

Winter Short Stories

An Adventure With Wolves

Some forty years ago I passed the winter in the wilderness of northern Maine. I was passionately fond of skating, and the numerous lakes and rivers, frozen by the intense cold, offered an ample field to the lover of this pastime.

Sometimes my skating excursions were made by moonlight; and it was on such an occasion that I met with an adventure which even now I cannot recall without a thrill of horror.

I had left our cabin one evening just before dusk, with the intention of skating a short distance up the Kennebec, which glided directly before the door. The night was beautifully clear with the light of the full moon and millions of stars. Light also came glinting from ice and snow-wreath and incrusted branches, as the eye followed for miles the broad gleam of the river, that like a jeweled zone swept between the mighty forests that bordered its banks.

And yet all was still. The cold seemed to have frozen tree, air, water, and every living thing. Even the ringing of my skates echoed back from the hill with a startling clearness; and the crackle of the ice, as I passed over it in my course, seemed to follow the tide of the river with lightning speed.

I had gone up the river nearly two miles, when, coming to a little stream which flows into the larger, I turned into it to explore its course. Fir and hemlock of a century's growth met overhead, and formed an archway radiant with frost-work. All was dark within; but I was young and fearless, and I laughed and shouted with excitement and joy.

My wild hurrah rang through the silent woods, and I stood

listening to the echoes until all was hushed. Suddenly a sound arose,--it seemed to come from beneath the ice. It was low and tremulous at first, but it ended in one long wild howl.

I was appalled. Never before had such a sound met my ears. Presently I heard the brushwood on shore crash as though from the tread of some animal. The blood rushed to my forehead; my energies returned, and I looked around me for some means of escape.

The moon shone through the opening at the mouth of the creek by which I had entered the forest; and, considering this the best way of escape, I darted toward it like an arrow. It was hardly a hundred yards distant, and the swallow could scarcely have excelled me in flight; yet, as I turned my eyes to the shore, I could see several dark objects dashing through the brushwood at a pace nearly double in speed to my own. By their great speed, and the short yells which they occasionally gave, I knew at once that these were the much-dreaded gray wolves.

The bushes that skirted the shore now seemed to rush past with the velocity of lightning, as I dashed on in my flight to pass the narrow opening. The outlet was nearly gained; a few seconds more, and I would be comparatively safe. But in a moment my pursuers appeared on the bank above me, which here rose to the height of ten or twelve feet. There was no time for thought; I bent my head, and dashed wildly forward. The wolves sprang, but, miscalculating my speed, they fell behind, as I glided out upon the river!

I turned toward home. The light flakes of snow spun from the iron of my skates, and I was some distance from my pursuers, when their fierce howl told me they were still in hot

pursuit. I did not look back; I did not feel afraid, or sorry, or glad; one thought of home, of the bright faces awaiting my return, and of their tears if they never should see me,--and then all the energies of body and mind were exerted for escape.

I was perfectly at home on the ice. Many were the days that I had spent on my good skates, never thinking that they would one day prove my only means of safety.

Every half-minute a furious yelp from my fierce attendants made me but too certain that they were in close pursuit. Nearer and nearer they came. At last I heard their feet pattering on the ice; I even felt their very breath, and heard their snuffing scent! Every nerve and muscle in my frame was strained to the utmost.

The trees along the shore seemed to dance in an uncertain light, my brain turned with my own breathless speed, my pursuers hissed forth their breath with a sound truly horrible, when all at once an involuntary motion on my part turned me out of my course.

The wolves close behind, unable to stop, and as unable to turn on smooth ice, slipped and fell, still going on far ahead. Their tongues were lolling out, their white tusks were gleaming from their bloody mouths, their dark shaggy breasts were flecked with foam; and as they passed me their eyes glared, and they howled with fury.

The thought flashed on my mind that by turning aside whenever they came too near I might avoid them; for, owing to the formation of their feet, they are unable to run on ice except in a straight line. I immediately acted upon this plan, but the wolves having regained their feet sprang directly

toward me.

The race was renewed for twenty yards up the stream; they were almost close at my back, when I glided round and dashed directly past them. A fierce yell greeted this movement, and the wolves, slipping on their haunches, again slid onward, presenting a perfect picture of helplessness and disappointed rage. Thus I gained nearly a hundred yards at each turning. This was repeated two or three times, the baffled animals becoming every moment more and more excited.

At one time, by delaying my turning too long, my bloodthirsty antagonists came so near that they threw their white foam over my coat as they sprang to seize me, and their teeth clashed together like the spring of a fox-trap. Had my skates failed for one instant, had I tripped on a stick, or had my foot been caught in a fissure, the story I am now telling would never have been told.

I thought over all the chances. I knew where they would first seize me if I fell. I thought how long it would be before I died, and then of the search for my body: for oh, how fast man's mind traces out all the dread colors of death's picture only those who have been near the grim original can tell!

At last I came opposite the cabin, and my hounds--I knew their deep voices--roused by the noise, bayed furiously from their kennels. I heard their chains rattle--how I wished they would break them!--then I should have had protectors to match the fiercest dwellers of the forest. The wolves, taking the hint conveyed by the dogs, stopped in their mad career, and after a few moments turned and fled.

I watched them until their forms disappeared over a

neighboring hill; then, taking off my skates, I wended my way to the cabin with feelings which may be better imagined than described. But even yet I never see a broad sheet of ice by moonlight without thinking of that snuffing breath, and those ferocious beasts that followed me so closely down that frozen river.

DEFINITIONS:--Glinting, glancing, glittering. Zone, belt. Velocity, swiftness. Fissure, crack.

EXERCISE.--Where is the Kennebec River? In what part of our country is Maine?