

The Storyteller.

A HUNTER HUNTED.

JONES got us the tale.

'Tell us that yarn of yours about the wolves, Granby,' he said. 'When they all—'

'Well, don't give it away before-hand,' said someone, 'if Granby's going to tell it.'

'I don't mind,' said the latter. 'Only remember, all of you, that it isn't a yarn, as Jones is pleased to describe it, but the true story of what actually happened to me.'

'I was in the Novgorod Government on business,' he commenced, 'and occasionally did a bit of snowshoeing, carrying a shot-gun in case of a hare or a tree-partridge, or so. They were very scarce, however, and I rarely got a shot. Consequently I usually carried no more cartridges than the couple with which my gun was loaded—a very foolish practice which I have since abjured, and which I do not recommend to any of you. Always carry at least half-a-dozen cartridges, even though you are practically certain to have no use for the same. This is a concession to the chapter of accidents which it can hurt no one to make, for half-a-dozen cartridges are no great weight, neither do they take up much room.'

'Well, I'm afraid I was a duffer. I went out into the forest one afternoon upon my snowshoes, carrying a gun with a couple of fours, but with no reserve of cartridges in my pocket. I merely intended to take my day's exercise, and the chance of a shot at some stray hare or bird was but a secondary consideration. I wandered for several hours, getting, of course, deeper and deeper into the heart of the forest—a circumstance which gave me no anxiety whatever, for the weather was clear and there was no danger of snow falling to obliterate the tracks of my snowshoes, and if a fellow cannot find his way home upon his own tracks, why he must be unfit to venture outside his own back garden, and had better sit at home and darn stockings.'

'There was a little rascal of a tree-partridge whose shrill whistle lured me farther and farther onward.'

'Then, suddenly, something happened that changed my dull, almost purposeless ramble into an exciting enterprise and set my heart beating with all the ardour of a sportsman.'

Something skulked across my path, a large grey creature which at first—like a fool—I took for a small donkey, though I might have known that such an animal was probably not to be found nearer than the Zoological Gardens at Moscow, where one was kept as a rarity and greatly valued as such.

'Then, like a flash, the truth was borne in upon me—it was a wolf, and a huge one. Fool—idiot that I had been to miss such a chance' for even number fours—and at a distance of twenty yards—might have so wounded the brute that I should have chased and perhaps over-taken him.

'I rushed forward in the forlorn hope of catching sight of him once more, little as I deserved it.'

'Well, I did catch sight of him. Skulking off quickly with a grinning face—as it seemed—turned back at me over his shoulder, he was cantering under the trees thirty yards away, and I sent a cartridge-full of number fours after him.'

'Of course, he instantly disappeared, but there was a spot of blood upon the track of the brute, who—to judge from the somewhat scrambling footmarks he had left in his first frightened rush into cover—had retreated upon three legs instead of four.'

'Away I scudded at full speed. I had my second barrel, and—said I to myself—I would keep my head and my cartridge; even though I should come as close upon the brute as 10 or 12 yards from his tail I would not fire. I should wait until I could actually over-take him, and then spurt along-side and fire point-blank into his ear.'

'Even as I turned I saw him again, 40 yards ahead, going for all he was worth at a three-legged gallop, holding his fourth foot in the air, and from time to time losing ground by suddenly stopping for an instant to turn and bite at the wounded member, which he would do with a yelp of pain or rage.'

'Away he went and away went I after him, and soon—though I hesitated to assure myself of the fact, lest it should prove a mistake and disappoint me—soon I could not help being pretty certain that I was gaining.'

'It was not very long before the forest began to thin, and it became evident that I had travelled fairly across the belt of forest, which I had entered at the Moscow side, and was about to emerge at the other end.'

By this time I was within 15 or 20 yards of the wolf, who hobbled along well, considering that he was a leg short.

'Another minute or two and we had passed out of the forest and were careering over a wide plain, and here—just as I expected, I began to gain pretty rapidly, a yard at a time, till I was first 12 paces, then 10, and at last but a bare half-dozen from his tail. The left hind leg was broken, I could see, near the foot.'

'I now began to feel certain of my wolf, and only waited for the moment when I should make my effort, spurt rapidly for a moment or two, rush past him on the right, and empty my gun into his head at discretion. I must be careful and do the thing thoroughly, once for all, since I had been so idiotic as to bring not a single spare cartridge.'

'Quickly we flew across the wide plain that opened, level and white, from the edge of the forest, and now we had reached a bushy patch of ground that seemed to crown a gully, leading, I suppose, in summer to the banks of a streamlet or small river.'

'I was almost at the very tail of my limping quarry, who panted now as he ran, occasionally turning a wicked face at me over his shoulder and snarling back at me a message of deadly

hatred and menace, which made me doubly determined to be very sure of my shot before I attempted to perform the happy despatch of him, for if I should only wound and enrage the brute and he turned and fell upon me with those fangs that he seemed so anxious to show me in all their glistening glory, why, the chase might end in a manner which would prove less agreeable to me than I had taken the liberty to expect.'

'Just as I was in the very act of sprinting forward in order to bring myself level with the side of his head, which I should then blow into fragments at half a yard range, we reached the top of the gully just mentioned and my snowshoes began to slip and skid and show that inclination to cross one and another and floor their master which is so familiar to all those who have practised the pretty art of ski-running and especially of shooting the hillsides, upon the narrow, slippery snowshoes or ski used in Norway and Russia.'

'I should have been all right, for I flatter myself that I can negotiate a steep hill on the shoes as successfully as most, but, unfortunately, the slope was covered with the stumps of felled or burned trees, some of which were visible above the surface of the snow, and some invisible, just beneath the snow level.'

'I dodged two or three of these, and the impetus of my rapid descent was just carrying me like a lightning's flash past the wolf, when suddenly the points of my ski struck a tree-stump concealed just beneath the surface, and in a moment I was flying head first through space, to plunge an instant later, face first, into a deep snow bath that awaits the overthrown ski-runner, and into which he penetrates to any depth that the impetus of his flight avails to carry him.'

'I was furious with rage and disgust. I knew I should now lose all the ground I had gained, and a great deal more besides, before I could be up and after my wolf, even though by good luck, and I suppose the instinct of the moment, I had clung to my gun, and still held it fast in my snow grave.'

'But, alas! No sooner had I begun to move in order to regain the surface and get once more upon my feet than I became aware, by a violent twinge of pain at the ankle, that I was damaged. It was agony to move my leg, and in despair and the deepest mortification I instantly realised that the hunt was up; I had lost my wolf.'

'This was bad enough, and at the first moment I certainly did not think that anything could possibly be worse, but when I began to pick myself up and attempt to get into my snowshoes once again I learned that worse things are possible than the mere losing of a wolf.'

'For I now discovered that I was dead lame. My ankle was badly sprained; the pain was great but that was nothing. The significant thing was that I could now no more attempt to skate homeward upon my snowshoes than leave them behind and fly homewards with only my coat-tails for pinions.'

'I sat down and began to think how I should best proceed in order to get back to town. It was obviously impossible to travel at any pace: the chase was up—I thought no more of that as a possible thing—but could I limp slowly along (if such a word can be used of ski-going, even of lame ski-going) or, indeed, use my sprained foot in any way whatever in order to get homewards?'

'A very little while spent in the attempt served to convince me that I could not.'

'Slowly the conviction forced itself upon me that I was destined to spend the night out of doors.'

'Now, this was not only an extremely disagreeable prospect, seeing that I was without food or warm clothing, but distinctly a dangerous one as well, for what if it should come on to snow—as well it might at this season—and the new fall were to obliterate the tracks of my snowshoes? Why, then I should not be found, maybe, until I was frozen stiff and hard, a candidate for sepulchral honours, which, of course, are all right so far as they go, though I, for one, prefer to remain as long as possible on the sunny side of the soil, and have never yet felt any ambition to be buried, even smartly.'

'On the other hand, if the weather continued fine and clear, my tracks would remain, and I should undoubtedly be sought for and easily found by my friends, but not until the next morning; for the short day was already almost ended, and dusk had begun to blunt the sharp lines and edges of the forest that lay behind and in front of me, surrounding the two-mile plot of open land in which I lay. I was, I suppose, quite ten miles from home. In a word, the prospect was unpleasant.'

'I would, I think, have painfully hobbled back as far as the nearest pine cover, but that it occurred to me, on reflection, that I would rather be benighted in the open than in the midst of the forest, where prowling beasts might creep up unseen, in the shadow of the pine trees, and watch and perhaps attack me unsuspected.'

'My wounded wolf, for instance, might well bethink him that I had caused him severe pain, and perhaps the anguish of fear also—for I had all but caught him when an evil destiny upset me and my calculations and gave him the game. Perhaps he would return up in his tracks—catch me asleep beneath a tree—work himself into a passion of hunger, which, for a wolf, is the one and only road to courage, and presently—primed to the necessary point—would suddenly spring upon my throat, and—crunch!—exit sleeper, after a disagreeable awakening!'

'No—I would remain here in the open, where, at least, I could watch and see anything that moved within sight. There would be half a moon to-night. I should distinguish objects pretty plainly.'

'So I tied up my ankle, which was swollen and painful, and covered myself with snow for warmth, until little but my head remained above surface, and waited.'

'My gun, with its one No. 4 cartridge, lay beside me—my only friend and guardian, a kind of one-armed sentry, that could strike but one blow in my defence, and must then, like its lame master be overpowered.'