

WHITE FANG

Jack London

PART I

CHAPTER I. THE TRAIL OF THE MEAT

A vast silence reigned over the lifeless and cold land. It was the Wild, the savage, frozen-hearted Northland Wild.

But there WAS life in the land. Down the frozen waterway toiled a string of wolfish dogs. Leather harness was on the dogs, attaching them to a sled which dragged along behind. On the sled, was a long and narrow box.

In front of the dogs toiled a man. At the rear of the sled toiled a second man. On the sled, in the box, lay a third man whose toil was over.

The two men travelled on without speech, saving their breath for the work of their bodies.

An hour went by, and a second hour. The pale light of the short sunless day was beginning to fade, when a faint far cry arose on the still air, and then slowly died away.

Then a second cry arose. Both men located the sound. It was to the somewhere rear. A third and answering cry arose, also to the rear and to the left of the second cry.

"They're after us, Bill," said the man at the front with an effort^

"There's little meat," answered his companion. "I ain't seen a rabbit sign for days."

Thereafter they spoke no more, though listened carefully to the hunting-cries behind them.

At the fall of darkness they made a camp. The coffin, at the side of the fire, served for seat and table. The wolf-dogs on the far side of the fire snarled among themselves, but manifested no desire to stray off into the darkness.

"Seems to me, Henry, they're stayin' close to camp," Bill commented.

Henry nodded. Nor did he speak till he had taken his seat on the coffin and begun to eat.

"They know where they are safe," he said. "They're pretty wise, them dogs."

Bill shook his head. "Oh, I don't know."

His companion looked at him curiously.

"How many dogs 've we got, Henry?"

"Six."

"Well, Henry..." Bill stopped for a moment. "As I was sayin', Henry, we've got six dogs. I took six fish out of the bag. I gave one fish to each dog, an', Henry, I was one fish short."

"You counted wrong."

"We've got six dogs," the other repeated. "I took out six fish. One Ear didn't get no fish. I came back to the bag afterward an' got'm his fish."

"We've only got six dogs," Henry said.

"Henry," Bill went on. "I won't say they was all dogs, but there was seven of 'm that got fish."

Henry stopped eating to glance across the fire and count the dogs.

"There's only six now," he said.

"I saw the other one run off across the snow," Bill said. "I saw seven."

Henry looked at him with sympathy, and said, "I'll be glad when this trip's over."

"What d'ye mean by that?" Bill demanded.

"I mean that this load of ours is gettin' on your nerves, an' that you're beginnin' to see things."

"I thought of that," Bill answered. "An' so, when I saw it run off across the snow, I looked in the snow an' saw its tracks."

Then I counted the dogs an' there was still six of 'em. The tracks is there in the snow now. D'ye want to look at 'em?"

Henry did not reply until he finished the meal.

"Then you're thinkin' as it was —"

A long sad cry from somewhere in the darkness, had interrupted him. He stopped to listen to it, then he finished his sentence with a wave of his hand toward the sound of the cry,

**— one of them?"

Bill nodded. "I'd sooner think that than anything else."

From every side the cries arose, and the dogs were staying together and close to the fire. Bill threw on more wood, before lighting his pipe.

"I'm thinking you're down in the mouth some," Henry said.

"Henry... " He smoked his pipe for some time before he went on. "Henry, I was a-thinkin' how luckier he is than you an' me'll ever be."

He indicated to the box on which they sat.

"When we die, Henry, we'll be lucky if we get enough stones over our bodies to keep the dogs off of us."

"But we ain't got people an' money an' all the rest, like him," Henry answered. "Long-distance funerals is somethin' you an' me can't afford."

Bill opened his mouth to speak, but changed his mind. Instead, he pointed towards the wall of darkness around them. A circle of the gleaming eyes had drawn about their camp.

"Henry, it's a blame misfortune to be out of ammunition."

Bill had finished his pipe and was helping his companion to spread the bed of fur and blanket.

"How many cartridges did you say you had left?" Henry asked.

"Three," came the answer. "An' I wish 'twas three hundred!"

He shook his fist angrily at the gleaming eyes.

"An' I wisht I'd never started on this trip, Henry."

Henry grunted and crawled into bed. As he dozed off he was aroused by his companion's voice.

"Say, Henry, that other one that come in an' got a fish — why didn't the dogs attack it? That's what's botherin' me."

"You're botherin' too much, Bill," came the sleepy answer. "You jes' shut up now, an' go to sleep."

The men slept, side by side, under the one covering. The fire died down, and the gleaming eyes drew closer the circle. The dogs stayed together, snarling in fear. Once their voices became so loud that Bill woke up. He got out of bed and threw more wood on the fire. As it began to flame up, the circle of eyes drew farther back. He glanced at the dogs, then rubbed his eyes and looked at them more sharply. Then he crawled back into the blankets.

"Henry," he said. "Oh, Henry."

Henry woke up and demanded, "What's wrong now?"

"Nothin'," came the answer; "only there's seven of 'em again. I just counted."

Henry grunted and went back into sleep.

In the morning it was Henry who awoke first. Daylight was yet three hours away, and in the darkness Henry went about preparing breakfast, while Bill rolled the blankets and made the sled ready for lashing.

"Say, Henry," he asked suddenly, "how many dogs did you say we had?"

"Six."

"Wrong," Bill said triumphantly. "Seven again?" Henry asked.

"No, five; Fatty's gone, but he always was a fool dog," said Bill.

And this was the epitaph of a dead dog on the Northland trail.