



Author of "Fair Warning in Big Hills," etc.

**W**ITH shaggy tails tucked in and noses raised to an unsympathetic moon, high on a bald ridge of the Jug Handle Peaks, the wolf pack was mourning. For old Gray Ears, the master wolf, was dead, and there was none to take his place; none among them whose strength, ferocity and cunning could compare with that of the great wolf who for years had been the leader of the pack.

As men reckon time, nearly a year had passed since Gray Ears had fallen a victim to the wiles of Grizzly Gallagher, the old trapper with the otter-skin cap and silver-tipped hair and bushy beard, who lived alone in a cabin he had built at the head of Cashaway Creek.

Pipe in mouth and comb in hand, he was sitting in his cabin combing out the long silky fur of the white wolf skin, when to his ears the cry of the bereft pack came drifting across the hills.

"I swan," exclaimed the old trapper. "If that ain't the loneliest cry as ever comes to a human's ears, I'll never set another trap."

Once, twice, thrice the howl of the pack was repeated, then it was heard no more.

Arising to his feet, Grizzly Gallagher shook out the white wolf skin; then he spread it out on the cabin floor and, taking a tape from his pocket, ran it over the hide. Six feet and eight inches it measured from the tip of the black nose to the equally black tip of the tail. It was not pure white,

for only Arctic wolves are that color, and Gray Ears had been but an exceptionally light-colored specimen of the gray timber wolf commonly found in the Idaho mountains. When living, the dark tips of the long guard hairs of his coat had passed unnoticed by those who had seen him slinking away among the shadowy hills, and so from the headwaters of the Middle Salmon to the shores of Payette Lake, Gray Ears had become known to men as the "great white wolf."

For an hour or more the old trapper combed and combed out the rich coat until beneath the rays of the smoky lamp the sheen of the fur was like unto that of the finest silk. Having done all that he could do to the fur, Grizzly Gallagher picked up the skin and spread it, leather side up, out on his bunk; and one might have seen that it had been tanned to a milky whiteness and that its texture was soft as the softest buckskin. "No wonder Doctor Silens offered me a hundred dollars for it," muttered Grizzly Gallagher, thinking of the rich man he had guided. "But how I hate to part with it. Forty-odd years in the big hills, and never before have I seen the equal of it; never before have I seen a wolf skin that came so durn near being white."

Satisfied at last that he could not improve on the beauty of the white wolf skin, Grizzly Gallagher hung it up and prepared for bed. But he did not at once give way to sleep. Instead, he reloaded his pipe and, after placing the little lamp on the shelf above his bunk, and setting his alarm clock, lay down, and, gazing at the white wolf skin

through a blue haze of tobacco smoke, became absorbed in a reverie.

"I'm getting old," his thoughts ran. "Forty-seven years in the hills and what have I got to show for 'em? Here's Christmas only ten days off; a season when other folks make merry, when women folks is planning for their kids and men folks is planning for their wives. As for me, I ain't got neither wife nor kids to plan for—not even a partner. Nobody but old Grizzly Gallagher himself, for Teddy Blaine, my old partner, he's gone and got himself a wife and while he 'pears to think as much of me as he used to, we can never be the same again, and—dog-gone it—I'm sixty-nine. Wonder if I did right to promise him and Hattie that I'd spend Christmas with 'em on their homestead at Lake-where-the-wind-never-blows? Wonder if they ain't just asking me out of pity for my loneliness? Dog-gone it, I'll bet that's it. Funny I never thought of it before. Well, it isn't too late yet. Come morning, I'll pack up my furs and start for Boise, and have a reg'lar old-fashioned Christmas of my own. And I'll go by way of Teddy's cabin and tell him and Hattie that I've changed my mind and that I ain't coming.

"A hundred dollars Doc said he'd give me for the white wolf skin; other furs will fetch me four hundred more; and on five hundred dollars an old man like me can have one spifflicating good time down thar in Boise City where the bright lights gleam."

It was not like Grizzly Gallagher to be despondent, but sometimes in the big hills despondency creeps up so insidiously that it takes even the oldest old-timers unaware, and nearly always these fits occur at that time of the year which should be the most joyful—just before Christmas.

So, fully convinced that he was in dire need of a trip to the city, Grizzly Gallagher laid down his pipe and turned out the light.

A gust of wind searched out a place where the chinking between the logs was loose and entered the cabin and softly blew on the white wolf skin pendant above the head of the old trapper, until it swung to and fro, to and fro like a ghostly pendulum, keeping time to the beating of Grizzly Gallagher's heart.

No paling star hinted of dawn when the shrilling of the alarm clock roused Grizzly Gallagher out of a dream wherein he had looked back through sixty years to the time when he was again a barefoot boy setting his first trap.

Like elves of the night, black little shadows danced in the corners of the cabin and watched Grizzly Gallagher as he ate his hot cakes and drank his coffee, and above the bunk he had just left, the great white wolf skin swayed to and fro.

Methodically Grizzly Gallagher washed up his dishes and smoothed out the quilts on his bunk; then one by one he took from their pegs in the rafters a dozen silver-faced, orange-throated marten skins, a fisher skin with black fur as soft as a maiden's hair, but tipped with silver like his own, and a lynx skin colored like a sun-kissed gray boulder mottled with patches of shadow.

Thoughtfully the old trapper eyed his catch; lovingly he passed his gnarled old fingers through the silky fur; then he rolled them all in the great white wolf skin and placed the bundle in his pack.

When Grizzly Gallagher left the cabin, a pale dawn was just beginning to steal through the woods, bringing with it a wind from the North that caused the tall pines to rub complainingly together, as though in fear of storm to come.

Six feet of snow lay beneath his crunching web snowshoes, and a sky gray with snow-filled clouds above him, as Grizzly Gallagher wound his way between the watching pines.

Not often do the old mountaineers leave their hills, and five years had passed since Grizzly Gallagher had seen the lights of Boise City. As he thought about the good time he would have, he was filled with a sort of exaltation. What in the world had made him promise to spend Christmas at the homestead of his old partner? There would be nothing new to him there. A good dinner followed by an evening spent talking over old times and bygone trips, and Christmas would be over. Now in a city it was different; there were the movies; there were cabarets where bright lights shone and pretty girls danced to most thrilling music. And there would be the stores, brightly lighted and filled with all kinds of wonderful presents, and gaily dressed men and women coming and going with their arms full of packages and their faces filled with cheer."

"I swan," exclaimed Grizzly Gallagher. "Wish I'd saved more'n I have; dog-goned if I wouldn't leave this eternal loneliness and ree-tire for the rest of my days. Furs, pines, snow, wind! More'n forty years of 'em, and, dog-gone it, they've grown old to me. Teddy won't mind and Hattie won't mind; they'll understand when I tell 'em I'm going to the city."

High overhead a wedge of geese flew honking

ahead of the wind. "Honk, honk!" said the leader as, espying Grizzly Gallagher, he swerved slightly from his course. "Honkity-honk," replied the wings of the V, and they swerved too.

"Even the gray geese know enough to go south for Christmas," muttered the old trapper through his beard. "But"—and a sudden thought struck him, and he added: "I wonder how many of 'em will come back?"

Down in the sloughs of the Southland men would be waiting with guns; men who needed Christmas dinners, but had no money to buy them. Was that why the good Lord sent the gray geese South about Christmas time? Hardly, thought Grizzly Gallagher, for there would be other hunters awaiting their arrival; hunters dressed in hundred-dollar suits, with guns that cost even more than that—hunters whose tables would never see one tenth of the wild geese they would kill in the name of "sport."

"Maybe Teddy will know," thought Grizzly Gallagher. "I'll have to ask him. Ain't got eddication enough myself to figure such things out. Yes, I'll ask Teddy, but I don't reckon he'll know; I don't reckon anybody knows or understands just why the gray geese go South for Christmas. But thar's one thing sure, a whole lot of 'em would be a durn sight better off if they didn't."

Never having heard the word "analogy," Grizzly Gallagher couldn't understand why the thought bred another that caused him to stop and scratch his head, and look up at the clouds from which a few snowflakes like great white butterflies were beginning to flutter down.

"I swan," he exclaimed. "I most sartinly do! Now I wonder if like the gray geese, I'd be a durned sight better off if I didn't go to the city. I'll have to ask Teddy about that, too."

But when at evening Grizzly Gallagher reached Teddy's homestead at Lake-where-the-wind-never-blows, no welcoming smoke arose from the stovepipe of the little cabin, and all thought of the city was temporarily banished from his mind, and a great fear entered into his heart. For the snow around the cabin was untrodden, save for the tracks of prowling wolves, and no voice replied to Grizzly Gallagher's hail.

"The pack," whispered Grizzly Gallagher as he stooped over and examined the tracks. "Fifteen or twenty gray wolves have been around here. Where's Teddy? Where has Hattie gone?"

But the only reply was the voice of a blue jay, who, from the shelter of a nearby spruce, cocked

his head to one side and harshly screamed a warning to Grizzly Gallagher to "stop thief! stop th-thief!"

Kicking the snow away from the threshold Grizzly Gallagher opened the door of the cabin and, rifle in hand, strode in. The cabin was empty, but everything was in apple-pie order, even to a pile of pitch kindlings near the little cook-stove, and on the white oilcloth of the little table by the window there lay a sheet of note paper held in place by a spool of white thread.

Picking it up, with sight undimmed by the snows of sixty-nine years, Grizzly Gallagher read the few words written on it. Then a strange thing happened. Out of the corner of each blue eye, a big, round tear rolled down Grizzly Gallagher's furrowed cheek and hung sparkling like a dewdrop in the tangle of his silver-tipped beard.

"I swan," he exclaimed in a curiously choked voice. "I most sartinly do! Now I won't get to see the bright lights after all."

Then Grizzly Gallagher relieved himself of his pack of furs, built a fire in the cook-stove, set on the coffeepot to boil and some bacon to fry. While his supper was cooking he sat down in Teddy's big homemade chair, and, taking the note from the table, sat reading it over again. Presently it slipped from his hands to the floor, and his head fell back, for Grizzly Gallagher was an old man and very tired.

The fire died out and night came creeping up, and a pale moon glanced for a moment through the little window at the old man sleeping in the chair. Then a cloud hid the moon and outside it began to snow; faster, faster, faster.

And from somewhere across the dark waters of the lake came the hunger cry of the pack.

When Grizzly Gallagher awoke it was very cold in the cabin, very dark, and pregnant with the strange silence which comes to the mountains at night when there is no wind and it is snowing fast.

"I swan," muttered the old trapper. "If I ain't been asleep! I must be growing old."

He lit the little lamp which stood on the table, and after rekindling the fire, he finished cooking and ate his supper. Afterward he washed the few dishes and opened the door with the intention of throwing the dish water outside.

"I swan," he exclaimed again. "If she keeps up her lick, there'll be another two feet of snow by morning." For it was snowing as it can snow only in the high altitudes.

Closing the cabin door Grizzly Gallagher sat

down for a few minutes and spread out his hands to the warmth of the stove; then he prepared for bed. For a moment he stood looking at the big bunk with its brightly colored patchwork quilts; then he looked at the spotlessly clean floor.

"Guess I'll sleep on the floor, like I do when Teddy and Hattie are home," he murmured. "That thar bed is too purty to spoil."

In the storeroom Grizzly Gallagher found two or three more quilts. Spreading them on the floor by the stove, he stood for a moment looking down at them; then his eyes strayed again to the big bunk.

"Mebbe Teddy and Hattie would just as soon as I'd use one of their pillows," he murmured. "Being filled with wild duck feathers they're softer than my mackinaw, which same is a mite damp." Then, from force of habit, he set the lamp and his tobacco on a chair which he drew up by the side of his bed, and with his pipe in his mouth he lay down.

Sleep was a long time coming to the old trapper. Perhaps it was because he had taken his nap, perhaps because of the strangeness of his surroundings, for never before had he been alone in Teddy's cabin.

Turning out the light made no difference, for in the darkness the cabin seemed to be suddenly filled with ghosts, called back by memory. Ghosts of the boys he had trapped with, ghosts of the girls he had danced with at a Christmas Eve dance in the mountains fifty years ago.

For the third time since sunset Grizzly Gallagher kindled a fire in the stove. Then he undid his pack and took out his furs, wrapped in the great white wolf skin. Tossing the smaller furs on the bed, he sat down by the stove and, spreading the white wolf skin across his knees, took his comb from his pocket and combed and combed out the shining fur.

"Doc Silens will sure be disappointed if I don't let him have the pelt," muttered Grizzly Gallagher. "Seems like he told me he aimed to give it to his wife for Christmas. Seems like"—Grizzly Gallagher was growing drowsy now—"seems like"—his voice trailed away into a snore, and he fell asleep at last with the white wolf skin across his knees.

While he slept the gray wolves came down from the hills and prowled around the cabin until dawn.

"Nine days to Christmas," murmured Grizzly Gallagher when he awoke the next morning. "That

would give me plenty of time to go to Boise and enjoy the bright lights for a white. For the note says that Teddy and Hattie won't be back until Christmas Eve. Seems like I can't very well go back on 'em now. But that's no reason why I should stay here all alone when I could be having the time of my life in the city. Guess I'll make everything snug for 'em before I leave and then I'll get back here in time to spend Christmas with 'em. Maybe, though, they wouldn't understand why I had to go, so instead of going in by way of McCall, I'll just cut across the hills to Cascade and take the train from thar."

Under the leadership of a big gray wolf, down from its haunts among the Jug Handle Peaks, the pack was running. From a clear sky a full moon shone brightly down on the trail they were following—a trail left by a man, a hand sled and a woman.

In just that order they hurried through the pines; Teddy ahead, pulling the sled, and Hattie behind, carrying a rifle. It was easier for her on a broken trail.

"Five miles more and we'll be home, girl," said Teddy cheerfully.

"I hope we get home before Grizzly Gallagher arrives," said his wife. "There are so many things we've got to do before Christmas."

"We'll fix up a tree for the old man," said Teddy, "and I know a place where I can dig down through the snow and get some red kinnikinnick berries with which to make wreaths. We'll sure give Grizzly the time of his life."

"We owe it to him," said Hattie, "for we'd never had found our homestead had it not been for him. I just love Grizzly Gallagher."

"It'll be good to be home again, sweetheart," said Teddy, "even if it was kind of hard on 'Lady' Malone when we refused to stay."

"Mother understands," championed Hattie. "I promised to spend New Year's Day with her, but this is our first Christmas since we got married. We just *had* to come home."

A wreath of vapor arose from Teddy's lips as his breath congealed under the fingers of the Frost King, and above their heads a bough snapped in the bitter cold.

"Mid pleasures and palaces"—his voice rang out clear and true, while Hattie followed up in her clear contralto—"wherever you may roam." Then together they sang the rest of the old dear song:

"Be it ever so humble, there's no place like home."

Out of breath, they stopped and looked at each other and laughed. Then the smile faded out of the girl's eyes and she glanced apprehensively at the tiny hand sled which contained their Christmas cheer, and Teddy's face grew grim.

For as the song ceased, from somewhere that seemed very far away, but which they knew was less than a half mile, came the hunting cry of the pack.

"Wolves!" In Hattie's eyes there shone a fear that seemed out of all proportion to the danger. "Gray wolves, Teddy, and we've got five miles to go."

"Better hand me that rifle, sweetheart," said Teddy. There would have been no use in trying to fool Hattie as to the imminence of their danger; for she, too, had been born and "raised" in the Salmon River Mountains.

"Do you think we can stand them off, Teddy?" asked his wife, "or had we better try to make a dash for it?"

"No use trying to stand 'em off," replied Teddy. "Grizzly Gallagher told me that there are close to twenty of 'em in the pack. And no use trying to outrun 'em; they'd be on us inside of a mile. Best thing we can do is to build a fire—a big one."

There was no lack of dry wood among the pines which timbered the big flat they were crossing when they heard the howl of the wolves, and it was not long before the woods were cheery with yellow, leaping flames.

"Guess we'll have to spend the night here," said Teddy. "They won't come near the fire."

"What'll Grizzly Gallagher think when he doesn't find us at home?" asked Hattie as she drew the little hand sled farther from the fire. "It's too bad; we'd set our hearts on giving him a Merry Christmas."

"More'n likely he'll come to meet us," said Teddy. "But there's one sure thing—he'll understand that we couldn't stand off the pack with only one rifle between us."

"Funny we haven't heard them howl since we built the fire," said Hattie. "Maybe they've gone."

"No danger," said Teddy. "They smelled the wood smoke and are somewhere out of sight, slinking among the timber, waiting for us to pull out. I'll bet that they're all around the fire right now."

"Listen," and Hattie raised a hand, "wasn't that a wolf howling?"

Deadened by distance, but unmistakable, it came again; the hunting cry of the pack.

"They *have* gone after all," said Teddy, "but I'll be darned if I can understand it. There is no game left for them to hunt since the big snow came. Only snowshoe rabbits, and they wouldn't have left us for the sake of a rabbit."

Again came the howl of the pack, but this time it was nearer than before, and hardly had it died away before a rifle shot rang through the moonlit night, then another and another and another.

"It's Grizzly Gallagher," screamed Hattie. "He's come to meet us; that's why the wolves left."

"Keep a big fire blazing," commanded Teddy, "and stay here. I've got to go and help Grizzly Gallagher."

"No," screamed Hattie, "I can't let you go. Suppose the wolves should get you both, what would I do? What would I do?"

Teddy stooped over his wife and kissed her. "Mountain girls don't talk that way," he chided, "when there's a man's life at stake. How could we enjoy Christmas knowing that poor old Grizzly had been eaten up by wolves?"

For a moment she flung her arms around Teddy and hung to him; then she broke free, picked up his rifle, put it into his hands, and, with the inconsistency of a loving woman, pushed him away.

"Hurry," she cried. "Hurry, before it is too late."

A sickening fear arose in Teddy's heart as, on his five-foot web shoes, he hastened through the moonlit pines in the direction from which had come the reports of the rifle. For by the silence Teddy knew that either Grizzly Gallagher had run out of ammunition or that—as sometimes happens—the mechanism of his rifle had jammed.

So intent were the wolves on making an end of the old man who, with clubbed rifle stood with his back against a tree, that they did not hear Teddy's approach until his rifle spitefully spoke, and a huge gray wolf was stopped in mid-air as it sprang for Grizzly Gallagher's throat.

"I swan," exclaimed the old trapper, as his rifle butt crashed down on the spine of another wolf. "If here ain't Teddy!"

Seven gray bodies lay in a ring around Grizzly Gallagher when Teddy arrived, and four more went down before the pack acknowledged itself beaten and slunk away among the pines.

"Only got back from the city yesterday," explained Grizzly Gallagher when he and Teddy returned to the fire. "Had the time of my life down thar. Met up with Doc Silens—the man who wanted the white wolf skin—and he and I purty near painted the town red. But I'll sure have to get back on the trap line soon as Christmas is over, for I'm busted flatter than a kite."

"Stop at our place last night?" asked Teddy.

"Sure did," answered the old trapper. "Good thing I did, too, for while I was thar I heard the hunting cry of the pack and I figgered out that the wolves were after you. Came away in such an everlasting hurry that I forgot to bring along enough cartridges."

"So we'll be able to get home for Christmas after all," said Hattie. "I'm so glad."

"Sure we will," agreed Grizzly Gallagher. "Let's go," and he picked up the rope of the hand sled.

"Teddy will pull that," said Hattie hastily. "Honest, I'd rather he would. You know, Grizzly," she added roguishly, "it's Christmas time, and you've got to do as you're told."

So beneath a silver moon and the brilliant stars of Christmas Eve, the three of them snowshoed through the sentinel pines to Lake-where-the-wind-never-blows.

A match flared in the dark cabin and the lamp chimney clicked as Teddy set it back; then he turned up the light.

For a moment Teddy and Hattie stared at what they saw, then as one they made a rush for Grizzly Gallagher, who, with his back turned, was kindling a fire in the stove.

"You old reprobate," shouted Teddy as he clapped the old trapper on the back. "No wonder you went broke."

But Hattie flung her arms around his neck and cuddled her soft cheek against his, so bearded and gray.

"I love you, Grizzly," she said softly.

For the table had been moved from in front of the window and in its place stood a Christmas tree

glittering with tinsel and silver stars loaded from its spire to its lowest branch with toys, toys, toys!

"But how did you know, Grizzly?" asked Hattie. "How could you know?"

From the pocket of his shirt Grizzly Gallagher took the note he had found on the table and handed it to Hattie, and her cheeks turned pinker than ever when she read:

"Grizzly Gallagher, we'll be back Christmas Eve. You're going to be a grandpa.

Signed. Teddy."

From the little hand sled Hattie took a tiny bundle and held it out to Grizzly Gallagher. Then she pointed at the Christmas tree, gleaming beneath the yellow flare of the lamp.

"You do it, Grizzly," she said.

Grizzly Gallagher laid Hattie's baby upon the silken fur of a great white wolf skin spread out beneath the tree.

For a moment they stood there, forty miles from the nearest neighbor, the old trapper with his silver-tipped hair and beard and the young couple radiant with their happiness. There they stood looking down at the little child on the great white wolf skin rug.

"I swan!" exclaimed Grizzly Gallagher at last. "I most sartinly do! What are you going to call him?"

Teddy looked at Hattie and Hattie looked back at Teddy; then the girl answered:

"Teddy Gallagher Blaine."

Quietly Grizzly Gallagher stole out of the cabin and raised his face to the stars, while, slowly two great drops rolled down his cheeks and hung in his silver-tipped beard.

Into the starlit night came Hattie and laid a hand on his arm. Leading him back into the cabin, she pointed to the little alarm clock ticking away on its shelf above the bunk.

"Merry Christmas," she said. "Merry Christmas."