

## The White Stag

Continued from Page 8

streaming from a fearful wound opened by the gallant stag's antlers.

It was dusk when Tomah and Baptiste reached their little cabin. As darkness increased the howl of a wolf came up from the lake—a prolonged howl, in which grief and fierce anger seemed struggling for expression. The pack was gathering, and for an hour the hunters listened to the wild dirge wailing about the dead wolves. A loud yelp sounded quick and sharp above the din, which ceased instantly. A moment of silence followed, then the trail cry broke out, and the same mysterious chase went sweeping along the ridges above the lake shore.

Standing without the camp the Indians listened till the cry ceased as before, then turned in to sleep. They had longed for the snow, and it was here, and the chase was run-over its tell-tale surface. Spirit or no spirit, to-morrow they would find out more about it.

With the first light they crossed the lake and entered the heavy timber. There, in the summit of the first low ridge, lay the trail they were seeking, and it needed no second glance at the big hoof-marks to tell them, what they have long known instinctively, that it was the white stag which led the nightly hunt. The tracks went leaping along, clearing every obstacle with mighty bounds, and running parallel to the trail, but never crossing it, confused footprints showed where a score of wolves had followed on the gallop.

Swiftly the Indians followed, up the ridge and across the inlet and miles away to the northwest, where the chase had ended nightly for a month past. Here the forest opened. A wild ravine cut by the swift mountain torrent stretched straight across their path. On the slope that led down to the edge of it stood an immense pine, towering head and shoulders over the forest. Straight under this pine at a terrific pace rushed the stag, clearing the thirty-foot ravine at a bound, and standing at the edge the hunters could see his tracks on the other side, where he had turned and waited for his pursuers. But what puzzled them was that not a wolf had approached the edge, nor attempted to follow. A short distance above or below they could easily have gained the other side, but instead of attempting it, the tracks showed that they had formed a half circle about the tree, wavered back and forth a few minutes in confusion and then slunk away on the back trail, as if something had frightened them.

For a long time then Tomah and Baptiste stood there on the edge of the torrent, casting wistful glances across, as if to read some explanation there in the shadowy thickets. But no explanation came; the mystery only deepened. Reluctantly they turned away and went back to the circle of wolf tracks, but no explanation was there either. Beyond a well defined line not a wolf had set his foot, and following some of the tracks they found that the pack had disbanded, and hurried away to their scattered dens far back among the ridges. Again the Indians turned back and stood silent, baffled, mystified, beneath the pine.

Lying close beside the pine was a small mound of snow, which seemed to force itself gradually upon Tomah's attention as he stood leaning upon his gun. He had noticed it before, but thought it only a rounded boulder. Now in a sudden spirit of curiosity, which was half obedience, he went and thrust his moccasins into it. Some object yielded beneath his foot, and with a quick twist he threw it upon the snow, then recoiled with a startled exclamation as the whole meaning of it flashed over him, in one of those marvelous mind movements which reveal a history as the lightning's flash illuminates a landscape at midnight. It was a human skull. They had found the lost Indian.

Carefully they scraped the snow aside and gathered the skeleton together. The half-grown bones, still showing the marks of wolf fangs, told all too plainly how he met his death. Near the tree they found a rusted knife and rifle, and in the underbrush the bones of three wolves, one with a bullet hole in the skull.

The story was clear as if written for them. Indeed it was written, in the characters an Indian best understands. The poor hunter, coming home late from

some lonely visit to his traps, had been chased by the starving wolves and had fled toward the river, hoping to throw them off the scent. They had overtaken him at the ravine before he could clamor down, had rushed out upon him, no doubt, while he yet thought them far away. With his back against the pine he had fought for his life, had killed three, perhaps more, of the wolves, and then was pulled down and eaten.

With the axe that Tomah always carried at his belt they sharpened some stakes and hollowed out a shallow grave beneath the pine. The wind eddied about them and whispered its secrets in the spruces, but the pine's great arms were motionless the while; only a soft, clear note sounded far up among its leaves like the echo of distant music. The Indians were silent, they listened as they worked. Into the grave they gathered the scattered bones; with the old knife and rifle, and covered them with loose earth, upon which they rolled heavy stones to guard them forever from prowling beasts. Deep into the rough trunk of the old pine they carved a rude cross.

That night, just as the moon rose, the uncanny chase began again. Standing by the little cabin the two men listened with breathless interest as the cry swept round toward the river and the lonely grave where it had been wont to end. Again, as before, they heard the trail-cry break into wild howls, and cease abruptly when the wolves reached the pine. Five minutes passed in dead silence. Still they stood waiting, with ears strained to catch the slightest sound. Then a prolonged howl, fierce and exultant, again set the echoes flying, and a moment later the full cry came ringing down the western ranges. The wolves had crossed the ravine. The white stag was running his last race.

The cry passed rapidly along the hill-side above the camp and went out of hearing toward the south. Four or five hours passed; the hunters were sleeping. Then strange, faint sounds came creeping through the dark woods to the little cabin. Baptiste stirred uneasily in his sleep; Tomah raised himself suddenly from his bed of boughs; the next moment they were both outside the camp. Far away in the southeast they heard the cry of the pack growing louder. It told them that the stag had turned, and seizing their guns they hurried down to an open point that commanded a view of the whole lake, lying white and still under the moonlight.

The minutes dragged on with the cry drawing nearer, but very slowly. Then the alders swayed suddenly on the south shore and the stag broke out upon the lake. A thrill of pity stole over the watchers as they saw him struggling over the ice, still slippery under the light snow. His head, instead of being thrown up and back, as deer run, drooped forward till the protruding tongue almost swept the snow and he staggered as he ran towards the point where Baptiste had first seen him. His spirit was broken—nay, it had left him, said Tomah—and he ran as if unconscious.

Fifty yards behind him the wolves broke out of the woods with redoubled howls, the sight of their game inspiring them suddenly with new strength and fierceness. Part of the pack at once separated from the rest and disappeared silently into the shadow that bordered the lake below the point. The rest eased up on the chase, giving their leaders a chance to head the quarry.

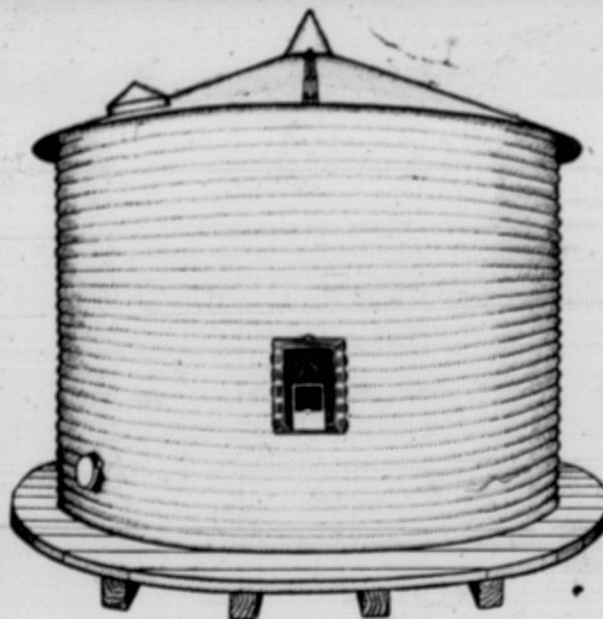
The stag reached the point and the watchers saw the antlered head go up as he bounded forward. Then from behind the great boulder dark forms leaped squarely athwart his path. An instant the hunted beast seemed to hesitate, frozen with sudden terror, then the antlered head went down again and he lunged straight forward to meet them.

A short, terrible struggle followed. For a few moments they could see him battle with desperate courage, plunging, striking among the leaping forms with the strength and spirit they had seen before. Twice the death-howl of a wolf rose above the tense silence of the fighting brutes. Suddenly they saw him rear high above the pack. An instant he stood poised, a gray silhouette against the dark woods, with the withering brutes below. Then a big wolf leaped up and fastened to his throat and he fell, as the pine falls when the steel has bitten through to its heart.

Continued on page 30

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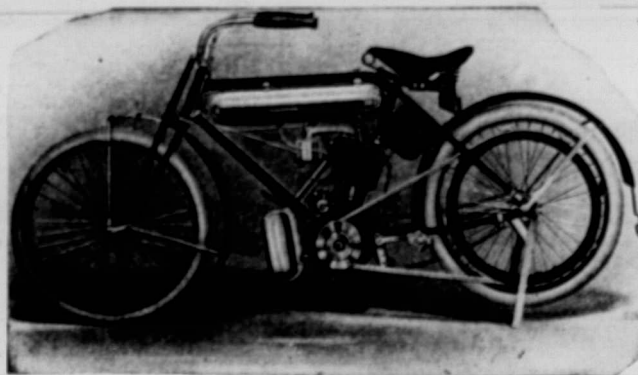
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