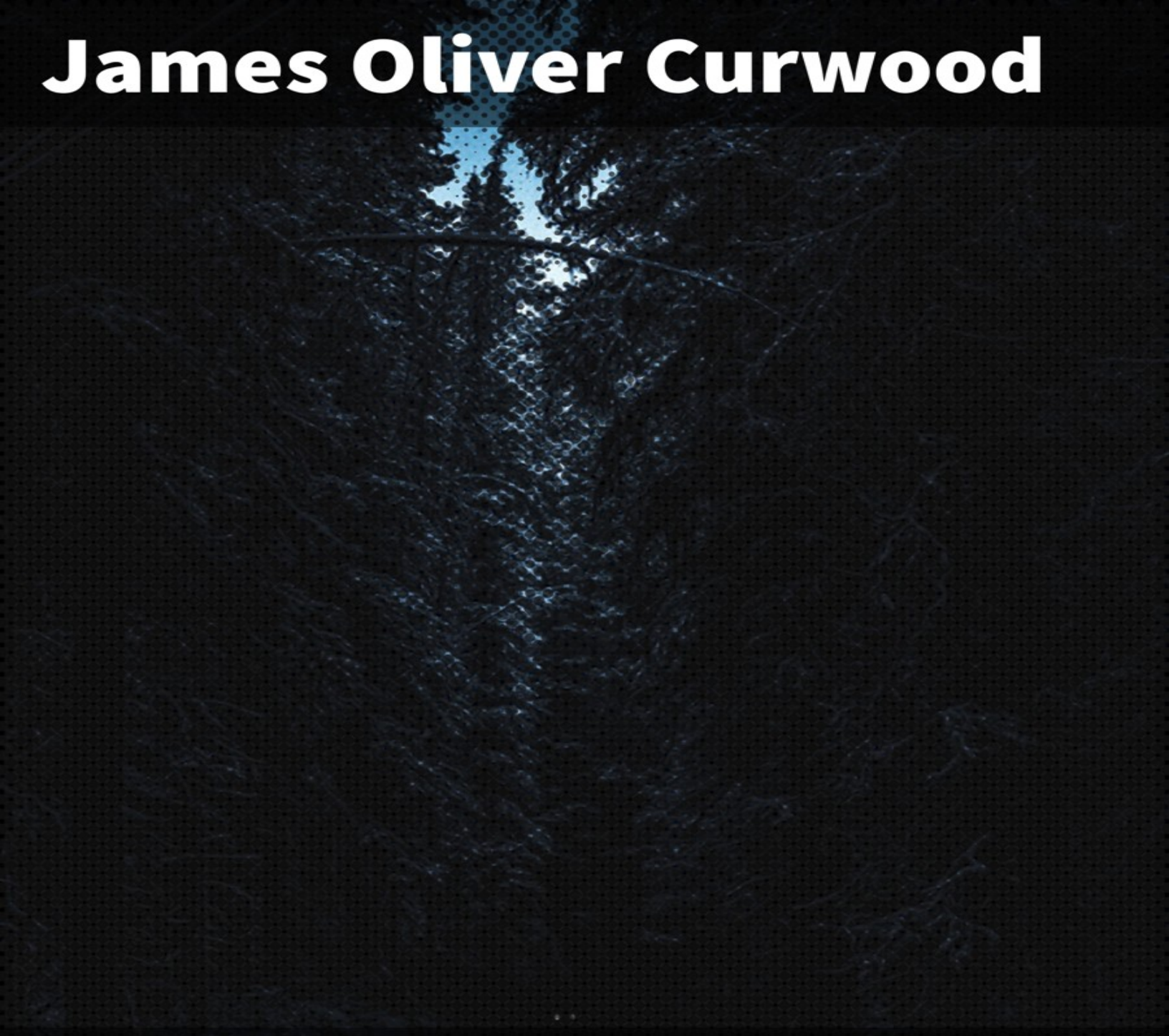
James Oliver Curwood



Swift Lightning

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Strange and mysterious whispers of the arctic night were in the air. It was twilight—early twilight—of the long gray months of sunless days that were descending swiftly upon the frozen-in world that caps the North American continent above the arctic circle. Underfoot there was less than half a dozen inches of snow, hard and fine, each particle like a granule of sugar, and under it the ground was frozen solid. It was forty degrees below zero.

Upon the bald crest of an ice hummock that overlooked the white sweep of Bathurst Inlet, Swift Lightning squatted on his haunches and gazed forth upon his world. It was his third winter—his third Long Night. And the twilight of its coming stirred him with a strange uneasiness. This twilight was unlike that of the south—it was a vast, gray, chaotic emptiness in which vision traveled far but saw nothing. Earth and sky and sea and plain mingled into one. There were no clouds, no sky, no horizon, no moon, no sun, no stars. It was worse than night. A little later there would be many of these things, and Swift Lightning’s shadow would run with him.

Now his world was a pit. And that pit was filled with sound which he had never liked, and which at times filled him with a great yearning and a strange loneliness. There was no wind, but in the gray chaos that hung under the sky there traveled moanings and whisperings at which the little white foxes yapped incessantly. Swift Lightning hated these foxes. Above all other things he hated them. He wanted to

tear them into pieces. He wanted to still their voice; he wanted to rid the earth of them. But they were elusive and hard to catch. Experience had taught him that. On his crag of ice he drew his lips back until his fangs were bared. A snarl gathered in his throat, and he stood to his feet.

He was a splendid beast. Not half a dozen wolves between Keewatin and the Great Bear could come shoulder to shoulder with him in size. He did not stand altogether like a wolf. He was square-chested, and his great head held itself high. About him was little of the sneaking and cautious alertness of his brethren. He looked forth openly and unafraid. His back was straight, his hips free of the “wolf droop,” and all over he was the soft gray of the brush-rabbit. His head had a massiveness about it that was strange to the wolf breed; his eyes were wider apart, his jowl heavier, and his tail did not drag. For Swift Lightning was a throwback—a throwback of twenty-wolf generations. That many years ago his forefather had been a dog. And the dog was a Great Dane. For twenty years his blood had run with the wolves, for twenty years it had bred with them, until at the end of the fifth breeding season the strain of the Great Dane was submerged in the wild-wolf breed. And for fifteen years thereafter his ancestors had been wolves—hungry, meat-questing wolves of the great barrens, wolves with drooping backs and haunches, wolves with dragging tails and narrow eyes—wolves, who did not hate the little white foxes as he hated them, and as the Great Dane of twenty years ago had hated them.

But Swift Lightning, standing on his crag of ice, a throwback of twenty wolf generations, knew as little of the

drop of dog in him as he did of the mysterious wailings and moanings high up in the gloom between him and the sky. He was wolf. As he stood there, the snarl in his throat, his long fangs bared to the yapping of the foxes, he was all wolf. But in his wild and savage soul—a soul hardened to battle, starvation, cold, and death—the voice of that Great Dane forefather of nearly a quarter of a century gone was trying to make itself heard.

And Swift Lightning, as he had answered the call before, answered it now. Blindly and without reason, without understanding and with a helpless instinct within him groping for the light, he went down to the level of the sea.

The “sea” was Bathurst Inlet. As Coronation Gulf is a part of the Arctic Ocean, so Bathurst Inlet is a part of Coronation Gulf. Wide at the mouth but tapering down to the slimness of a woman’s finger, it reaches two hundred miles into Mackenzie Land, so that on its ice one may travel from the grassless and shrubless regions of the walrus and the white bear to the junipers, birches and cedars below the great barrens. It is the long and open trail that reaches from Prince Albert Land down into open timber—a whim and a freak of the arctic, a road that points the way straight as a die from the Eskimo igloos of Melville Sound to the beginning of civilization at Old Fort Reliance, five hundred miles to the south.

It was southward that Swift Lightning turned his head and muzzled the air. He forgot the little white foxes. He set off at a trot and at the end of an eighth-mile he was running. Swifter and swifter raced his great gray body. In his second year a Cree and a white man had seen him running across

the neck of an open plain, and the Cree had said, "*Weya mekow susku-wao*—He is swift as the lightning." Swift Lightning ran like that now. It was not work. It was his play—his joy in living. There was no prey ahead of him. He was not hungry. And yet a wild thrill possessed him, the thrill of quick movement, of splendid muscles, of a magnificent and tireless body that responded to his humor and his desires as a faultless mechanism responds to the electrical touch of a man's hands. In his savage way he was conscious of this power within himself. Best of all, he loved to run under the moon and the stars, racing with his shadow, the one thing in all the Northland he could not beat in a straightaway across the open. Tonight, or today—for it was neither one nor the other now—the madness of speed was in his blood. For twenty minutes he ran his race with nothing—and then he stopped. His sides rose and fell in rapid breathing, but he was not winded. His head was erect the instant his movement ceased; his eyes peered restlessly into the chaotic emptiness ahead of him, and he tested the air.

In that air was something which drew him at right angles to his tail and sent him into the thin scrub timber along the shore. This "timber" was a thing that revealed the mighty forces of the arctic. It was a gnarled and twisted Tom Thumb of a forest into which he moved—a forest warped and contorted until it seemed to have been frozen lifeless while writhing in a tempest of agony. Living for ages, it had never grown above the protecting depth of the snow. It might have been a hundred, five hundred, or a thousand years old, and its mightiest tree, as large around as a man's leg, rose no higher than Swift Lightning's shoulder. In places it was

dense. And at times it was shelter. Big snow-hares popped in and out. A huge white owl floated over it. Twice Swift Lightning bared his fangs as he caught ghostly flashes of the little foxes.

But he made no sound. A bigger thing than his hatred of the white foxes was gripping at him now, and he moved on. The scent in the air grew stronger. He faced it squarely, and did not slink or cringe as he advanced. Half a mile farther on he came to a seam in the earth scratched there by a rough edge on some prehistoric glacier. It was narrow and deep and strange, more like a crevasse than a valley. In a dozen long leaps he could have spanned it. In it was timber—real timber—for each winter the winds from the barrens swept it full of snow and its trees were protected to a height of thirty or forty feet. They lay dense and black below him. And Swift Lightning knew there was life there—if he cared to seek it.

Passing along the crest of this glacier-cut crevasse, he was no more than a gray shadow that was a part of the gloom. But there were many eyes in this pit, that were born to darkness, and they watched him savagely. Out of it rose great white ghosts of snow-owls. Their huge wings purred over him and he heard the vicious snap of their murderous beaks. He saw them, but he did not stop, and neither was he afraid. A fox would have scurried for safety. Another wolf would have swung barrenward, snarling. But Swift Lightning troubled himself to do neither of these things. He was not afraid of owls. He was not afraid even of Wapusk, the great white bear. He knew that he could not kill him, but that Wapusk could crush him with one sweep of his huge paw. Still, he was not afraid. In all his world only one thing held

him in awe, and suddenly that rose up before him, a shadow in the dusk.

It was a cabin—a cabin built of saplings dragged from the darkness of the glacier-slash. Out of it rose a chimney, and from the chimney came smoke. It was the smoke Swift Lightning had smelled a mile away. For several minutes he stood without moving. Then he circled slowly until he came on that side of the cabin where there was a window.

Three times in twice as many months he had done this same thing, and had squatted on his haunches and looked at the window. Twice he had come at night and each time the window had been aglow with light. It was aglow now. To Swift Lightning it was like a square patch of ruddy sun. From it poured a pale-yellow *something* out into the night. He knew fire, but until he found the cabin he had never known fire like this—a fire without flame. It was as if the world had grown dark because of that cabin, for within it the sun had hidden itself.

In his deep chest his heart beat fast, and his eyes glowed strangely as he faced the lighted window a hundred feet away. Back over twenty generations of wolves the drop of dog in him sped like a homing pigeon—back to the days of the Great Dane, who had slept in the circle of a white man’s fire and had felt the touch of a white man’s hand; back to sun and life and warmth and the love of a master’s voice. It was the ghost of his forefather that sat at Swift Lightning’s side as he looked at the yellow window. It was the spirit of Skagen that was in him. And it was the ghost of Skagen that had run with him through the twilight to seek the smell of the white man’s smoke.

These things Swift Lightning did not know. He faced silently the cabin and the light, and into his savage heart came a great yearning and a great loneliness. But not understanding. For he was wolf. Through the bodies and the hearts and the blood of twenty generations of wolves he had come. Yet did the ghost of the Great Dane persist at his side as he watched.

In the cabin at the edge of the glacier-slash, with his back to a stove, Corporal Pelletier of the Royal Northwest Mounted Police was reading aloud to Constable Sandy O'Connor an appendage to his official report, which was starting by Eskimo sledge within a few days for Fort Churchill, seven hundred miles to the south. Pelletier's last word was addressed to Superintendent Starnes, commanding "M" Division at Churchill, and it read:

> I beg to append the following regarding the caribou and the wolves to emphasize my report on the famine conditions that are bound to grip the Northland this winter. The wolves are gathering in monster packs, numbering from fifty to three hundred. On one trail we counted the bones of two hundred caribou slain within a distance of seven miles. On another we counted more than a hundred in nine miles. It is common to find where thirty or forty have been killed in smaller pack-hunts. I am told by the older Eskimos that once in a generation the wolves go "blood-mad," gather in huge packs and drive all game from the country, slaughtering what does not escape. In these years,

the Eskimos believe their “devils” have triumphed over the good spirits of the land; and because of this superstition it is difficult to secure their cooperation in great wolf-hunts which we might otherwise organize. I have hope that the younger Eskimos may be convinced, and Constable O’Connor and I are working to that end.

I have the honor to be, sir,
Your obedient servant,
FRANÇOIS PELLETIER,
Corporal of Patrol.

Between Pelletier and O’Connor was a table of split saplings, and over them hung the tin oil lamps that lighted the window. For seven months they had stood their post at the top of the earth, and for them the razor was forgotten, and civilization a thing far off. On the map of the world there was one other place where the law was personified farther north and that was over at Herschel Island. But the barracks at Herschel Island, with their comforts and their occasional luxuries, were not like this shack. And as they sat in the glow of the lamp, the two men were a part of the savagery which they policed. O’Connor, red-headed and red-bearded, with a giant’s shoulders, doubled his huge fists in the middle of the table and grinned across at Pelletier, whose beard and hair were as black as O’Connor’s were red. And Pelletier grinned back, a bit apologetically. Seven months of hell and the anticipation of five more ahead of them had not spoiled their feeling of comradeship.

“It’s fine,” said O’Connor, admiration in his blue eyes. “If I could write like that I’d be south and not here—for

Kathleen would have married me long ago. But you've forgotten something, Pelly. You didn't put in what I told you about the leaders—the leaders of the packs."

Pelletier shook his head.

"It doesn't sound good," he said. "It doesn't sound—reasonable."

O'Connor rose to his feet and stretched himself.

"Then damn the reason of it," he protested. "I say, is there reason in anything up here, Pelly? I tell you these Eskimos with their guinea-hen clack are *right*. If the devil himself ain't leading the packs, I'm black and not white and my name ain't O'Connor. I'd tell that to the Super till I was black in the face, I would. Now if we could get the leaders ——"

He stopped suddenly and faced the window. And Pelletier, stiffening where he sat, also listened.

Again it was Skagen—the spirit of Skagen, and not Swift Lightning—who howled at the white man's cabin. Through his great jaws the cry came, a far-reaching lament that pointed straight up into the gray mash of the sky—a call back through those twenty generations to masters who long ago had forgotten or were dead. No wolf among the great packs had a voice that rose from deeper in the chest or reached farther into the distance than Swift Lightning's. It began low, mourning, filled with a weird sadness, but steadily increasing in volume. It was a message of life, and yet of death—a thing that traveled far in wind and storm and darkness—the one thing of all others feared, inspiring, and terrible. And the world shuddered and shrank from the sovereignty of that cry.

Thus Swift Lightning howled at the edge of the glacier-slash. And before the echoes of his howl had died away over the wide barrens the door of the cabin opened, and in its path of light stood a man. It was O’Connor. Into the grayness he stared, and his arms moved quickly, bringing something to his shoulder. Twice before this hour Swift Lightning had seen the flash of fire and heard the crash of strange thunder that followed movements like O’Connor’s. The second time a thing like burning iron had seared a long furrow in his shoulder. Instinct told him it was death that hummed close over his head now—a death with which he could not cope, a death which he could not fight and himself destroy, a thing treacherous and unfair. And treacherous things he hated. For his forefather had been fair to man and beast until his great heart died. With Swift Lightning it was a heritage.

He turned, and the farther gloom swallowed him up. But he did not run. He was not frightened. Another thing than the fear of death struggled in the wild, blood-yearning soul of him now. It was the spirit of the Great Dane, fighting for survival, overwhelmed at last.

And, when again Swift Lightning reached out and sped like a shadow through the gloom, the ghost of Skagen no longer ran at his side.

II

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The shot—that deadly humming in the air—and again the fierce red blood of the wolf sped like a running fire through Swift Lightning’s veins. Once more he was the raw, magnificent pirate of the barrens, a buccaneer of the great snows, “*kakea iskootao*”—“a hell-driver among beasts.” Quickly O’Connor had wrought the change—O’Connor and his rifle.

A new pulse stirred him. The loneliness that had drawn him to the cabin and the call of a breed long dead were replaced by another and more thrilling desire—the desire to rejoin his pack. The spell was broken. Again he was wolf—all wolf.

Straight as a compass might have pointed he streaked across the barren—five miles, six, seven, almost ten. Then he stopped, and with his sharp ears thrown to the wind ahead he listened.

Three times in the next three miles he stopped to listen. The third time he heard faintly and far away the voice of Baloo giving the hunt-cry to the pack—Baloo the Slaughterer, Baloo the Long-Winded, to whom size and fleetness and giant strength had given the leadership of packs. Swift Lightning sat back on his haunches and answered. From south, east, west, and north came echoes of the pack-cry of which Baloo was the center. His note was longer, more frequent, more significant; and those of the wolves who were hungry for new blood and fresh meat

turned in its direction. In ones and twos and threes they trotted over the frozen ground. For seven days and nights, as hours were counted, there had been no big kill, and long fang and bloodshot eye were eager for the sight and the taste of game.

That same desire surged through Swift Lightning as it surged in the wildest of the wolves. Many of the pack had gathered and were on the move when he joined them. They ran silently, a close-shouldered, ghostly incarnation of savagery, a mighty force of jaw and fang and muscle bent on death. Perhaps there were fifty, and the number steadily increased—up to sixty, eighty, a hundred. At their head ran Baloo. In all the pack only one other wolf could compare with him in size and strength, and that was Swift Lightning. For that reason Baloo hated him. Tsar and overlord of all the others, he sensed in his rival a menace to his sovereignty. Yet they never had fought. This, again, was because of the Great Dane. For Swift Lightning, unlike any wolf that ever was born, coveted no power of leadership. In his youth and his strength, his individual prowess and his power to kill, lived the joy and the thrill and the fulfilment of his life. For days and weeks at a time he hunted alone, and held himself aloof from the pack. In those days and weeks his voice gave no response to its call. He adventured alone. He ran alone. Always alone—except that at these times the ghost of Skagen ran at his side. When he returned Baloo looked at him with red and bloodshot eyes, and the fangs of his great jaws were bared in jealous hate.

Swift Lightning, in the mastering youth of his three years, had no desire to fight his kind. He fought, but it was not the

fighting of oppression, nor was it his choice; and he did not kill the conquered, as Baloo would have killed them. Many a swift gash of resentment he had taken from smaller and weaker wolves without demanding the vengeance which lay within the power of his jaws. Yet, at times, red murder ran in his heart.

It was there now. Never had the desire to kill been stronger in him, and he gave little thought to Baloo as he ran close to the head of the pack.

As the arctic fight for existence weighs heavily in the lives of men, so it is with the wolves. Baloo and his pack did not run as the forest wolves run. Their excitement was repressed, and once it had set foot to the trail the pack gave forth no cry. It was a weird and ghostly monster of a thing sweeping through the gloom like a Brobdingnagian *loup-garou* moved by the pulse of a single heart. Its silence was the silence that comes with the Long Night. One standing a distance away would have heard its passing—the purring beat of a multitude of feet, its panting breath, the clicking of jaws, a low and terrible whining.

To Swift Lightning this was his game, this his reward for living. He paid no attention to Muhekun, the young she-wolf who ran at his side. She was a slim, beautiful little beast, and all the effort of her agile young body was exerted to keep shoulder to shoulder with him. Three times he heard her panting breath close to his neck, and once he turned slightly so that his muzzle touched her back. With the birthright of young motherhood before her there had risen in her an instinct even greater than the instinct to kill. But in Swift Lightning there was no responsive thrill. The day and

the hour had not come. Only one passion possessed him now—the passion to overtake what was ahead of him, to tear and to rend, to bury his fangs in living flesh and hot blood.

He was the first of all the pack to catch what a hundred muzzles were seeking in the air—the scent of the caribou herd. Another quarter-mile and it was coming up strong in the wind, and Baloo turned southwest with his horde. The speed of the pack increased, and slowly, very slowly, the monster shadow made up of a hundred racing bodies began to disintegrate, and the wolves to scatter. There had been no signal. The leader had made no sound. Yet it was as if a command had leaped from brain to brain, and each had responded to it. Daylight would have revealed a mighty spectacle and the impending tragedy. The hunters were spreading themselves over a front of an eighth of a mile. The strongest and fleetest made up the two ends of the advancing fighting-line. Less than a mile away were the caribou.

The thick gray gloom covered the onsweep of the deadly line, and the wind was against the herd of cloven hoof and horn. There was no warning and no sound.

Swift Lightning leaped suddenly ahead. For the first time he exerted his great speed. Pack-instinct, the law of leadership, the presence of the young she-wolf, who had fought hard to keep her pace beside him, were no longer a part of his existence. He sprang shoulder to shoulder with Baloo. He passed him. His speed was the speed of the wind itself. In half a mile he gained an eighth—and he was alone. The smell of living flesh was hot in his nostrils. Gray shapes

loomed up in the night ahead of him, and straight as an arrow he launched himself to the kill. In that same instant came the savage outcry of the pack. Silent until the moment of attack, its throat burst now, and like an army of pitiless Huns the wolves swept down upon the caribou.

The herd was scattered. They had been digging the crisply frozen green moss from under the snow, and Swift Lightning's attack was their first warning. From him alone they would have fled instantly and without confusion, but terror seized upon them with the coming of the pack, and on the frozen plains there was suddenly the beat of hoofs that sounded like the rumble of distant thunder. The instinct of the sheep is to herd close in time of danger, and so it is with the caribou.

Swift Lightning's rush carried him twenty yards inside the lines of the herd, and his fangs were at the throat of a young bull when the terrified animals began crowding upon him. In a close and crushing mass they hemmed him in. With his hundred and forty pounds of muscle and bone he hung to the young bull's jugular. He heard the crash of bodies, the snarling tumult of the pack, but no sound came from between his own locked jaws. His brethren were at work, two and three and four to a caribou, but it was Swift Lightning's humor to make his kill alone. The great herd began to move, and in the heart of the inundation he and his victim went down. Not for an instant did he loosen his grip at the bull's throat. A mass of bodies swept over them; they felt the beat of hoofs, and about them was a rattle and crash of horns. Still deeper sank Swift Lightning's fangs. Then for a moment he ceased to breathe; every vital force