiries were, for the time, entirely forgotten, and I even breathed a sigh of relief when the boy suddenly clambered up the face of the cliff, turned, gave us a fierce look of defiance, made some quick energetic gestures with his hand and disappeared. [129]

He scaled that precipitous rock with the rapidity and self-confidence of a gray squirrel running up the trunk of a hickory tree, squirrel-like, taking advantage of every crack, cranny and projection that could be grasped by fingers or moccasin-covered toes.

Not until the Indian had disappeared down a dry coulee did I venture from the shelter of the protecting rock, or realize that my carefully planned interview must be indefinitely postponed.

With his arms folded across his chest, his blond hair sweeping his shoulders, his blue eyes fixed upon a rocky rib of the mountain behind which the boy had disappeared, Big Pete still stood like a statue. But gradually the statuesque pose resolved itself into a more commonplace posture, and the muscles of the face relaxed until the familiar twinkle hovered around the corners of his eyes. "What did he say when he made those motions, Pete?" [130]

"Waugh! he said he was not afraid of any whitefaced coyote like us." And bringing forth his pipe, Pete filled it from the beaded tobacco pouch which hung on his breast, and by means of a horn of punk, a flint and steel, he soon had the pipe aglow and was puffing away as calmly as if nothing unusual had occurred. Presently he exclaimed, "Gol durn his daguerrotype, what good did it do him to throw that sheep down the gulch? Reckon Le-loo and me could find a better grave for mutton chops than that canyon bottom. The mountains didn't need the sheep an' we did. But, I reckon it was his own sheep you killed, 'cause it had a porcupine collar same pattern as the trimmings of his shirt."

Turning his great blue eyes full upon me, he suddenly shot this inquiry, "Be he bar, ecutock or werwolf?"

"He is the finest adjusted, easiest running, most exquisitely balanced, highest geared bit of human machinery I ever saw," I answered enthusiastically. [131]

"Wall, maybe ye are right, Le-loo, an' maybe ye hain't; which is catamount to saying, maybe it is a man and maybe it tain't."

"Steady, Pete, old fellow, let us go slow; now tell me at what you're driving?" I pleaded.

"It looks to me this hea'-a-way," he explained. "I've seed his trail onct or twice, an' I've seed him onct, but I never yet seed his trail and the Wild Hunter's trail at the same time and place. 'Pears to me that a man who, when it's convenient, kin make a wolf of hisself, might likewise make a boy of hisself whenever he felt that way. Never heard tell on enny real laid who cud climb like a squetton and shoot a bow better nor a Robin Hood or Injun, and that's howsomever!"

"Well, it does look 'howsomever,' and no mistake," I admitted, "and what makes it worse, our dinner is at the bottom of this infernal gulch. Come, let us be moving; the breeze from the [132]

snowfields chills me. Let us hit his trail now while it is fresh.”

This was a simple proposition to make, but a difficult one to carry into execution; for to all appearances that trail began upon the other side of the chasm, and there was no bridge in sight by which we could cross. Big Pete carefully put a cork-stopper in his pipe, extinguishing the fire without wasting the unconsumed contents; he then carefully put his briarwood away and began to uncoil a lariat from around his middle. As he loosened the braided rawhide from his waist his gaze was roaming over the opposite rocks. Presently he fixed his attention upon a pinnacle which reared its cube-like form above the top of the opposite side of the chasm; the latter was of itself much higher than the brink upon which we stood. Swinging the loop around his head he sent it whistling across the chasm, where it settled and encircled the projecting stone, the honda striking the face of the cliff with a sullen thud. The rope tightened, but when we both threw our weight on our end of the lariat to try it, the cube-like pinnacle moved on its base. [133]

“I oughter knowed better than to try to lasso a piece of slide rock,” said Pete in disgusted tones, as he cast the end of the braided rawhide loose and watched it for a moment dangling down the opposite side of the canyon.

“Now, Le-loo, we must get over this hole or lose the best lariat in the Rocky Mountains. We kin look for that boy’s trail on this side, for even if he be an Ecutock, I’ll bet my crooker bone ’gainst a lock of his hair that he can’t jump th’ hole, an’ I’ll wager my left ear that he’s got a trail an’ a bridge somewhar—’nless he turns bird and flops over things like this,” he added, with a troubled look.

“Pete,” said I, “never mind the bird business. I’ll admit that there is a lot of explanation due us before we can rightly judge on the events of the past few weeks; still I think it may all be explained in a rational manner; but what if it cannot? We have but one trip to make through this world, and the more we see the more we will know at the end of the journey. I am as curious as a prong-horned antelope when there is a mystery, so put your nose to the ground, my good friend, and find the spot where this Mr. Werwolf, witch, or bear flies the canyon, and maybe, like the husband of ‘The Witch of Fife,’ we may find the ‘black crook shell,’ and with its aid fly out of this ‘lum.” [134]

“I believe your judication is sound, Le-loo; stay where you be an’ if he hain’t a witch I’ll bet my front tooth agin the string of his moccasin that I’ll find the bridge, and I’ll swear by my grandmother’s hind leg that that little imp will pay for our sheep yit.”

As Pete finished these remarks there was a sudden and astonishing change in his appearance. His head fell forward, his shoulders drooped, his back bowed and his knee bent. It was no longer the upright statuesque Pete the Mountaineer, but Peter the Trailer, all of whose faculties were concentrated upon the ground. With a swinging gait the human bloodhound traveled swiftly and silently along the edge of the crevasse, noting every bunch of moss, fragment of stone, drift of snow or bit of moist earth, reading the shorthand notes of Nature with facility which far excelled the ability of my own stenographer to read her own notes when the latter are a few hours old. But a short time had elapsed before I heard a shout, and, hurrying to the place where my big friend was seated, I inquired, “Any luck?” [135]

“Tha’s as you may call it. Here is wha’ tha’ boy jumped,” he replied, pointing to some marks on the stone which were imperceptible to me, “an’ tha’s wha’ he landed,” he continued, pointing to a slight ledge upon the face of the opposite cliff at least twenty feet distant. “He’s a jumper, an’ no mistake—guess I might as well have my front tooth pulled, fur I’ve lost my bet,” soliloquized the trailer, as he sat on the edge of the cliff, with his legs hanging over the frightful chasm. [136]

The ledge indicated by Big Pete as the landing place of the phenomenal jumper might possibly have offered a foothold for a bighorn or goat, but I could not believe that any human being could jump twenty feet to a crumbling trifle of a ledge on the face of a precipice, and not only retain a foothold there, but run up the face of the rock like a fly on a window-pane. Yet I could see that something had worn the ledge at the point indicated and when I stood a little distance away from the trail I could plainly note a difference in color marking the course of the trail where it led over the flinty rocks to the jumping place.

“Wull, Le-loo! What’s your opinion of the Ecutock now? Do he use wings or ride a barleycorn broom?” asked Pete, with a triumphant smile.

CHAPTER XIII [137]

Apparently there was no possible way by which we might hope to cross the canyon, and I threw myself prone upon the top of the stony brink of the chasm and peered down the awful abyss at the silver thread, shining in the gloom of the shadows, which marked the course of a stream, and wondered what the Boy Scouts of Troop 6 of Marlborough would do under the circumstances.

I studied the face of the opposite cliff in a vain search for some hint to the solution of the problem before us, looking up and down from side to side as far as allowed by the range of my vision. At length my attention wandered to the perpendicular face of the cliff, on the top of which my body was sprawled; there was an upright crack in the face of the stone wall, and as I examined the fracture I saw that a piece of wood had lodged in the crack; a piece of wood in a [138]

crevice in a rock is not so unusual an occurrence as to excite remark; but when it occurred to me that we were then far above the timber line, my interest and curiosity were at once aroused.

The end of the stick was within a short distance from my hand, and reaching down I grasped the wood and brought forth, not a short club or stick, as I thought to be concealed there, but a very long pole. The result of my investigations was so unexpected that I came dangerously near allowing the thing to slide through my fingers and fall to the bottom of the canyon. It was a neatly-smoothed, slender piece of lodge-pole pine which was brought to view, and it had a crooked root nicely spliced to one end and bound tightly in place with rawhide thongs. Big Pete was wholly absorbed in the trail, the study of which he had resumed, and when I looked up he was down on all fours, minutely studying the ground. Presently he cried, "Le-loo, tha' pesky lad ha' been over wha' you be after sompen and he took it back tha' again afore he made his jump! If you're any good you'll find what the lad was after."

[139]

"He was after his barleycorn broomstick," I replied, proudly, "and here it is, although I must confess it is a pretty long one for a fellow of his size, and it looks more like a giant Bo-Peep's crook than a witch's broom."

Big Pete eagerly snatched the pole from my hands and examined it carefully. At length he said, "This hyer is the end used for the handle; one can see by the finger marks, an' this crook is used to scrape stone with, one kin see, with half an eye, by the way the end is sandpapered off. Over tha' air some marks on the stone which look almighty like as if they'd been made by the end of this yer hook slipping down the face of the rock."

"Now, I wonder wha' cud be up tha' on the top of the rock that the boy wanted," mused Big Pete, and for a moment or so he stood in silent thought; at length he exclaimed, "Why, bless my corn-shucking soul, if I don't believe he's got a lariat staked out tha' an' crosses this ditch same as we-uns aimed to do!" With that he began raking and scraping the top of the opposite rock with the shepherd's crook, and presently there came tumbling and twisting like a snake down the face of the cliff, a long braided rawhide rope with a loop at the bottom end.

[140]

"Waugh, Le-loo! tha's no witchcraft 'bout this 'cep the magic of common-sense; but we hain't through with him yit!" By this time Pete had the end of the rawhide rope in his hands and was testing the strength of its anchorage upon the opposite cliff. The point where it was fastened projected some distance over the ledge, where the supposed landing-place was located, thus making it possible for one to swing at the end of the rope from our side without danger of coming into too violent contact with the opposite cliff.

As soon as my big friend was satisfied that the rope was safe he grasped it with his two hands, and with one foot in the loop and the other free to use as a fender, he sailed across the abyss and landed safely upon the crumbling ledge opposite.

[141]

Holding fast to the rawhide rope with his hands and bracing his feet against the rock, Pete could walk up the face of the cliff by going hand-over-hand up the cable at the same time. He had almost reached the top when I was horror-stricken to see a small hand and brown arm reach over the precipice; but it was neither the grace nor the beauty of this shapely bit of anatomy which sent the blood surging to my heart, but the fact that the cold gray glint of a long-bladed knife caught my eyes and fascinated me with the fabled "charm" of a serpent. The power of speech forsook me, but with great effort I succeeded in giving utterance to the inarticulate noise people gurgle when confronted in their sleep by a shapeless horror. Big Pete heard the noise, but he was not unnerved when he saw the knife, neither did he show any nightmare symptoms, although he was dangling over the terrible abyss with a full knowledge that it needed but a touch of the keen blade of that knife to sever the straining lariat and dash him, a mangled mass, on the rocks below. The danger was too real to give Pete the nightmare; there was nothing spooky to him in the glittering knife blade, and only ghosts and the supernatural could give Big Pete the nightmare. Calmly he looked at the hand grasping the power of death with its strong tapering fingers. Suddenly and in a firm, commanding voice he gave the order, "Drap tha' knife!"

[142]

Ever since I had been in the company of this masterful forest companion I had obeyed his commands as a matter of course, and so was not surprised to see the fingers instantly relax their grasp and the knife go gyrating to the mysterious depths. In a few moments Big Pete was up and over the edge of the rock and hidden from my view.

Seizing the long-handled shepherd's crook, I caught the dangling end of the lariat, and was soon scrambling up the face of the cliff, leaving a trail which the veriest novice would not fail to notice and sending showers of the crumbling stones down the path taken by the knife; it was several minutes before I had clambered over the face of the projecting crag and was safe across the black chasm which lay athwart our trail.

[143]

If the Wild Hunter was indeed my father, he certainly was a woodcrafter and scout to bring pride to a fellow's heart, for I doubted not that the Indian boy was his retainer because the porcupine quill decorations on his buckskin shirt had the same peculiar pattern as that on the wamus of the Wild Hunter himself as well as on the collar of the pet sheep I had killed, and also on the buckskin bag of gold.

Only those persons who have made solitary trips over snow-capped mountain ridges can appreciate the overwhelming feeling of solitude that I felt on looking about me. To whatever point of view I turned my eyes were greeted with a tumbled sea composed of stupendous petrified billows.

The occasional fields of snow were the white froth of the stony waves and the turquoise colored glacial lakes between the crags rather added to the effect of an angry ocean than detracted from it.

On a closer examination, some of the rocks appeared to be rough bits of unfinished worlds still retaining the form they had when poured from the mighty blast furnaces of the Creator. It was God's workshop strewn with huge fragments, still bearing the marks of His mallet and chisel; yet these cold barren wastes were the pasture lands of the shaggy-coated white goats and the lithe-limbed bighorned sheep. [145]

Suddenly a shrill whistle pierced the air and with a jump I instinctively looked for a vision of the Wild Hunter, but a moment later realized that the sound I heard was but the warning cry of a whistling marmot. Again the silence was broken, this time by a low rumbling sound which increased in volume until it roared like a broadside from an old forty-four-gun man-of-war, each crag and peak taking up the sound and hurling it against its neighbor, until the reverberating noise seemed to come from all points of the compass.

Away in the distance I could see a white stream pouring from the precipitous edge of an elevated glacier; this seeming mountain torrent I knew was not water, but ice, thousands of tons of which having cracked and broken from the edge of the glacier, were now being dashed over the hard face of the rock into minute fragments.

The white stream could be seen to decrease perceptibly in size, from a broad sheet to a wide band, a narrow ribbon, a line, a hair and then disappear altogether. While the distant mountains were still growling, mumbling and playing shuttlecock with the echoes a timid chief hare went hopping across a green half-acre of grass at the damp edge of a melting snow patch in my path. Overhead a golden eagle sailed with a small mammal in its talons; strange reddish-colored bumblebees busied themselves in a bunch of flowers growing in a crevice in the rocks at my feet. [146]

But my eye could discern no larger creatures in this Alpine pasture land; not only could I see no sheep or goats, but not a sign of my friend. He had vanished from the face of the picture as completely as if the master artist had erased him with one mighty sweep of his paint brush.

When I viewed the lonely landscape with no human being in sight, I confess to experiencing a creepy sensation and a strong inclination to flee, but I knew not in what direction to run. I was in a rough basin-shaped depression among the mountain peaks, and I sat on a large rock with my back to a black chasm. From my elevated position I could see a long distance. Strange fancies creep into one's head on such occasions and play havoc with previous well-founded beliefs. To me, poor fool of a tenderfoot, Big Pete had melted into the thinnest of thin air, such as is only found in high altitudes, and somehow I wondered whether the Wild Hunter had had anything to do with it. [147]

How could I tell that I myself was not invisible?

I hauled myself up short there for I realized that such folly was not good to have tumbling around in my brain. I figuratively pulled myself back to earth, and to steady my nerves reached into my pack and brought out several hard bits of bannock that I had stored there. I was dreadfully hungry and I munched these with enthusiasm, meanwhile keeping a sharp eye out for Big Pete, and between times making the acquaintance of the little chief hare who, as he scuttled about among the rocks, looked me over curiously. [148]

A short distance to my left was a huge obsidian cliff, the glassy walls of which rose in a precipice to a considerable height. On account of its peculiar formation, this crag of natural glass had several times attracted my attention, and on any other occasion I would have been curious enough to give it closer inspection. Once, as I turned my head in that direction, I thought I heard a wild laugh and later concluded that it was only imagination on my part, but now, as I again faced the cliff, I unmistakably heard a shout and was considerably relieved to see silhouetted against the sky the figure of Big Pete.

"Hello, Le-loo," he shouted. "Through chasin' that 'ere spook Indian kid be you? It's about time. Gosh-all-hemlocks! I been breakin' my neck tryin' to keep up with you, doggone yore hide," shouted the big guide as he started to climb down toward me.

"Hello, Pete! You bet I'm through and I'm blamed near all in. Where are we, do you know?" I called to him. [149]

"Top o' the world, my boy. Top o' the world, that's whar we be," he said with a grin.

I had seen no game since I had lost the bighorn, and the sunball was now hung low in the heavens. It appeared to me that there was every prospect for a supperless night, too. But Big Pete evidently had no such idea, and he "lowed" that he would "mosey" 'round a bit and kill some varmints for grub.

There seemed to be plenty of mountain lion signs, and I was surprised that they should frequent such high altitudes, but Pete told me that they were up here after marmots, and were all

sleek and fat on that diet. I would not have been surprised if my wild comrade had proposed a feast on these cats. But it was not long before Pete's revolvers could be heard barking and in a short time he returned with two braces of white ptarmigan, each with its head shattered by a pistol ball, and I confess these birds were more to my liking than cat meat. Up there 'mid the snow fields the ptarmigan apparently kept their winter plumage all year round, and their natural camouflage made them utterly invisible to me, but to Pete, a white ptarmigan on a white snowfield seemed to be as easy to detect as if the same bird had been perched on a heap of coal. I had not seen one of these grouse since we had been in the mountains and was not aware of their presence until my companion returned with the four dead birds.

[150]

Without wasting time, Pete began to prepare them for cooking. He soon built a fire of some sticks which he gleaned from one or two twisted and gnarled evergreens that had wandered above timber line and cooked the birds over the embers. He gave a brace to me, and sitting on a boulder with our feet hanging over the edge we ate our evening meal without salt or pepper, and then each of us curled up like a grey wolf under the shelter of a stone and slept as safely as if we were in our bed rolls down in the genial atmosphere of the park in place of being in the bitingly cold air of the bleak mountain tops.

[151]

I, at least, slept soundly, and, thanks to the clothes Pete had so kindly made for me, I do not remember feeling cold. When I awoke again it was daylight and I could scarcely believe that I had been asleep more than five minutes since my friend bade me good-night. Big Pete was up before me, of course, and when I opened my eyes I found him cooking breakfast and making tea in a tin cup over those economical fires he so loved to build even when we were in the park where there was fuel enough for a roaring bonfire. It's queer how difficult it is to make water boil on a mountain top.

"Well, now fer the witch-b'ar track agin," said Big Pete, wiping his mouth.

"Witch-bear!" I exclaimed. "Oh—yes—you don't mean to tell me you kept following the track of that two-legged bear this far, Pete?" I exclaimed, suddenly recalling that we had started out following a mysterious moccasin trail that had later turned into bear tracks.

[152]

"Sartin' sure. Didn't you figger out that that tha' b'ar war the Injun or tha' Wild Hunter who put on moccasins made o' b'ar feet when he thought we'd foller him?" asked Pete.

"Yes, I did, but I forgot—maybe that ram was the Wild Hunter himself—blame it. Nothing will astonish me in this country."

"Yes, you fergot everything, even yore head when you started to foller that tha' ram yesterday. But I didn't. I jest kept peggin' away at them tha' rumswattel b'ar tracks and I followed 'em right up to yonder cliff. They go on from tha', but I left 'em last night to come over by you. Come on, we'll pick 'em up agin." And off he started.

It was soon evident that it was an exceedingly active bear which we were following for it could climb over green glacier ice like a Swiss guide and over rocks like a goat. It led us a wild, wild chase over crevasses, friable and treacherous stones covered with "verglass," over dangerous couloirs and all the other things talked of in the Alps but forgotten in the Rockies, to high elevations, where frozen snow combed over the beetling crags, and the avalanches roared and thundered down the rocks, dashing the fragments of stone over the lower ice fields. We were not roped together like mountain climbers in the Swiss or Tyrolean Alps; we got the real thrills by using our own hands and feet without ice pick, staff or hobnailed shoes.

[153]

But Big Pete never hesitated and I followed him without a word, and when the trail led along the edge of a dizzy height I could look at the middle of Big Pete's broad back and then my head would not swim. It required quick and good judgment to tell just how much of a slant made a loose stone unsafe to step upon. It was exciting and exhilarating work, and the violent exercise kept me so warm that I carried most of my clothes in a bundle on my back. Presently our path led us into a goat trail, one of those century old paths made by shaggy white Alpine animals, and used by them as regular highways. There were plenty of fresh goat signs, and the broad path led us over a saddle mountain to the verge of a cliff, beyond which it seemed impossible for anything but birds to pursue the trail. Here we sat down to rest and to make a cup of tea over a tiny fire, although wood was plentiful at this place, it being in the timber line.

[154]

Below us lay a valley, into which numerous small glaciers emptied their everlasting supply of ice and blocks of stone, and horse-tail falls poured from the melting snow fields. It might have presented enchanting prospects to an iceman or a bighorn, or a Rocky Mountain goat, but for two tired men it was a gloomy, dangerous and desolate place and I felt certain that even a witch-bear would not choose such a dangerous place as a camping ground. We had finished our tea and I was feeling somewhat refreshed when I noticed a peculiar stinging sensation about my face; I felt as if I had been attacked by some peculiar form of insect. But there were none in sight.

[155]

Pete, at this time, was some distance away prospecting the "lay of the land." I saw him suddenly pull the cape of his wamus over his face, and reasoned that he also had been attacked by these invisible insects.

To my surprise, the big fellow seemed very much alarmed, and every time I shouted to him it greatly excited him. As he was hurrying to me as rapidly as possible, I desisted from further inquiry. When Big Pete reached my side he pulled a handkerchief from around my neck and put it over my mouth, making signs which I did not comprehend. At last he put his muffled mouth to my

ear and shouted through the cape of his wamus. "Shut yer meat-trap or you're food for the coyotes. It is the WHITE DEATH!"

CHAPTER XV

[156]

Clothes and stage trappings can neither add nor detract from our respect for death. He is the same grim old gentleman, be his mouldy bones naked, or clothed in robes of the most gaudy or brilliant hues. A blue death, a red death or a yellow death is just as grizzly and awe-inspiring as one of any shade of gray. Even a black death excites no emotions not touched by the first name, for it is the dread messenger himself whom we respect and not his fanciful robes of office.

As far as I am personally concerned, I confess that Big Pete's painful suggestion about the coyotes had more to do with keeping my mouth shut than any terror inspired by the lily-like purity of the garments of the white death; what made my bones ache was the thought of the wolves gnawing them.

Overhead the sun shone with an unusual brilliancy, and the atmosphere had that peculiar crystalline transparency which kills space and brings distant objects close to one's feet. Where then was the terrible white messenger? Why must my head be muffled like a mummy? Why must I keep my mouth shut, while the curiosity mill within me was working overtime grinding out questions I should dearly love to ask?

[157]

Again and again I looked around me to see where this ghostly white terror might lurk, and now, as I gazed at the mountains, I was surprised and annoyed to discover that the distant peaks were gradually disappearing, being blotted out of the landscape before my eyes; a ghost-like mantle was creeping over and enshrouding the mountains.

Like Big Pete, the witch-bear, the ptarmigan and the stinging insects, the mountains themselves had joined in the weird game and were donning their fernseed caps of invisibility. Now the air around and about me seemed to be filled with powdered dust of mica that glistened, sparkled and scintillated in the sunshine. The breeze which was tossing about the bright atoms loosened the handkerchief which swathed my nose and mouth, and I was seized with a violent fit of coughing.

[158]

It was no gentle hand which Big Pete laid on my shoulder before he again bound the handkerchief around my face and motioned for me to follow him.

Evidently my guide had been making good use of his time while I was engaged in idle speculation, for he led me to a point about fifty yards from the goat trail where there was a possible place to descend the cliff to a ledge fifty feet below. By this time I had become enough of a mountaineer to follow my guide over trails which a few weeks previous would have seemed to me impossible to traverse, and after a hasty and daring descent we reached the ledge, where I discovered the black mouth of a cavern; into this hole Pete thrust me and led me back some twenty yards into the darkness, ordered me to disrobe to the waist, then he began a most vigorous and irritating slapping and rubbing of my chest; so insistent and persevering was he that I really thought my skin would be peeled from shoulders to waist. At last he desisted and ordered me to put on all my clothes.

[159]

"Are you mad, Pete? Has the rarefied air of the mountains upset your brain? If not, will you kindly tell me what on earth all this means and why we are hiding in this gloomy hole?" I asked as soon as I got the breath back in my body.

"Le-loo, you be a baby, and need a keeper to prevent you from committing susancide several times a day. Tenderfoot? Well, I should say so. No one but a short-horn from the East would keep his mouth open gulping in the frozen fog, filling his warm lungs with quarts of fine ice. I reckon it would be healthier to breathe pounded glass, fur it hain't sharper nor half as cold. Why, Le-loo, tha' be a dose of fever and lung inflammation in every mouthful of this frozen fog."

He held my face between his two strong hands so that the faint light that filtered through the murky darkness from the cavern's mouth dimly illuminated my countenance, and as he watched the streams of perspiration falling in drops from the end of my nose his frown relaxed and a broad grin spread over his handsome features.

[160]

"You're all right this time," he added "I calculate that I've melted all the ice in your bellows, so just creep up tha' and sweat a bit more to make it slick and sartin that we've beat the White Death this trip." I did as he said, not because I wanted to sweat but because habit made me obey the commands of my guide.

Evidently this cavern had been in constant use by some sort of animals as a sort of stable for many, many years, and I have had sweeter couches, but by this time my rough life had transformed me into something of a wild animal myself, and it was not long before I was comfortably dozing. During the time that I slept I was dimly conscious of being surrounded by a crowd of people; as the absurdity of this forced itself through my sleep-befuddled brain and I opened wide my eyes, what I saw made me open my eyes still wider.

[161]

I was about to start to my feet when I felt Big Pete's restraining hand on my shoulder, and not until then did I realize that the cave was crowded with the shaggy white Rocky Mountain goats,

and not weird, white-bearded old men. Few persons can truly say that they have been within arm's length of a flock of these timid and almost unapproachable animals; but we had invaded their secret place of refuge, and they had not, as yet, taken alarm at our presence in their castle. It may be that the frozen fog had driven the goats to the cavern for shelter, and it is possible that never having been hunted by man, these animals feared the White Death more than they did human beings, and did not realize the dangerous character of their present visitors; whatever the cause of their temerity, the fact remains that men and goats slept that night in the cavern together.

[162]

I did not awake next morning until after the departure of the goats and opened my eyes to find myself alone in the cavern.

Having all my clothes on, no time was wasted at my toilet, but I made my way directly to the doorway and was gratified to discover that Big Pete was roasting some kid chops over the hot embers of a fire.

After breakfasting on the remains of the kid, Big Pete arose and scanned the sky, the horizon and the mountain tops, and turning to me said, "Now, Le-loo, that Wild Hunter-b'ar-wolf man has fooled us by doubling on his trail an' as it hain't him we're after now but the trail out of the mountains, I mean to go by sens-see-ation, but you must keep yer meat-trap shut and not speak, 'cause soon as I know I'm a man I hain't got no more sense than a man. I must say to myself, 'Now, Pete, you're a varmint and varmints know their way even in a new country.' Then I just sense things and trots along 'til I come out all right."

[163]

I had often heard of this wonderful instinct of direction, the homing instinct of the pigeon, which some Indians, Africans, Australian black boys and a few white men still possess; I say still possess because it is evident that it was once our common heritage, a sort of sixth sense which has been lost by disuse. That Big Pete possessed this sixth sense I little doubted, and it was with absorbing interest that I watched the man work himself into the proper state of mind.

For quite a time he stood sniffing the air and looking around him while his body swayed with a slow motion. Then suddenly, as if he had seen something or as if answering the call of something, he started off almost at right angles to our trail, acting very much like a hound on an old scent, but keeping up a pace that tried my endurance.

It was truly wonderful the way this man, in a trance-like state, was guided by an invisible power over the most dangerous ground, but no one, after a careful survey, could have selected a better trail than that chosen by Big Pete. On and on we went, scrambling over rock-skirting precipices and crumbling ledges. A dense fog settled around us, making each step hazardous, but with an instinct as true and apparently identical with that of our four-footed brothers, my guide kept the same rapid pace for hours, and then, all of a sudden, came to an abrupt stop.

[164]

For several seconds he stood in his tracks, his body keeping the same swaying motion, but after a short while he crept cautiously forward in the fog, with me at his heels, and we found ourselves at the edge of a giant fault, similar to the one in Darlinkel Park, but there was apparently no pass to let us down the towering precipices to the valley below.

"Well, that was a wonderful trip," I cried.

"Shut up!" shouted Pete savagely, but I had spoken and the spell was broken; reason, not instinct, must now lead us.

[165]

Vapor and clouds concealed the low grounds from our view; however, we were determined not to spend another night in the mountains, so while I rested and regained my breath, Big Pete went on to explore the ledges.

Presently my guide hove in sight and motioned me to follow him; he led me to a place where another goat trail went over the edge of the precipice, this time not in ten and fifteen feet jumps, but by a steep diagonal path. Down the treacherous trail we slipped and slid with a wall of rocks on one side and death in the form of a bluish white space on the other side.

As we were clambering carefully around the face of a big rock Pete suddenly whispered that he smelt a "Painter," and upon peering around the corner we found ourselves face to face with a large cat; the animal was crouching upon a flat-topped projecting stone immediately in our path. That it was not the puma of the low-lands, its reddish-colored coat and great size proclaimed. It was a so-called mountain lion and a grand specimen of its kind.

[166]

The cat's small head lay between its muscular forepaws, its hair adhered closely to its body, its long tail was full and round and waved slowly from side to side, while its eyes gleamed like electric sparks.

We were in a most awkward position; our guns were swung by straps over our backs, so that we might use our hands, and we were clinging to the face of the big rock while our toes were seeking foothold in the treacherous shale of the trail. To loosen our hands was to fall backwards into the bluish white sea of unknown depths, and to retrace our steps was out of the question.

Pete often expressed the opinion that no predaceous creature, from a spider up to a cougar, will attack its prey while the latter is immovable.

As a corollary to this proposition he said that when a person is suddenly confronted by a

[167]

dangerous wild beast, the safest plan to pursue is to remain perfectly quiet, or, as he quaintly put it, "to peetrify yourself in the wink of an eye."

Truth to tell, on this occasion I found no difficulty in following his directions. I was "peetrified" by fear; my feet were cold and numb, chills in wavelets washed up and down my spine, a sudden rash seemed to be breaking out all over my body and the skin on my back felt as if it had been converted into goose-flesh.

Had we been able to travel a few feet further we would have both found a comparatively safe footing and had our arms free and a fighting chance with the big catamount in place of hanging suspended to the face of the rock like two big, helpless, terrified bats.

CHAPTER XVI

[168]

With an imperceptible movement, as steady and almost as slow as that of a glacier, my guide twisted his neck until his face was turned from the puma and the side of the mouth pressed against the flat surface of his rock. I was crowded up against Big Pete, who occupied a position but slightly in advance and a little above me. My agony of fear having somewhat subsided I ventured to steal a momentary glance at my comrade's face. To my unutterable surprise I discovered a whimsical twinkling at the corners of his eyes and a mirthful expression of mischief in his countenance. This was incomprehensible to me, for I could imagine no more awe-inspiring position than the one we then occupied.

While my thoughts were still busy trying to fathom the cause of Pete's untimely mirth, the long-drawn howl of the big timber wolf floated over the valley and sent a new lot of shivers down my back. It was the rallying call used by the wolves to call the band together when game is in sight. The sound increased in volume until it reverberated among the crags like the voice of a winter's storm, and then it gradually died away. Big Pete was not only a good mimic but he proved himself to be a ventriloquist of no mean ability; by the help of the rock against which his cheek was pressed he had been able to throw his voice off into space in such a manner that it baffled me for several moments.

[169]

The gray wolves are old and inveterate enemies of the panther or cougar, hunting the cats on all occasions. Consequently all panthers know the meaning of that wild lonesome howl, the assembling call, as well as the oldest wolf in the pack, and its effect upon the lion in our path was instantaneous. The hair, which had a moment before been as slick as if it were oiled, now rose upright until the fuzzy hide gave the animal's body the appearance of being twice its original size.

Scarcely had the big cat vacated the path before we scrambled to the firm foothold and I breathed a great sigh of relief when it was reached. But Big Pete was convulsed with suppressed laughter at the practical joke he had played on the mountain lion.

[170]

"Gosh darn my magnolia breath! That painter went as if he had a ball of hot rorrum tied to his tail," cried my guide.

It was difficult for me to realize that it was Big Pete himself who had given vent to that shuddering howl, and now the danger was over I pleaded with him to give another exhibition of his skill in wolf calls.

The good-natured fellow at first seemed reluctant to repeat his performance, but at length consented and put his hands to his mouth, forming a trumpet, then bent forward his body, stooping so low that his face was below his waist, after which he began again that wild cry which so closely resembles in sentiment and tone the shriek of the wind. As the sound increased in volume the man waved his head from side to side; continuing the movement he gradually assumed an upright pose, and ended by making a low obeisance as the sound died away.

[171]

The imitation was perfect and I was expressing my delight and appreciation when my ear caught a distant sound which put a sudden stop to our conversation.

Was it the wind which I now heard? No! there was not a breath of air stirring, neither was it an echo. There could be no doubt about it, the long-drawn sepulchral howl which filled and permeated the shivering air was an answering cry to Big Pete's call.

Scarcely had the sound waves faded away when in the mysterious distance came another and another answer, until it seemed as if a troop of lost souls were vocalizing their misery. I unslung my gun and loosened my revolvers in their fringed holsters, but Big Pete only shrugged his shoulders and said,

"Come, let's be moseying. 'Taint nothin' but wolves." A fact of which I was as well aware of as Pete, but I, tenderfoot that I was, could not treat howling of wolves with the same unconcern as did my guide.

[172]

We soon reached a point where the goat trail turned again up the mountain and we forsook that ancient path for a diagonal fracture very similar to the one by which we had ascended, which led down the face of the precipice "slantendicularwise," Big Pete said, and soon plunged into the bluish gray sea which filled the valley. We were now enveloped in a dense fog, which added

materially to the dangers of the journey. I had had so many thrills in the last few moments that my nerves were becoming dull and failed to vibrate on this occasion, so that descending the cliff in a fog by a diagonal fracture in the rock became only an incident of our journey; this trail, however, was wider than the one by which we ascended.

The Rocky Mountains are full of new sensations and I got a new one when I discovered that the fog through which we had been traveling was in reality a cloud, and, all unexpectedly, we emerged into the clear mellow light below the floating vapor. It was an enchanting scene which met our eyes; below us stretched a beautiful valley. [173]

For the first time in months I saw a human habitation. The blue smoke from the chimney ascended slowly in a tall column and then floated horizontally in stratified layers. There were fields of ripe grain, orchards, groves, pasture lands and a winding stream fringed with poplars, which flowed in a tortuous course across the valley. As I feasted my eyes on the peaceful scene a great longing took possession of my soul.

Big Pete, too, was lost in thought, conjured up by the scene below us. He stood leaning on his rifle with his eyes fixed on the enchanting picture; so full of unconscious dignity was his pose, so immovable stood the mountain man that he looked like a grand statue done by a master hand.

But what thoughts were conjured up in the guide's brain by the unexpected sight of this ranch could not be interpreted from the expression of his countenance, for that showed no more trace of emotion than an American Indian at the torture stake, or the marble face of a Greek god. Presently he shifted his pose, threw back his head, and Big Pete's eyes were fixed on the valley in front of us, as with distended nostrils he sniffed the mountain air, his brows contracted to a frown, his eyes lost their gentle angelic look and seemed to change from China blue to a cold steel color, and his tightly closed mouth had a stern expression about the corners which appeared altogether out of keeping with the occasion. [174]

"Rot my hide!" he exclaimed, "if I hain't had a neighbor all these years and never knowed it. Waugh! Some emigrant—terrification seize him!—has found another park an' squatted, t'ain't more'n eight miles as a crow flies from mine, nuther, Le-loo." He looked at the sun and muttered. "Hang me, but 'tis t'other end of my own park," then he paused a moment and added fiercely, "if these geysers know when they are well off, they'll steer shy of Darlinkel Park. If I catch 'em scoutin' 'round my claim, I'll send 'em a-hoppin'." [175]

"Bless me, you are neighborly," exclaimed a voice in smooth, even tones.

"What!" said Pete, looking sternly at me. "Did you speak?"

"I said nothing," I replied.

Big Pete's countenance changed and he ran his hands over the cartridges in his belt in the old familiar manner, and with a motion quicker than I can describe it, whipped out his revolvers and wheeled about face, at the same time snapping out the words, "Throw up your hands!"

CHAPTER XVII [176]

We were standing on the surface of a flat table-rock, which jutted out from the face of the towering cliff and overhung the valley that was spread out like a map beneath us. About twenty feet back from the edge of the rock was a pile of debris heaped up against the face of the cliff; but the remaining surface of the stone was clean bare and weather-beaten. The talus against the cliff was composed of loose fragments of stone and other products of wash and erosion. This was overgrown with a thicket of stunted shrubs, wry-necked goblin thistles and murderous devil's clubs. These bludgeon-shaped plants, thickly covered with sharp thorns, reared aloft their weapons as if in menace to all living things; the unstable ground and thorny thicket formed the only shelter where we could be ambushed in the rear, and it was not a likely spot to be chosen for such a purpose by man or beast. [177]

When Big Pete wheeled about face with his trusty revolvers in hand, I quickly followed his example, and our mutual surprise may be imagined when we found ourselves gazing in the faces of a semicircle of gigantic wolves. The animals were squatting on their haunches at the foot of the talus, their wicked slant eyes fixed upon us and their red tongues lolling out from their cavernous mouths.

I cannot tell why, whether it was the state of my nerves or the effect of the rare air of the high altitude, or what, but I felt no fear at facing this strange wolf pack. Indeed, to me they appeared all to be laughing and their red tongues lolled from their open mouths in a very humorous fashion.

The whole scene appeared to me to be exceedingly funny and, in a spirit of utter reckless bravado, I doffed my fur cap, with exaggerated politeness made a low bow, and, addressing the largest and most devilish-looking wolf in the pack, exclaimed, [178]

"Ah! this is Monsieur Loup-Garou, I believe. Pardon me, Monsieur, but did you speak a moment since?"

But Big Pete Darlinkel looked at the wolves, and great beads of sweat stood on his forehead. It was his turn to have the shivers. There was no more color in his face than in a peeled turnip. His gun shook in his left hand like an aspen, while the spangled gun in his right hand dropped its muzzle towards earth and there was scarcely strength enough in his nerveless fingers to have pulled a hair-trigger.

Pete's great baby-blue eyes turned helplessly to me; but it was now my innings, and with a cheery voice I cried,

"Why, Pete, old fellow, what ails you?" Then meanly quoting his own words, I added, "They hain't nothing but wolves!"

There is not a shadow of a doubt that Pete expected the wolves to answer me with human voice, and I am willing to confess that, even to me, there seemed to be no other alternative for the slant-eyed bandits to pursue. But for the present they appeared to prefer to maintain a solemn silence. [179]

The middle wolf had been looking intently at us for some time before a well-modulated voice said,

"I have answered your call, gentlemen; how can I serve you?"

I was more than half expecting some such answer, but if it had not been so evident that Big Pete was badly frightened and had lost all his self-possession, I should have thought he was again practising his art as ventriloquist.

Of course I deceived myself. The wolves had no more power of speech than a house-dog. But I really thought the wolves were doing the talking until I caught sight of a tall man of handsome and distinguished appearance seated among the weird goblin-thistles just above the wolves. The stranger appeared to be a man of almost any age; he might be young but, if old, he was wonderfully well preserved. He was clad in a light-colored buckskin suit of clothes, edged and trimmed with fur, a fur cap on his head and moccasins on his feet. And I noticed, with a start, that he had that same red porcupine quill ornament on his hunting shirt that the young Indian wore. [180]

When I saw how his dress blended perfectly with his surroundings I excused myself for not sooner detecting him. I could not help but admire his easy grace and the sense of reserved strength in his strong figure. The calmness and repose forcibly reminded me of the mountain lion we had lately encountered.

"You kin hackle me and card my sinews, if it hain't the Wild Hunter himself an' his pack," said Big Pete under his breath.

The color now began to return to his face and at the recollection of his late rude words the big fellow blushed like a school girl. Gradually he recovered his self-possession, and, doffing his cap, made a low bow as graceful and as courtly as that of any polished courtier. This was an entirely new side to my friend's character and I listened with interest when he said, [181]

"Sir, whether you be loup-garou, werwolf, witch-b'ar or all them to onct, I do not care. What I want ter say is ef that tha' ranch yander be your'n, you may hamstring me ef I hain't proud to have such a man for a neighbor. Whatever else you be yore no shavetail or shorthorn, an' that's howsomever. I don't mind sayin' that yore a better shot an' all around hunter an' mountain man than Daniel Boone, Simon Kenton, Davy Crockett, Kit Carson, Bison McClean and Jim Baker all rolled in one. Yore the slickest woodsman on the divide. I'm powerful proud of you as a neighbor and would be still prouder ef I might call you my friend."

Our strange visitor displayed a beautiful white set of teeth as a frank smile played over his smooth face. But his only answer at that moment was an inclination of his head and a muttered command to the wolves, which they instantly obeyed by silently disappearing in the underbrush. [182]

After a pause the tall stranger came forward, and, removing his own cap, made a bow even more courtly than that of Big Pete, as he thus replied: "Sir, I feel highly honored at this flattering expression of commendation. I can honestly say that it is the greatest compliment I have ever received from a stranger, and," he added with another winning smile, "you are the first stranger with whom I have held converse in nearly twenty years. That I am not unfriendly I have already proved by some trifling services, but the honor of the acquaintance is mine."

After the formalities of our meeting were over the stranger stood for a few moments with his chin resting on his breast. He was evidently thinking over some serious subject. His head was bare, his fur cap being in his hands, and his hands locked behind his back. A mass of light colored hair fell over his forehead and shoulders.

Presently he looked at us again, with that same grave smile on his face, and said that if we would consent to be blindfolded and trust ourselves implicitly to his care, he would be glad to take us to his home and would feel honored if we should choose to visit him. [183]

"You can proceed no further on this trail for it ends here, and not even a goat can go beyond the rock on which we stand, therefore we must retrace our steps a few hundred yards," he explained, as he apologized for his strange proposition. He securely bandaged our eyes with our own handkerchiefs, and after turning us around until I at least had lost all sense of direction, he

placed thongs in our hands, and then we discovered that we were to be led by some sort of animals, presumably wolves. Whatever else they were, they proved to be careful and sagacious leaders.

After a short distance of rough climbing where we constantly needed the personal help of our mysterious host, we began to descend and soon our feet told us that we were traveling on a comparatively smooth though steep trail. Now and again our guide would speak to warn us of stones or other obstructions in our path, but, with the exception of these necessary words of caution and brief words expressing approval or reproof to the animals, we made the journey in silence and in due time reached the bottom, and our feet told us that we were walking on a level shale-covered path. [184]

At this point the creatures leading us were dismissed and we could hear them scrambling back over the trail. We heard the bleating of sheep, the lowing of cattle and all the multiplicity of noises so familiar on a well-stocked farm, and we could easily detect the different odors as familiar and characteristic as the noises. We enjoyed to its fullest extent the novelty of the homely sensations aroused by the smell of new-mown hay and the familiar medley of sounds peculiar to the farm.

In due time we found ourselves at the foot of a couple of wooden steps, which we ascended, and, crossing a broad veranda, entered a doorway. Here we stood awaiting further commands in utter ignorance of our surroundings. Of course, we surmised we were in the ranch house which we saw from the table rock, but this was only a surmise. [185]

"Gentlemen," said the strange old man, "you are welcome to my home, and allow me to add that you are the only white men who have ever crossed the threshold of this house."

As he ceased speaking he removed the bandages from our eyes.

CHAPTER XVIII

 [186]

It was a strange place, indeed, in which I found myself. Our eyes were unbandaged after we entered the portal of the ranch house, and when Big Pete and I turned toward our guide, we were facing in a direction that gave us a sweeping view of the entire ranch. And what we saw made us marvel.

This farm, between the towering, almost insurmountable mountains, had evidently been wrenched from what two decades before had been as much of a wilderness as the Darlinkel Park across the divide. Timber clothed the mountains on either hand but the fertile valley bottom was as rural as a district of the middle west. On one hand stretched acres and acres of ripened grain. Beyond was pasture land dotted with strange whitefaced animals, which later proved to be hybrid buffalos, a strange cross between wild and domestic cattle.^[3] In other pastures and on the hillsides I could see goats and sheep, and these too were evidently a cross breed of wild and domestic stock, the goats having a very strange resemblance to the fleet-footed shaggy old fellows we had seen on the mountains, while the sheep closely resembled usual domestic sheep. [187]

[3] Since that time the late Buffalo Jones has bred buffalo and domestic cattle and called the offspring "catelow."

There were stables, too, and corrals, all made of logs, as was the ranch house, but what seemed very strange to me was the fact that there were no horses in sight. All of the animals at work in the fields were those strange hybrid buffalo-oxen, all save one, a single, lame and apparently almost blind burro that I saw lying in the sun. From his grayness about the head I had little doubt that he was of great age.

There were hordes of strange poultry too,—strange to me at least, for never had I expected to find flocking together wild turkeys, Canadian geese, black ducks, wood ducks, and mallards (all with wings clipped so that they never again could fly), sage hens, quail, spruce-grouse, partridge, ptarmigan and western mountain quail. All seemed perfectly at home and comfortably domesticated. [188]

Beyond the poultry houses was still another outhouse, a long, low, log building before which was a lawn. On the lawn were all manner of perches and roosts and on these, sunning themselves and preening their feathers, were several types of predaceous birds, ranging from huge and powerful female eagles to smaller hawks and true falcons. This evidently was the Wild Hunter's falconry.

Another thing that made an instant impression upon me was the number of men at work about the place. The workmen were all, without an exception, Indians, and as they moved about silently, their stoic, almost expressionless faces held a decided look of contentment, a few of them turned toward the porch with a frank, honest stare. There was no evidence of fear or restraint in their actions but they always gave the wolf dogs plenty of room as they passed them. These black beasts were ugly, snarling things that showed no love for anyone; on the least provocation menacing growls rumbled in their throats. [189]

What manner of place was this that we had permitted ourselves to be led into? Indeed, what manner of man was this strange host of ours? I shot a sidelong glance at him and it seemed to me

as if I caught a strange, hunted look in his eyes, and a sad smile on his handsome but grim countenance. A slight feeling of fear crept into my heart. Could this strange man be my father? For some reason he certainly did attract me and excite my sympathy, yet I stood in awe of him. The strangeness of my surroundings, too, settled upon me. I turned toward Pete and I had a premonition of evil. I could see that he too was affected the same way. The valley was an earthly paradise, the Wild Hunter a kindly gentleman, what then was it that gave me an uncomfortable and uneasy feeling? I was eager to be alone with Pete for I knew that he would have some interesting observations to make.

[190]

"I am disappointed, gentlemen, you say nothing. Isn't my ranch interesting to you?" demanded the Wild Hunter, with a smile. In a low smooth voice he gave some orders to a young Indian who was walking toward the stables. The Indian instantly snapped into action and hurried away as if one of the black wolf dogs were snapping at his heels, and I felt certain that it was the youth whom we had been trailing.

A hurried and very unpleasant thought flashed through my mind: What was the source of the power the Wild Hunter held over these Indians? They were not slaves in this mountain-surrounded prison; this grim, forceful but kindly wild man did not hold them through fear. He always smiled when he greeted them, but he never smiled at his wolves; when giving them orders or even looking at them, the expression of his face was stern and almost fierce. But the man had asked a question. He was expecting an answer.

[191]

"It is a wonderful place," I managed to stammer; "who could conceive of such a remarkable ranch buried here in the heart of the wilderness?"

"It's a ring-tailed snorter, hamstringing me if it hain't," said Big Pete in an attempt to be enthusiastic.

The man's face glowed with pleasure.

"You are the first white men to see it. I think I have achieved something here in the wilds, thanks a great deal to Pluto and his strain."

"Eh, what?" exclaimed Big Pete in alarm.

"To—to—whom," I gasped, for to have the man actually confess an alliance with Satan rather startled me also.

The Wild Hunter chuckled in an amused manner.

"Thanks to Pluto, I said. But Pluto is that black wolf-dog over there, nevertheless. I think that the name 'Pluto' fits his character to a nicety."

[192]

He pointed to the massive, deep-chested, long-haired, long-limbed, vicious looking leader of his black wolf pack where it was chained to a post. The great animal glared at his master when his name was mentioned. He crouched twenty feet away with his slanting green eyes fixed constantly on his master's face and in them ever flared a fierce, wicked fire.

"Yes, you son of Satan, you and your hybrid whelps have helped me do all this in spite of the fact that you hate me, and would love to tear me limb from limb. You splendid, ugly brute, you are insensible to kindness!"

I noticed that whenever he looked the wolf in the face his own countenance became grim and his eyes exceedingly fierce and not unlike the wolf itself in expression.



"I think the name 'Pluto' fits his

“He hates me,” he continued, turning to us, “because of his ancestors. In him is the blood of a Great Dane noted for its strength, size and ferocity, a fierce brute which I brought over the mountains with me many years ago. Pluto’s mother was a pure black wolf of a mean disposition, and his father the half-breed son of a Great Dane and a she-wolf. He is the fiercest and most bloodthirsty beast in the whole pack, he hates me with the intense hatred of his wolfish nature, he hates me because he knows that I am the master of the pack, the real leader, and he is jealous. Since his puppy days he has watched for a chance to kill me; twice he nearly succeeded—the time will no doubt come when it will be his life or mine. Yet because of his wonderful strength, endurance and sagacity, I could almost love him.

[193]

“His breed does not want to recognize any master. But *I am* his master!” cried the Wild Hunter as his eyes flashed and he struck himself on his chest, “and he knows it. The only way, however, that I keep my power over him and his pack is by forcing myself to think every time I speak to them, now I am going to *kill you*, and brutes though they are they can read my mind and fear me. Besides which self-interest helps a little towards their loyalty. With me for a leader there is always a kill at the end of the hunt, and they know that they come in for a share of the food.

[194]

“Sometimes I fear the wolves will break loose and attack my Indians, which I would very much regret, for the Redmen are faithful fellows and we form a happy community. The Indians look upon me as Big Medicine because I can control these medicine wolves.”

Big Pete looked at the man with open admiration, a man who by the sheer power of his will could control a band of wolves, any one of which was powerful enough to kill an ox, certainly was a man to please the wild nature of Big Pete. “But,” said Pete, “you say Pluto has helped you. How?” he asked.

“How,” exclaimed the Wild Hunter, “why, gentlemen, by governing the pack as savage as himself. The pack is the secret of my whole success; my power over them first won the allegiance of the Indians, won their admiration and their respect. They know that I could turn those wolves upon them at any moment, but they also know that I would not think of doing such an act and they are human and love me; the wolves are brutes and not susceptible to kindness. The wolves hate the Redmen as they hate me, but they supplied us all with food, they secured for us our winter meat while the men worked to build houses and clear the land, and thus made it possible for us to start this settlement. They even acted as pack animals for us, each of them carrying as much as seventy pounds in weight on their backs. But be on your guard, gentlemen, be on your guard! Remember that you are strangers to the wolves and they will not hesitate, if the opportunity offers, to rend you and even devour you.”

[195]

A moment later his expression changed.

“Enough of this,” he exclaimed in pleasanter tones, “come, dinner is served,” and turning, he led the way through the broad doorway of the log ranch house into an almost sumptuously furnished dining room where two silent, soft-footed Indians began immediately to serve a truly remarkable meal.

[196]

“He may be lo-coed,” whispered Pete to me as we took our places at the table, “but I’ll tell the folks, he is a master looney alright. He knows how to make Injuns love him and varmints fear him, he kin pack all his duffle in my bag, he need not cough up eny money when he’s with me. Reckon we be alright here, but waugh! we’ve gotter watch tha’ black wolf pack!—yes and also that young Indian whose ram you shot; it seems he looks after the wolves and sees to it that they are fastened up in their corral. I wouldn’t want him to be sort of careless, you know.”

CHAPTER XIX

[197]

What a dining room that was! All of logs, high ceilinged, with smoked rafters stained like an old meerschaum pipe. It reminded me of a wealthy man’s hunting lodge in Maine, perhaps, rather than the abode of a wild man. There was a huge yawning fireplace at one end, above which was the finest specimen of an elk’s head I have ever seen. There were other heads, too, prong-horned antelope, beautiful bison heads, remarkable specimens of bighorn sheep and mountain goats, there were buffalo robes and wolf robes strewn over the floor, and there were abundant well stocked gun cases on every hand.

But conspicuous among the collection of firearms was one, kept apart, polished and cleaned, and on a rack made of elk horns handily placed just above the big mantle. It was beautifully though not elaborately made, with a fine damascus barrel of tremendous length, a lock and set trigger that showed expert handicraft, and stock of beautifully polished birds-eye maple. An expert would have known immediately that it was a first-water product of an expert gunsmith.

[198]

Big Pete noticed it as soon as I did and he could not keep his eyes from roving to it occasionally during the meal.

“You may scalp me, stranger, fer sayin’ it, but I’d like mightily well to heft that tha’ shooting iron o’ your’n and examine it when we git through with chuck,” he said.

Our strange host looked up at the rifle, then searchingly at Big Pete.

"I don't mind showing it to you, but you must not touch it," he said finally.

"I reckon I wouldn't hurt it none. I've handled guns before," said Big Pete shortly, and I could see that he was piqued at the man's attitude.

"Guess you wouldn't, but I've made it a rule never to let strange hands touch that rifle," said the strange man, and there was a grimness about his tone that forbade quibbling. [199]

"Huh, well I can't say as perhaps yore not right about yore shootin' hardware at that," said Pete. Then after glancing at it again, he added, "a hunter's gun and a woodsman's ax should never be trusted in strange hands. Bet a ten spot it's a Patrick Mullen. Hain't it?"

The name of my kinsman, the famous gunsmith, brought a sudden realization that Mullen was my own family name.

The mention of the gunsmith seemed also to have a curious effect on the old man. His face grew red under the tan and his brow wrinkled and I could see his cold blue eyes scrutinizing Big Pete closely. Finally he said bluntly,

"It is, and it's worth a thousand dollars."

"A thousand dollars!" I exclaimed, "a thousand dollars?"

"Yes," cried the old man almost fiercely, "yes, yes, and it is my gun. He gave it to me, he did—to me and not to Donald. He—"

He stood up suddenly as if he intended to stride over and seize the gun, to protect it from us but as quickly sat down again and buried his face in his hands, and I could see him biting his lips as if he were attempting to control his feeling. [200]

As for me, quite suddenly a great light seemed to dawn. This strange old man was mentioning names that were familiar—that meant worlds to me. I leaned toward him eagerly. Big Pete stood quietly listening, a silent but interested spectator.

"Did you know Donald Mullen, a brother to the famous gunsmith? Tell me, did you know him? I have come all the way—"

I stopped in wonder. Never in all my life do I ever expect to witness such a pitiful expression of anguish pictured so vividly on the human countenance as it was on the face of the Wild Hunter.

"What," he whispered, "did you know him?"

"He was my father," I answered simply.

For a moment the Wild Hunter looked at me intently, then said, "I believe you, you favor him somewhat." He then came forward as if to shake my hand, but changed his mind and sat down with a forced and wan smile. [201]

"Did I know Don Mullen? Did I? He was my partner, my bunkee for many years and on many prospecting trips, a better bunkee no man ever had, but he is dead now, dead! dead! dead! been dead for a dozen years. He was killed by an avalanche. A better partner no man ever had," he murmured and relaxed into silence.

My efforts to get more information of my parents were of no avail. The Wild Hunter turned the conversation in other directions.

Of course, the knowledge that my real father was dead, had been dead a long time, caused me a feeling of sadness, yet strangely enough the little knowledge that I had gleaned from this strange old man brought a sense of relief to me. I think that it must have been a certain sense of satisfaction to know that this queer man was not my father. [202]

But if he was not Donald Mullen, who was he? That question kept me pondering and for the rest of the meal I was silent, speculating on this strange situation, nor did I have an opportunity to note, as Big Pete did, the tearful, kindly glances that the Wild Hunter shot at me now and then.

Still, for all, he was sociable, extremely sociable, and talkative, too, but I fancy now as I recall it, he was simply keeping the conversation in safe channels, for it was very apparent that the rifle and his former mining partner were painful subjects.

Dinner over, we all went out onto the porch of the ranch house, where we talked while the twilight lasted. At least Big Pete and the Wild Hunter talked as they smoked two of those mysterious long cigars, but I was still silent because of the many strange thoughts that were romping through my mind.

Soon darkness settled down and Big Pete began to yawn. I also was heavy-eyed, and presently the Wild Hunter clapped his hands and summoned a leather-skinned old Indian to whom he gave brief low command in the Mewan Indian tongue, as I was afterwards informed by Big Pete, then turning to us he said in his fascinating soft voice: [203]

"It will probably be a novelty for both of you gentlemen to again sleep in a bed between sheets and under a roof. I doubt whether you will enjoy it even though the sheets are clean linen which

were spun and woven by my noble Indians. Moose Ear, here, will conduct you to your rooms and I will take a turn about the place before retiring to see that all is well, and also to see that my black wolf pack is securely confined within the wolf corral. This is a precaution, gentlemen, which I take every night, because a wolf is a wolf no matter how well trained he may be upon the surface, and night is the time wolves delight to run. These beasts are especially dangerous to strangers and it is for that reason I am putting you in the house in place of allowing you to camp outdoors, as I know you would prefer to do. Good-night, gentlemen, see that the doors are closed. Pleasant dreams."

[204]

As we said good-night to him I wondered vaguely if the wolf pen was securely built, for it seemed to me that I detected a suggestion of doubt in the mind of the Wild Hunter himself. I little realized, however, the horrors the darkness had in store for us.

CHAPTER XX

[205]

Moose Ear, the silent, wrinkled old Indian, with lighted candles made of buffalo tallow, guided Big Pete and me up the broad skilfully built puncheon stairway to the upper story of the surprisingly large ranch house, where he showed us to our rooms, rooms which were a joy to look upon. Each was furnished with a heavy, hand-made four-posted bedstead, which in spite of the massiveness was beautifully made, and I wondered at the patience of the Wild Hunter in teaching the Indians their craftsmanship.

The other furniture in the room was also hand wrought, as were the fiber rugs on the floor and the checked homespun blankets on the beds. There was a harmonious and pleasing effect; the rooms were cheerful, abounding in evidences of Indian handicraft. Beadwork and embroidery of dyed porcupine quills were prevalent, even the tester which roofed the four-post bedstead was ornamented with fringes of buckskin and designs made of beads and porcupine quills. The chairs and floors were plentifully supplied with fur rugs, and the quaint, old-fashioned appearance of the room in nowise detracted from its comfort or even luxury.

[206]

If it had not been for the uncomfortable thought of that pack of black wolves outside, I am sure I would have been supremely happy at the prospect of once more spending a night between clean and cool sheets and a real feather pillow on which to rest my head. Eagerly and almost excitedly I threw off my clothes and donned the long, linen nightshirt with which old Moose Ear had provided me. Then I put the buckhorn extinguisher over the candle and dove into the feather bed as gleefully as a child on Christmas Eve.

I expected to immediately fall asleep, but there is where I made a mistake; my mind would not cease working, the wheels in my head kept buzzing and would not stop. I was as wide awake as a codfish; the bed was comfortable, too comfortable, but tired though I was I felt no inclination to sleep. I thought it was the strangeness of my surroundings which kept me tossing from side to side, but I soon realized that the trouble was to be found in the fact that for months I had only had the sky for my roof, never using our tents or open faced shack except in bad weather; but here, the ornamented tester of the bed and the ceiling itself seemed to be resting on my chest; in spite of the wide open windows the room seemed stuffy and oppressive. I felt as if I would suffocate.

[207]

Twice I got up and sat by the open window and gazed out at the black landscape. The sky was cloudy and there were no stars; this combined with the pine trees about the ranch house made the darkness so black and thick that it seemed as if one might cut it in chunks, with a knife. The air felt good to breathe but I did not propose to sit by the window all night so at last I arose, put moccasins on my feet and, taking my blankets with me, stole stealthily down the stairs, opened the front door and made my bed on the floor of the broad piazza. I had not forgotten the warning to keep indoors, but I thought I would rather risk the wolves than to smother all night.

[208]

In the darkness I discovered another occupant of the piazza also rolled up in a blanket taken from a bed in the house. Feeling with my hands I discovered that it was Big Pete. Comfortably settling myself in my blanket I felt the breeze from the mountain blowing over my face and through my hair, and it soothed me until I dropped off into gentle slumber; but during the months I had been sleeping in the open I had learned the art, as the saying is, of sleeping with one eye open. In this case, however, if the eye had really been wide open it could have seen nothing because of the darkness, but the darkness did not interfere with my ability to hear, and after I had been sleeping awhile I found myself suddenly sitting bolt upright in my blankets with beads of perspiration on my forehead and that terrible sensation of horror which one experiences in a nightmare. I knew that I had heard something, but what?

[209]

The oppressive silence of the wilderness made the valley appear as if Nature was holding her breath for a moment before giving voice to an explosion of sound. I sensed impending disaster of some sort. What it was I could not guess, but was convinced that something was about to happen.

As I held my breath and listened, the ranch house was silent; even Pete had not, apparently, awakened, but I could not hear his regular breathing. Now I thought I could detect a soft and very faint noise as of some large body creeping over the puncheon steps. I also imagined I detected the noise of padded feet and the scraping noise of claws on the wood. A shudder ran through me. Was a panther, a mountain lion, about to spring upon me? No, I abandoned the

[210]

thought and instinctively I knew that it must be one of the black wolf pack. Then I remembered hearing the cracking and breaking of sticks or timber while I was trying to sleep in the bedroom, and I felt that Pluto had broken out of the pen and was creeping up on us slowly and stealthily as I have seen a fox creep up on a covey of quail.

Would the beast presently hurl its terrible form upon me, or on Big Pete? I attempted to warn my friend, but my tongue clung to the roof of my mouth and for the moment I was powerless and speechless, subdued by a combination of fear of the real beast and superstitious fear of the fabulous werewolf or loup-garou,^[4] but the next moment I pulled myself together, mastered my trembling limbs, rolled softly out of my blankets, and gun in hand wormed my way toward the spot where Big Pete lay, determined to sell my life dearly. With Big Pete beside me, now that I was thoroughly awake, I would fight all the werewolves of the old world and all the loup-garous of Canada. I reached out and felt for Pete but he was not there, the blankets were empty; once or twice I thought I detected the glint of the wolves' eyes, but the night was very dark and in the shadow of the roof I could really see nothing.

[4] A werewolf, or loup-garou, is a legendary man who, it was formerly believed, could at will take on the form and nature of a wolf.

Closer and closer sounded the stealthy, dragging noise, and I heard a hand feel softly for the latch of the front door and could hear fingers scraping ever so softly over the wood surface of the other side. A slight rattle told me that the hand had found the latch and that presently the door would be flung open. With my revolver ready I waited developments and braced myself for the attack.

The door flew open wide, and the voice of the Wild Hunter cried,

"Pluto, you fiend, down! down! I say!"

But this time the huge brute did not obey and the command was answered by a low rebellious growl, a scratching of feet on the puncheons, and a heavy thud of someone falling told me that the final struggle for the leadership of the black wolf pack had begun.

Then burst upon the stillness of the night such an uproar that for a moment I thought the whole pack was mixed in the fight, but at length I heard Pluto's snarling, rumbling growl, answered by the distant howl of the wolf pack, followed immediately by a close-by yell that chilled my blood; after this came Big Pete's war cry, then the crash of falling objects, shrieks and growls and savage yells.

I had flung myself forward, and there in the pitch darkness of the doorway of the hall I felt and heard rather than saw the lean twisting bodies of the Wild Hunter and Pluto clasped in a life and death struggle on the floor. I feared to use my revolver, as it would have been impossible to tell whether I was shooting the hunter or the wolf.

Suddenly a light burst upon the scene. Big Pete's absence was explained; he had secured a lantern and holding it aloft with his left hand, with a six-shooter in his right, he paused a moment over the struggling figures. By the light of the lantern one could see that the Wild Hunter was on his back struggling with the giant beast which he was trying to choke with his two hands, while the wolf's teeth were seeking the throat of the man. It was a terrible scene but it was no time to waste in horror. The efforts of the hunter to free himself from his terrible assailant would have been of little avail but for the assistance of Big Pete, for the wolf was shaking the wild man from side to side with terrific force, very much the same as a bull-terrier might shake a cat.

Pete wasted no time but placing the muzzle of his gun against the wolf's head he fired, then shouted to me, "Look behind you."

As I wheeled about I found that I was facing the rest of the pack. Pluto reared upon his hind legs, clawed the air frantically in his death struggle, and fell with a thud across his master's body, but Pete and I were now concentrating our fire on the snarling, leaping bodies of the wolf pack. Fortunately the death of Pluto and the silence of the Wild Hunter seemed to discourage the pack, they evidently missed their leaders and this gave us the advantage, for if they had rushed us we undoubtedly would have fallen victims to their savage teeth.

In the melee the lantern was upset and the struggle ended in darkness as it began, but when things quieted down and Pete relit the lantern there were only two wolves which were alive and they were fiercely attacking each other. We soon dispatched them, however, and then devoted our attention to the Wild Hunter over whose body Big Pete was now bending.

"By the great horn spoon, Le-loo!" cried he, looking up for a moment, "we've wiped out the pack, and now that the scrap is over here comes the Injuns. I calculate our friend here is a dead one; Pluto has chewed him to pieces. Come, lend a hand and we will see what we can do for the poor old man; he certainly did put up a glorious fight."

Reaching down I gathered the old man's legs in my arms, and with Big Pete supporting his head and shoulders, we carried him into my room and laid him on the feather bed under the savagely ornamented tester.

Big Pete was all action then, and I helped as best I could. The Scout ripped one of the homespun sheets into ribbons and with these made bandages and proceeded to stay the flow of blood from the old man's lacerated throat. He worked hard and long and now and then he would

shake his head dubiously. Presently he muttered, "'Taint much use, Ol' Timer, I guess yore a goner. Yore goneta pass over t' Divide this time, I guess. That tha' Pluto fiend done chewed you up fer further orders."

At this the old man opened his eyes, and a grim smile wrinkled his now ashen face.

"I knew he'd do it some day, and I think he got me this time. The Mewan Indians call the giant wolf "Too-le-ze" and that is also the name they gave me, but I am not a werwolf, a loup-garou or a Too-le-ze. I was only their master but now their victim.

[216]

"I feared that Pluto, as I call him, or Too-le-ze, was strong and treacherous and that is why I ruled him with an iron hand. He's got me this time. I guess it had to end this way—give me a cup of water."

He then fixed his gaze on me and I noticed that he no longer had that worried, haunted look which had heretofore characterized him.

"So you are Donald's son—well, when I heard Pluto stalking you I knew that it was you or your uncle that the beast would get; it was fate that made me slip and fall, and once down the wolf saw his long-looked-for opportunity and instantly availed himself of it. But the good Lord was not going to allow me to bring bad luck to both you and your father, boy. Yes, I am Fay Mullen and I caused the death of your father, and my brother. I bear the brand of Cain.

[217]

"We were crossing a steep bank of snow at the foot of a cliff, and being both tired and hungry we were bickering and quarreling over nothing. I should have remembered that your father was but just recovering from an attack of nervous prostration, but I did not; we had been months in the mountains prospecting and the unprofitable toil and loneliness must have got on my nerves. At any rate, after some hot, unbrotherly language, we agreed to part company.

"We sat down on the snow and divided our outfit by lot. I got the flint-lock Patrick Mullen, the fierce Great Dane and the gentle little donkey; your father got the packhorse and the Winchester rifle.

"We—we—parted without saying good-bye, and just then an elk came out on the snow bank. Instantly your father fired and I fired, the elk fell, but the simultaneous concussion of the reports of the two rifles started the snow to moving. The Great Dane and the donkey sensed the danger and fled to the right. I turned to warn your father and motioned him back, but he came on a run toward me and I fled at the heels of my outfit. The burro and dog escaped to safety, I was caught in the edge of the slide, knocked unconscious and buried in snow, from which the dog rescued me.

[218]

"A fragment of stone struck me on the head and I have never been the same since then. Your father and his outfit are buried under five hundred feet of snow and rocks. I camped nearby for days but could find no trace of my brother and all the time a voice seemed to cry, 'You killed your brother; you are marked with the brand of Cain.'

"This thought has haunted me night and day and I have never quarreled with a man since then; for fear that I might do so, I have avoided white men ever since and buried myself in these mountains. I found this valley and I hid here and with the aid of the Great Dane and the wolf dogs I bred, as beasts of burden, I built this ranch. I—I—was afraid—all the time, though—afraid someone would—find out about—Donald's death and blame it on me. When you—said—you—were—Donald's son I was frightened—I thought you'd come to get me—for killing your—father and—I—I—I was going to kill myself. But Pluto got—me—and saved me from further guilt. I—"

[219]

He said more, but neither Big Pete nor I could understand him. Indeed, he kept mumbling incoherently for an hour or more while we watched over him and did all that we could to make him comfortable until the death rattle in his throat put an end to his mumbling. But despite our efforts, he passed on at dawn. Just as the first warm light of the sun glowed above the mountains, he breathed his last.

Now you know why my private den is just cram full of the things you fellows like. You may also guess where I procured the black wolfskin rugs and the rare bead and porcupine quill decorations. Yes, that long-barrelled rifle hanging on the buckhorn rack is the famous Patrick Mullen gun. It is a rifle that Washington, Boone or Crockett would have almost given their scalps to possess, because it is the same pattern as the ones they themselves used but more scientifically and skillfully made. It's a flint-lock, too, and that is the funny part about it that interests all the Scouts of our Troop. It is my good-turn mascot, for as long as it hangs there I am under the influence of my wild uncle and can quarrel with no man.

[220]

Now you know why the gun is preserved as a trophy for my old Scouts and is an object of veneration upon which they love to gaze when they sit cross-legged on the skins of the black wolf pack before the crackling fire of their Scoutmaster's private den.

Big Pete? Oh, he now runs the Pluto Ranch in Paradise Valley.

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