

The End of the Trail

By HAMILTON M. LAING

IT was a fresh trail, showing here and there a drop of bright red blood. It wound away through the scrub and swamps toward the north, into the wilderness. The floundering tracks in the fresh snow told of the passage of a heavy animal dragging something. Where the prints were revealed on the more solid drifts, they showed the unmistakable foot pads of an immense timber wolf.

Half the night and all the following day that trail had been slowly lengthening back from the settlement. On one front paw the maker of it carried a strong trap, to which was attached a heavy ox trace chain. When down to the settlement on his accustomed predatory expedition, misfortune had befallen him, and he had inadvertently stumbled into a wolf trap. At first, of course, there had been a clog attached, but this was no ordinary wolf, and when the drag held him fast he ripped it off. Then, finding that grinding the trap, chain, and other inanimate surroundings with his teeth was of no avail, he had fled for refuge into the woods.

The story of the great wolf's fierce struggle in his mad rush for freedom was plainly written in the snow. Heavy, frozen saplings, chopped cleanly off, showed that they paid the penalty for getting in the way and impeding his progress. Patches of bloody, frozen foam told where in his fury he had ground the frosty trap, until his tusks were splintered, and his chops all sore and bloody.

The fear of the hunted, a new born sensation in his wolfish heart, had driven him forward. Well he knew that none too far back on his blood speckled trail a sinewy pioneer was striding along on his snow shoes, bent on bringing that trail to an end. Here the soft snow told of his weary floundering, till every muscle ached; and again the hard drifts showed where he had been bumping his trapped paw painfully. Sometimes every print of his sound foot was marked red, for the trap springs had pounded it raw.

Avoiding the thicker scrub, where every willow seemed to go out of its way to become entangled in the trap or chain, he had learned to skulk along the edges of the swamps and follow the jack pine ridges. Occasionally a big thawed spot denoted a resting place. Seldom, though, had he stopped, for he had gorged himself on one of McLellan's juicy porkers at the settlement before he ran foul of the trap, and such bountiful subsistence was sustaining his terrible endurance.

The sun was about two hours from setting, when Kashawamp, returning from some outlying traps, came upon the trail. He examined it critically for a few moments on his knees. Suddenly he seemed transformed from a lethargic old Indian into an excitable savage. Rising from his knees, he looked long and keenly south on the back trail; then he turned and strode off on the wolf's track, muttering:

"The Blue Devil at last! None other could make such prints. These ten lonely years I have not lingered here in vain. Hitherto, old fiend, your trail has been very long; it has crossed the snows of many winters; but now it is becoming short, and the end is almost in sight. You shedder of innocent blood, destroyer of my own kin, think you well of your misdeeds now, when Kashawamp the avenger is on the trail so close behind! A Cree father does not live to forget the slaughter of his child. I have not forgotten! Those blood stained footmarks, those telltale blue hairs, that disheveled snow—all is as plain as on that terrible morning ten years ago. Bright Eyes, my pretty one, the debt shall be paid! Hear me, Spirit of my fathers! I will see the end of this trail, and the end shall be very red!"

Gradually the sun approached the spruce tops to the southwest, and dark-



Kashawamp Strode Off on the Wolf's Track.

ness came on. The Indian quitted the trail, sought a sheltering grove of spruces, and prepared to spend the night. He had nothing to eat, but that troubled him little. He tightened his sash, lit a fire, and made a shelter of boughs. The morrow, he argued, would supply him with a grouse, or by the following night he would feast from the carcass of the big wolf.

A few miles back another lonely fire was giving its genial warmth to the tired McLellan, as he ate a snack from his little stock of provisions. He had struck the track of the Indian just at sundown, and after muttering a few curses about Indians and bad luck, had dragged his tired body to shelter.

"Anyhow," he said to himself, "it is an Indian ahead of me—old Kashawamp to a certainty—and he'll do the job as well as anybody. Gad, though, I am disappointed! I thought the privilege of taking that blue devil's life was reserved for me. Two hundred he weighs, if a pound, for he breaks through the crust where I don't; but I would drag him back every inch of the way. I fancy I see Dad McTavish when I return. And Jean—why, she could not delay any longer. By Heaven! I have it! I'll hang around here, and if the old buckskin comes back with that wolf, I'll buy it."

With the first signs of daylight next morning, McLellan headed back for a remote shanty,

the tale. The pursuer noted each little mark eagerly, joyfully, and then pushed forward. Suddenly he stopped. There before him lay the heavy chain. It had worked through the ring on the end, out of the trap spring, and now, but for the trap and its long chain, the wolf was free.

Well did old Kashawamp know the task that lay before him now. But he had sworn his vow, and called on the Spirit of his ancestors to hear and bear witness to that vow. He was gaunt from fasting, but the thirst for blood was as strength to his body. Ten thousand bloody demons in his heart urged him on. The trail would be long now, but he would see the end. He would revel in the blood of the maker of those steps ahead. He knew now that he must be more stealthy. The big wolf was not so handicapped as formerly; and a straightaway chase meant days of fruitless traveling.

About noon a partridge fluttered into a nearby tree. As Kashawamp was about to raise the old muzzle loader, it occurred to him to look to his ammunition pouches. Lo! the powder horn was empty, the stopper having evidently been out for sometime. He ripped out a mighty oath of chagrin, shaking the empty horn meanwhile as though unable to believe his senses. With one load in his rifle he must get food for many days and kill the big wolf, or—he winced at the terrible alternative—return. Never!

Raising his hands in piteous appeal, his swarthy face, now pinched and haggard, turned to the heavens, he prayed: "Spirit of my father, give me strength for the long trail! Give me food to sustain me until my work is done! Must this destroyer of my blood and kin still go free because Kashawamp has no strength to fulfil the will of his body?"

He cut a long, slender sapling, and, with a piece of cord attached in the form of a noose, endeavored to snare the bird. Many a time he had done it before when he had a full stomach and plenty of meat in camp; but now the pangs of gnawing hunger were tormenting him, his hand was unsteady, and he blundered. The partridges whizzed off across the spruces.

Bitterly chagrined, Kashawamp trudged onward again. Suddenly a wood mouse scurried out of the snow ahead of him. He squeezed out its life with his snowshoe; then he took it by the tail and crunched it down after the manner of a cat.

Toward evening he saw a moose cow and calf. The thought of those juicy steaks almost caused him to waver. He could smell the tantalizing odor as they simmered at the hot coals. But it could not be. Such was his unflinching determination that rather for himself would he reserve that one bullet than expend it on other than the wolf.

The day wore painfully away. At dusk the indefatigable trailer made a shelter in the thickest grove available, and through the long night, while an owl hooted dolefully from the woods, he dozed, shivered, and froze the heavy hours away. Toward morning the stars were obscured and the snow came softly sifting through the evergreens. When daylight broke, however, it was clear again.

All the trails were obscured as the swarthy old hunter staggered from his shelter. Almost half of his being said, "Kashawamp, return! The Spirit has not favored you, and the search is fruitless." But again he heard the command,



The Indian Met the Onslaught Bravely.

while Kashawamp, ahead on the trail, drew his sash a hitch tighter and struck northward. For breakfast he had a smoke, but it was not very satisfying, and the stiffness in his limbs warned him, as it often did now, that Kashawamp the young and the old were as two different fellows.

Soon he came to a spot where the big wolf had laid down for a rest. A few crimson patches, some dark hair, and the disheveled snow told