

Penguin



Readers

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WHITE FANG



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CHAPTER ONE

The red wolf

Day was turning into night. Dark, lifeless trees stood on either side of the **frozen trail**. During the short summers, this was a river, but now, in the winter months, it had become thick ice. The **wild** of the Northland was without sound or movement.

And then life appeared. A line of dogs pulled a **sled** along the trail, their thick **fur** covered in snow, and their breath **freezing** in the air as it left their mouths. On the sled there were blankets, an ax, a coffee pot, a pan, and . . . a coffin.

Two men drove the dogs, one at the front of the sled and one at the back. A third man was in the coffin.

The wild is not kind to moving things. It freezes the water so that it cannot run to the sea, it freezes the lifeblood of the trees, and it **crushes** humans and animals.

But these two men, working and breathing hard, were not dead yet. They wore thick fur coats and wide snow shoes. Their cheeks and mustaches were white with frozen snow, and they looked like ghosts with the coffin between them. But they were men and they were alive, in a place as unwelcoming as the moon.

They did not speak, needing all their energy to move forward through the freezing land. The heavy **silence** made them feel very small and unimportant.

Suddenly there was a cry far away. It sounded like a poor lost



creature, except that the cry was hungry and **fierce**. A second cry went up, this time behind them, cutting through the silence like a **sharp** knife. A third cry answered, from another part of the forest.

“They’re after us, Bill,” said the man at the front.

“They’re hungry, Henry, and there’s nothing for them to eat,” replied Bill, the man at the back. “I haven’t seen a rabbit for days.”

They did not speak again, but they listened closely for the **hunting** cries that followed them.

It was completely dark an hour later, and the men brought their dogs into a circle at the edge of the frozen river under the moonless sky. After collecting firewood and making camp, using the coffin as a seat and a table, Henry cooked the men's supper while Bill fed the dogs.

The dogs were **restless** and fought with each other, but they stayed close to the camp as the men had dinner.

"Did you notice the noise they made when I fed them, Henry?" Bill asked as he ate a spoonful of beans.

"I did. They were **barking** worse than usual," said Henry.

"I took six fish out of the bag," said Bill. "One fish for each dog, and I was one fish short."

"You counted wrong," said Henry.

"There were seven dogs," said Bill.

"Well, there's six now," said Henry, looking across and counting the dogs himself.

"The other one ran off across the snow," said Bill.

"I'll be glad when we get to Fort McGurry," said Henry. "You're beginning to see things that aren't there."

"I thought of that," said Bill. "But then I looked at the **tracks**, and there were seven sets of tracks."

Henry finished his beans in silence and drank some coffee.

"So, you're thinking—," he started to say.

A long cry from close by in the dark forest stopped him.

“You’re thinking . . . it was one of them? A **wolf**?”

Bill nodded. He made a cigarette, lit it, and started to smoke, pointing down at the coffin they sat on.

“He’s luckier than you or me, Henry,” he said.

“You’re right, Bill,” said Henry. “We’ll be lucky if someone puts a few stones to mark our dead bodies.”

“There’s something that I don’t understand, Henry,” said Bill. “What was a man like Mr. Alfred here—rich and famous in his own country—doing here at the end of the Earth?”

“I don’t get it either, Bill. If I was him, I would have stayed at home and enjoyed life,” said Henry. “Instead he’s ended up in a box in the middle of a frozen forest.”

When the light from the fire died a bit, they saw that they were **surrounded** by a circle of shining eyes. The dogs became restless, pushing closer to the men, so close that the heat from the fire burned their fur. As the smell of burning hair filled the air, some of the pairs of eyes disappeared for a time. The pairs of eyes returned once the dogs became calmer.

“How many **bullets** did you say you had left?” asked Henry.

“Three,” answered Bill. “And I wish it was three hundred. And I wish this trip was over and we were at Fort McGurry now, playing cards by the fire.”

“You’ll feel better after some sleep,” said Henry, getting into bed himself. Bill lay down next to him.

As the fire burned low, the pairs of eyes closed in. The men woke at 6 a.m., three hours before the sun came up. Henry

prepared breakfast while Bill packed the sled.

“Henry,” Bill said, suddenly. “One of the dogs is gone. There are only five!”

“You’re right, Bill,” said Henry, coming to count the dogs. “Fatty’s gone.”

“He always was a stupid dog,” said Bill. “I hope none of the others are as stupid as him.”

But, on the next two mornings, the same thing happened. Each time they woke, another dog was missing. And each evening the wolves became a little braver and came in a little closer. One of the wolves even came right into the firelight so that they could see it clearly. It had an unusually red coat, and it seemed to have no fear of the fire.

The wolves were becoming braver in the daytime, too, running nearer to the men and their sled as they continued on their journey. Suddenly Bill called to Henry.

“Stop! Look!”

Behind them, the red wolf was walking along the frozen trail. When they stopped, it came closer, looking right at them.

“It’s a female,” said Henry. “So that’s how they get our dogs. She attracts one of them and it follows her, and the rest of the **pack** is waiting.”

“That’s the wolf that took the fish on the first evening,” said Bill. “She’s a strange color for a wolf. I’ve never seen a red wolf before.”

“She’s big, too,” agreed Henry. “She must be two and a half feet tall at the shoulder . . . and about five feet long, I’d say. She knows more than a wolf ought to. My guess is that she’s half **tame**, and she’s escaped from a sled team. She’s lived with men, Bill.”

Bill called to her. “Come here, you!”

There was **hunger** in the red wolf’s eyes, and to her the men and their dogs were meat. Although Bill waved his arm at her and shouted loudly, she did not move.

“She isn’t a bit scared of you,” said Henry.

“Listen, Henry,” said Bill, now whispering. “I know we only have three bullets, but I can’t miss from here. What do you think?”

“We have three dogs instead of six because of her,” said Henry. “Let’s stop her now.”

Bill slowly moved to the sled and took out the gun. He raised the gun to his shoulder.