

SHEPHERDS OF THE WILD

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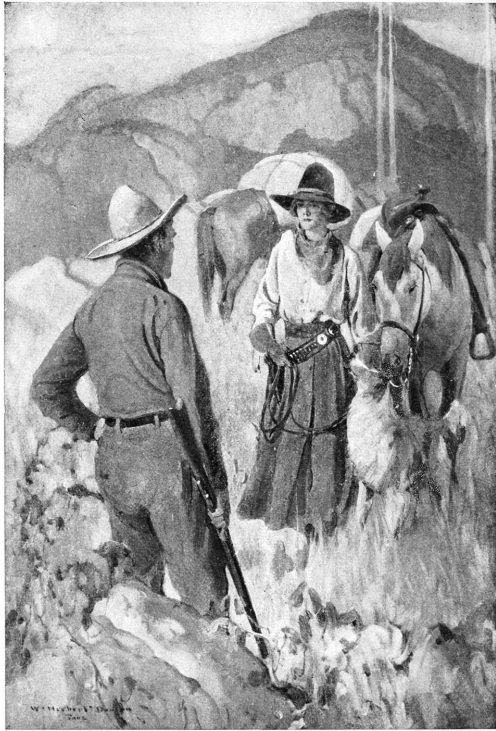
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“We’ll pay you two dollars a day—and furnish you with supplies,” she assured him soberly.—FRONTISPIECE.

Shepherds of the Wild

CHAPTER I

The mouth of the canyon was darkened with shadows when the bull elk came stealing down the brown trail through the dusky thicket. In all this mountain realm, a land where the wild things of the forest still held sway, there was no creature of more majestic bearing or noble beauty. He was full-grown; his great antlers swept back over his powerful shoulders; and it was evident from his carriage that he had no fear of such enemies as might be lurking in the gloomy canyon. For it was known far through the forest that even the great puma or the terrible grizzly, unless they had the advantage of ambush, treated Spread Horn with considerable respect.

Signs of July were everywhere: signs that were large print and clear to the eyes of the wild creatures, but which would have been mostly unintelligible to men. The huckleberries were just beginning to ripen in the thickets as always, in the seventh month. The fledglings, the little weasel noticed as he climbed here and there through the branches, were just the July size,—still soft with the fat of squabhood but yet big enough to make a pleasing lump in the stomach. The pines are a wonderful calendar in themselves; and only to the eyes of human beings, badly in need of spectacles, do they seem never to change. They go from a deep, rich green to a strange dusky blue, and now they were just about halfway between. This fact, as well as the size and developments of their cones, indicated as clearly as a printed calendar that the month was July. Besides, old Spread Horn had a sure index to the month in his own antlers.

Time was, and not many months back at that, when he had no more sign of antlers than his own cows. The time would come, just before they fell off completely, when they would be suitably hard and sharp for the edification of any rival stags that should attempt to disrupt his family life. Just at present they were full-grown but still in the “velvet,”—covered with a sort of tawny fuzz that was soft to the touch. It indicated July without the least chance for doubt.

He came slipping easily down the canyon; and there was no reason whatever for expecting him. He walked into the wind: his scent was blown behind. Otherwise certain coyotes and lynx and such hunters, too ineffective ever to get farther than hungry thoughts and speculations, would have been somewhat excited by his approach. Spread Horn made it his business to walk into the face of the wind just as much as possible, and in that way he was aware of all living creatures in the foreground before they were aware of him. To walk down the wind, all creatures know, is to announce one's self as clearly as to wear a bell around the neck.

Neither did the great elk make any sounds in particular. If indeed a twig cracked from time to time beneath his foot it was not enough to arouse any interest. He was not especially hungry, but now and then he lowered his head to crop a tender shoot from the shrubbery. At such times he kept watch, out of the corner of his eyes, for any enemies that might be waiting in ambush beside the trail. He would stake his horns and hoofs against any wild creature that inhabited Smoky Land, in a fair fight; but the puma—and sometimes even the grizzly—didn't always play fair. They knew how to leap like the blast of doom from a heavy thicket.

A coyote—most despised of hunters—saw Spread Horn's tall form in the shrubbery and glided away. There was a legend in the coyote's family of how once a particularly bold forefather had seized a cow elk by the leg, and of the subsequent tragedy that had befallen. The only result, it had seemed, was a careful and patient dissection of the gray body beneath the front hoofs of the bull—arriving just the wrong moment—and Gray Thief had no desire to start a new legend on his own account.

Spread Horn showed no surprise at his appearance. His only neighbors were the wild folk,—the only people that he knew. For the wild creatures were still, as far as facts went, the real owners and habitants of Smoky Land. It is true that in various heavy and dusty books in legal offices it could be learned that this particular part of Idaho was public domain, but as yet few frontiersmen had come to clear away the forest and till the meadows. The place was really startlingly large—distances are always rather generous in the West—but few were the maps that named it. Those that had gone to fish in its waters and hunt its mountains thought of it always as beyond,—beyond the last outposts of civilization, beyond the end of the trails, and clear where the little rivers rose in great springs. The cattlemen had named it, and at the end of the dry summer, when forest fires ranged here and there through the high ridges on each side, the name was particularly appropriate. Because of the structure of the passes the winds were likely to fill the region with pale, blue smoke.

In reality Smoky Land lay on the great shoulders of the Rockies,—a high plateau, studded here and there by grim and lofty snow peaks. It was not a land for gentlefolk. It was a hard, grim place, a forbidding land where the sun was a curse in summer and the winds a stinging lash in winter, where great glaciers gleamed in the

morning light and snow fields lay unchanging above the line where the timber became stunted and died. There were rugged crags and impassable cliffs, deep gorges and dark, still canyons; miles of gray sliderock and glossy grass slope; and through it all, dwelling like a spirit, there was a beauty that could not be denied. It manifested itself to every sweep of the eyes.

Game trails wound and crisscrossed through the thickets, and the dung was not dried to dust and the tracks half obliterated and stale as in many of the game trails of the West. One only had to wait, to lie still as a shadow in the coverts to see such sights as the forest gods usually reserved for the chosen few. Sometimes it was a doe, stealing with mincing steps and incredible grace from thicket to thicket; sometimes a puma, glaring of eye and hushed of foot and curiously interested in all the doings of the deer; sometimes an old black bear grunted and mumbled and soliloquized as he blundered along; and there is a tale, one that only the swans that come to the high lakes lived long enough to remember, that years ago, in a particularly cold winter, Old Argali, the great mountain ram, led his flock down from the high peaks to feed on the green banks of the streams.

Spread Horn knew them all. They were his neighbors. Also he knew the people that lived in the cataract at the bottom of the gorge. Sometimes, when he paused to drink, the salmon rushed past him in their mysterious journeyings,—their fourth-year migration to the waters in which they were born. They come to spawn in the waters where they were themselves spawned before they go down to the sea, and after they spawn they die. To the naturalist there are strange significances in this repatriation of the salmon. There is a sense of curious relationships,—for strong men, too, always try to return to their homeland for their last days. After

four years, almost to the day, the salmon come fighting their way back through the riffles, into dreadful gorges, up cataracts, and high is the waterfall that holds them back.

The salmon were not the only water people that Spread Horn knew. He had seen the trout, too (of course the salmon himself is just an overgrown trout that has taken up a seafaring life) and some of them, like the salmon themselves, took an occasional thousand-mile jaunt to the ocean. These were the great steelheads and such seagoing people, and sportsmen say that a five-pounder at the end of a silk line will permit, for ten tearing, fighting, breathless moments, a glimpse into the Promised Land. But you can imagine the mighty salmon, who have spent four years in the sea and who have swum about the reefs of Kamchatka, regarding them with some patronage. Then there were the little trout: quivering, timid, sparkling creatures that, although great stay-at-homes and never going to sea, still look very beautiful in a creel.

It seems to be one of Nature's aims to make life interesting and exciting for all her creatures, so she had provided certain other river-folk to entertain these finned people. Their method of entertainment was to take a sudden leap into a riffle or trout pool with glittering, gleaming razor-edged teeth all set and ready. One little instant's delay in darting to safety, one little clasp of those wicked teeth into the beautiful silver shoulder,—and the trout leaped no more for flies in the cool of the evening. These were the otter and mink and such fur-bearing people, and they existed in plentiful numbers because in this region the trapper had not yet made himself particularly manifest. Then there were plenty of mergansers and other feathered fishermen to take care of the fingerlings.

The cattle herds fed through the region, and sometimes sportsmen penetrated its fastnesses, but mostly Smoky Land was simply the wilderness, primeval and unchanged. The venerable grizzly still dug for marmots on the high ranges,—the great killer that shared the mountain monarchy with the bull elk. The Rocky Mountain goat, white-whiskered as a patriarch, had a range just adjoining that of the bighorn. The wolf pack sang of death and hunger when the ridges were swept with snow.

The late afternoon sunlight, shot and dappled by the shadows of the leaves, fell over the bull elk's body; and the animal sensed the approach of night. It was the drinking hour. A spring flowed at the foot of the glen, Spread Horn knew, and he turned toward it, stealing softly. And all at once he seemed to freeze in his tracks.

The wind had brought him a message, unmistakably as wireless telephones bring messages of approaching foes across a battle field. His nervous reaction was instantaneous: danger, go slow! Yet it was not a familiar smell, and scientists would have a hard time explaining why the stag had at once recognized its menace. For the creature from whom it came was almost a stranger to these mountains, and it was wholly possible that Spread Horn had never perceived the breed before.

He stood still, gazing, and he looked a long time through the shrubby branches down to a little green glade beside the spring. He raised one foot and lifted his long muzzle. Then he gave the warning cry,—the sound with which, in the fall, he would warn his herd of danger.

There was no more distinctive cry in the whole wilderness world than this,—a strange, whistling snort, beginning high on the scale

and descending to a deep bawl. It traveled far through the stillness. He waited a breathless instant while the echo came back to him. Then he sprang and darted at full speed away into the heavier thickets.

Far below, at the spring, an unfamiliar figure in these wilds leaped to his feet with a guttural cry. It was also a distinctive sound: and no wonder the little chipmunk paused in his scurried occupations to listen to it. Even to the addled brain of the squirrel it suggested annoyance and anger,—a quality possessed by the snarl of the puma when it had missed its stroke. No wonder Spread Horn had fled. The figure was none other than that tall harbinger of death and peril, man.

“It was an elk,” the man cried. “You’ve missed your chance.”

Some one stretched on the grass at his feet answered with a half-snarl. “To hell with the elk,” he replied. “You’ve tipped over the last quart.”

CHAPTER II

It is a far cry from the fastnesses of Idaho back to the lounging room of the Greenwood Club in a great and fashionable city on the Atlantic seaboard; but that distance must be traveled in order to explain at all, to the satisfaction of the old camp-robber bird that perched and squawked upon a limb beside his camp, the presence of Hugh Gaylord in Smoky Land. It all went back to a June evening, immediately preceding the dinner hour, in which he had a short and somewhat important talk with that gray, wise, venerable head of the board of governors whom all men knew fondly as the "Old Colonel."

It was always very easy to learn to love the Old Colonel. On the particular late June night in question the Colonel looked his usual best in correctly tailored dinner clothes, possessing only one note of individuality, the black bow, obviously factory-tied, set at his collar at a rather startling angle.

"Gaylord," he said suddenly. "I'd like a few words with you. Bring your glass over to my chair."

The young man thus addressed had been one of a gay group across the lounging room, and they all looked up with interest. It was a remembered fact that when the Colonel spoke in that tone of voice it was well to listen closely. Gaylord himself smiled and came at once toward him. The group went on with their talk.

The club lights showed the young man plainly, yet he did not in the least stand out. In fact, at first glance there was very little to distinguish him from most of the other men of his age that

frequented the club rooms. It was not until two weeks later, when his great adventure had actually begun, and when the camp-robber studied him from the tree limb, that his real personality stood forth. Of course it was by light of contrast. In these luxurious rooms he was among his own kind: in those far mountains he was a stranger and an alien.

He was a familiar type: rather boyish, kind-hearted as are most men who have lived sheltered lives, a fair athlete and a good sportsman at the poker table. It was enough; most of his young friends were wholly satisfied with him, and except perhaps for a vague, troubled hour—usually late at night—Hugh Gaylord was wholly satisfied with himself. And perhaps the reason why the blood mounted higher in his cheeks as the Colonel summoned him was his realization that the old man had had sterner training, and that he possessed X-ray eyes that could read straight into a man. In the first place the Colonel had amassed a fortune by his own resistless effort. In the second, he had known the great school of the forest. He was a sportsman whose metal had been tried and proven on the game trails of two continents.

His eyes leaped over Hugh's face, and he wondered if he had undertaken a vain task. He knew that a steel-worker cannot make tempered blades out of inferior metal. He wondered if he could hope for any real response from the treatment he was about to suggest. Hugh looked soft, and soft men are not usually made hard by a few weeks in the mountains. To follow the high trails, to seek the hidden people, to scale the cliffs and wade the marsh require a certain hardihood of spirit to start with,—and Hugh Gaylord seemed lacking in that trait. It was not that he had a weakling's body. Because it was the thing to do in his own circle he had kept himself fit on the gym-floor of his athletic club. His hands were

hard and brown, his figure lithe, his face and neck were tanned in tennis court and golf links.

Yet that hard-eyed old woodsman looked at him straight and knew the truth. Hugh would not be able at once to enter into the spirit of the land where the Colonel was about to advise him to go. The lean foresters, natives of the land, would not accept him either; nor would they stay to eat at his camp. They wouldn't linger to tell him secrets of the wild. If they talked to him at all, it would be to narrate long and impossible adventures that are usually, on the frontier, the "feed" for tenderfeet. He could not enter into the communion of the camp fire; and yet no one—except possibly the Colonel himself—could tell him why.

Perhaps he lacked the basic stuff. The Old Colonel was a little despairing: he had begun to fear that in this lay the true explanation. But perhaps—and this was the old man's hope—the matter got down to a simple phrase of ancient usage: that Hugh had merely not yet learned to be a "man of his hands." The meaning goes deeper than mere manual toil. It implies achievement, discipline, self-reliance. It is not a thing to mistake. It promotes the kind of equality that the Old Colonel himself knew,—that which abides at a Western cow ranch or in the battle trench. Hugh's face was not unlined; but dissipation rather than stress had made the furrows. The lips did not set quite firm, the young eyes were slightly dimmed and bloodshot. There was, however, the Colonel saw with relief, no trace of viciousness in his youthful face. He was an Anglo-Saxon: after the manner of most Northern men he was an honest young debaucher, taking his orgies rather seriously and overdoing them in a way that would be shocking in a Latin. Possibly the same Northern blood gave him a background of strength: this was the old man's hope.

“You’re looking a bit seedy, Hugh,” the Old Colonel began in his usual straightforward way. “I’m afraid you’re getting to be sort of a poor stick.”

His tone was that with which he was wont to begin an interesting story: perfectly matter-of-fact, just as if he were pronouncing a judgment on the weather. Hugh flushed to the roots of his hair but he didn’t take offense. No one ever could take offense when the Colonel told them truths.

“Complimentary mood to-day, eh, Colonel,” Hugh commented lightly. In reality he didn’t feel in a festive mood at all. But he sat still, dreading what might come next.

“No, not particularly,” the Colonel answered soberly. “You know, Hugh, the interest I’ve always taken in you. And you know why.”

Yes, Hugh knew why. It went back to one of his own mother’s girlhood romances,—a rather beautiful story such as men tell their wives and sweethearts but from masculine reserve do not talk over among themselves.

“I know,” Hugh agreed.

“I can’t see,” the old man went on thoughtfully, “that in spite of the—er—damnable joy of having you around, you’re any good to yourself or any one else. Why don’t you lay off of it a while?”

“You mean—this?” Hugh tilted his glass up on one edge.

“I didn’t happen to mean that, but perhaps I’d better include it. I saw you last night, Hugh, and I’m not one to think hard of a boy for an occasional exhilaration. But the trouble was—it was the night before too, and the night before that, and nobody knows how

many more such nights. You're looking a little soft around the mouth, and just a little—too old for your years. Won't do, Hughey boy. I mean why don't you lay off this sort of life you've been leading: too much ease, too much loaf, too much booze, too much chorus, not enough work. Oh, damn their skins! I wish they'd sent you to France."

"And I guess you know how I felt about that," Hugh replied in his own defense. Yes, the Colonel knew: Hugh had really and earnestly wanted to go to France. He had been commissioned, however, rather sooner than was best for him, and he had been kept in an office in Washington.

"And the worst of it is you never even had to go through the grind of being a real buck private, with nothing particularly in sight. You've had everything too easy. You ought to sweat once, and feel a few breaks in your skin and a few sore muscles. Soft, Hugh, soft as soap. Lazy as sin. Why don't you get out and rough it for a while?"

Hugh stood up. "I don't know——" he began stiffly.

"But I do. Sit down."

The eyes of the two men met, and those of the old man smiled under his bushy brows. Hugh sat down again. He knew, only too well, how true these words were. He had always been soft, and trial had never hardened him. "I suppose the same old chant—to go to work."

"Not this time. I'm going to prescribe another treatment—a more pleasant one. I know there's no use of asking you to go to work. I don't see what work you could do. Sitting around an office,

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