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WORLD'S GREATEST ANIMAL CRIMINAL DEAD.

By Dixon Merritt.

"The Custer Wolf is dead."

He was the master criminal of the animal world.

Throughout the region around Custer, S. D., that day, the telephone lines were busier than they were on the day the Armistice was signed.

For 9 years this wolf had lived as an outlaw--the cruelest, the most sagacious, the most successful animal outlaw that the range country had ever known. His cruelty was surpassed only by his cunning. He killed with the refinement of animal ferocity. Here to-night--to-morrow night he devastated a range half a hundred miles away.

He loped through every kind of danger and spurned them all. He sniffed at the subtlest poison and passed it by. The most adroitly concealed trap was as clear to him as a mirror in the sunshine. Old hunters, unerring shots, drew the bead on him and saw him glide away unharmed. The price on his head was \$500. Bounty hunters sought him for profit. Sportsmen put forth every device to slay him for reputation's sake. And still the old wolf went unscathed about his work of destruction.

Credulous people said he was a charmed thing. Others attributed his immunity to a wisdom greater than beast ever before possessed. Still others said he escaped by plain luck--the mysterious thing that adheres to some animals as to some men. In whatever way they explained his uncanny elusiveness, everybody feared him--perhaps not consciously, very rarely openly, but there was no man throughout that region who did not feel a shiver run down between his shoulder blades when, alone or in the dark, he thought of this gray devil of the desert.

All kinds of stories got abroad. This thing, they said, was not a wolf--not merely a wolf. They believed that nature had perpetrated a monstrosity, half wolf and half mountain lion, possessing the craftiness of both

and the cruelty of hell. In public opinion he had all the qualities of the Were wolf of Old World legends.

No wonder that the telephones hummed when the word went out that a hunter, sent by the United States Department of Agriculture to protect the live-stock industry, had killed the criminal wolf. That word ended a nine years' reign of dread during which the stockmen around Custer had paid tribute to this wolf to the extent of \$25,000 worth of live stock. And mere money loss was not the whole of the horrible toll he took. When he killed for food, he took only the choicest animals, but sometimes he killed in atrocious ways for the mere sake of killing. Often he wounded cattle, breaking their legs, biting off their tails, mutilating them in unspeakable ways.

Four years ago his mate was killed. He never took another and many people supposed that he devoted himself to revenge for her death. Later on, he attached to himself two coyotes, not as equals, but as servants. He never permitted them to come near him, and they could feed from his kills only after he himself had finished. They traveled far out on his flanks, giving him warning of ambush or approaching danger and adding to the atmosphere of mystery that surrounded him.

After a bounty, reaching by stages from \$100 to \$500, failed to bring in the old criminal's scalp; after private trappers and sportsmen hunters had given up the quest; after poisons and dogs had failed--the stockmen tried a round-up. Having, as they thought, located the wolf, a large number of riders started in a great circle and closed up. This, like all the other devices, was unsuccessful. Some of the stockmen, in resignation, announced that they would have to board the wolf for the rest of his life. Others decided to send for a Government hunter. Therefore, in March, 1920, the Bureau of Biological Survey, United States Department of Agriculture, sent to Custer, H. P. Williams, one of its best hunters, with instructions to stay after the wolf until he was taken, no matter how much time was required.

Williams went. He took with him a bunch of traps, but, as the old wolf was known to be trap-wise, he expected to depend mainly on his rifle. As things turned out, he required both the trap and the rifle to get the wolf when he was finally taken on October 11, 1920.

Since there is involved in this story the reputation of 2 geniuses--the criminal genius of the wolf and the protective genius of Williams--it may be

just as well to let the account proceed in the language of the predatory animal inspector who reported the facts to the Biological Survey. It was a long time coming. Like most outdoor men, he did not want to talk in heroics. Here is the story from the time Williams went to Custer until he brought down the criminal.

"When Williams first went into the country where the wolf ranged, he tried to find fresh tracks, but without success. He asked some of the men who had lost stock just where the wolf made his headquarters in their section. They said the wolf may have had quarters anywhere within a district 40 miles wide and 65 miles long. They told him to wait there a few days and the wolf would be sure to pay him a visit. Contrary to their advice, Williams went into the hills west of Pringle and found that the wolf was staying around some old dens in Pelgar Mountains.

"Williams scented up the soles of his shoes and started stringing out his traps. The wolf got on his trail that night and showed signs of great excitement at what he thought to be the presence of a possible mate in his neighborhood. He followed the scent entirely around the line and then, returning to Pelgar Mountains, cleared out two old dens and made a new one which ran back into the hill for about 50 feet.

"On April 1, Williams had his first glimpse of the wolf, but was unable to get a shot at him. The coyotes were acting as bodyguards, traveling from 100 to 200 yards on the flanks of their master. They would warn him of danger by taking flight. For a while, Williams did not shoot the coyotes, hoping that he would get a chance at the wolf without having to give him warning by the shots that would be necessary to dispatch his bodyguard. Finally, realizing that there was no chance of getting at the wolf unless the coyotes were killed, Williams shot them, hoping that he then had a clear field. In this he was greatly mistaken. The wolf played hide and seek with him. After making a kill, he would go on some distance, back trail for a few rods to a point where he could keep under cover and watch the hunter on his trail. Though this is a common habit of a bear, I have never before known a wolf to do it. It was on April 26 that Mr. Williams first found the wolf was doing this. At other times the wolf took to fallen timber and so could not be tracked.

"Twice during May the wolf stepped on the jaws of traps and on the night of July 3, he rolled into or lay down on one and had a lot of his hair pulled out. This gave him such a scare that he left the country for a while. No sign could be found of him near Custer until the night of August 1, when he made his presence known by killing several head of cattle and wounding several more. Williams found some of these cattle, took the trail of the wolf and followed him all day on a fresh track. This led up to the mouth of a canyon and, knowing that the wolf would be taking a sleep after his big feed, Williams tied his horse and started in. Just then two horsemen came up, riding at breakneck speed and calling to Williams that they had found a yearling steer killed by the wolf. Williams motioned them to go back but they did not understand what he meant and he was forced to return to meet them. Thus, he lost the best chance he ever had of getting the wolf with a rifle. When he returned to the trail, he found the place where the wolf had bedded down to sleep. The noise made by the horsemen had given him the alarm and he had gone back down the canyon very close to the hunter and escaped.

"Early in September the wolf stepped on a trap and was caught slightly by one foot. Apparently the trap had tipped so that it caught only one side of the foot and the wolf was able to pull loose. He left some hair in the trap. This happened again in the early days of October.

"Williams finally got the wolf on October 11. Here is his own account of it:

"He stepped into a trap in the morning and it got a good grip on him. He ran with it about 150 yards when the hock caught on a tree, but that did not seem to stop him at all. He broke the swivel of the trap and ran on with it on his front foot. I trailed him 3 miles and got a shot at him and got him. He has been so lucky that I expected the gun would fail to shoot, but it worked O.K. He is smaller than the average male wolf, weighed 98 pounds and measured just 6 feet from tip to tip; 11 inches from toe to hock, and had a tail 14 inches long. His teeth would be good for 15 years longer. He broke some of them off on the trap but aside from that they were in good condition. He is an old wolf with a fur that is almost white."

In that simple fashion does the man who outwitted the cleverest of animal criminals tell his story."