

The Outcasts

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Illustration:

Shag carried the Dog-wolf on his back

Chapter 1

A‘tim the Outcast was half Wolf, half Huskie Dog. That meant ferocity and bloodthirst on the one side, and knowledge of Man’s ways on the other. Also, that he was an Outcast; for neither side of the house of his ancestry would have aught of him.

A‘tim was bred in the far Northland, where the Cree Indians trail the white snow-waste with Train Dogs; and one time A‘tim had pressed an unwilling shoulder to a dog-collar. Now he was an outcast vagabond on the southern prairie, close to the Montana border-land.

It was September; and all day A‘tim had skulked in the willow cover of Belly River flat-lands, close to the lodges of the Blood Indians.

Nothing to eat had come the way of the Dog-Wolf; only a little knowledge of something that was to happen, for he had heard things—the voices of the Indians sitting in council had slipped gently down the wind to his sharp Wolf ears.

As he crawled up the river bank close to Belly Buttes and looked across the plain, he could see the pink flush of eventide, like a fairy veil, draping the cold blue mountains—the Rockies.

„Good-night, warm Brother,“ he said, blinking at the setting sun; „I wonder if you are going to sleep with an empty stomach, as must A‘tim.“

The soft-edged shafts of gold-yellow quivered tremblingly behind the blue-gray mountains, as though Sol were laughing at the address of the Outcast. The Dog-Wolf looked furtively over his shoulder at the smoke-wreathed cones of the Blood tepees. The odor of many flesh-pots tickled his nostrils until they quivered in longing desire. Buh-h-h! but he was hungry! All his life he had been hungry; only at long intervals had a gorge of much eating fallen to his lot.

„Good-night, warm Brother,“ he said again, turning stubbornly from the scent of flesh, and eying the crimson flush where the sun had set; „one more round of your trail and I shall sleep with a full stomach, for to-morrow the Bloods make a big Kill—the Run of many Buffalo.“

A‘tim, sitting on his haunches, and holding his nose high in air until his throat pipe drew straight and taut, sang: „O-o-o-o-o-h! for the blood drinking! W-a-u-g-ha! the sweet new meat—hot to the mouth!“

The Indian Dogs caught up the cry of A‘tim as it floated over the Belly River and voiced it from a thousand throats.

„The Blackfeet!“ screamed Eagle Shoe, rushing from his tepee. „It’s only a hungry Wolf,“ he grunted, as he sat in the council again; „let us talk of the Buffalo Run.“

That was what the Dog-Wolf had heard lying in the tangle of gray willow, close to the tepee of Eagle Shoe, the Blood Indian; and he would sleep peacefully, his hunger stayed by the morrow’s prospect. As he sat yawning toward the rose sky in the West, a huge, dark form came majestically from a cleft in the buttes, and stood outlined, a towering black mass. A‘tim flattened to earth as though he had been shot, looking not more than a tuft of withered bunch-grass. Then he arose as suddenly, chuckled to himself, and growled nervously: „Oh! but I got a start—it’s only old Shag, the Outcast Bull. Ha, ha! A‘tim to fear a Buffalo! Good-evening, Brother,“ he exclaimed; „you quite frightened me—I thought it was that debased Long Knife, Camous.“

„Thought me Camous!“ bellowed the Bull, snorting indignantly; „he’s but a slayer and a thief. All the Paleface Long Knives are that; killing, killing—stealing, stealing. Why, even among his own kind he is called *Camous*; and you, who were bred in the Man camps, know what that means.“

„Of course, of course—ha! most surely it means *a stealer of things*. But I meant not to liken you to him, Brother Shag—it was only my fright; for even in my dreams I am always seeing the terrible Camous. I have cause to remember him, Shag—it was this way. Did I ever tell you?“

„Never,“ answered Shag, heavily.

Illustration:

„Lying on my back as though I were dead,

I held my tail straight up“

„Well, it was this way: Once upon a time, in the low hills they call Cypress, I was stalking a herd of antelope. To tell you the truth, I had been at it for two days. Waugh! but they were wary. At last I worked within fair eyesight of them, and knowing the stupid desire they have to look close at anything that may be strange to them, I took to myself a clever plan. Lying on my back as though I were dead, I

held my tail straight up, and let the wind blow it back and forth. The big-eyed Eaters-of-Grass asked one another: ‘What is this new thing? Is it a plant or an animal?’ That is the way they talked, I am sure, for they are like wolf-pups, quite silly. Well, they came closer and closer and closer. E-u-h-h, e-u-h-h! but my mouth watered with the thought of their sweet meat as I lay as one dead. Now, they hadn’t the knowledge to work up wind to me, but came straight for the thing they saw that moved. Would you believe it, just as I was measuring from the corner of my eye the time for a strong rush, who should creep over a hill but Camous! In fright I sprang to my feet, and away went the Goat-faced small-prongs. Then the deviltry of the many-breathed Fire-stick this Camous carries came down upon me as I ran faster than I’d ever gone before. *Click, snap! click, snap!* the quick-breathing Fire-stick coughed; and though I rocked, and jumped sideways and twisted, before I could get away I had one of the breath-stings in my shoulder. E-u-h-h! but I go lame from it still.”

Shag slipped a cud of sweet grass up his throat with a gurgling cough and chewed it reflectively, for he was of a slow turn of thought, not at all like the nimble-brained Dog-Wolf. Then he swallowed the cud, blew from his nostrils the sand that had come into them crossing the scant-garbed hills of Belly Buttes, and said ponderously: „Yes, I know the many-breathed Fire-stick; that’s what makes the Palefaces so terrible. The plain simply reeks with the dead bodies of my people whom they have slain.“

„And the bodies all poisoned, too; whur-r, whur-r! All turned into death meat for the Flesh-feeders, Dog or Wolf,” snarled A’tim. „Killed for the hide—think of that, Shag!—or just the tongue taken. If we make a kill it is for the eating—to still the gnawing pain that comes to us, and we waste nothing, leave nothing.“

„Most assuredly,” replied the Bull, „thou leavest nothing but the bones.“

„Nothing but the bones,” concurred A’tim. „And as I was saying, these Long Knives put the Flour of Death in the dead Buffalo, and my Wolf Brethren, when they eat, being forced to of their hunger, die like flies at Cold Time.“

„And a good thing, too—I mean—“ and Shag coughed apologetically; „I mean, as a Calf I received cause to remember your Wolf Brothers, A’tim; there’s a hollow in my thigh you could bury your paw in, where one of your long-fanged Pack sought to hamstring me. You, A’tim, who are half Wolf, know how it comes that where one of your kind puts his teeth, the flesh, sooner or later, melts away, and leaves but a hole—how is it, A’tim?“

„Foul teeth,” growled the Dog-Wolf. „They’re a mean lot, are the Gray Runners; even I, who am half of their kind, bear them no love—have they not outcasted me because of my Dog blood? I am no Wolf, Shag; I am A’tim, which meaneth *a Dog*, in the talk of the Crees.“

„Even so, Brother,” said Shag, „how comes it that thou art a half-breed Wolf at all?“

Illustration:

„I am no Wolf, Shag; I am A’tim,
which meaneth a Dog in the talk of the Crees“

„That is also of Man’s evil ways, Brother Bull—thinking to change everything that was as it should be before he came. This false mating is of his thought; to get the strength of the Wolf, and the long-fasting of the Wolf, and the toughness of the Wolf, into the kind of his Train-Dogs. And because of all this, I, who am a Dog, am outcasted.“

„Well, we’ll soon all be gone,“ sighed the Bull, plaintively; „when I was a Smooth Horn, and in the full glory of my strength—“

„Thou must have been of a great strength, Shag, for thou art the biggest Bull from Belly Buttes to Old Man River—Waugh! Waugh! that I can swear to.“

„In those days,“ continued Shag, taking a swinging lick at his scraggy hide with his rough tongue, „in those days, when I was a Smooth Horn, I led a Herd that caused the sweet-grass plain to tremble like water when we galloped over it. We were as locusts—that many; and when crossing a coulee I’ve turned with pride on the opposite bank—I always went first—and, looking back, saw the whole hollow just a waving mass of life. Such life, too, Lone Dog; silk-coated Cows with Calf at knee; and Bulls there were full many—because I tolerated them, of course—and all strong and fat, and troubled by nothing but, perchance, in the Cold Time a few days of the White Storm which covered our food. But that did not matter much; we just drifted head on to the harsh-edged blizzard, and lived on the thick fat of our kidneys.“

„But the Redmen—the hairless-faced ones,“ interrupted Dog-Wolf; „they killed many a Buffalo in the old days.“

„We could spare them,“ replied Shag; „their Deathshafts of wood slew but a few. Like yourself, A’tim, they killed only when they were hungry. It’s the many-breathed Fire-stick of the Paleface that has destroyed us, A’tim; but like you, Brother, I, who am but an Outcast because of my great age, and because my horns have become stubs, care not overmuch. Why should I lament over my own people who have driven me forth—made of me an Outcast?“

„There is to be a big Run to-morrow—a mighty Kill,“ said A’tim, growing tired of the old Bull’s reminiscent wail.

„Where?“ queried the other.

„At Stone Hill Corral. Eagle Shoe says they will kill five hundred head.“

„I know,“ sighed Shag—„at the Pound; I know that death-trap. Half a Herd I lost there once through the conceit of a young Bull hardly out of the Spike Horn age. Well I know the Pound—even the old Indian of deep cunning who made it, Chief Poundmaker—that’s how he came by his name, A’tim. But, as I was saying, when I tried to turn the Herd, knowing what was meant, this Calf Bull led a part of them straight into the very trap. Served him right, too; but the Cows! Ah, me! My poor people! Slaughtered, every one of them; and so it will be again to-morrow—eh, A’tim? It’s the big Herd down in the good feeding they’re after, I suppose.“

„Yes,“ answered A’tim; „to-morrow the whole Blood tribe, and Camous the Paleface, who is but a squaw man, living in their lodges, will make the Run.“

„I wish I could stampede the Buffalo to save them,“ sighed Shag; „but my sides are sore from the insulting prods of the Spike Horns. Not a Bull in the whole Herd, from Smooth Horns, who are wise, down to Spike Horns, who are fools because of their youth, but thinks it fair sport to drive at me if I go near. Surely I am an

Outcast—which seems to me a strange thing. When we come to the knowledge age, having gained wisdom, we are driven forth.“

„No; you'd only get into trouble,“ declared A'tim decisively. „We, who are Brothers because of our condition, will watch this Run from afar. To-morrow, for once in my life, I shall have a full stomach.“

„I am going back to the Buttes to sleep,“ declared Shag.

„I will go also,“ said A'tim; „while you rest, I, who sleep with one eye open, after the manner of my Wolf Brothers, will watch.“

In a little valley driven into the Buttes' side, where the grass grew long because of deep snow in winter time, the big Buffalo stopped, prospected the ground with his nose, flipped a sharp stone from the couch with nimble lip, and knelt down gingerly, for rheumatism had crept into his old bones; then with a tired grunt of relaxation he rolled on his side, and blew a great breath of sweet content through his nostrils.

„A good bed,“ quoth A'tim. „I will share it with you, Brother; close against your stomach for warmth.“

He took the three turns that had come to him of his Dog heritage, and curled up contentedly against the great paunch of the scarred Bull.

„I can't sleep for thinking of the big Kill,“ murmured Shag. „My poor Brothers and Sisters, also some of my own children, are in that Herd, though they, too, have disowned and driven me forth.“

„There will be more sweet grass for your feeding when they are gone, Shag,“ declared Dog-Wolf.

„Ah, there's plenty of eating, such as it is; though the grass on the prairie looks short and dry and harsh, yet it is sweet in the cud. To you, who are but a Dog-Wolf, the eating comes first in your thought, but with us it is the dread of hunters, who keep us ever on the move.“

„I know of a land where it is not this way,“ asserted A'tim, after a pause; „a beautiful land, with pea-vine knee-deep, and grass the Men call blue-joint, that fair tops my back when I walk through it. As for drink! why, one day in a single tramp I crossed sixteen streams of beautiful running water.“

„Are you dreaming, A'tim?“ asked Shag, touching the Dog-Wolf's back with the battered point of his stub-horn.

„No, Bull; and there are few hunters in that land, and few of your kind; and shelter of forest against the White Storm; and buttes and coulees everywhere.“

„An ideal Range,“ muttered the Bull; „is it far?“

„Perhaps half a moon—perhaps a whole moon from here to there, just as one's feet stand the trail.“

„You make me long for that great feeding,“ sighed Shag enviously.

„Yes, you'd be better in the Northland, Shag,“ said the Dog-Wolf, sleepily — „better there. Here you are an Outcast, even as I am.“

„Yes, after the big Kill to-morrow,“ sighed the Bull mournfully, „I shall want to trail somewhere. Across Kootenay River is good feeding-ground, but there the accursed Long Knives are filled with the very devil of destruction, and kill even such as I am, though my hide is not worth the lifting. I, who am an Outcast, and have lost all pride, know this—I am worthless.“

The bubbling monotone of the old Bull had put A'tim to sleep. He was giving vent to gasping snores and plaintive whimpers, and his legs were twitching spasmodically; he was dreaming of the chase. Shag turned his massive head and watched the nervous Dog-Wolf with heavy, tired eyes. „He is chasing the reed-legged Antelope now; or, perhaps, even in his sleep, Camous pursues him with the many-breathed Fire-stick. Well, well, by my hump, but we all have our troubles; even this Dog-Wolf, who is not half my age, has lived into the hard winter of life.“

Then Shag rested his black-whiskered chin on the soft turf, his tired eyelids, mange-shaved, drooped over the age-blurred eyes, and these two Outcasts, so strangely mated, driven together by adversity, slept in the coulee of Belly Buttes.

Chapter 2

A cold, weakling gray-light was touching with ghastly fresco the Belly Buttes when A'tim stretched out his paw and scratched impatiently at Shag's leather side. The Bull came back slowly out of his heavy sleep.

„Gently, Wolf Brother,“ he cried petulantly; „your claws are wondrous strong, and my side has many sore spots—love scars from my Brother Bulls.“

„You'll have worse than Bull scars if you don't wake up,“ answered A'tim; „can't you hear something?“

Shag tipped his massive head sideways with drowsy inquiry, the heavy lids opening in unwilling laziness. A muffled, palpitating beat was in the sulky morning air; it was like the monotonous thump of a war drum over on the Reserve.

„What is it?“ queried the Bull, raising his head with full-aged dignity.

„Eagle Shoe's pinto is pounding the trail; the Run is on,“ answered A'tim.

Shag heaved his huge body to his knees wearily, struggled to his feet with stiff-limbed action, and shook his gaunt sides.

„You needn't do that,“ sneered A'tim; „not much grass sticks to your coat now.“

„No, it's only force of habit,“ grunted Shag. „And to think of the time when my beautiful hair was the envy of the whole range; for I was a Silk-Coat, you know—a rare thing in Bulls, to be sure. But I'm not that now; when I look in the lake waters and see only this miserable ruff about my neck, and scant tuft on my tail, I feel sad—feel ashamed. The tongue of the lake tells me all that, Brother, so say no more about it.“

„Wait you here, Shag,“ commanded A'tim; „I will go up on a Butte and see the method of these hunters; my eyes are younger than yours, Herd Leader.“

When the Dog-Wolf returned he said: „Eagle Shoe is riding far to the South; let us follow in the river flat and see this Run, for it will be a mighty Kill. O-o-o-h! but I am empty—famished!“

„Always of blood,“ muttered the Bull to himself—„always of blood and meat eating; Wolf and Dog; Dog-Wolf and Man—always full of the blood thought and the desire for a Kill.“

They could hear the thud of pony hoofs on the dry prairie's hollow drum as they traveled, winding in and out the tangle of willow bushes that followed the river.

Then the hoof beats died away, and A'tim said: „Now he has circled to the West—that means something; let us go up and see.“

They stole up the old river bank to the brow of the uplands. A mile off they could see Eagle Shoe standing beside his cayuse. As they watched, the Blood Indian stooped, caught up a handful of black earth-dust and threw it high in air. That was sign talk, and told his comrades who were hiding on the prairie that he saw many Buffalo—Buffalo many as the grains of sand cast to the wind.

Then he trailed his blanket behind him as he walked beside his ewe-necked pinto, and two Indians stole stealthily from their prairie cover like Coyotes, and followed Eagle Shoe.

„Ah!“ muttered Shag, as he and A'tim went forward slowly, „I know. This Indian has the cunning of a whole Wolf-Pack; is that not so, Brother? King Animals!“ he exclaimed, in a great voice like the low of the wind coming through a mountain gorge; „is that not the Herd yonder, clear-eyed Dog-Wolf?“

„By the chance of meat, it is—a mighty Herd, Shag; such a Herd as the Caribou make in the Northland when they mate.“

„Now the Buffalo see Eagle Shoe,“ continued Shag; „but they have no wisdom; they but see some one thing that has life. Perhaps they will even say: (It is only old Shag, the Outcast; let us feed in peace.) Their eyes are the eyes of Calves, and their noses tell them nothing, for the hunt Man is down Wind, is he not, A'tim?“

„Surely, Brother; even a *moneas*, a green hunter of a Paleface, would know better than to send the flavor of his presence on the Wind's back.“

„Yes, even so,“ continued Shag. „See how gently he moves toward them. Danger! One Bull's head is up; he has discovered that it is not a Buffalo; now he has whispered to the others, for they are moving slowly. Thou hast spoken truth, A'tim—a strange thing for a Dog-Wolf, too,“ he muttered to himself—„it *will* be a mighty Kill. How slowly the Herd moves; they are not afraid of the one animal, whatever it is—one, did I say, A'tim? Look you, Brother, for you have the Wolf-eyes: are there not three now—three Kill drivers?“

„Yes, three Indians,“ answered the Dog-Wolf. „The same old Hunt. I've watched it many a time from behind the runners; I know every trick of these slayers. Now the Run surely begins; let us close up, Shag, for the hunters will have no eyes for such as us; their hearts are full of the killing of many Buffalo. Also, there will be much meat warm to a cold stomach to-night“; and he licked his chops greedily.

„I don't like it,“ muttered Shag; „the Palefaces, with their many-breathed Fire-sticks, have killed my people, and have driven them up from the South, and now they are gathered together in a few mighty Herds such as this. The Redmen, who have not these Fire-sticks, but have the cunning of Wolves, see all this, and say they too must slay a whole Herd, where before they killed but two or three. We'll soon be all gone—we, who are the meat food of these Redmen, we'll soon be all gone, and then what will they do, A'tim? Will they kill each other, as your people do when the famine gets into their hearts? Or will they just lie down and die, as my people do when the White Storm blots out all the grass food?“

„I do not know, Great Bull,“ answered A'tim. „To-night I shall be full of much meat, perhaps even to-morrow; after that I know not what may come with the warm trail of the sun.“

The Outcasts saw the two Indians ride into the eye of the Wind that blew up from the South across the Herd. As a sudden squall ripples a smooth lake, so the scent of the Redmen carried by the prairie breeze stirred the sea of brown-backed Buffalo.

„Now they will stampede,“ quoth Shag, eyeing this manœuvre with heavy intentness.

„Yes,“ answered A'tim, „and Eagle Shoe will lead your brethren to their destruction. We will wait here till they have passed, then we will follow.“

„Yonder is one of the bush wings leading to the slaughter-pen, the Stone Hill Corral,“ cried Shag; „and on the far side will be another, though we can't see it yet.“

„Yes,“ concurred A'tim, „I see it; they'll come closer and closer together, these two run of bushes, and at the far end there will be but a narrow trail like a coulee, and after that they drop into Stone Hill Pit—the Buffalo Pound. I saw the Indians building these trail-slides last night. It will be a great Run—a mighty Kill!“

„Yes,“ affirmed Shag, „we both know of this thing—we who are of no account; it is only the Outcasts who have much wisdom, seemingly. Behind the bushes hide the Indians, and no Buffalo will break through because of them. On, on they'll gallop to the death-pit, the Pound. Let us move up closer; my old blood tingles with it, for I've been in many a Run.“

A'tim grinned like a Hyena. Already in his Wolf nostrils was the visionary scent of blood, and much killing. That night he would dip his lean jaws in the Kill of the Redmen.

Eagle Shoe and the two Indians who had come up out of the level plain like evil spirits were leading and driving their prey into the wide jaws of the converging stockade. The Buffalo were pressing on to destruction with increased pace, following with blind stupidity the horseman who cantered in front of them. From a lazy stroll they had quickened to a fast walk; a shuffling trot had given place to an impatient lope. Calves were being hustled to the center of the moving Herd by loving mothers. Head down, and wisp-tail straight out, the brown bodies shifted from lope to mad gallop. The Bulls snorted restlessly and called hoarse-voiced to their consorts: „Speed fast, for something evil follows.“

The beaten earth groaned in hollow misery; the thrusting weight of half a thousand head made its breast ache; its plaintive protest grew into an angry roar like incessant thunder; the dust, sharp-hoof-pounded, rose like a hot breath, and hung foglike over the troubled sea of rocking bodies.

Behind, the two horsemen, wide apart like fan points, galloped with hard-set faces. Eagerly the ponies, bred to the Hunt, stretched their limbs of steel-like toughness, and raced for the brown cloud that fled as a broken regiment.

Surely it was wondrous sport, as A'tim thought; surely it was unholy slaughter, as the Outcast Bull muttered.

Now the galloping brutes were well between the brush walls of the ever-narrowing stockade. A Calf, speed-strangled, slipped from the dust cloud and wandered aimlessly toward the galloping horsemen; Grasshead's pony swerved as the Calf sprawled in his path.

On the Buffalo galloped; faster and faster rode Eagle Shoe. His cayuse, the fleetest Buffalo horse of all the Blood tribe, galloped with the full fear in his heart

of the danger that was behind. Low over his neck crouched Eagle Shoe; one false step—a yawning badger hole, a swerve at a white rock, a falter, and crunching hoofs would grind the Redskin to pulp.

Wedge-shaped the Herd raced for the leading horseman; hindermost labored the fatted bulls, but in front thundered the leader.

With hawk eye, Eagle Shoe swept the stockade wall for the opening through which he was to slip and let the Herd gallop on to their destruction. Hi, yi! there it was. Sharp to the left, swinging his body far out on the side to steady the careening cayuse, he turned. As he shot through the opening two Indians rose up, and their guns belched a red repulse in the faces of the Buffalo.

On swept the Herd—on raced the pursuing Redskins, now joined by Eagle Shoe. An Indian rose like a specter behind the bush wall, and twanged a hoarse-singing arrow into the quivering flank of the Herd that was as one Buffalo. His Hunt-Cry of joy, fierce-voiced, was like the wail of an infant—the roar of the troubled earth hushed it to nothing.

Fear rode on the backs of the striding beasts, and they were afraid; and in their hearts was only gallop, gallop, gallop; there was no thought, nothing but frenzy; no thought of breaking through the wing sides, flimsy as a deep shadow, for behind twig-laced walls were strange demons possessed of the Man-Call, the Kill-Cry. On, on, on! only in front was any opening; there the prairie lay still and smiling. Wedge-like behind their Bull Leader they thundered. To him the open prairie in front beckoned and smiled a lie of safe passage; the Pound, the death-pit, dug on its rounded breast, lay hushed in silent ambush, and the Bull Leader saw only a narrow gate at the far end of the fast-closing wings. Soon he would lead all this mighty Herd that had grown into his charge past the walls that were alive with evil spirits, and out to the prairie beyond.

What could rise up in front and stay that mad rush of half a thousand Buffalo? Nothing—nothing! and the Pound still lay hushed—waiting.

Behind the Bull, with implicit faith, pressed the Herd. Only a short distance reached the dreaded yellow-leaved walls that hid the Man enemy. In six breaths he would have passed the narrow mouth, and all his heart's pride would stream out from that death gauntlet to the broad Range that called to him.

Even now he drew a sigh of relief; one more jump—oh, spirit of sacred Buffalo! that yawning abyss! the frown of the Pound. He braced his giant forelegs in the graveled earth on its very brink. Too late! Behind, two hundred tons of impetuous fright crashed against his guarding frame; the treacherous sod crumbled; down, down, thirty feet sheer, over the cliff he shot: two, six, a dozen, fifty! beyond all count, one after another, bellowing Cow and screaming Calf, they hurtled into the slaughter-pen of the Blood Indians' corral.

Illustration:

One after another they hurtled into the
slaughter-pen of the Blood Indians' corral

Inferno upon earth was born in an instant; up from the sun smile of the prairie rose a shadow of fiends. The walls of the pit, large as the Coliseum, were lined with Redskins of the murder caste. Bow-strings twanged; dag-spears, long-

handled, were driven with vengeful swish into the bellowing mob of crazed Buffalo. A sulphurous cloud of gun smoke settled over the pit. Of a verity it was a carnival of demons. Surely it was a mighty Kill! Surely it was a blood fresco on the beautiful earth.

Some strong animals, not shattered in their fall, rushed about the pit in erratic frenzy, like victims in a Roman arena. The mocking walls rose on every side, grim, unsurmountable, and thrust the captives back into the shambles; jagged flint arrow-heads stung their hearts like angry serpents. Oh, blessed quick death! better than the smother and trample that beat out the lives of others, inch by inch. The gun fire belched hot in their faces; the bellowing of Bulls almost hushed the Hunt-Cry of the Redman.

For an hour the full carnage lived; the joy of blood-shedding was over the Indians; gray-aged warriors and lean-chested children, all drank of the glory of slaughter. Skinning-knife in hand, the Squaws waited for the tumult to subside that they might complete the tragedy.

At last no Buffalo chased hopelessly over the dead bodies of his fellows, seeking a vain safety; all were stricken to their death—not one had escaped. No bellowing was heard now; nothing but the victory clamor of the rabble and the gasping choke of dying Buffalo. Out on the prairie the silly Calf wandered like a lost babe—the only survivor of a king-led Herd.

Like butchers, the strong-backed Squaws leaped into the arena, its stone floor slippery with blood, and stripped the bodies of their victims. The Indians, their warrior pride holding them aloof from this menial labor, sat and gloried in the mighty Kill.

Shag and the Dog-Wolf had heard the din from afar. „They will not poison the meat to-night,“ muttered A‘tim, „and when they have gorged themselves to sleep, I also shall feast, for it must have been a great Kill.“

„It’s dreadful!“ lamented Shag; „it’s dreadful! I can’t eat—the grass tastes of blood, for this Kill has been of my kind. It is different with you, A‘tim. I will sleep here in this near-by coulee, and when you have feasted, Dog Brother, come back to me, for I am sad and my heart is heavy; come back, A‘tim, and sleep warm against my side.“

Far into the night, by the light of dry willow fires, like dancing ghouls, the Squaws cut and hacked and laid bare the bones that had been joyous in much life at sunrise.

Over the camp-fires, for long hours, the pots boiled and bubbled with the cooking meat—the delicious Buffalo flesh that was meat and bread to the Indians; and beside the glowing embers huge joints spitted on sharp sticks sizzled and threw off a perfume that came to the starved nostrils of A‘tim, and almost crazed him with eager hunger.

Would the Indians never cease eating? he wondered. Close-crept, he watched Eagle Shoe take a piece of the luscious „back fat“—ah, well A‘tim knew the loin!—and devour it greedily. How like vultures these feeders were, A‘tim thought. At least a dozen times each Indian returned to the flesh-pots, the Dog-Wolf felt sure. „They are like Wolves,“ he snarled; „well I know them. For days and days they will live on nothing, even as a Wolf; then, when the Kill is on, they will gorge until they

are stupid. E-u-h-ha! but when they become stupid from this feeding surely I will also feast; wait, hunger-pain, wait just a little.“

A cold moon came up over the fog-lined prairie and looked down wonderingly at the fierce barbecue. Sometimes the silent prairie, silent as the Catacombs, would be startled by the exultant cry of a blood-drunken feaster. It was a fierce joy the Kill had brought to these Pagans.

Half a thousand robes Eagle Shoe had tallied. „Waugh! Ugh! Ugh!“ he had grunted in sheer joy when the little willow wands which marked the score had been counted before him. Surely they would revel in things dear to the heart of an Indian when the robes were carted to the Hudson Bay Store. The meat was feeling all right in its way when the stomach was lean, but at the Fort, at the time of giving up the robes—Waugh! God of the fallen Indians! how they would revel in the fierce fire-water, the glorious fire-water! Even the Squaws, useful at the skinning, would also drink, and reel, and become lower than the animals they had slain to bring about all this saturnalia. Why had his forefathers fought against the Palefaces? Was not all this civilized evil a good thing, after all?

A cloud drifted a frown over the face of the cold moon, and A'tim skulked closer and closer—almost to the very edge of the slaughter-pit. The Indian Pack-Dogs snarled at his presence, and yapped crabbedly. Other gray shadows, less venturesome than the Dog-Wolf, flitted restlessly back and forth in the dim mist of the silent plain.

A'tim sneered to himself maliciously. „To-day is the Kill of the Buffalo,“ he muttered; „to-morrow you, my Gray Brothers, will give up your lives because of the Death Powder. There will be meat enough for the poisoning; feast to-night, for to-morrow you die, and your pelts will go with those of the Dead Grass-Eaters. If you had not outcasted me, I, who know of this thing, would save you; but to-morrow I shall be far away and care not.“

Would the Indians never gorge themselves to sleep? Eagle Shoe's voice was hushed; one by one the feasters stretched themselves upon the silent grass, and slumbered with a heaviness of full content. When the last Squaw, weary of the blood toil, curled beneath her blanket, A'tim crept to the meat piles. All the energy of his rested stomach urged him to the feasting; there was no stint.

Surely no Swift-runner, Dog or Wolf, ever had such a choosing. The Pack-Dogs kept the Wolves at bay, but with A'tim was the scent of their own kind, the Dog scent. He was not an utter stranger to them, only an Outcast; they tolerated him as a beggar at the meat store of which they had more than enough.

At last the hunger pain was all gone. Once in his Train-Dog days he had looted a cache of White Fish, and eaten until he could eat no more; it was like that now. Then, with a Dog thought for the morrow, he stole four huge pieces of choice meat, and cached them in the little coulee where waited Shag.

„Ah! you've come back, Brother,“ said the Bull, as A'tim crept complacently to his side. „I was afraid something might have happened to you, for hunger often carries us into unknown danger.“

„E-u-h-h! but it was a mighty Kill, Shag. Such flesh I've never tasted—never—tasted—“ He was asleep.

„I wonder what makes the moon red,“ muttered Shag, drowsily, as he, too, nodded off to sleep.

Then again the two Outcasts, the one for whom the blood horror had colored the moon red, and the other with a new joy of meat fullness, slumbered together in the little coulee by the Buffalo Pound.

Chapter 3

Shag was the first to awaken; the night's banquet caused the morning to come slowly to A'tim.

The pulling cut of Shag's heavy jaws on the crisp grass awoke the Dog-Wolf. He yawned heavily, and eyed the old Bull with sleepy indifference. Ghur-h-h-h! what a plaintive figure the aged Buffalo was, to be sure.

„Good-morning, Brother,“ whuffed Shag, his mouth full of grass; „where are you going?“

„I *cached* a piece of the new meat here last night,“ answered A'tim, as he nosed under an overhanging cut-bank. „Forest thieves!“ he ejaculated angrily; „the Gray Stealers of Things have taken it.“ His cache was as bare as Mother Hubbard's cupboard—not even a bone; there was nothing but the reddened stones where the meat had lain, and a foul odor of Wolf. Impetuously he rushed to the second *cache*; it, too, was void of all meat; the third *cache* held nothing but the footprints of his gray half-brothers, the Wolf Thieves.

Despair crept into the heart of A'tim; what use to explore the fourth *cache*? The meat would be gone of a certainty. Why had he slept so soundly? Why had he hidden the meat at all? Oh! but he *was* stupid; as silly as a calf Musk Ox.

And the other meat up at the Pound, such as was left, would be full of Death Powder, put there for the Gray Runners. How he hoped they might eat it all—the thieves! It seemed such unnecessary looting, too, to steal his food when there was so much at the Pound; it was like the persecution that had kept him an Outcast from the Wolf Pack.

„There is nothing meaner in the world than a Wolf,“ he muttered; „nothing; and already I am hungry again.“

At his fourth *cache* he scratched indifferently. But the long nails of his paw touched something soft and yielding—it was flesh. How had it escaped the Gray Stealers?

„See, Shag,“ he said, bringing his joint close to the Bull, and laying it down lovingly, „last night I laid in a grub stake, as my old Master would say, that would have landed me in fair condition in the Northland. Those accursed Wolves, of whose kind I am not, being a Dog, have stolen it—all but this piece. It was out of consideration for you, my friend, knowing your dread of the blood smell, that made me cache it a little apart. How I wish I had lain on it—made my bed on its soft, sweet sides. Such meat I have not eaten for many a day.“

„I'm sorry,“ lamented Shag; „it's too bad. Here is nothing but sorrow for every one. See how still and quiet the old Range is; only those slayers of Redmen up by the Pound. Years ago, A'tim, perhaps when you were a Pup, all this prairie that is so beautiful with its short Buffalo grass, was just covered with people of my kind;

and Antelope—though they were not of our kind, still we liked to see them—there was no harm in them, being, like ourselves, Grass Feeders; and to the South-West, Dog-Wolf—“

„I am no Wolf,“ interrupted A'tim, thinking of his stolen meat; „I am a Dog!“

„Well, well, Dog, to the South-West—from here we can even see Chief Mountain where is that land—there were beautiful big-horned Elk, also Grass Feeders, and of a sweet temper.“

„I know,“ ejaculated A'tim, licking at his flesh food; „in the North it was just the same with the Caribou, the whole land alive with them—and Mooswa, too.“

„But now, A'tim, since the coming of the Palefaces we are slaughtered by them and by the Redmen. L-o-u-g-h—h-o-o! I shall leave this old Range to-day forever; my heart is sad.“

„Come with me, then, Brother,“ cried A'tim; „together we will go to the land of which I have spoken. It is a long, lone trail for one. I will guard you well, for I know Man's ways; and at night we will rest side by side.“

„I will go,“ said the Bull simply.

„Let us start,“ cried A'tim, seizing his joint of Buffalo meat, and sweeping the horizon with suspicious eyes.

„Your eating is heavy,“ said Shag; „I will carry it for you on my horns. L-o-u-g-h—h-u! the blood smells terrible!“ he exclaimed as A'tim pulled the buffalo flesh over Shag's forehead.

Then the two Outcasts took up the long trail toward the Northland, where in a woof of sage green and bracken gold was woven a scheme of flesh-colored Castilleja, and wine-tinted moose-weed, and purple pea-flower; where was the golden shimmer of Gaillardia and slender star-leafed sunflower; the pencil stalk of blue-joint, and the tasseled top of luscious pony-grass: a veritable promised land for the old Bull, buffeted of his fellows, and finding the short grass of the Southland stubbornly hard against his worn teeth.

There, too, was Wapoo, the Hare so easily caught in the years of plenty, and A'tim need never feel the pangs of a collapsing stomach. There also were Marten, and Grouse, and Pheasant, and Kit Beaver, and other animals sweet against the tongue. Surely the Dog-Wolf had lingered too long in that barren Southern country, where there was only the rat-faced Gopher, who was but a mouthful; with, perhaps, the chance of a Buffalo Calf caught away from the Herd. Even that chance was gone now, for man was killing them all off. Yes, it was well that they should trail to the Northland, each said to the other.

For days they plodded over the prairie, cobwebbed into deep ruts by Buffalo trails leading from grassland to water.

It was on the third day that A'tim said to the Buffalo Bull: „I am thirsty, Shag; my throat is hot with the dust. Know you of sweet drinking near—even with your sense of the hidden drinking you can find it, Great Bull, can you not?“

„This hollow trail leads to water, most assuredly,“ answered Shag, stepping leisurely into a path that was like an old plow furrow in a hay meadow. „Even this shows how many were my people once.“ The Buffalo sighed. „Within sight are more trails like this than you have toes to your feet, Dog-Wolf—this whole mighty Range from here to the Uplands, which is the home of the White Storm, is so

marked with the trails of my people; and now there are only these Water Runs to remind us of them.“

Soon they came to a little lake blue with the mirrored sky, its mud banks white as though with driven snow. „The bitter water mark,“ said Shag, as his heavy hoof sank through the white crust on the dark mud.

„I know,“ answered A‘tim—„alkali, that’s what Man calls it.“

„Let us rest here this night—close to the drinking,“ commanded Shag; „tomorrow we will go forward again.“

That night A‘tim ate the last of the Buffalo meat Shag had packed on his horns for him. The next day they trailed again toward the Northland.

When they came to a river that was to be forded Shag carried the Dog-Wolf on his back; when there was presence of danger, a suspicious horseman, Shag curled up like a boulder, or crouched in a coulee, and if the Man came too near A‘tim led him away on a hopeless chase. Daily the Dog-Wolf grew into the heart of Shag, the Buffalo, who listened with eager delight to his tales of the Northland.

A‘tim had fared well while the meat lasted; but they were now in a land of much hunger—a land almost devoid of life; and the Dog-Wolf was coming again into the chronic state of his existence—famine.

As they trailed Northward the grass grew richer and softer and more luscious; Shag commenced to put on fat. But daily the Dog-Wolf grew hungrier and thinner. In the vast solitude, walled on every side by the never-ending sky from which the stars peeped at night and the sun smiled by day, there was little for the Dog-Wolf, who was a flesh-eater. Scarce anything but Gophers; not an Antelope, nor a Mule Deer, nor a Black Tail had they seen for days. Once a Kit Fox, the small, gray kind of the prairie, waited tantalizingly with his nozzle flat on the turf, seemingly asleep, until A‘tim was within two jumps, then he slipped nonchalantly into his burrow as though he had just been called to dinner. A froth of disappointed rage wreathed the hungry lips of the Dog-Wolf. Surely he was in danger of starvation.

For two days he lived on a single Mole, unearthed quite by chance; then a Gopher, stalked from behind the big legs of Shag, saved him from utter collapse. Of a verity he was living from hand to mouth; such abject poverty he had never known, not even in the Southland by the Blood Reserve.

„Carry me, Brother,“ he said to the Bull, „for I am weak like a new Pup. If I could but see a Trapper’s shack or a camp,“ he confided to Shag, as he clung to the Bull’s hump, „I might find something to eat—Ghur-r-r! a piece of the Pork Eating, or a half-picked bone, or a Duck killed by the Fire-stick! Even one of my own kind, a Dog, would I eat, I’m that famished—Great Bull, is that not a shack?“ he exclaimed suddenly as a square building loomed on the horizon.

„I think I see it,“ said the Bull; „but my eyes are no longer good at a great distance.“

As they journeyed toward the object Shag suddenly stopped and gave a loud bubbling guffaw.

„What are you laughing at, Bull?“ demanded A‘tim angrily.

„I, who am an Outcast because of my great age, Dog-Wolf, am even now a great Fool; and so art thou, A‘tim, an Outcast and a Fool.“

„Your wit is like yourself, Shag, heavy and not too pleasing. Pray, why am I a Fool!“

„That is no shack,“ answered the Bull; „it is but a rock; there’s a line of them, like a trail of teepees, for miles, stretching for the length of many a day’s march, running as straight as the cough of a Fire-stick, all looking like that one. Wie-sah-ke-chack, who is God of the Animals, put them there for the Buffalo to brush their hides against—a most wise act.“

With a weary sigh A’tim turned his eyes from the deceitful rock, and watched furtively for the chance of even a small Kill as they journeyed.

Day by day Shag was eating of the richer grass and becoming of a great corpulency. Envious thoughts commenced to creep into the mind of A’tim. Why should he starve and become a skeleton, while this hulking Bull, to whom he was acting as a friend and guide, waxed fat in the land that was of his finding? Many times Shag carried the Dog-Wolf on his back, and at night the heat of his great body kept A’tim warm.

But the vicious envy that was in the Wolf mind of A’tim started a line of proper villainy. Let the Bull grow fat. If the worst came to the worst—if no other meat was to be had—when the Frogs, and Moles, and such Waterfowl as might be surprised had failed, and his very life depended on food, would not there be much eating off the body of this Bull Buffalo? Therefore let him wax fat. At first A’tim only thought of it just a little—a flash-light of evil, like the sting of a serpent; but daily it grew stronger. What was Shag to him? He was not of his kind. If, when they came to the Northland, to the forests of the Athabasca, the Wapoos were in the year of plague, and all other animals had fled the boundaries because of this, and there was no food to be had, why should he not feast for days and days off the Buffalo?—that is, if anything happened to Shag. Something might happen to him very easily. A’tim knew of many muskegs where a stupid, heavy-footed Bull might be mired; also, there was the poison plant, the Death Flower of the Monkshood. He could persuade the stupid Shag to eat of it, and in an hour the Bull would die—puffed up like a Cow’s udder; it would not hurt the flesh. Eu-h-h! there were many ways. Shag’s company was good—he was weary of being alone; it was dreadful to be an Outcast; but rather than starve to death—well, he would eat his friend.

What matter to him the ever-increasing beauty of the landscape, the richer growth that appealed strongly to his companion from the bare Southern plain? The wild rose bushes, red-berried in the autumn of their fruitage, caressed their ankles as they passed; pink and white berries clung to silver-leaved Buffalo willow like rose-tinted snowflakes; hazel and wild cherry and gentle maple swayed in the prairie wind, and sent fluttering leaf-kisses to the parent earth. Great patches of feed-land waved silver gray with a tasseled spread of seeding grasses. Oh! but they were coming into a land of much growth. Shag the Bull lowed in soft content as he rested full-bellied on the black-loamed prairie. All the time A’tim was but thinking of something to kill, something to eat.

That was as they came to Egg Lake.

„Trail slowly, kind Brother,“ admonished the Dog-Wolf. „It is now the season of many Ducks here, even at Egg Lake; perchance in the reed grass yonder, by the willows, I may stalk a Wavey, or even a Goose.“ Ghur-r-r! but he was hungry!

A’tim stole on in front; flat to the grass his belly, and low his head. As silently as floating foam on still water he passed into the thicket of reed grass, his fierce eyes fixed on four Mallard that gabbled and dove their supple heads to the mud bottom

for wild rice. Only a little farther and A'tim would be upon them. Shag was watching solicitously the stalk of his friend.

Suddenly, and without provocation, the lake seemed to stand up on end and commence throwing things about. The Bull was startled—what did it all mean? Gradually something huge and black began to take shape and form from amidst the whirl of many moving things.

„A Bear!“ gasped Shag. „By the strength of my neck he means to devour A'tim!“

With a rushing charge Shag was upon the fighters—only just in time, for Muskwa had A'tim in his long-clawed grasp, and in another instant would have crushed his Dog ribs. And in the succession of surprises one came to Muskwa with vivid suddenness, for he was lifted on a pair of strong horns, like a Cub, and thrown with great speed far out into the thin waters of the lake.

„Thanks, Great Bull,“ panted the frightened Dog-Wolf, creeping painfully from the thick sedge grass. „He also was after the ducks, I think; I walked right on top of him, I was that busy with my hunt.“

„If I had not been in such a blundering hurry,“ lamented Shag, „I might have saved him for your eating; but he's gone now.“

And so they journeyed till they came to Battle River. There A'tim caught three frogs among the blossom-topped leeks; they were no more than three small oysters to a hungry man.

„The water is deep and the banks steep,“ grunted Shag, looking dubiously at the stream.

„Lower down is a ford,“ answered A'tim; „we will cross there.“ For when Shag swam in deep water the Dog-Wolf found it difficult to keep on his back.

„A teepee!“ exclaimed A'tim, as they came close to the crossing.

„Let us go back and swim the river,“ pleaded Shag; „there will be hunters within the lodge.“

„No, wait you here,“ commanded A'tim; „there will surely be food in the teepee, and I mean to have it.“

Illustration:

Muskwa had A'tim in his long-clawed grasp

„Be careful,“ warned Shag; „this is a land of scarcity, and the hunters may bring us evil.“

But already A'tim was skulking toward a small canvas tent, gleaming white beside the blue waters of Battle River. The Bull lay down to conceal his great bulk, and watched apprehensively the foray of his pillaging comrade. A'tim circled until he was down wind from the teepee.

„The Man is not in his burrow,“ he muttered, sniffing the air that floated from the tent to his sensitive nostrils; „but I smell the brown Pork Meat they eat.“

Cautiously, stealthily, burying his brown-gray body in the river grass, he stole to the very tent pegs of the canvas shelter; there he listened, as still and silent as the river stones. There was no sound within; no living thing even drew breath beyond the cotton wall—he could have heard that.

In through the flap he slipped. Yes, his scouting had been perfect. A pair of blankets, an iron fry-pan, and—ah! there was the rich brown meat, its white edge

gleaming a welcome. With a famished snarl A'tim fastened his lean jaws upon it, and sprang for the door. He was none too quick. *Thud, thudety-thud, thudety-thudety-thud!* a horseman was hammering down the sloping bank across the ford.

As A'tim leaped from the tent the horseman shouted and drove big rowel spurs hard up the flank of his galloping Cayuse.

„Just my evil chance!“ snarled A'tim as he headed for Shag; „but what is a small piece of Bacon compared with a big Buffalo?“ For into his quick Wolf brain came the safety thought that should the pursuing hunter sight Shag he would follow, and let the bacon go.

As the Man galloped he unslung a gun, and fired at the fleeing Dog-Wolf. A little sputter of dust drove into the nostrils of A'tim as a trade ball spat in his face and buried itself in front of him. There was no second shot; only the *thudety-thud* of the Pony's hoofs. The pursuer was armed with a muzzle-loading trade musket.

The shot startled Shag. Now he could see them rushing his way; soon they would be upon him. With a bellow of frightened rage at the stupidity of A'tim, he stuck his scraggy tail out with its tip curled over his back, and broke into a solemn gallop.

In an instant the hunter swerved from his course and raced for the Bull, loading his gun as the Cayuse swung along under a free rein. Shag chuckled softly as he spread his great quarters, and hung his nose closer to earth.

„It's a down trail for miles,“ he muttered, „and I, who in my prime have outrun the fastest Buffalo Horses of the Bloods and Blackfeet, can surely show that lean-flanked Pack Animal a long trail. Mou-o-o-h! but already I feel in my veins the strength of this rich feeding.“ And the huge form slipped down the gentle grade of sloping plain like an express train. Once the hunter threw the butt of his musket to shoulder and fired; but half the powder charge had spilled in the restless loading, and the trade ball wandered aimlessly yards wide of the fleeing Bull. Shag grunted and kinked his tail derisively as the spirit of old times threw its glamor over him. It was years since he had been thought worthy of the chase; surely he was becoming of some account in the Buffalo world again.

A'tim, sitting on his haunches, watched the departing cavalcade, and industriously absorbed much of the fat pork. „I can carry it better in my stomach,“ he reasoned philosophically. „But who would have thought old Shag had it in him?“ he muttered in admiration.

As he gazed, the extent of territory between Shag and his pursuer widened perceptibly. The overworked Pony was tired; no doubt his rider had trailed for many a league with him, and he was in no condition for the fierce gallop of a Buffalo Run.

A'tim finished the bacon with undoubted relish, then struck out across the boundless field of grass. „I must not lose sight of Shag,“ he thought; „there will not always be bacon for the stealing when I am on the edge of starvation.“

At last the Pony was pulled to a walk, turned about, and headed for the teepee that nestled on the river bank. The rider was indulging in much injudicious vituperation of all the animal kingdom, including his own well-blown Cayuse, whose trembling flanks vouched for the energy with which he had tried to overhaul the galloping Bull.

A'tim circled wide, and, when he considered it safe, fell into Shag's trail and followed on. Soon he overtook his comrade. „Well done, my big Bull!“ he exclaimed; „that was a rare turn you did me.“

„It was,“ answered Shag shortly; „hardly of my own choosing, though; you thrust it upon me. I suppose you were bringing me the bacon, kind Brother?“

„I knew you could do it,“ flattered A'tim. „You have the full speed of a Spike Horn, and the great wisdom of your own age.“

Shag said nothing; he was angry at the selfish heartlessness of the other Outcast. It seemed hardly a fair recognition of the service he had rendered the Dog-Wolf when he prodded the Bear from his throat.

„Come, let us be moving,“ he said; „we must find another crossing.“

„Oh! but I feel years younger,“ cried A'tim joyfully, as they headed again for Battle River. „Euh-euh-euh-euh! Yap-yap-yap!“ he laughed; „this eating has put the joyousness of a Pup into my heart.“

That night they crossed the river at another ford, and slept in a bluff of slim-bodied white poplars, for they were on the edge of the North timber lands.

„This is good cover,“ muttered A'tim, as he raked the yellow heart-shaped leaves of the poplar together for a bed.

„It's new to me,“ muttered Shag; „and it will also give cover to one's enemies; one must be very cautious in the Northland, I think.“

Then the two Outcasts slept together on the border of the North fairyland to which the Dog-Wolf was leading Shag the Bull.

Chapter 4

In the morning A'tim had for his breakfast a wistful remembrance of the yesterday's eating—that was all; while Shag made a frugal meal off the bronzed grass, fast curing on its stem for the winter forage.

„There'll be good eating here for the Grass Feeders,“ he said, grinding leisurely at the wild hay.

„Indeed there will,“ answered the Dog-Wolf. „The Grass Feeders will wax fat for the benefit of the Meat Eaters. I wish one would come my way now,“ he sighed hungrily.

„We are almost half way,“ continued A'tim, as he trotted beside the long-striding Bull.

„I'm glad of that, Brother. My foot joints are not so well oiled as they once were, and are getting hot and dry. Strange that we should not see some of our cousins, is it not, Dog-Wolf?“

„I saw one yesterday,“ replied A'tim.

„Aye, Brother, and he saw you, too.“

„Else I had eaten him,“ added the Dog-Wolf.

„A Coyote?“ asked Shag incredulously; „eat a Coyote? Impossible! No animal ever ate a Coyote!“

„No animal was ever so hungry as I was yesterday before Wie-sah-ke led me to the Fat Bacon.“

„It’s terribly dreary,“ said Shag, returning again to his first thought; „no Elk, no Antelope, no Buffalo, no Indian Cayuse. Why is it? Has Man killed them all off, as he has done with my people?“

„Yes, Man, and the Man-fire. From the black that is underneath this new grass I know that last year the Man-fire swept over this land faster and straighter than a Wolf Pack gallops—“

Suddenly he broke off and made a fierce rush into the prairie. A brown Cow-Bird flew up and lighted on Shag’s horn. The Dog-Wolf rose on his hind legs and snapped viciously at the Bird.

„Steady, Dog-Wolf, steady,“ admonished Shag, „this is a friend of mine. Do you not know the Cow-Bird, who is always with the Herd?“

„Who is your friend?“ asked the Cow-Bird of Shag. „Queer company you keep, Great Bull; a Herd Leader leading a Wolf is new to me.“

„I’m no Wolf, Scavenger!“ retorted A’tim. „I’m a Dog; I’ll crack your—“

„Perhaps, perhaps,“ retorted the Cow-Bird.

„Perhaps what?“ snarled A’tim.

„Perhaps you’re a Dog, and perhaps you will crack my—neck, you were going to say. Are you leading the Bull to your Wolf Pack, perhaps—Dog?“

„Never mind, Comrades,“ interrupted Shag. „We are glad of your company, little Cow-Bird—are we not, A’tim?“

„Yes,“ answered the Dog-Wolf, licking his chops, and looking treacherously from the corner of his slit eyes at the Bird.

„Where are you going, Great Bull?“ asked the Cow-Bird, spreading his deep-brown wings mockingly, as though he would fly down on the Dog-Wolf’s head.

„To the Northland.“

Illustration:

„Steady, Dog-Wolf, steady,“ admonished Shag,
„this is a friend of mine“

„I know,“ quoth the Bird; „but I stick to the plains; why, I don’t know, for there are few Buffalo now. This summer I made a long trip. I started in at Edmonton with a Herd of the Man’s Buffalo.“

„I’ve seen them,“ said Shag; „great clumsy things without shape or make; as big behind as they are in front; of a verity the shape of their own carts.“

„Well,“ continued the Bird, „there was a matter of a dozen of these creatures tied to a four-wheeled cart, and I followed the Herd through to the place they call Fort Garry. But I got tired of it—day after day the same thing. What I like is to fly about. Now, I’ll travel with you to-day, just for companionship, and to-morrow I shall be off with some new friend.“

„Perhaps,“ mumbled the Wolf.

„Did you speak, Wolf?“ perked the Bird.

„I said, *Good riddance*,“ snapped A’tim.

„He, he, he!“ laughed the Cow-Bird; „your friend is pleasant company, Great Bull.“

That night the two Outcasts and the Cow-Bird camped together, near the Saskatchewan River; the brown body curled up contentedly on Shag's horn, while the Dog-Wolf slept against his paunch.

In the morning the Cow-Bird was gone.

„Have you seen him?“ Shag asked of A'tim.

„He flew away early,“ answered the Dog-Wolf.

„He should have taken all his coat with him,“ answered Shag, thrusting from his mouth a bunch of grass in which were three brown feathers.

„He flew far away,“ affirmed A'tim sheepishly.

„The length of your gullet, Dog-Wolf,“ declared Shag. „Thou must be wondrous hungry to eat one of our own party—a cannibal.“

A'tim answered nothing as they journeyed down along the steep, heavily wooded river bank, its soft shale sides slid into mighty terraces, but in his heart was a murder thought, as he eyed the great bulk of his Brother Outcast, that he would also eat him.

They passed over the broad Saskatchewan, running emerald green between its high, pink-earthed banks, through a long, tortuous ford, taking Shag to the belly and half way up his ribs. As they topped the north bank and rested after the steep climb, A'tim pointed his nose to a distant flat where nestled the white stockaded fort of the Hudson's Bay Company.

„That's Fort Edmonton,“ he said bitterly; „and see the cluster of teepees all about, thick as Muskrat lodges in a muskeg. Because of the dwellers within there is no eating to be had here for me. Cree Indians, and Half-breeds, and Palefaces, all searching the country for something to kill; and when they have slaughtered the Beaver, and Marten, and Foxes, and everything else that has life, they bring the pelts there and get fire-water, which burns their stomachs and sets their brains on fire. An honest hunter like myself, who only kills to stay the hunger that is bred in him, has no chance; we must sneak and steal, or die.“

„But there will be much waste of the Bacon Food there, surely, A'tim. Why do you not replenish the stomach that is but a curse to you, being empty, at the lodges we see?“

„No, friend Bull,“ answered the Dog-Wolf; „unwittingly enough I nearly caused you disaster the last time I fed at Man's expense. That time there was but one hunter; here are many, and they would slay you quick enough.“

This was all a lie; the Dog-Wolf had no such consideration for his Brother Outcast. At the Fort were fierce-fanged hounds that would run him to earth of a certainty should he venture near; either that, or if caught he would be quickly clapped into a Dog Train, and made to push against a collar. Many a weary day of that he had in his youth; he would rather starve as a vagabond. Also, would he not perhaps fall heir to the eating that was on the body of the huge Bull?

„No, Brother,“ he said decisively; „we shall soon come to a land with food for both of us; let us go.“

Toward the Athabasca they journeyed. The prairie was almost done with, only patches of it now like fields; poplar and willow and birch growing everywhere; and beyond the Sturgeon River, tiny forests of gnarled, stunted jack-pine, creeping wearily from a soft carpet of silver and emerald moss which lay thick upon the white sand hills. Little red berries, like blood stars, peeped at them from the

setting of silk lace moss—wintergreen berries, and grouse berries, and lowbush cranberries, all blushing a furious red.

„I could sleep here forever,“ muttered Shag, as he rolled in luxurious content on this forest rug.

„I can't sleep because of my hunger pains,“ snarled A'tim. „You who are well fed care not how I fare.“ A'tim was petulantly unreasonable.

Shag looked at the Dog-Wolf wonderingly. „I'm sorry for you, for your hunger, Dog Brother. Did I not call lovingly to a Moose Calf but to-day, thinking to entice him your way?“

„Yes, and frightened the big-nosed, spindle-legged suckling with your gruff voice, so that what should have been an easy stalk turned out a long chase for nothing.“

„Well, well,“ responded Shag soothingly, „no doubt you will soon have food—this can't go on forever, this barrenness of the woods; I'm sorry for you, for once I had nothing to eat for days and days. That was ten seasons of the Calf-gathering since—I remember it well. The White Storm came in the early Cold Time, and buried the whole Range to the depth of my belly. We Buffalo did nothing but drift, drift, drift—like locusts, or dust before the wind. We always go head-on to a storm, for our heads are warm clothed with much hair, but when it lasts for days and days we grow weary, and just drift looking for food, for grass. I remember, at Pot Hole, which is a deep coulee, and has always been a great shelter to us in such times, on one side was some grass still bare of the White Storm; but the Buffalo were so many they ate it as locusts might—quicker than I tell it. As I have said, Dog-Wolf, I lived for a month off the fat that was in my loins about the kidneys, for I had never a bite to eat. Then the fat, aye, even the red meat, commenced to melt from my hump and my neck, even to my legs, and I grew weak—so weak I could hardly crawl. Many of us died; first the Cow Mothers, giving up their lives for the Calves, A'tim; then the old people; we who were in the middle of life (for I was a Smooth Horn then, Brother, and Leader of the Herd) lived through this terrible time.

„It was a great weeding out of the Herd; it was like the sweep of the fire breath that bares the prairie only to make the grass come up stronger and sweeter again. Longingly we waited for our friend, the gentle Chinook, to come up out of the Southwest; but this time it must have got lost in the mountains, for only the South wind, which is always cold, or a blizzard breath from the Northwest blew across the bleak, white-covered Buffalo land.

„One night, just as I thought I must surely die before morning, a sweet moisture came into my nostrils, and I knew that our Wind Brother, the Chinook, had found us at last. The sun smiled at us in the morning and warmed the white cover, and by night we could see the grass; next day the White Storm was all gone. So, Brother Outcast, I too, know what it is to be hungry. Have a strong heart—food will be sent.“

„Sent!“ snapped A'tim crabbedly; „who will send it? Will my Gray Half-Brothers, who are Wolves, send it—come and lay a dead Caribou at my feet? Will the Train Dogs, of whose kind I am, come and feed me with White Fish—the dried Fish their drivers give them so sparingly?“

„I cannot say, Dog-Wolf; but surely food does not come of one's own thinking. The grass does not grow because of me, but for me. The Animals all say it is our God, Wie-sah-ke-chack, who sends the eating.“

„E-u-h-h!“ yawned A'tim sulkily, swinging his head in petulant irritation, „I must have meat, no matter where it comes from; I can't starve.“ There was a covert threat in the Dog-Wolf's voice, but Shag did not notice it—his mind was above that sort of thing.

In the evening, as they entered a little thicket of dogberry bushes growing in low land, a small brown shadow flitted across their path. With a snarl A'tim was after it, crushing through the long, dry, spike-like grass in hot pursuit. Shag waited.

Back and forth, up and down, in and out, double and twist, sometimes near and sometimes far, but always with the „Ghur-r-r!“ of the Dog-Wolf's breath coming to Shag's ears, the shadow and its pursuer chased. Suddenly Shag started as a plaintive squeak died away in a harsh growl of exultation.

„He has him,“ muttered Shag; „this will stay the clamor of his hunger talk, I hope.“

The well-blown Dog-Wolf came back carrying a Hare. „Hardly worth the trouble,“ he said disdainfully, laying the fluffy figure down at Shag's feet. „Now I know of a surety why the Flesh Feeders have fled the Boundaries; it is the Plague Year of Wapoos. This thing that should be fat, and of tender juiciness, is but a skin full of bones; there are even the plague lumps in his throat. There is almost as much poison in this carrion as in a Trapper's bait; but I must eat of it, for I am wondrous hungry.“

„I, also, have eaten bad food in my time,“ said Shag; „great pains in the stomach I've had from it. Some seasons the White Storm would come early in the Cold Time, and cover the grass not yet fully ripened into seed. It would hold warm because of this, and grow again, and become green; then the white cover would go, and the grass would freeze and become sour to the tongue. Mou-u-ah! but all through the Cold Time I would have great pains. How far do we go now, A'tim, till we rest in the Northland?“

„Till there is food for both of us.“

„Quite true,“ concurred Shag. „We must go on until you also have food, my friend.“

It was coming up the bank out of La Biche River that A'tim, perfectly mad with hunger, made a vicious snap at the Bull's leg, just above the hock, meaning to hamstring him. Shag flipped about and faced the Dog Wolf.

„What is this, A'tim?“ he demanded, lowering his horns and stamping in vexed restlessness.

„A big fly of the Bull-Dog kind. I snapped at him, and in my eagerness grazed your leg.“

Shag tossed his huge head unbelievably, and snorted through his dilated nostrils. „There are no Bull-Dogs now, A'tim; they were killed off days since by the white-striped Hornets.“

„There was one, Shag—at least I thought so, Great Bull.“

„Well, don't think again—just that way. Once bitten is twice shy with me; and, as you see, I carry the Tribe mark of your Wolf-kind in my thigh since the time I was a Calf.“

„Ghur-r-r! Of the Wolf-kind, quite true, Great Bull—that is their way; but I, who am no Wolf, but a Dog, do not seek to hamstring my friends.“

The Bull answered nothing, but as they journeyed watched his companion carefully.

„Dreadfully foolish!“ mused A‘tim. „I must coax this stupid Bull into a muskeg; his big carcass will keep me alive through all the Cold Time.“

Chapter 5

They were now well within the treacherous muskeg lands which border the Athabasca; and that very night, while Shag slumbered in the deep sleep of a full age, A‘tim, whose lean stomach tugged at his eyelids and kept them open, stole off into the forest, and searched by the strong light of the moon for a bog that would mire his comrade to death.

An open piece of swamp land, fringed by tamarack and slim-bodied spruce, promised fair for his scheme. Back and forth, back and forth over its cushion of deep moss he passed, seeking for a treacherous place—a place wherein Shag would sink to the belly; where the sand-mud would grasp his legs like soft chains and hold him to his death, but not engulf the body—that must remain for A‘tim’s eating.

„Euh-h! the very thing!“ he exclaimed joyously, as his foot sank deep in soft slime. „Yes, indeed, the very spot. Now must I cover up its black mud so that the blurred eyes of old Shag will see only a fair trail, not over ankle-deep.“

For an hour he labored with rare villainy, carrying bunches of moss to cover up the black ooze, that was not more than twenty feet broad; even small willow wands and coarse rush grass he placed under the moss, so that he himself, light-footed as a cat, might cross ahead of the unsuspecting Bull, and lure him to his death. „There,“ he said finally, as he sat on his haunches and rested for a minute, looking like a ghoul in the ghostly moonlight, „I think that’s a trick worthy of my Wolf cunning.“ Then he hastened back to the other Outcast.

Shag was awake and heard the Dog-Wolf creep to his side. „Where have you been, A‘tim?“ he asked sleepily.

„I heard a strange noise in the forest, and thought perhaps some evil Hunter had followed your big trail; fearing for your safety, Brother, I went to see what it was.“

„And?“ queried Shag.

„It was nothing—nothing but a Lynx or some prowling animal.“ Shag was already snoring heavily again, and the Dog-Wolf, tired by his exertion, also soon slumbered.

Next morning A‘tim was in rare good humor. „We shall only have another day or two of this weary tramp,“ he said, „for the air is full of the perfume of living things; also things that are dead, for yonder, high in the air, float three Birds of the Vulture kind. I shall be in the land of much eating to-day or to-morrow, I know.“

„I am glad of that,“ answered Shag heartily; „I am tired of this long tramp—my bones ache from it.“

Talking almost incessantly to distract the other's attention, A'tim led the way straight for his muskeg trap.

„There is some lovely blue-joint grass on the other side of this beautiful little plain,“ he said as they came to the tamarack border of the swamp.

„Is it safe crossing?“ asked Shag.

„Quite safe,“ answered the Dog-Wolf; „there is not a mud spot to be seen—you will scarce wet a shin. I will go ahead and warn you should it so happen that there be a soft hole; follow close in my track.“

„Lough-hu! lough-hu!“ grunted the Bull at the first step in the muskeg, as his foot cushioned in the deep moss: „this is like walking on the White Storm.“ Ere he could take another step a startled, „Mouah! Mouah!“ struck on his ear. It was the call of his own kind; and whipping about in an instant, he saw, staring at him from the tamarack fringe, a Buffalo Cow.

Where had she come from? It was the God of Chance that had sent her to save the unsuspecting, noble old Bull, only he did not know that—how could he? „Perhaps she is an Outcast like myself,“ he muttered, advancing eagerly to caress her forehead with his tongue.

„Come back, Shag,“ called the Dog-Wolf, seeing the destruction of his plan; „come back to the sweet feeding; that is but a disgraced Cow, outcasted from some Herd.“

Startled by the bark of the Dog-Wolf, or perhaps by the ungainly garb of the hairless, manged Bull, the Cow turned and fled. Excited into activity, Shag galloped after her, his huge feet making the forest echo with the crack of smashing timber as he slid through the bush like an avalanche; but the Cow was swift of foot, and pig-jinked around stumps and over timber, and down coulees and up hills until Shag was fairly blown and forced to give up the pursuit.

„Was there ever such a queer happening?“ exclaimed Shag, staring after the vanished figure of the Cow. A'tim had followed with eager gallop, inwardly reviling the ill luck which had snatched from him the mighty Kill of the fat Bull. The Cow Buffalo was, perhaps, only one of those spirit animals that prowl at night and utter strange cries.

Also had they galloped miles past the muskeg trap, and A'tim dared not take the Bull back; some new plan must be devised for his destruction.

„Where did she come from?“ puffed Shag, his froth-covered tongue lolling from between big, thick lips; „where did she come from, A'tim, you who know the Northland forests?“

„She's a Wood Buffalo,“ answered the Dog-Wolf.

„What's a Wood Buffalo?“ asked Shag.

„They are even as yourself, Great Bull; driven from the plains by the many-breathed Fire-stick, they have come to this good Range of the Northland. They go not in Herds, but few together, as Mooswa and others of the forest.“

„Why did she run away, Brother A'tim?“ grunted Shag, lying down to rest.

The Dog-Wolf laughed disagreeably. „That is but the way of the Cow kind,“ he answered.

„No,“ said Shag decisively; „she was frightened.“

„She was,“ assented A‘tim; „Ghur-r-r! I should say so.“

„At what?“ asked Shag.

„Forgive me, Brother, but most assuredly she was frightened by you.“

„By me—am I not of her kind?“

„Yes, but how should she know? Are you like a Buffalo, Shag? Your hide is bare and scarred, and perhaps she took you for some evil thing.“

Shag looked ruefully at his great, scraggy sides, so like an Elephant’s, only more disreputable, and sighed resignedly; „I suppose I can’t help it,“ he muttered.

„You can, Shag; if you will but eat of the Fur Flower it will cure this evil disease which is in your blood, and bring back the beautiful silk coat that was the envy of the Buffalo Range.“

„Do you speak the truth, Dog-Wolf?“ asked Shag.

„Most surely. All the Dwellers in the Northland know that. Are not all the Forest-Dwellers full-haired?“

„And this Fur Flower, A‘tim; where is it?“

„Less than a day’s trail,“ answered the Dog-Wolf.

„Find it for me, kind Brother,“ begged the Bull. „When one frightens those of his own kind it is time to try something.“

As they plodded through the forest, A‘tim muttered: „Now I shall surely have this vain old Bull. The Death Coulee is close to Porcupine Water, and that is not far. Shag shall eat of the Death Flower, which I have called the Fur Flower, to improve his appearance; and when he is dead I will eat of him to improve mine.“

A three hours’ tramp and they came to a little valley rich in bright yellow grass, topped by a stately plant that nodded and rustled in the wind as its many seed pods swayed like strings of dark pearls. It was the Monkshood, the deadly aconite, which, when the summer was young, hung its helmet flower in a shimmering veil of blue over the sweet grass of the Death Valley—the valley known of all animals as the Coulee of the Long Rest, for he who browsed there found his limbs bound in the steel cords of death.

„There,“ said A‘tim, nodding his head at the bronze gold of the many Monkshood, „there is the Fur Flower. It will be dry eating now, being of a season’s age, but in the early feed-time it is sweet and tender. While you eat of it I shall rest here.“

A strong rustling of grass almost at their heels caused the Dog-Wolf to spring to his feet in alarm.

„Eu-h-h, eu-h-h! here is the accursed Cow again. Where in the name of Forest Fools have you come from—why do you follow us?“ exclaimed A‘tim.

„It is the way of my kind,“ she replied, „to follow a Herd Leader; there is no harm in that.“

Into the big, sleepy eyes of Shag crept a pleased look.

„Where go you, Great Bull?“ she asked.

„To eat of this Fur Flower my kind Brother, A‘tim, has told me will bring back my coat; a soft, silky coat it was, too.“

„Eat of that—that which is the Death Grass growing in the Valley of the Long Rest! You must wish to die; our Herd Leader, who was even of your size, Great Bull, ate of it, and died like a stricken Calf.“

„What is this?“ demanded Shag, his big, honest eyes turned on A'tim with a wondering look of unbelief.

„A lie,“ quoth A'tim; „the Cow is full of a stupid duplicity: perhaps she even killed this Herd Leader by some trick, and blames it on the innocent Fur Flower. Does it look like a poison herb, Wise Bull? Is it like the scraggy Loco Plant of the South Ranges? Has it not the beautiful blossom of a good herb? Would Wie-sah-ke-chack, who is wise, put such a tempting coat on a death plant?“

Shag looked puzzled. Why should A'tim wish him to eat of a Death Flower; and yet, there was the graze of the Wolf's fang on his thigh that time they came up out of La Biche River. That surely had the full flavor of treachery about it. His ponderous mind worked slowly over the tortuous puzzle.

„I am a stranger here,“ he said, „and know little of these herbs, but this Dog-Wolf, who is also an Outcast like myself, has trailed from the Southland with me, and we have been even as Brothers. Thinking perhaps that my rough coat was not so fine as it once was, I listened to the speech of this Dog-Wolf to the end that this blue-flowered herb will cause the soft, beautiful hair to grow again.“

„It is the Death Flower,“ declared the Cow with sententious persistence; „and this Outcast Wolf is a traitor, for if he is from the Northland he also knows that, even as in the Southland they know the Loco Plant.“

A'tim slunk back nervously and watched Shag with wary caution.

„Do you believe this lie, Shag, my dear Friend? Ghur-r-r-ah! do you think I would do such a thing? This lone Cow, who is also an Outcast because of some wrong thing, must be locoed (mad)—even as every Herd has one such.“

„I am wise enough not to eat of the Death Flower, by the knowledge of our kind. But you can prove all this, Herd Leader—let the Dog-Wolf eat of this medicine plant, if it be harmless.“

This clever idea pleased the Bull mightily. „Yes, A'tim,“ he cried; „the Cow, who is but a Buffalo, and, of course, has not the great Wolf wisdom, may be mistaken. You who are an eater of grasses when you are ill, eat of this Fur Flower, as you name it; then also I will eat in great faith—after a little,“ he added in an undertone.

A'tim walked backward a few paces hesitatingly, and, looking wondrous hurt, said in a deprecating voice: „Ghur-r-rh, eu-h-h! I have been a friend to you, Lone Bull, even a Brother in solitude; and now at the word of a stranger, a silly Cow, who having done some wrong has been outcasted from her Herd, you lose faith in me, and treat me as a traitor.“

Still farther into the tangle of birch and poplar he backed, saying: „Of course, I couldn't expect you to take my part against a sleek-hided Buffalo Cow.“

With a sudden spring he turned, and barked derisively as he loped through the forest: „Good-by, bald-hided old Bull; I will bring harm to you because of this.“

„I think you were just in time,“ said Shag to the Cow; „that Dog-Wolf meant my death.“

Then Shag learned from the Buffalo Cow that she was one of a Herd of six, and that the Herd was not very far away; that they were unguarded because of the loss of their Leader through the Death Flower, even as she had said. Willingly Shag went with her, making many protestations as to his disreputable appearance, and the unfitness of his well-worn stub-horns to battle for them; but he went.

Chapter 6

A'tim slunk through the forest, his lean body filled with nothing but the rage of disappointed appetite. „I'm starving!“ he gasped; „Starving! I must have something to eat. By the feast that is in a dead Buffalo! if that evil-minded Cow had also eaten of the Death Flower when her Bull did, as she says, I should now be closer friend than ever with old Shag—Shag, the Fool.“

A large dead cottonwood, rotted to the heart till its flesh was like red earth mould, lay across his path like an unburied Redskin. „Should be Grub Worms here,“ muttered A'tim, sniffing at the moss shroud which clothed the tree corpse. In famine haste he tore with strong claws at the crumbling mass. One, two, three large Grubs, full of a white fat, twisted and squirmed at their rude awakening; the Dog-Wolf swallowed them greedily. „Eu-h-h! Hi, yi! Such a tiny morsel,“ he whined plaintively; „they but give life to the famine pains which were all but dead through starvation. Wait, you, fool Bull—I'll crack your ribs with my strong teeth yet! But small as the Grubs are there should be more.“

With swift diligence A'tim excavated, grumblingly, until his gaunt form was half buried in the hole.

Three Gray Shadows were creeping in stealthy silence upon his flank; owing to his anxious work A'tim was oblivious to the approaching trouble.

„E-e-yah!“ and quick as a slipping sound that fluttered his ear A'tim was up on the dead cottonwood, only to find himself peering into the lurid eyes of a huge Wolf.

Like war stars, four other balls of light gleamed at him from a close crescent. The Outcast was clever. Surely this was a case for diplomacy; he had no desire to feed three hungry Wolves with his thin carcass.

„You startled me, Brothers,“ he said, grinning nervously.

„I did not mean to,“ replied the Pack Leader; „my foot slipped on a wet leaf.“

„Ye-e-s—just so,“ hesitated A'tim in deprecating voice; „so fortunate—I mean—Brothers, I'm sorry I can't offer you good eating—there were only three Grubs—“

„Oh, don't mention it!“ exclaimed the Wolf; „no doubt we shall find something for dinner presently—don't you think so, children?“ he asked, turning to the others.

„I was going to say,“ recommenced the Outcast, „that I could not ask you to eat just here, but I was actually on my way to invite you to a big feeding.“

The Timber Wolf bared his fangs in a grin of derisive unbelief. His comrades blinked at one another solemnly. „Was there ever such a liar?“

A'tim coughed nervously and continued his politic address. „I heard your powerful bay, Pack Leader, hours ago, as I was attending to a little trailing matter I had on hand, and resolved to invite you to the Kill when I had located the trailed one.“

Illustration:

„Oh, don't mention it!“ exclaimed the Wolf;

„no doubt we shall find something for dinner, presently“

„That’s good news,“ answered the Wolf, „for we are wondrous hungry,“ and he edged closer to the Outcast.

A’tim shrank into a very small parcel on the log. „I, too, have been sick for the need of food. I have starved, actually starved, for a moon; why, I am nothing but skin and bone; the smallest creature, even a weasel, would find it difficult to fill his stomach from my lean ribs. Besides, I have eaten off a plague-stricken Rabbit but a day since, and my blood is on fire—though there’s not much of it, to be sure. I’m filled with the accursed plague poison—I believe there’s enough of it in my poor, thin body to bring to their death a whole Wolf Pack.“

„That’s serious!“ exclaimed the Gray Wolf; „but you’d die anyway, so it doesn’t matter—I mean, never mind about that just now. Gh-u-r-r-h! what of this great kill?“

„Well, Brother Wolves—“

„Brother *Wolves?*“ questioned the other with a sneer-tinge in his gruff voice; „thou art overthick in the shoulder for a Wolf.“

„I never saw ears like yours on a Wolf, Newcomer,“ said one of the youngsters; „they are short and round like those of the Huskie Dog we ate. Is not that so?“ he asked, turning to the Leader.

„Yes, indeed; we ate him, I’m ashamed to say—for Dog meat is horrible—but what is one to do when there’s naught else in the Boundaries?“

A’tim shuddered; their merciless eyes gleamed with the ferocity of famine. Neither his strength nor his speed, which had so often stood him in good stead, would avail him this time; nothing but his half-breed duplicity—Wolf cunning and Dog wisdom.

„But I *am* a Wolf,“ he reiterated; „else why should I seek your company at my Kill?“

„We were easily found,“ sneered the Wolf; „we did not take much calling, did we? Knowing your desire for our fellowship, we kept you not waiting—E-a-ah, Lone Dog? But where hunts the Pack that carry their tails curled over their backs like Train Dogs?“

„It’s because of my nervousness—you startled me,“ pleaded A’tim; „also my seat is narrow.“

„And the big, round feet, Lone Dog? They leave not a Wolf track. And you’re broad in the loin, and heavy in the jowl, and short in the leg—a Dog, a Hermit Dog, by the knowledge that has come to me of age.“

„I’m a Wolf from the Southland,“ maintained A’tim. „We shape different there. Our meat is the flesh of Buffalo, and our Kill is because of strength, and not speed—therefore we are of a strong build. You are of the Northland; swift as the wind, and long running, Great Wolf—you and your beautiful Sons—yet was I eager for your company at this Kill, which has taken me days to arrange.“

„Buh-h, buh-ha! his great Kill! and here is the killer slaying fierce, white Wood Grubs—but never mind; what of the Kill, Lone Dog?“

„What say you to a Buffalo—a fat, young Bull?“ asked A’tim, heaving a sigh of relief; „would not that be a dinner fit for a great Pack Leader, like yourself?“

„A Buffalo?“ queried the Wolf incredulously. „I have heard of such in these forests, but I come from the North, and have never seen them—have we, Sons?“

„Never,“ they answered, closing in on A‘tim.

„Even to-day I trailed one, and was on my way to ask you to the Kill, as is the way of the Wolf kind. I am no Dog, to kill and eat in secret.“

„It’s truly noble to feed your friends,“ declared the Wolf. He snapped viciously at A‘tim’s throat with fang-lined jaws. The Dog-Wolf jumped back nervously.

„Wait, Brothers,“ he pleaded; „you do not believe me, I see—let us go together, and if I do not show you this Buffalo, waiting for the Kill, then—“

„Yes, then—“ sneered the Wolf; „if you fail to show us this Buffalo, then—“ He grinned diabolically in A‘tim’s face.

„E-e-u-h, I know,“ exclaimed the Dog-Wolf, stepping down gingerly from the log. „You may keep close; I will show you that I have spoken no lie.“

Together, one Wolf on either side of A‘tim and one behind, they glided along his back trail till they came to the scene of his caustic farewell to Shag. Suddenly the Pack Leader stopped, buried his nose in a hoof hole and sniffed with discriminating intentness.

„If-if-if-fh-h! By my scent, ‘tis not Mooswa—nor Caribou. What say you, sons? Perhaps it is the Buffalo of which the Lone Dog speaks. Phew-yi, hi! Another trail call. Here are two of these big-footed creatures, be they Buffalo, or what—you spoke of but one, Lone Dog; Wolves do not tackle a Herd.“

„Only a silly Cow,“ answered A‘tim. „She will flee at the first blood cry.“

The big Wolf softened a trifle. Surely here was prospect of a mighty Kill. There would be much flesh feeding and blood drinking till they were gorged. And the Lone Dog would keep. When the Buffalo were eaten, then—He look grimly at A‘tim’s attenuated form. „Not much to tempt one after the sweet meat of a Grass Feeder,“ he muttered disconsolately. „How shall we make the Kill, Lone Dog?“ he asked.

„When we have trailed them down watch till they feed apart and stampede the Cow with a fierce rush full of much cry; then all on the Bull—two in front, to put them at bay, and two behind with sharp teeth for the hamstring. That will lay him helpless as a new Calf.“

„Thou art a Leader of Sorts, Lone Dog; but why not the Cow first? It’s an easier task, and better eating.“

„Ah, my Brothers, I see you have never run the Kings of the Prairie. While you were busy with the Cow, what think you the Bull would be doing—brushing his mane with a wet tongue? His strong horns, stronger than Wolf tusks, would be ripping your ribs, and the weight of his huge forehead would be breaking your backs—flat as a fallen leaf he would crush you. No, no; by my knowledge of these things, first the Bull—after, the Cow will be easy.“

All this logic, sound though it seemed, was born of A‘tim’s desire for revenge upon old Shag for refusing to be murdered.

„Well, it is your Run and your Kill, and to the Trailer the say of the Kill is our Law,“ answered the Wolf; „lead us to the eating, and make haste lest we get too hungry.“

But A‘tim had started ere the Wolf had finished his implied threat. Nose to ground, and tail almost as straight as a true Wolf’s, he raced through the ghost

forms of silent poplars, sheared by the autumn winds of their gold-leaf mantle. Over wooded upland, and through lowland cradling the treacherous muskeg, spruce-shielded and moss-bedded, he followed the trail of old Shag and his Cow mate. Ever at his flank, one on either side, sped the young Wolves, and, lapping their quarters, loped in easy stride their giant Sire. In the Dog-Wolf's heart were revenge and the prospect of much eating, and the diplomacy that was to save his life.

„This strange Run is surely from the hand of Wie-sah-ke-chack,“ muttered the Pack Leader; „and of the end I have no knowledge, but, by the memory of my long fast, there will be food at the end of it for me and the Pups.“

Through a black cemetery of fire-killed trees, the charred limbs cracking harshly under their eager feet, they swept. Suddenly the trail kinked sharply to the right, and the Dog-Wolf, swift-rushing, overshot it. „E-u-h! at fault,“ he muttered. „Some trick of the fool Cow's.“ Back and forth, back and forth like Setters the four Killers scurried.

„H-o-o-oh! here away!“ cried A'tim, picking it up; and on again galloped the Gray Hunters.

At Towatano Creek the trail went into the air; at least it was no longer of the earth. Straight to the south bank it had led, but on the north there was nothing; nothing but the hoot of a frightened Arctic Owl that swirled off into the forest because of their impetuous blood cry.

„They are not wet to their death,“ cried the Wolf, „for here is little water.“

It was as though the Bisons had crawled into a cave, only there was no burrow in sight—nothing. A'tim was confused.

„Surely thou art a Dog,“ cried the Wolf disdainfully; „they have gone up the water, or they have gone down the water. This is no young Bull we follow, for he has the wisdom which comes with age; that, or this Cow has the duplicity of a Mother guarding her Calf.“

„I will search up, and do you seek down,“ said A'tim.

„Not so,“ replied the Wolf; „we will stay here together while my Pups pick up the trail, be it up or down.“

Very close to A'tim the huge Wolf sat while his two Sons searched the opposite bank for the coming out of Shag. Soon a „Hi, yi—he, he, he-voh-ooh!“ came floating dismally up the tortuous stretch of winding stream. „Come; they have found it,“ said the Wolf.

On again, faster and faster, flitted the Gray Shadows in the waning of the day. All vain had been the precautions of the Cow; the twisting and doubling, and walking in the water to kill the scent—all in vain. Nothing would turn these blood-thirsters from the trail.

„Hurry a little,“ panted the Wolf from behind. „Gallop, Lone Dog; gallop, brave Pups; the scent grows strong, and we need light for our work.“

A'tim stretched his thin limbs in eager chase; at his shoulder now raced the Wolf Pups; the blood fever crept stronger and stronger into the hot hearts of the Gray Runners. Short yelps of hungry exultation broke from their dry throats; it was like the tolling of a death bell; first one and then the other, „Oo-oo-ooh-ooh!“ The dry leaves scurried under their feet, swirled up by the wind from their rushing bodies. Poplar bluff, and jack-pine knoll, and spruce thicket, and open patch of

rosebush-matted plain flitted by like the tide of a landscape through which an express speeds.

Why had this silly Cow and effete old Bull traveled so far? A'tim wondered. Would they never overtake them?

Suddenly a vibrating bellow echoed through the forest and halted the Wolf Runners.

„It's the Bull!“ cried A'tim triumphantly. „Now, Brothers, we shall feast. Have I not spoken the truth?“

On again sped the four Killers—the four that were eager of blood; on through the thicket, and with suddenness out upon a plain that had been fire-swept years before—a plain wide, and void of poplar, or spruce, or cottonwood. Only the grass plain, and on the plain seven Buffalo; a waiting crescent of seven huge heads lined in symmetrical defense; a little in front old Shag, and behind, shoulder to shoulder, the others. With a cry of dismay, A'tim stopped.

„A trick—a trap!“ yelped the Wolf.

„I did not know of these,“ whined A'tim; „but it is nothing. If we charge boldly they will stampede.“

„They will fight,“ answered the Wolf. „No charge will break a Wolf Pack, and it will be that way with these, I think.“

„The Buffalo are different,“ lied A'tim. He knew better, but it was his only hope. Well he knew that if there were no attack his New Comrades would surely eat him. In the battle many things might come to pass, his Dog wisdom said; the Wolves might be killed, or prodded full of a sufficiency of fight; the Buffalo might stampede, being new to Shag's leadership; or, when the combat was heavy, he could steal away if he saw it going against them. Also his desire for revenge on Shag was a potent factor.

„They will surely break if we charge with strength,“ he declared: „they are Cows, having no Calves to guard, and each will think only of her own safety when she hears your fierce cry, Pack Leader. I, who have lived upon Buffalo in the South, know this. Why should I say this, being also in the fight, if it were not true. Come, Brothers, even now they are afraid.“

The Buffalo Cows were stamping the young-turfed prairie with nervous feet. Shag was throwing clouds of dust over his lowered head, and kinking his tufted tail in battle anger.

„Yes, he will fight,“ declared A'tim, as Shag snorted and shook his head defiantly; „he will fight, but that will save much running, for we shall soon bring him down.“

The Wolf Leader weighed the matter with a gravity born of his long fast. Certainly it appeared worth a battle. If they could but make one Kill, what a feast it would be! Never had he seen Grass Feeders of this bulk. Why should he and his Sons, who were strong fighters, full of the Wolf cunning, dread these Buffalo who had nothing but horns for defense! No fear of the fierce-cutting hoof thrust, such as Mooswa gave! And he was hungry. He looked at the Dog-Wolf with the eye of an epicure; what miserable eating his thin carcass would make. Much better this fight for a Buffalo.

„We will charge,“ he said. „All at the Bull!“

With short, gasping yelps the three Wolves and the Mongrel dashed at the Herd. The crescent of horned heads swayed a little irresolutely; but Shag, wise old Leader, Leader of mighty Herds, Patrician of a thousand kine, who had stood against the fierce blizzard, and the Foothill Wolves that came down in mighty Packs seeking the calves that were in his charge—he who had fought the young Bulls growing into their strength, and kept them in subjection until his horns were worn to stubs and of no avail; whose heart, once aroused, was strong, and knew not of defeat until it came: this dauntless Monarch of the plain stood firm. What were four Wolves to him! Let them come.

„This is a Leader!“ said the six Cows. „Surely here is no danger.“

„No danger,“ repeated Shag, hearing their voices; „stand close and there is no danger.“

„Oo-oo-oo-ah, wah, wah, wah!“ howled the Wolves and barked the Dog-Wolf, as almost to the stockade of heavy heads they rushed.

„Circle, Brothers, circle,“ called the big Wolf, as he swerved to the right, seeking to turn the flank of the Cow line. Like trained soldiers the Buffalo crescent swung as the Wolves swung, Shag always a little in front. With an angry snarl the Leader dashed at the Buffalo; his two Sons were at his shoulder.

„The Bull! the Bull!“ yelped A’tim, crouching to steal under the giant head, and lay him by the flank.

Famine-braved, the Wolves fought and snapped, and snarled the Kill cry. Crazy beyond cowardice by the smell of their own blood, the Cows fenced and thrust, and stood one against the other—the sharp horns ripped like skinning-knives.

„Ee-e-yah! if I could but do it!“ snarled the great Wolf. Ah! he had her—by the nose! Down to her knees, dragged by the Wolf, came the Cow that had turned Shag from the Death Flower.

„Yah, yah, yah!“ snarled the Wolf joyously through his set teeth, as the Cow bellowed loud in her agony of terror.

Then something like the falling of a great forest was heard, and the Buffalo Bull descended upon the Big Wolf and blotted him out from the light of the world. It was not a question of horns at all; it was simply a great weight like an avalanche of rock crushing him into the herbed plain. His grim jaws relaxed their hold; from ears and nostrils flowed his mighty strength in a red stream.

Even as Shag charged the Wolf, A’tim had reached for the Cow's flank! Ah! here was his chance. The Bull's fat throat beckoned to him from within easy reach. Wah, for his revenge! E-e-uh, for the throat grip—the throat-cutting hold!

Eagerly, wide-jawed he sprang at the Brother Outcast—and missed.

The carnage had sent Shag's life back a score of years; the battle heat warmed his old blood until it coursed with the fire of fighting youth; he was a young Bull again, full of the glorious supple strength that had been his as chief gladiator of all the prairie arena: that was why A'tim fell short as he reached for the death hold.

With a deft twist Shag had the Dog-Wolf pinned to the earth between the worn old horns.

„Now, traitor,“ he grunted.

„Spare me,“ pleaded A'tim; „I, who am not of your kind, slept by your side, and guided you to this land where you have a Herd. I was forced to this by the

Wolves—they threatened to eat me. Spare me, Great Bull; I came to warn you, but the Wolves followed fast.“

Shag hesitated. One crunch from his broad forehead, one little push—so, and the Dog-Wolf, who was A'tim, would—

Illustration:

„Thou art a traitor, and a great liar,“ said the Bull

„Spare me, Shag—let me go,“ pleaded the mongrel again; „I brought you to this Herd—to this Northland which is good. Were we not Outcast Brothers together?“

Again Shag hesitated. Why not? Was he not a Buffalo Bull, a Leader of Herds? Did his kind ever do aught for revenge—kill except in defense of their own lives? And was not this Dog-Wolf lying helpless between his horns beyond all chance of doing him injury—this Mongrel that had been as a Brother to him when they were Outcasts? Also the Wolves were dead—trampled into silence.

„Thou art a traitor, and a great liar, A'tim,“ said the Bull, rising, „but you may go because you are an Outcast, and because I also was one.“

And that was the beginning of the Herd of the Wood Buffalo, that are big and strong and beautiful, in the spruce forests of the Athabasca Lake.

