

## Starlight

Written for The Western Home Monthly by H. Mortimer Batten

### The Story of a Wolf that Lived

**S**PRING comes quickly in the valley of the Silvertrail—or rather winter lingers till the warmth of the northward journeying sun compels its release. One day a blizzard sweeps the landscape, and the wooded valleys are so lone and cold that even the chickadees have nothing to say, but the next blue birds sing in the thickets and a vast assortment of buzzing and piping insect life creeps into existence. It is a kindly mantle, this long lingering snow, for beneath it the spring flowers bud and mature, secure from wind and frost, so that when in an hour it is gone, the slopes are starred with flowers.

But to the woodland folk the snow is no friend. It tells too clearly the tale of their coming and going, betraying their most closely guarded secrets to the deadliest of their foes, and though a few of them have learnt a limited number of tricks whereby to break or deaden the scent trail, none have as yet aspired to the knowledge that these same tracks are worthless when the snow is on the ground.

Thus the snows of that winter had proved fatal to most of the wolves and coyotes of the Silvertrail, for Wolver Wells was a hard and remorseless hunter, and he knew his business. As professional wolver of the range he drew not only the government bounty of ten dollars per wolf and five dollars per coyote, but the ranchers had supplemented these rewards and kept the wolver provided in all the necessary gear for his occupation. Now, with the coming of spring, the wolver's harvest was ended, and he would have packed out to his home in Colorado had it not been for one considerable inducement to stay. That inducement took form and personality in the existence of a huge black wolf which all winter had foiled the trapper's efforts, and scattered dust and ashes on his choicest sets.

The black wolf of the Silvertrail was well known to the punchers of the range, who had named him Starlight on account of his alleged likeness to a black malamute famous the previous winter as the winner of the great Alaska sled race, for it was this wolf that had led and organized the many sheep-raids which resulted in the establishment of Wolver Wells. And now the ranch owners, hearing that the black wolf was still free, ordered Wells to remain at his own terms till he had rid the country of this pest.

There was wisdom in this, for when a wolf of exceptional abilities remains in possession of its range, it will draw to that range other wolves to hunt in concert, and at all events the offspring of an exceptional wolf, if it be left to breed, are apt to prove as dangerous as their parent guide. Thus, though Wells had done his work well in exterminating the whole of Starlight's followers, he had failed in the one essential feature of his quest, for the leader of the pirates, the brain and organizer of those bloody nightly raids, was still at large, and if left in undisputed possession of the Silvertrail next autumn and winter would prove but a repetition of the last.

Wells had fondly imagined that Starlight was the sole survivor of the desperado band, but that last fall of snow before the sudden dawning of the spring told him differently. It told him that Starlight had a mate, a wolf of normal size though the tracks appeared insignificant against those of the grim old leader. He saw where the two wolves had run flank to flank from a wooded hollow along the banks of a creek which terminated finally at the mouth of a great canyon into which Wells could not follow.

The canyon, known for some obscure reason as the Valanese Cutting, had long been a wolf stronghold, and Wells now knew that somewhere in its rugged fastness Starlight and his mate would have their den. There, when the last of the geese had honked their way north-

ward, eight or nine atoms of wolfish cubhood would come into existence, and Starlight and the dam, fondly imagining that the coming of their babies brought a truce with man, would pass fearlessly to and from the canyon in quest of the wherewithal to supply their hungry brood.

Wells's hunting now took on a different form. All winter he had carried a rifle and generally he had betrayed himself from afar by the things he carried over his shoulder. The wolves had watched his coming and going, the coyotes had yapped derision at him from the nearby buttes so long as there were any of them left to yap, but with the coming of the warm still days of spring Wells became, from all appearances, a shiftless idler of the hills. Sometimes he would lie for hours in the sun, smoking unlimited Blackjack, then he would wander slowly off to his cayuse, mount and jog away, and any coyote or wolf watching him would say to its mate: "There goes that drunken, loafing cowboy! Let's yap at him again!" But Wells was watching—watching, and many things he came to know.

Firstly he learnt that Starlight's mate hopped on three legs every few paces, which meant that she had once been in a trap, so that he knew it would be of no use making any ordinary set for her. Secondly he learnt that this same she-wolf was bob-tailed, and since rumor asserted that it was a bob-tailed wolf that had been Starlight's second in command since the raids began, he knew her to be a wolf as clever as her lord, for with him she had survived when the rest had perished. As for the big black wolf—Wells saw him but once. The trapper was ambling towards his cayuse after a long and fruitless watch, when his quick eyes caught two large black points and a rounded scalp peering over a neighboring ridge. Then he knew that Starlight had been watching him, and at once the man became absorbed in a pursuit of his half-forgotten boyhood. He began to pick flowers, picking and zig-zagging here and there and whistling a careless air as he went. It mattered not that there were no flowers to pick, nothing but pebbles and the thorny cacti, for the general trend of the wolver's going was towards the wolf, and his right hand lay on the stock of the heavy automatic at his belt, with which he was a dead sure shot at a most astounding range.

Soon, too soon, the big wolf turned into the mouth of the canyon, and there rumbled from the rocky depths such a thunder of hatred that even Wells paused and wondered.

It was not an ordinary wolf challenge that, uttered half in menace half in bravado, but a full-throated bristling warning which meant: "You can idle about on the rest of the hills but this is my range! If you follow me here you do so at your peril!"

To the trapper it explained why the she-wolf had left no tracks on the creek bank for some days past. To him it meant that somewhere in that rocky, inaccessible ravine the she-wolf had given birth to a litter of blind and sprawling wolflets, for which she and her mate, singly or together, were prepared to face death, or the things they dreaded more.

Nor were the wolver's conjectures wrong. Deep in a fissure of the mountain face Jess, the black wolf's mate, had that day realized an event of long anticipation in the production of nine squirming puppies. She did not leave the den that day nor the next, for Starlight supplied her needs. Gaily he would trot to the mouth of the cranny, wagging his big tail this way and asking his wife, as clearly as wolf could ask: "May I come in and look?" But should he set his feet to enter Jess would lay back her ears and snarl a terrible forbidding, at which Starlight, somewhat crestfallen, would drop the prairie dog

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