

A Life for a Life

By H. Mortimer Batten

BERWICK, the range boss, galloped down from the foothills like an avalanche from the heights. It was the third time that month that the thing had happened, and as yet the boys had failed to catch the perpetrators. Berwick drew rein opposite the veranda of the ranch house, white with fury and in a cloud of dust.

A youth of about sixteen strolled forward to meet him. He was a smart, good-looking youngster, dressed after the fashion of the well-to-do range owner's son. It was Hal Hanley.

"Gee! but you seem in no end of a hurry, captain," drawled the boy, with a humorous, one-sided smile. "Why didn't you sit on the pony's neck and you'd have got here sooner?"

"Where's the boss, Mast' Hal?" blurted out the range boss. "Some blame coyote has gone and scooped through them wires again."

"Nol Say, dad, this is a bright lookout," the boy added, as a big, square-shouldered, red haired man slouched from the bungalow. "Them Indians have cut the boundary wires again."

"Yes," added Berwick, "cut them in five places and let six hundred head of cattle loose onto the range. It will take the boys all day to get the bunch together."

The ranch owner colored up angrily. "Who did it?" he demanded.

"Indians, of course," answered the foreman, "and in my opinion, sir, you've only yourself to congratulate. Them Indians have to thank you for not being able to trap beaver along the creek this season. It was you who pointed out that beaver were getting scarce, and it was you who stopped the trapping. Some of these Indians ain't going to stand down on that without retaliation, since it comes pretty hard on most of them."

Mr. Hanley stamped across the veranda. "It would come a deal sight harder if they found no beaver left in two years' time," observed Hal, during the momentary lull. "They'll have to thank dad then for plenty beaver, instead of none at all."

"I'll tell you what to do, Berwick," said the ranch owner presently. "We got to show them Indians what they're up against. Tell the boys to send word round that anyone found along our boundary line after dusk will get shot at. Rig out some of the boys with those old shotguns of yours, lightly charged, and set them to patrol the line. Tell them it's my orders that they've to scare any Indians they see after dark. Now git!"

The foreman grinned and vanished in a cloud of dust.

"Say, dad, that's a bit risky, isn't it?" observed Hal. "Some of them boys of ours aren't to be trusted with firearms. They'll sure go and pepper some kid out with a rifle after gophers."

"Can't be helped," answered the ranch owner impatiently. "We don't want no Indians nor anyone else hitting along our line after dark."

II.

During the succeeding nights several cattle punchers watched the boundary fence, each man armed with a rusty muzzle loader charged with small shot, and a week later one of the boys caught the wire cutters red-handed. Hearing a faint sound coming down the wires he listened intently, then, slipping from his cayuse, proceeded to scout on foot. Again he heard that sharp "ping," followed by the vibrating recoil of the severed wire. Then just ahead of him he saw two Indians stooping over the wire, their ponies tethered near. He took steady aim and fired—not at the men, but at their unfortunate ponies.

A terrific report shook the hill-side, then came a shrill scream. The range was shorter than the puncher had judged in the darkness, but quick as prairie foxes the Indians gained their mounts and fled into the gloom.

With triumphant "whoops" the cowboy gave chase, most of the ranch staff following from different points of the compass. They pursued to the edge of the range, then pulled up for a breather.

"That will teach the swipes what they're up against," observed Berwick. "Anyway, I guess they won't come mooching around this way for a week or two."

Had the foreman known what was happening at that moment, however, his gratification might have been less liberally mingled with mirth.

III.

The Indians who had cut the wires were two brothers—professional wolves and trappers. They lived together at the margin of Lorn Lake, about twelve miles from Hanley's ranch, and though men of tough material, they were regarded as quiet characters.

These men, Joe and Peter Long, had a little grievance against white men in general, and Hanley in particular. At one time there was game in plenty but now there was little. They had to thank the white man for the departure of the buffalo and the deer. Then it was Hanley who set methodically to work to destroy the wolves, so that to-day there were no wolves left and no bounties for killing them. Indeed it was owing to the wealthy ranch owner that the country had become converted from a game wilderness into a more or less prosperous stock rearing district.



Alaskan Wolf

For all this changed state of affairs Joe and Peter Long blamed Hanley. And the closing of the beaver season was the last straw. It was Hanley who had driven away the game and divided their hunting ground by high wire fences. What more natural, then, than that they should show their enmity by cutting down the hated wire fence?

The news that any Indian found about the boundary after dark only increased the anger of these two men. To them this was a free land; no one had a right to make laws to suit his own convenience. That night the Indians set out intent on cutting the wires all up and down and driving the cattle pell-mell into the canyons.

But their plan of campaign was thwarted, as already described. Had they known that when the shot was fired there was but one man near, that man would have fared badly, but naturally they concluded that the whole ranch staff was hidden in ambush to give chase. So away they went, wild as the wind, the thunder of hoofs behind them, the empty echoes of the range ahead. They headed for a stretch of rugged mountain country, known as Midnight Canyon, through which, they knew, few horsemen would attempt to travel with the darkness overhead.

Peter's cayuse was hit, but there was no telling whether it was seriously harmed. Once it screamed and almost fell. Behind them they heard the pursuing cowboys, so it was not safe to slacken pace till the canyon was passed.

They crossed the river girth deep, and gained the narrow sheep track that

wound giddily up the face of the precipice to a height of six hundred feet. Their ponies took the track at a trot till they were past midway, then something terrible happened.

Peter's cayuse suddenly gave a scream of pain and reared high up on the narrow shelf. The Indian threw himself forward, his body rigid, but for a second the animal seemed to hang there. Then slowly but surely it went over backwards, and without a sound both cayuse and man fell giddily into the blackness of the gulch.

For some moments Joe could not grasp the grim truth. He was alone on the shelf. Somewhere at the foot of that black void lay the man who had ridden with him.

Joe Long slowly dismounted and looked down into the gloom. Three hundred feet below he could see the white river moving, while the roar of it filled the canyon with ghostly sounds. Then slowly the Indian rose to his feet, his face towards the stars. No words left his lips, but his magnificent teeth shone white in the starlight. His hands were crossed before him, and his whole bony frame seemed drawn up tense as though with some great effort.

For fully a minute he stood there, a wonderful type of giant, savage manhood, swearing fidelity to his lost brother whose soul was now among the stars—swearing to avenge this bitter injustice that had fallen upon them. Then he

Presently Hanley turned to the bartender. "Say, I've got to go up country and want a messenger to take with me," he said. "Is there anyone around who might suit?"

"There's that Indian at the other end," suggested the bartender in a quiet voice. "He's a quiet fellow, quite dependable. You might look further and fare worse."

Hanley strode over to Joe and put forward his proposal. He wanted him to ride back to the ranch in the buggy, obtain two ponies, and ride back to meet him up the range to-morrow.

For a moment a savage gleam came into the Indian's eyes, then he quietly accepted the offer. He was told that the ranch owner's son would meet him in an hour and ride back with him, after which he was to take all orders from Hal.

An hour before sunset Hal Hanley and Joe Long set out from the city in a loose-wheeled buggy, and soon the dusty avenue was left behind and the still, sweet-scented prairie lay ahead.

Hal Hanley knew something about Indians and soon he was chatting about musquash, beaver and wolves as though he had been brought up in a menagerie. In reply, however, the good-looking Indian at his side gave an occasional grunt, till Hal almost lost heart. Then, feeling in his tunic pocket, the boy's fingers found a small imitation dagger, the handle of which was ornamented and highly polished. Here, at any rate, was a peace offering to gladden his taciturn companion and make him in a more talkative mood.

Then the Indian became aware that his companion was holding something out to him. What was it?—a little imitation dagger, with white handle, in which was set a bright red stone.

The Indian took it. Why he did so he did not know. He wondered often later. But the boy meant it for him—a peace offering, such as one Indian might give another to establish good faith between them. Hal was a clever, attractive youngster, with a fund of outdoor knowledge and a quiet way with him that usually enabled him to make friends with the Indians. Soon he drew Joe into conversation, and as they talked on, the twilight settling about them, the gophers scuttling from their path, the Indian began to wonder if, after all, he had any real grievance against this boy whose interests were so much akin to his own, whose quiet voice was so much like that of his brother Peter.

"I guess we'll be good friends, Joe," said Hal, when at length they gained the ranch. "But you take my tip and don't go butting around the city. It ain't no place for an Indian. The city Indians ain't worth a cuss and if you want a job you come along to me. I'll get you fixed up right away."

V.

When Mr. Hanley returned Hal asked: "Say, dad, what do you think of that Indian?"

"He's all right," replied the range owner absent-mindedly. "Ain't much to say for himself, which is, perhaps, a good fault."

"I was thinking, dad, that it's about time we had a messenger on this range," pursued the boy. "We're short handed and it takes one puncher all his time running round the ranch after you and delivering mail. I propose we take on the Indian. He'll come in mighty useful as general factotum, especially when we go hunting in the fall."

"Take him on if you like," answered Hanley, "it's your show, anyway."

Joe Long accepted the post of messenger at the ranch, with the result that he and Hal saw a good deal of each other. In their spare time Hal taught the red man to shoot, and the Indian taught him to snare rabbits, trap musquash and catch wild fowl in the reeds.

Ere a month was passed, however, the boundary fence was cut one dark night in a dozen different places, and two hundred head of cattle stampeded into the canyons. Some were crowded over the ledges by the frantic mass coming along behind, others got down among the rocks and were crushed or maimed by falling boulders, while out of the entire bunch not more than fifty were finally herded back to the corral. Hanley was wild, Berwick was furious and the whole ranch staff was on tip-toes. There was no clue by which the malefactor