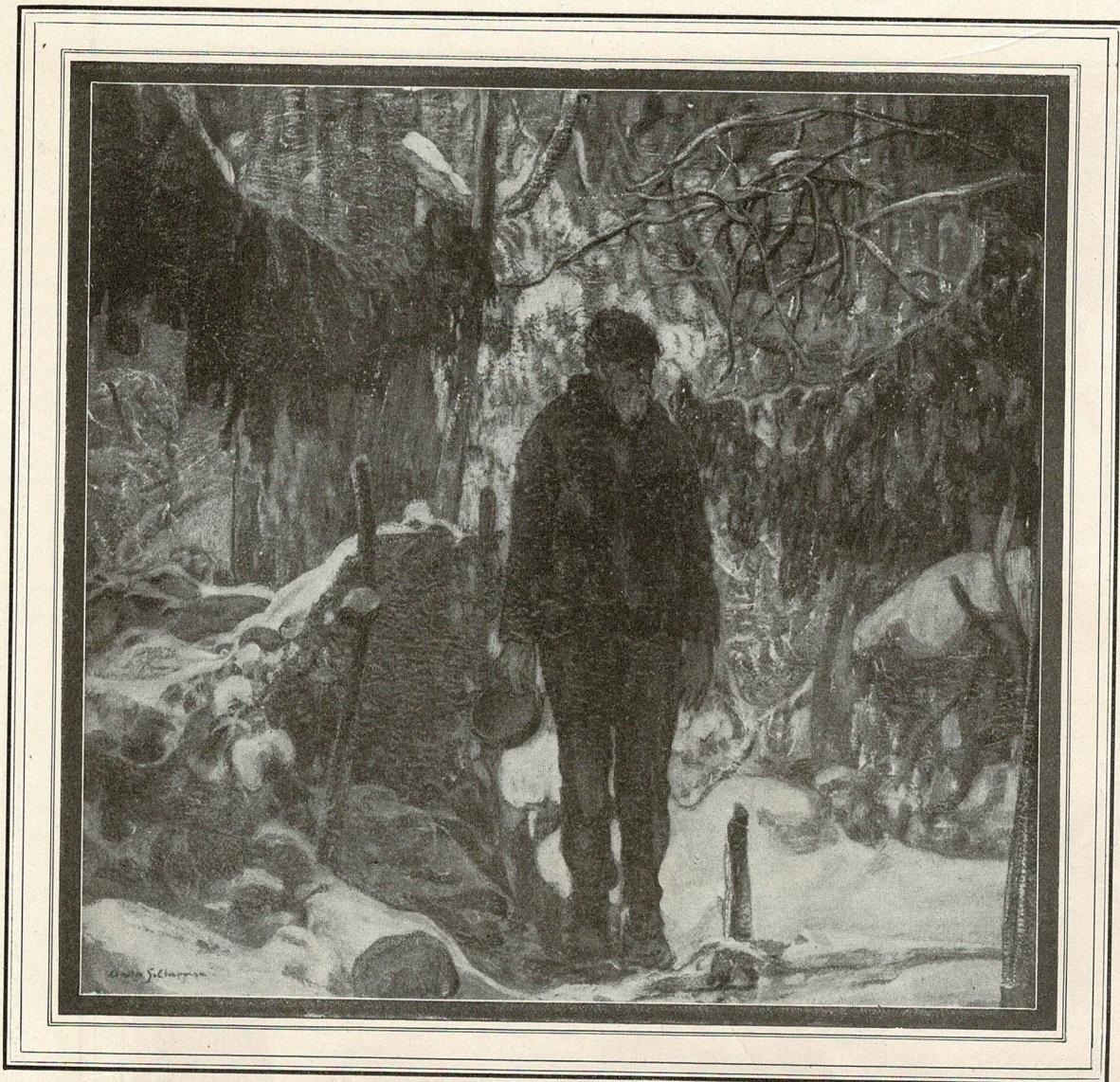


The Wolf Tracker

By ZANE GREY

Illustrations by Charles S. Chapman



A LOWERING GRAY DAWN DISCLOSED THE FOREST MANTLED IN A WET SNOW, DEEP ENOUGH TO COVER THE GROUND AND BURDEN THE TREES

THE hard-riding cowmen of Adams' outfit returned to camp that last day of the fall round-up, weary and brush-torn, begrimed with dust and sweat, and loud in their acclaims against Old Gray, the "lofer" wolf, notorious from the Cibique across the black belt of rugged Arizona upland to Mount Wilson in New Mexico.

"Wal, reckon I allowed the Tonto had seen the last of Old Gray's big tracks," said Benson, the hawk-eyed foreman, as he slipped the bridle of his horse.

"An' for why?" queried Banty Smith, the little arguing rooster of the outfit. "Ain't Old Gray young yet—just in his prime? Didn't we find four carcasses of full-grown steers he'd pulled down last April over on Webber Creek? Shore he allus hit for high country in summer. What for did you think he'd not show up when the frost come?"

"Aw, Banty, cain't you savvy Ben?" drawled a long, lean rider. "He was jest voicin' his hopes."

"Yep; Ben is thet tender-hearted he'd weep over a locoed calf if it happened to wear his brand," remarked Tim Bender with a huge grin, as if he well knew he had acquitted himself wittily.

"Haw! Haw!" laughed another rider. "Old Gray has shore made some deppredashuns on Ben's stock of twenty head—most as much as one heifer."

"Wal, kid me all you like, boys," replied Benson good-naturedly. "Reckon I had no call to think Old Gray wouldn't come back. He's done thet for years. But it's not onnatural to live in hopes. An' it's hard luck we had to run acrost his tracks an' his work the last day of the round-up. Only last night the boss was sayin' he hadn't heard anythin' about Old Gray for months."

"Nobody heerd of anyone cashin' on thet five thousand dollars reward for Old Gray's scalp either," replied Banty with sarcasm.

Thus after the manner of the range the cowboys volleyed badinage while they performed the last tasks of the day.

TWO streams met below the pine-shaded bench where the camp was situated; and some of the boys strode down with towels and soap to attend to ablutions that one wash pan for the outfit made a matter of waiting. It was still clear daylight, though the sun had gone down behind a high timbered hill to the west. A rude log cabin stood above the fork of the streams, and near by the cook busied himself between his chuck wagon and the camp fire. Both the cool pine-scented air and the red-gold patches of brush on the hillside told of the late October.

Adams, the boss of the outfit, had ridden over from his Tonto ranch at Spring Valley. He was a sturdy, well-preserved man of sixty, sharp of eye, bronze of face, with the stamp of a self-made and prosperous rancher upon him.

"Ben, the boss is inquirin' about you," called Banty from the bench above the stream.

Whereupon the foreman clambered up the rocky slope, vigorously rubbing his ruddy face with a towel, and made his way to where Adams sat beside the camp fire. In all respects, except regarding Old Gray, Benson's report was one he knew would be gratifying. This naturally he reserved until after Adams had expressed his satisfaction. Then he supplemented the news of the wolf.

"That lofer!" ejaculated Adams in dismay. "Why, only the other day I heard from my pardner Barrett, an' he said the government hunters were trackin' Old Gray up Mount Wilson."

"**W**AL, boss, thet may be true," responded the foreman. "But Old Gray killed a yearlin' last night on the red ridge above Doubtful Cañon. I know his tracks like I do my hoss'. We found four kills today an' I reckon all was the work of thet lofer. You don't need to see his tracks. He's shore a clean killer. An' sometimes he kills for the sake of killin'."

"I ain't sayin' I care about the money loss, though that old gray devil has cost me an' Barrett twenty-five hundred," replied Adams thoughtfully. "But he's such a bloody murderer, the most aggravatin' varmint I ever —"

"Huh! Who's the gazabo comin' down the trail?" interrupted Benson, pointing up the bench.

"Stranger to me," said Adams. "Anybody know him?"

One by one the cowboys disclaimed knowledge of the unusual figure approaching. At that distance he appeared to be a rather old man, slightly bowed. But a second glance showed his shoulders to be broad and his stride the wonderful one of a mountaineer.

He carried a pack on his back and a shiny carbine in his hand. His garb was ragged homespun, patched until it resembled a checkerboard.

"A stranger without a hoss!" exclaimed Banty, as if that was an amazingly singular thing.

The man approached the camp fire, and halted to lean the worn carbine against the woodpile. Then he unbuckled a strap round his breast, and lifted a rather heavy pack from his back, to deposit it on the ground. It appeared to be a pack rolled in a rubber-lined blanket, out of which protruded the ends of worn snowshoes. When he stepped to the camp fire he disclosed a strange physiognomy: the weather-beaten face of a matured man of the open, mapped by deep lines—strong, hard, a rugged mask, lighted by penetrating quiet eyes of gray.

"Howdy, stranger. Get down an' come in," welcomed Adams with the quaint, hearty greeting always resorted to by a Westerner.

"Hod do. I reckon I will," replied the man, extending big brown hands to the fire. "Are you Adams, the cattelman?"

"You've got me. But I can't just place you, stranger."

"Reckon not. I'm new in these parts. My name's Brink. I'm a tracker."

"Glad to meet you, Brink," replied Adams curiously. "These are some of my boys. Set down an' rest. I reckon you're tired an' hungry. We'll have grub soon. Tracker, you said? Now, I just don't savvy what you mean."

"I've been prospector, trapper, hunter, most everythin'," replied Brink as he took the seat offered. "But I reckon my callin' is to find tracks. Tracker of men, hosses, cattle, wild animals, specially sheep-killin' silvertips an' stock-killin' wolves."

"Aha! You don't say!" ejaculated Adams, suddenly shifting from genial curiosity to keen interest. "An' you're after that five thousand dollars we cattlemen offered for Old Gray's scalp?"

"Nope. I hadn't thought of the reward. I heard of it, up in Colorado, same time I heard of this wolf that's run amuck so long on these ranges. An' I've come down here to kill him."

ADAMS showed astonishment along with his interest, but his silence and expression did not approach the incredulity manifested by the men of his outfit. They were amiably nonplused as to the man's sanity. Nothing more than their response was needed to establish the reputation of Old Gray, the lofer wolf. But Brink did not see these indications; he was peering into the fire.

"So ho! You have?" exclaimed Adams, breaking the silence. "Wal, now, Brink, that's good of you. Would you mind tellin' us how you mean to set about killin' Old Gray?"

"Reckon I told you I was a tracker," rejoined Brink curtly.

"But, man, we've had every pack of hounds in two states on the track of that wolf."

"Is he on the range now?" queried Brink.

Adams motioned to his foreman to reply to this question. Benson made evident effort to be serious. "I seen his tracks less 'n two hours ago. He killed a yearlin' last night."

At these words Brink turned his gaze from the fire to the speaker. What a remarkable fleeting flash crossed his rugged face! It seemed one of passion. It changed, and only a gleam of eye attested to strange emotion under that seamed and lined mask of bronze. His gaze returned to the fire, and the big hands, that held palms open to the heat, now clasped each other, in strong and tense action. Only Adams took the man seriously, and his attitude restrained the merriment his riders certainly felt.

"Adams, would you mind tellin' me all you know about this wolf?" asked the stranger presently.

"Say, man," expostulated Adams, still with good nature, "it wouldn't be polite to keep you from eatin' an' sleepin'."

"Old Gray has a history then?" inquired Brink.

"Humph! Reckon I couldn't tell you all about him in a week," said the cattelman emphatically.

"It wouldn't matter to me how long you'd take," returned Brink thoughtfully.

At that Adams laughed outright; this queer individual had not in the least considered waste of time to a busy rancher. Manifestly he thought only of the notorious wolf. Adams eyed the man a long, speculative moment. Brink interested him. Brink's face and garb and pack were all extraordinarily different from what was usually met with on these ranges. He had arrived on foot, but he was not a tramp. Adams took keener note of the quiet face, the deep chest, the muscular hands, the wiry body and the powerful legs. No cowboy, for all his riding, ever had legs like these; the man was a walker.

THESE deductions, united with an amiability that was characteristic of Adams, persuaded him to satisfy the man's desire to hear about the wolf. "All right, Brink, I'll tell you somethin' of Old Gray—leastways till the cook calls us to come an' get it. There used to be a good many lofers—timber wolves we called them—in this country. But they're gettin' scarce. Naturally there are lots of stories in circulation about this particular wolf. I can't vouch for his parentage, or whether he has mixed blood. Seven or eight, maybe ten years ago some trapper lost a husky—one of them regular Alaskan snow-sled dogs—over in the Mazatzals. Never found him."

"Some natives here claim Old Gray is a son of this husky, his mother bein' one of the range lofers. Another story is about a wolf escapin' from a circus over heah in a railroad wreck years ago. A young gray wolf got away. This escaped wolf might be Old Gray."

"The name Old Gray doesn't seem to fit this particular wolf, because it's misleadin'. He's gray—yes, almost white, but he's not old. Bill Everett, a range hand, saw this wolf first. Tellin' about it, he called him an old gray Jasper. The name stuck, though now you seldom hear the Jasper tacked on."

"From that time stories began to drift into camp an' town about the doin's of Old Gray. He was a killer. Cowboys an' hunters took to his trail with cow dogs an' bear hounds. But though they routed him out of his lairs an' chased him all over they never caught him. Trappers camped all the way from the Cibique to Mount Wilson tryin' to trap him. I never heard of Old Gray touchin' a trap.

"In summer Old Gray lit out for the mountains. In winter he took to the foothills an' ranges. I've heard cattlemen over in New Mexico say he had killed twenty-five thousand dollars' worth of stock. But that was years ago. It would be impossible now to estimate the loss to ranchers. Old Gray played at the game. He'd run through a bunch of stock, hamstringin' right an' left, until he had enough of his fun, then he'd pull down a yearlin', eat what he wanted an' travel on.

"He didn't always work alone. Sometimes he'd have several lofers with him. But Old Gray is a lone wolf. He didn't trust company. The government hunters have been tryin' to get him these several years. But so far as I know, Old Gray has never been scratched. My personal opinion is this: He's a magnificent wild brute, smarter than any dog; an' you know how intelligent dogs can be. Well, Old Gray is too savage, too wild, too keen to be caught by the ordinary means employed so far. There, Brink, is the plain, blunt facts."

"**M**UCH obliged," replied Brink with a break in his rapt intensity. "Have you ever seen this lofer?"

"No, I never had the good luck," replied Adams. "Nor have many men. But Benson, here, has seen him."

"What's he look like?" queried Brink, turning eagerly to the foreman.

"Wal, Old Gray is about the purtiest wild varmint I ever clapped my eyes on," drawled Benson, slow and cool, as if to tantalize this wolf hunter. "He's big—a heap bigger'n any lofer I ever saw before—an' he's gray all right, a light gray, with a black ring part round his neck, almost like a ruff. He's a bold cuss too. He stood watchin' me, knowin' darn well he was out of gun-shot."

"Now what kind of a track does he make?"

"Wal, jest a wolf track bigger'n you ever seen before—almost as big as a hoss track. When you see it onct you'll shore never forget."

"Where did you run across that track last?"

Benson squatted down before the fire, and with his hand smoothed a flat, clear place in the dust on which he began to trace lines. "Heah, foller up this creek till you come to a high falls. Climb up the slope on the right. You'll head out on a cedar an' piñon ridge. Halfway up this ridge from there you'll strike a trail. Foller it round under the bluff till you strike Old Gray's tracks; I seen them tnis mawnin', fresh as could be—sharp an' clean in the dust, makin' for the Rim."

BRINK slowly rose from his scrutiny of the map. His penetrating gaze fixed on Adams. "I'll kill your old gray wolf," he said.

His tone, his manner seemed infinitely more than his simple words. They all combined to make an effect that seemed indefinable, except in the case of Banty, who grew red in the face. The little cowboy enjoyed considerable reputation as a hunter, a reputation which, to his humiliation, had not been lived up to by his futile hunts after Old Gray.

"Aw, now—so you'll kill thet lofer," he ejaculated in the most elaborate satire possible for a cowboy. "Wal, Mr. Brink, would you mind tellin' us jest when you'll perpetuate this execushun? We'll give a dance to celebrate. Say when you'll fetch his skin down—tomorrow around

sunup, or mebbe next day, seein' you'll have to travel on Shanks' mare, or possiblee the day after."

Banty's drawling scorn might never have been spoken, for all the effect it had on the wolf hunter. Brink was beyond the levity of a cowboy. "Reckon I can't say just when I'll kill Old Gray," he replied with something sonorous in his voice. "It might be any day, accordin' to luck. But if he's the wolf you-all say he is, it'll take long."

"You don't say!" spoke up Banty. "Wal, by gosh, my walkin' gent, I figgered you had some Injun medicine thet you could put on Old Gray's tail."

The cowboys roared. Brink showed no sign of appreciating the ridicule. Thoughtfully he bent again to the fire, and did not hear the cook's lusty call to supper.

"Never mind the boys," said Adams kindly, putting a hand on the bowed shoulder. "Come an' eat with us."

II

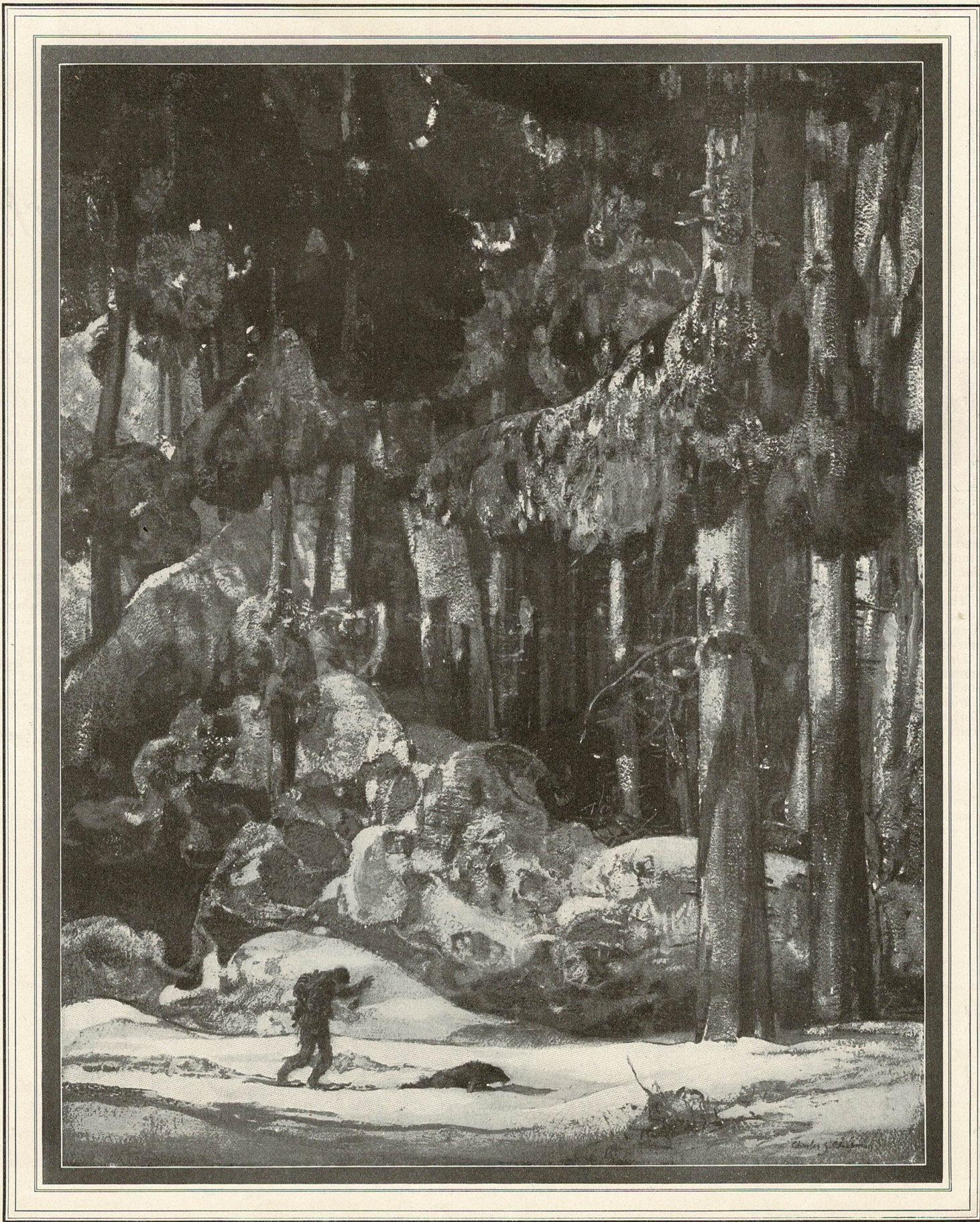
THE morning sun had not yet melted the hoar frost from the brush when Brink halted in the trail before huge wolf tracks in the red dust.

"Same as any wolf tracks, only big," he soliloquized. "Biggest I ever saw, even in Alaska."

He leaned his shiny carbine against a pine sapling and lifted his pack from his shoulders, all the time with gaze riveted on the trail. Then, with head bent, he walked slowly along until he came to a place where all four tracks of the wolf showed plainly. Here he got to his knees, scrutinizing the imprints, photographing them on his inward eye, taking intent and grave stock of them. For moments he remained motionless. Presently he relaxed, and seating himself beside the trail seemed to revel in a strange, tranquil joy.

Brink's state of mind was a composite of a lifetime's feelings. As a boy of three he had captured his first wild creature—a squirrel that he tamed and loved and at last freed. All his early boyhood he had been a haunter of the woods and hills. At sixteen he had run away from school and home; at fifty he knew the West from the cold borders of the Yukon to the desert-walled Yaqui. Caravans, mining camps, freighting posts, towns and settlements, ranchers

(Continued on Page 184)



OVER WHITE BENCHES, THROUGH SPRUCE THICKETS, UNDER WINDFALLS MAN AND BEAST REMAINED ONLY A FEW PACES APART

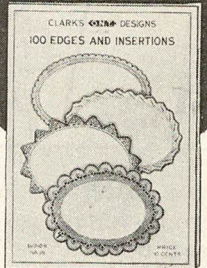
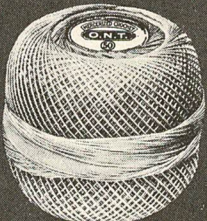
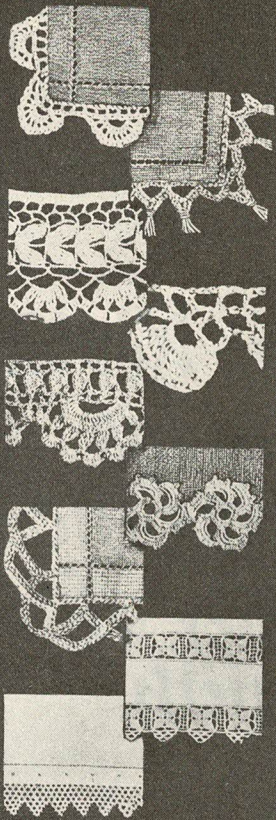
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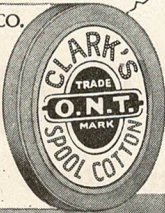
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The Wolf Tracker

(Continued from Page 7)

and camps had known him, though never for any length of time.

The tracks showed sharply in the dust. Old Gray had passed along there yesterday. He was somewhere up or down those ragged slopes. Cunning as he was, he had to hold contact with earth and rock; he had to slay and eat; he must leave traces of his nature, his life, his habit and his action. To these Brink would address himself with all the sagacity of an old hunter, but with something infinitely more—a passion which he did not understand. "Wal, Old Gray, I'm on your track," and strapping the heavy pack on his broad shoulders, he took up the carbine and strode along the trail.

IT PLEASED Brink to find that his first surmise was as correct as if he had cognizance of Old Gray's instincts. The wolf tracks soon sheered off the trail. Old Gray was not now a hunting or a prowling wolf. He was a traveling wolf, but he did not keep to the easy-going, direct trail.

Brink could not find tracks on gravel and boulders, so he crossed the wide bottom of the gorge, and after a while found Old Gray's trail on the opposite slope. Before he struck it he had believed the wolf was heading for high country. Brink tracked him over a forested ridge and down into an intersecting cañon, where on the rocks of a dry stream bed the trail failed.

At length he came to pools of water in rocky recesses, where the sand and gravel bars showed the tracks of cattle, bear and deer. But if Old Gray had passed on up that narrowing cañon, he had avoided the water holes. Patches of maple and thickets of oak covered the steep slopes, leading up to the base of cracked and seamed cliffs, and they in turn sheered up to where the level rim shone black-fringed against the blue. Here the stream bed was covered with the red and gold and purple of fallen autumn leaves.

The sun, now at the zenith, fell hot upon Brink's head. He labored on, to climb out a narrow defile that led to the level forest above. Here the wind blew cool. Brink rested a moment. Then he strode east along the precipice, carefully searching for the wolf trail he had set out upon. In a mile of slow travel, he did not discover a sign of Old Gray. Retracing his steps, he traveled west for a like distance, without success. Whereupon he returned to the head of the cañon out of which he had climbed, and there, divesting himself of his pack, he set about a more elaborate scrutiny of ground, grass, moss and rock.

HE WORKED back from the Rim down into an aspen swale that deepened into a cañon, heading away from the Rim. He had no reason to believe Old Gray would travel this way, except that long experience had taught him where to search first for tracks. And quite abruptly he came upon the huge footprint of the lofer, made in soft black mud beside elk tracks that led into a hole where water had recently stood.

"Hah!" ejaculated Brink. "You're interested in that yearlin' elk. Wal, Old Gray, I'll let this do for today."

The cold, raw dawn found Brink stirring. A blanket of cloud had prevented a white frost on the grass, but there glistened a film of ice on the brook. As the sun came up, it brightened a blue sky mostly clear. The drift of the thin clouds was from the southwest, and they were traveling fast.

Before the sun had warmed out the shade of the cañon Brink, pack on back and rifle in hand, had taken up Old Gray's trail. The wolf showed a preference for the open cañon, and in many places left plain imprints in the sand. The cañon, running away from the Rim, deepened and widened; and its disconnected pools of water at last became a running

stream. Evidently the great wolf was not losing time to place distance between him and his last kill. Brink found no more sign of his evincing interest in any tracks.

About noon, by which time Brink had trailed the animal fully ten miles down the cañon, seldom losing the tracks for long, Old Gray took to an intersecting cañon, rough-walled and brushy, and soon he went up into the rocks. It took Brink all afternoon to find where the wolf had lain, but Brink would gladly have spent days for such a triumph.

"Aha, you old gray devil!" he soliloquized, as he bent his gaze on a snug retreat under shelving rocks, where showed the betraying impress of feet and body of the wolf. "So you have to sleep an' rest, huh? Wal, I reckon you can't get along without killin' an' eatin' too. Old Gray, you're bound to leave tracks, an' I'll find them."

At length Brink came to a beaver dam, and on the very edge of it, deep in the wet mud, showed the unmistakable tracks of the giant wolf. From that point Old Gray's tracks showed in the wet places up and down the banks of the narrow ponds of water. He had been vastly curious about these dams and mounds erected by the beaver. Everywhere he left tracks. But Brink could not find any sign of the wolf catching a beaver unawares. The beaver of this colony had been at work that night cutting the aspen trees and dragging boughs and sections of trunks under the water.

SUNSET came before Brink had found a track of the wolf leading away from that park. Still he made camp satisfied with the day. Any day in which he found a single fresh track of this wolf was indeed time well spent. His hope was that he might keep the general direction Old Gray had taken until the snow began to fall.

Night settled down like a black blanket; the wind moaned louder than usual. Brink soliloquized that the wind was warning Old Gray to leave the country before the fatal snow fell. Contrary to his custom on preceding nights, he sat up a long time and, whether he had his face to the fire or his back, his palms were always spread to the comforting heat. Brink looked and listened with more than usual attention during this vigil beside the camp fire.

"Rain or snow sure," he muttered.

At length drowsiness made his eyelids heavy, and he sought his bed under the shelter of pine boughs. Sleep claimed him. He awakened with a feeling that only a moment had elapsed, but he could tell by the dead camp fire how misleading this was. Something had roused him.

Suddenly from the dark forest on the cold wind came the deep wild bay of a hunting wolf. With a start Brink sat up. No other wild sound in nature had such power over him. It seemed as if this bay came from a vague, dim past. Again it pealed out, but with a sharper note, not greatly different from that of a hunting hound.

"Lofers trailin' a deer," said Brink. "Two of them, mebbe more."

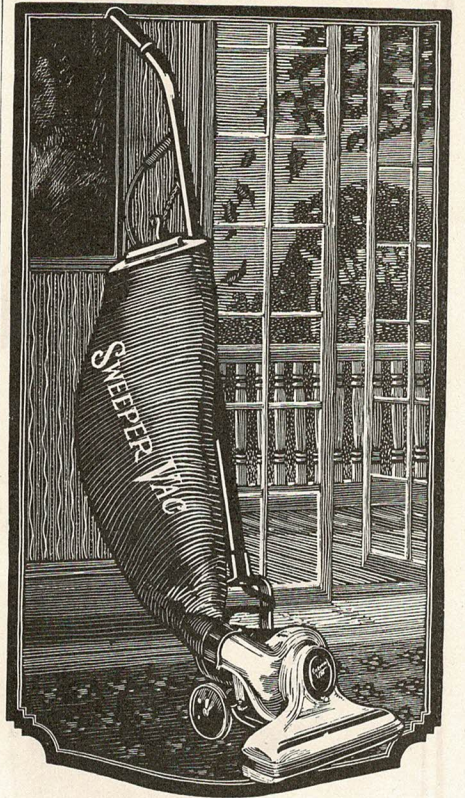
Again he heard the bays, growing farther away, and another time, quite indistinct. After that the weird moaning solitude of the forest remained undisturbed.

BRINK lay back in his blanket, but not to sleep. He would lie awake now for a long while. He imagined he heard deep, low bays back in the forest. Always the wind made the sound for which the eager ears were attuned. Suddenly Brink again sat up. "Say, have I got a nightmare?"

He turned his ear away from the cold wind and, holding his breath, he listened. Did he hear a bay or a moan in the forest? Long he remained stiff, intent. Now he felt himself fooled, and then he was sure he heard something. His patience matched his imagination. Then came a slight lull in the wind, and into it rang a low, deep wolf-bay, wild and terrible in its suggestiveness. "Reckon that's a bigger, older wolf," observed Brink. "An' if he runs this way it means somethin'."

(Continued on Page 187)

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The Wolf Tracker

(Continued from Page 184)

Not for a long time did the strange sound ring out, and then it was followed by another one, less hoarse and deep.

"Two more lofers, an' sure one of them is not what I heard before," said Brink.

Twice again he caught the lower, shorter sound, coming against the wind. Then ensued an interval fraught with listening suspense. Brink slowly sank back, almost convinced that his expectation was groundless. Close at hand then, across the pond in the forest, burst out a loud rolling, deep-throated bay like that of a great bloodhound, only infinitely wilder.

It thrilled Brink to the marrow of his bones. He jerked up with a burst of hot fire over him. "Old Gray! That's Old Gray!" he exclaimed exultantly. "No ordinary lofer could have a voice like that. He's fallen in with the bunch rangin' this forest. An' sure as I'm born they're relayin' a deer."

Far off in the woods the bay pealed out, clear on the wind now, remarkable in its appalling long-drawn note of savage nature. These bays came from the same direction as those that had awakened Brink. The wolves had resorted to a trick Brink knew well. The pack had split into several parts, one of which relayed the deer for a time, driving it round while the others rested. In Brink's experience the trick was common for a pack that had a great leader.

III

LOWERING gray dawn disclosed the forest mantled in a wet snow, deep enough to cover the ground and burden the trees. The wind had eased somewhat and was colder, which facts augured for clearing weather.

"Wal, reckon it's only a skift," remarked Brink. "But it's snow, an' right here my trackin' begins. If it melts, it'll leave the ground soft. If it doesn't, well an' good."

Brink was singularly happy. The Indian-summer days were past. The white banner of winter had been unrolled. Old Gray had passed in the night, ringing his wild and unearthly voice down the aisles of the forest. Somehow Brink had no doubt that the hoarse, hound-like bay belonged to the wolf he was stalking.

"I know his tracks," said Brink, "an' I've heard him yelp. Sooner or later I'll see him. Wal, now, that'll be a sight!"

His educated eyes sought the ground. He crossed the open glade to enter the forest. A blue jay screeched at him from an oak tree, and a red squirrel chattered angrily. Brink espied the wolf and buck tracks fully fifty yards ahead of him. Soon he stood over them. They had been made before the snow had ceased to fall, yet they were clear enough to be read by the hunter. The buck had been running. Two wolves had been chasing him, but neither was Old Gray.

Without a word Brink set off on the trail so plain in the snow. Through level, open forest, down ridge and over swale, into thickets of maple and aspen, across parks where bleached grass glistened out of the snow, he strode on with the swing of a mountaineer. He did not tire. His interest had mounted until the hours seemed moments.

THE trail he was following swung in a ragged circle, keeping clear of rocks, cañons, and the windfalls where running would be difficult. Brink passed three relay stations where resting and running wolves had met; and at the last of these all five wolves took the trail of the doomed buck. They had chased him all night. Their baying had kept all of them within hearing of each other. The resting relay had cunningly cut in or across at times, thus to drive the buck out of a straightaway race.

Toward noon the sun came out, lighting up the forest. Everywhere snow was sliding, slipping, falling from the trees. On the snow

lay leaves of yellow and red and brown, fallen since the storm. Pine needles were floating down from the lofty pines, and through the green-and-white canopy overhead showed rifts in the clouds and sky of deep blue.

Brink missed none of the beauty, though the grim task absorbed him. He arrived at last where the buck had reached the end of his tragic race, and by some strange paradox of nature the woodland scene was one of marvelous color and beauty. Over a low swale the pine monarchs towered and the silver spruces sent their exquisite spiral crests aloft. Underfoot, however, the beauty of this spot had been marred. Here the buck had been overtaken and torn to pieces.

AS BRINK had seen the beauty of the colorful forest, so now he viewed the record of the tragic balance of nature. The one to him was the same as the other. He did not hate Old Gray for being the leader in this butchery of a gentle forest creature.

"Wal, now, I wonder how long he'll trail with this pack of lofers," he soliloquized. "If I was guessin', I'd say not long."

How different from those running wolf tracks he had been following were these leisurely trotting paces that led up to the rough bluffs! Brink calculated they had been made just before dawn. The wolves had gorged. They were heavy and sluggish. At this moment they would be sleeping off the orgy.

Brink reached the foot of a very rugged butte, not so high as the adjoining one, Black Butte, which dominated the landscape, but of a nature which rendered it almost insurmountable for man. Obstacles, however, never daunted Brink. Laying aside pack and snowshoes, with rifle in hand he essayed the ascent. After an hour of prodigious labor he reached the base of a low, bulging wall of rock, marked by cracks and fissures. Bobcat, lynx, cougar, fox and coyote had climbed the bluff to their lairs. And then round on the windward side, Brink found the trail of the lofers. The difference between their sagacity and that of the other wild beasts was indicated by their selection of the windy side of the bluff. Brink tracked them toward the dark hole of a den. Upon reaching the aperture he was not in the least surprised to see Old Gray's tracks leading out. He had got a scent on the wind, perhaps even in his sleep, and had departed alone.

BRINK took exceeding pleasure in the fact that the great wolf had been too cunning to be holed up by a hunter. This was just what Brink had anticipated. Old Gray was beginning to show the earmarks of a worthy antagonist. Brink knelt to study the tracks.

Old Gray kept to his straight course until halted by the trail he and his lofer allies and Brink and the buck had left in the snow. Here Old Gray had stood in his tracks. Brink imagined he could see the great gray brute awakening to the scent and trail of man in their relation to him. Old Gray had crossed and recrossed the trail, trotted forward and back, and then he had left it to continue the straight course at precisely the same gait.

This nonplused the hunter, who had calculated that the wolf would deliberately set out to find what was tracking him. But there seemed nothing sure here, except that the beast had tarried at this crossing to smell of the man tracks.

Brink took comfort in the assurance that the future trail would prove everything. He trudged on as before. A cold, drab twilight halted him in dense forest, mostly spruce. He selected one so thick of foliage that the snow had not even whitened the brown mat of needles and cones under it, and here he camped. Making fire, melting snow and

(Continued on Page 188)

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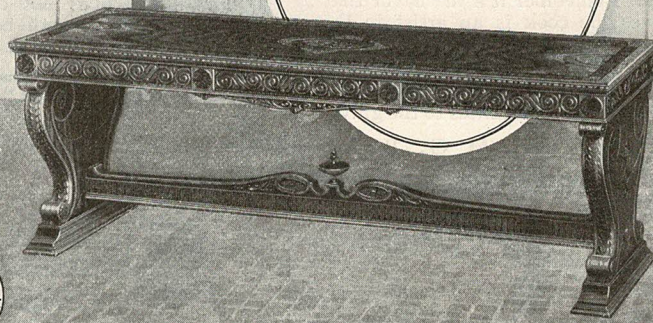
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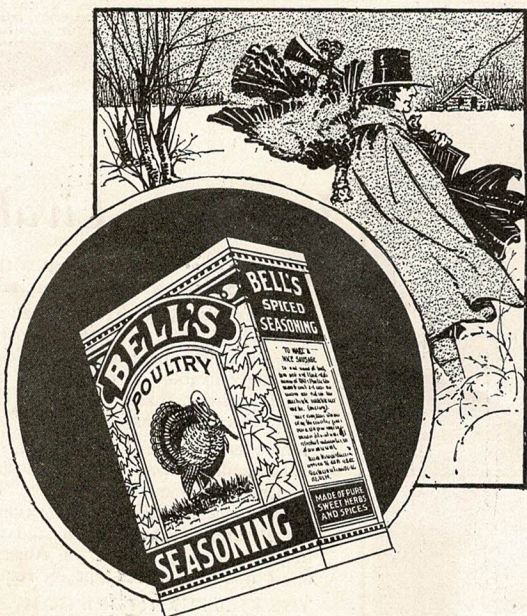
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The Wolf Tracker

(Continued from Page 187)

roasting strips of deer meat occupied him till dark, and then he sought his fragrant bed under the spruce.

Next day it snowed intermittently, in some places half filling Old Gray's tracks. The wolf, soon after leaving the spot where he had crossed the old tracks, had taken to a running lope and had sheered to the east. The hunter had signaled this change by a grim "Ahuh!"

Brink was seven days in covering the hundred or so miles that Old Gray had run during the day and the night after he had left the den on the bluff. It beat any performance Brink could recall in his experience. The beast must have covered the distance in eighteen hours or less; and in his wolf mind, Brink was absolutely certain, he believed he had traveled far beyond pursuit. For then he had abandoned the straight running course for one of a prowling, meandering hunt. Three days more of travel for Brink brought him to the spot where Old Gray had pulled down a yearling.

"Nine days behind," soliloquized Brink. "But it has snowed some, an' I reckon I'm playin' on velvet."

WHAT he was ready for now was to strike the trail Old Gray would break after a kill, when he was making for a high lair to rest and sleep during the day. Brink tracked himself back to the point where he had left the trail of the lofer, and here he camped. During the succeeding week he traveled perhaps fifty miles to and fro across country striking Old Gray's tracks several times, heading both ways. The morning came then, when as much by reason of Brink's good judgment as the luck that favored him, he fell upon a fresh trail, only a few hours old.

The snow lay six inches in depth. By the time Brink had climbed out of the cedars into the pines the snow was three times as deep. Old Gray had navigated it as easily as if it had been grass. Brink trudged slowly, but did not take recourse to his snowshoes.

The winter day was bright, cold and keen, though not biting, and the forest was a solemn, austere world of white and brown and green. Not a bird or a living creature crossed Brink's vision, and tracks of animals were few and far between. It so happened that there was no wind, an absolutely dead calm, something rather unusual for high altitudes at this season. This section of the country contained almost as much park area as forest. It was easy going, despite a gradual ascent.

Old Gray traveled at least eighteen miles up and down, mostly up, before he took to a rocky, brushy recess. Brink considered the distance at least that far because he had walked six hours since he struck the trail.

Taking the general direction of Old Gray's tracks, Brink left them, and making a wide detour he approached on the opposite side of this fastness. He encountered no tracks leading out on that side. The wolf was there, or had been there when Brink arrived. Naturally he wanted to see Old Gray, but not nearly so much as he wanted the wolf to see him. There was no sense in trying to surprise the lofer. After a careful survey of the thicketed ridge he chose the quickest way up and scaled it.

IV

BRINK had long fortified himself to meet the grueling test of this chase—the most doubtful time; the weeks of cold tracking, the ever-increasing distance between him and the great wolf. For when Old Gray espied him that morning, he took to real flight. Suspicious of this strange pursuer without horse or dog, he left the country.

Five weeks, six, seven—then Brink lost count of time. The days passed, and likewise the miles under his snowshoes. Spruce and cedar and piñon, thicket of pine and shelving ledge of rock, afforded him shelter at night. When the fresh snow covered Old Gray's

tracks, Brink with unerring instinct eventually found them again. Old Gray could not spend the winter in a cave, as did the hibernating bears. The wolf had to eat; his nature demanded the kill.

Thus his very ferocity and tremendous activity doomed him in this contest for life with a man creature of a higher species.

His tracks led back to the Cibique, down into the Tonto Basin, across Hell Gate, and east clear to the Sierra Ancas, then up the bare, snow-patched ridges of the basin into the chaparral of juniper and manzanita and mescal, on up the rugged Mazatzal range; over and west to the Red Rock country, then across the



pine-timbered upland to the San Francisco peaks, round them to the north and down the gray bleak reaches of the desert to the Little Colorado, and so back to the wild fastnesses where that winding river had its source in the White Mountains.

THE king of the gray wolves became a hunted creature. He shunned the range lands, where the cattle nipped the bleached grass out of the thinning snow. At night, on the cedar slopes, he stalked deer, and his kills grew infrequent. At dawn he climbed to the deep snows of the uplands, and his periods of sleep waxed shorter.

Brink's snowshoes were as seven-league boots. The snow was nothing to him. But Old Gray labored through the drifts. The instinct of the wild animal prompts it to react to a perilous situation in a way that almost always is right. Safety for the intelligent wolf did lie away from the settlements, the ranches and the lowlands, far up in the snowy heights. Many a pack of hounds and band of horsemen Old Gray had eluded in the deep snows. In this case, however, he had something to reckon with beyond his ken.

Hunger at length drove Old Gray farther down the south slopes, where he stalked deer and failed to kill as often as he killed. Time passed, and the night came when the wolf missed twice on chances that, not long ago, would have been play for him. He never attempted to trail another deer. Instead he tracked turkeys to their roosts and skulked in the brush until at dawn they alighted. Not often was his cunning rewarded. Lower still he was forced to go, into the cañons, and on the edge of the lowlands where like any common coyote he chased rabbits. And then his kills became few and far between. Last and crowning proof of his hunger and desperation, he took to eating porcupines. How the mighty had fallen! Brink read this tragedy in the tracks in the snow.

FOR weeks Brink had expected to overtake Old Gray and drive him from his day's lair. This long-hoped-for event at length took place at noon of a cold bright day, when Brink suddenly espied the wolf on the summit of a high ridge, silhouetted against the pale sky. Old Gray stood motionless, watching him. Brink burst out with his savage yell. The wolf might have been a statue for all the reaction he showed.

"Huh! Reckon my eyes are tired of this snow glare," muttered Brink, "but I ain't blind yet. That's sure Old Gray."

The black slash at the neck identified the notorious lofer; otherwise Brink could not have made certain. Old Gray appeared ragged and gaunt. The hunter shaded his eyes with his hand and looked long at his coveted quarry. Man and beast gazed at each other across the wide space. For Brink it was a moment of most extraordinary exultation. He drew a great breath; and expelled it in a yell that seemed to pierce the very rocks. Old Gray dropped his head and slunk down out of sight behind the ridge.

Brink plodded on wearily, every step a torture. Only the iron of his will, somehow

(Continued on Page 190)



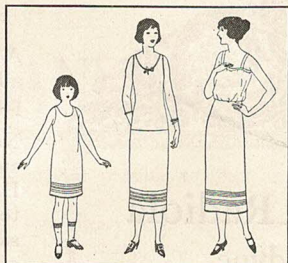
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The Wolf Tracker

(Continued from Page 188)

projected into his worn muscles and bones, kept him nailed to that trail. His eyes had begun to trouble him. He feared snow-blindness, that bane of the mountaineer. Upon rounding a thicket of spear-pointed spruce, Brink came to a level white bench, glistening like a wavy floor of diamonds in the sunlight.

Halfway across this barren mantle of snow a gray beast moved slowly. Old Gray! He was looking back over his shoulder, wild of aspect, sharp in outline. The distance was scarce three hundred yards, a short range for Brink's unerring aim. This time he did not yell. Up swept his rifle and froze to his shoulder. His keen eye caught the little circular sight and filled with gray.

But Brink could not pull the trigger. A tremendous shock passed over him. It left him unstrung. The rifle wavered out of alignment with the dragging wolf. Brink lowered the weapon.

"What's come—over me?" he rasped out, in strange amaze. The truth held aloof until Old Gray halted out there on the rim of the bench and gazed back at his human foe.

"I'll kill you with my bare hands!" yelled Brink in terrible earnestness.

NOT until the ultimatum burst from his lips did the might of passion awake in him. Then for a moment he was as a man possessed with demons. He paid in emotion for the months of strain on body and mind. That spell passed. It left him rejuvenated. "It's man agin' wolf!" he called grimly.

And he threw his rifle aside into the snow, where it sank out of sight.

Brink had to zigzag down snowy slopes, because it was awkward and sometimes hazardous to attempt abrupt descents on snowshoes. Again the lofer drew out of sight. Brink crossed and recrossed the descending tracks. Toward the middle of the afternoon the mountain slope merged into a level and more thickly timbered country. Yet the altitude was too great for dense forest. It was a wilderness of white and black, snowy ridges, valleys, swales and senecas interspersed among strips of forest, patches and thickets of spruce, deep belts of timber.

Brink did not see the wolf again that day, though he gained upon him. Night intervened.

In the cold gray dawn, when the ghostly spruces were but shadows, Brink strode out on the trail. There was now a difference in his stride. For months he had tramped along, reserving his strength, slowly, steadily, easily, without hurry or impatience. That restraint constituted part of his greatness as a tracker. But now he had the spring of a deer stalker in his step. The weariness and pang of muscle and bone had strangely fled.

Old Gray's tracks now told only one story. Flight! He did not seek to hunt meat. He never paused to scent at trail of deer or cat. His tracks seemed to tell of his wild yet sure hope of soon eluding his pursuer.

BEFORE noon Brink again came in sight of the wolf. Old Gray passed the zone of snow crust. He walked and waded and wallowed through the deep white drifts. How significant that he gazed backward more than forward! Whenever he espied Brink, he forced a harder gait that kept the hunter from gaining.

The next morning was not half gone before Brink caught up with Old Gray. The wolf had not eaten or slept or rested, yet he had traveled scarcely ten miles. But he had lagged along. At sight of the hunter he exhibited the panic of a craven dog. The action of his accelerated pace was like the sinking of his body forward. Then he went on, and for long kept even with his pursuer.

The time came, however, when Brink began almost imperceptibly to gain. Brink's practiced eye saw it long before the wolf. But at length Old Gray looked back so often that he bumped into brush and trees. Then he seemed hurried into a frenzy which did not in the least augment his speed. He knew his pursuer was gaining, yet even that could not spur his jaded body to greater effort.

The hours wore on. The moon soared. The scene changed. A wind mourned out of

the north. The spectral spruces swayed against the blue sky. A muffled roar of slipping avalanche rose from a long distance and died away. On the level reaches of snow that bright eye above could see the slow diminishing of space between man and wolf. Five hundred yards—four hundred—three hundred!

When daylight came, and Brink saw Old Gray dragging his gaunt body through the snow, now only a hundred paces distant, he awoke the cold, mocking echoes with his terrible yell. And the shock of it appeared to send the wolf staggering off his feet. When the sun tipped the snow-rimmed mountain far above, to bathe the valley in morning glory, Brink was gaining inch by inch.

THE end of the long chase was not far off. Old Gray's heart had broken. It showed in every step he made. Sagging and lame, he struggled through the snow, fell and got up to drive his worn-out body to yet another agony. Seldom he gazed back now. When he did turn, he showed to Brink a wolf face that seemed extraordinarily to express the unalterable untamableness of the wild. That spirit was fear. If in that instant Old Gray could have suddenly become endowed with all his former strength he would never have turned to kill his age-long enemy.

Brink's endurance was almost spent. Yet he knew he would last, and his stride did not materially lessen. Inch by inch he gained. But he stifled his strange exultation.

The battle must go to the strong, to prove the survival of the fittest. Nature had developed this wolf to the acme of perfection. But more merciless than Nature was life, for life had weakness. Man shared this weakness with all animals, but man possessed some strange, sustaining, unutterable, ineradicable power. Brink relied upon it. Old Gray was yielding to it.

The last hour grew appalling. Brink felt on the verge of collapse. Old Gray's movements were those of a dying creature. The hunter did not gain any more. Over white benches, through spruce thickets, under the windfalls man and beast remained only a few paces apart. Brink could have knocked the wolf over with a club. But he only stretched out a great clutching hand, as if the next moment he could close it round that black-slashed neck.

UNDER Brink's snowshoes the snow grew wet and soft. Soon he must take them off. But there would be drifts in the black belt of pine forest below. He smelled the tang of the pines, warm, sweet, woody. The irregular furrow which he trod out with his snowshoes led down over slope and bench to level forest. Under the stately spreading pines the snow swelled into wavy mounds.

Old Gray sank the length of his legs, fell on his side and lay still. Soon the wolf tracker stood over him, gazing down. "Ahh! Old Gray, you're done!" he panted huskily.

All that appeared left of magnificence about this wolf was his beautiful gray coat of fur, slashed at the neck with a glossy mark of black. Old Gray was lean and thin. His wild head lay on the snow, with mouth open, tongue protruding. How white and sharp the glistening fangs!

It was nothing new for Brink to see the coward in a beaten wolf. The legend of the ferocity of a trapped wolf was something he knew to be untrue. This notorious lofer, so long a menace to the range, showed in his wonderful gray eyes his surrender to man. The broken heart, the broken spirit, the acceptance of death! Brink saw no fear now, only resignation. And for a moment it halted his propelling rush to violence.

Man and wolf, age-long hereditary foes, alone there in the wilderness! Man the conqueror, man obsessed with the idea that man was born in the image of God! No wolf, no beast had ever been or could ever be man's equal. Brink's life had been an unconscious expression of this religion. This last and supreme test to which he had so terribly addressed himself had been the climax of his passion to prove man's mastery over all the beasts of the field.

(Continued on Page 192)

A Year of Cheer

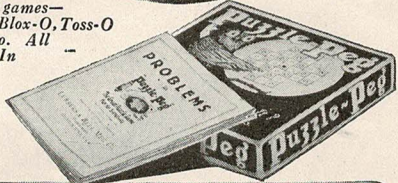
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The Wolf Tracker

(Continued from Page 190)

Yet, with brawny hand extended, Brink suffered a singular and dismaying transformation of thought. What else did he read in those wild gray eyes? It was beyond him, yet from it he received a chilling of his fevered blood, a sickening sense of futility even in possession of his travail-earned truth. Could he feel pity for Old Gray, blood drinker of the cattle ranges?

"Ahhh! Reckon if I held back longer——" he muttered darkly, wondering.

Then stepping out of his snowshoes, he knelt and laid hold of Old Gray's throat with that great clutching hand.

IT WAS springtime down at Barrett's ranch. The cows were lowing and the calves were bawling. Birds and wet ground and budding orchard trees were proof of April, even if there had not been the sure sign of the rollicking cowboys preparing for the spring round-up.

"I'm a-rarin' to go. Oh, boy!" shouted Sandy McLean.

The shaggy, vicious mustangs cavorted in the corral, and whistled, squealed, snorted and kicked defiance at their masters.

"Reckon I gotta stop smokin'. I jest can't see," complained Thad Hickenthorn.

"Aw, it ain't smokin', Hick," drawled the red-headed Matty Lane. "Yore eyes has plumb wore out on Sally Barrett."

"She's shore dazzlin', but thet's far enough for you to shoot off yore chin," replied Thad.

"Cheese it, you fellars. Hyar comes the boss," added another cowboy.

Barrett strode from the ranch house. Once he had been a cowboy as lithe and wild as any one of his outfit. But now he was a heavy, jovial, weather-beaten cattleman. "Boys, heah's word from my pardner, Adams," he said with satisfaction. "All fine an' dandy over on the Cibique. You got to rustle an' shake dust or that outfit will show us up. Best news of all is about Old Gray. They haven't seen hide nor hair nor track of that wolf for months. Neither have we. I wonder now—— Wouldn't it be dod-blasted good luck if we was rid of that lofer?"

On the moment a man appeared turning into the lane, and his appearance was so unusual that it commanded silence on the part of Barrett and his cowboys. This visitor was on foot. He limped. He sagged under a pack on his shoulder. His head was bowed somewhat, so that the observers could not see his face. His motley garb was so tattered that it appeared to be about to fall from him in bits of rags.

He reached the group of men and, depositing his pack on the ground, he looked up to disclose a placid grizzled face, as seamed and brown as a mass of pine needles.

"Howdy, stranger. An' who might you be?" queried Barrett gruffly.

"MY NAME'S Brink. I'm new in these parts. Are you Barrett, pardner to Adams, over on the Cibique?" he replied.

"Yes, I'm Barrett. Do you want anythin' of me?"

"I've something to show you," returned Brink and, kneeling stiff legged, he laboriously began to untie his pack.

When Brink drew out a gray furry package and unfolded it to show the magnificent pelt of a great lofer wolf the cowboys burst into gasps and exclamations of amaze.

"Ever seen that hide?" demanded Brink, with something subtle and strong under his mild exterior.

"Old Gray!" boomed Barrett.

"I'm a locoed son of a gun if it ain't!" said Sandy McLean.

"Wal! I never seen Old Gray, but thet's him!" ejaculated Thad.

"It's shore the gray devil with the black ruff. Old Gray wot I seen alive more'n any man on the ranges!" added Matty Lane in an incredulity full of regret.

"Stranger, how'n thunder did you ketch this heah wolf?" demanded McLean.

Brink stood up. Something tame and deceiving fell away from the man. His face worked, his eye gleamed. "I walked him to death in the snow," he replied.

Barrett swore a lusty oath. It gave full expression to his acceptance of Brink's remarkable statement, yet held equal awe and admiration. "When? How long?" he queried hoarsely.

"Well, I started in early last October, an' I saw the end of his tracks yesterday."

"IT'S April tenth," exclaimed Barrett. "Tracked—walked Old Gray to death! By heaven, man, but you look it! An' you're come for the reward?"

"Reckon I'd forgot that," replied Brink simply. "I just wanted you to know the lofer was dead."

"Ah-hum! So that's why?" returned the rancher ponderingly, with a hand stroking his chin.

His keen blue eyes studied the wolf tracker gravely, curiously. His cowboys, likewise, appeared at the end of their wits. For once their loquaciousness had sustained a check. One by one, silent as owls and as wide-eyed, they walked to and fro round Brink, staring from his sad lined face to the magnificent wolf pelt.

But least of all did their faces and actions express doubt. They were men of the open range. They saw at a glance the manifestations of tremendous toil, of endurance, privation, and time that had reduced this wolf tracker to a semblance of a scarecrow in the cornfield. Of all things these hardy cowboys respected indomitableness of spirit and endurance of body. They wondered at something queer about Brink, but they could not grasp it. Their meed of silent conviction, their reverent curiosity, proclaimed that to them he began to loom incomprehensibly great.

"NEVER felt so happy in my life," burst out Barrett. "Come in an' eat an' rest. I'll write you a check for that five thousand. An' fetch Old Gray's hide to show my women-folks. I'll have that hide made into a rug."

Brink gave a slight start, and his serenity seemed to shade into a somber detachment. Without a glance at Barrett he knelt, and folded up the wolf skin and tied it in his pack.

But when he arose, lifting the pack to his shoulder, he said, "Keep your money. Old Gray is mine."

Then he strode away.

"Hey, what d'ye mean—rarin' off that way?" called Barrett, growing red in the face. It was as if his sincerity or generosity had been doubted. "Fetch the wolf hide back hyar an' take your money."

Brink appeared not to hear. His stride lengthened, showing now no trace of the limp which had characterized it upon his arrival.

The cattleman yelled angrily for him to stop. One of the cowboys let out a kindlier call.

But Brink, swinging into swifter stride, remarkable even at that moment to his watchers, passed into the cedars out of sight.

