

Demons of the Cold



*Raymond
S. Spears*

TWICE in one day at L'Amadieu station Jem Josen and Couray Follensby disagreed—just the merest little tiffs about whether they should carry five or seven dozen jump-traps and the other on the number of cartridges they should take in for the little bait-rifle.

If they had been going to pass the winter at the station, or even if they had been going to remain a few days longer there, the disagreements would have been forgotten; but they were packing for the long canoe-journey through lakes and rivers to trapping- grounds where they would be alone all winter long. Not only did they need all their fortitude, but they needed perfect, serene, confident peace.

Trappers of marten and lynx, fishers and mink, otter and weasel, poisoners of foxes and wolves, they had traveled together for years; and they knew as all men in the wilds know, that to start upon the weary winter months with even so small a dispute between them as a matter of two dozen traps and two hundred .22 caliber cartridges meant that they would find the tail of the winter full of bitterness.

But they could not wait long enough, to forget. Not ten hours after they had trifled irritably with each other's nerves they dipped their paddles deep and cut the still water with their canoe bow.

Their canoe was deep-laden with thirteen hundred pounds of supplies, and the whole station, unmindful of their worry, turned out to see them depart—an event, even where the departure of trappers into the fastnesses of the fir country is not infrequent during the autumn.

Big Couray sat in the stern, swinging his strange New Zealand Maori blade—a shallow spoon—while Black Jem knelt in the bow, driving deep a conventional Canadian paddle. It was almost an experience to see this couple depart, backing out into the placid lake and then driving round into the true course toward the north country.

Their poise, their precision, their practiced grace, delighted the eyes of men and women who recognized the perfection of woodsmanship.

There was little need of speaking about the making of lunch and the night camping. Each knew what to do, and did it without parley and in unison—Big Couray got up the night-wood, Black Jem shook out the rabbit fur sleeping-bags, laid down the bunk boughs, and together they pitched the little tent, got the meal, and ate. After that they sat smoking while the evening shadows chased the reflections across the stone-studded lake.

Through the north country, as on the arid deserts of the Mojave, men know that the least tinge

of disagreement grows into bitterness and hate. The bitter cold, like the scorching heat, tries the tempers of men; and these two trappers, full of northland lore, found themselves musing over the tales of hate they had heard—and of the tragic ends.

They mixed their bannock bread and baked it on the flat stone, and had only one laugh—when Big Couray, at the head of the river, selected a thin slab of blow-up stone, and the thing exploded with a crash that threw the fire in all directions, and the dough turned somersaults in the air, shot to pieces with broken stone.

The laugh—the fact that they could laugh—eased the strain of dread and apprehension. The two became more cheerful, and they talked as of old, with only the least of restraint. They arrived at the new trapping-lands they had discovered the previous year, and put up their log main camp, roofed with spruce-boughs and clay, and with mica windows.

When their home camp was built they took on their winter work—trapping. One stepped out in the late afternoon and shot a good cow moose; and the other, with the little bait-rifle, had been amusing himself hanging up porcupines for bait, for the porcupine is better for fisher, wolverine, marten, and mink than any other bait.

With skilled impatience they ran their line down the river, building a cubby for each trap and setting a well-sweep pole so that when any victim was caught its struggles would swing it clear of the snow, too high for hungry wolf to seize.

They worked the harder because they felt the faint restraint that was upon them; they wanted to be tired—dead tired—so that they would not have energy to waste in frivolous bickering. Nevertheless, there was ominous upcropping of temper from time to time.

They disagreed as to whether they should put a trap on a log or against a rock ledge not ten yards distant.

Black Jem was snappish, and Big Couray did not dispute; Black Jem built a cubby on the log, and Big Couray put one under the ledge—a waste of a trap, it seemed.

They wolfed through the timber, reading the trails and the signs and the lay of the land. They snarled when one found a set or an otter-slide or a marten-crossing first—low and ominous snarl, held back, held in check, because ahead of them was the

long and bitter winter through which they must make their way together, whatever might be in their hearts.

They ran their line forty miles down the river, and forty miles up what they called Otter Fork—because they shot an otter on it the first thing—then through a chain of lakes, and finally along the edge of a great, undulating barren, with pockets of woodland and heavy brush in ravines.

Thence they struck southward again and came out within half a mile of their camp—more than two hundred miles of trap-line to follow from day to day, week to week, through the long winter of short days, long twilights, and unspeakable nights.

After a day in the main camp, where they took time to hang up meat for the winter, they drew cuts to see who should travel around the east line and who should go the west.

Big Couray won. He hesitated a moment before making his choice, and then he picked the east line.

Black Jem sniffed and held back a snarl with difficulty. Why had Big Couray taken the course that would make him face the northwest and north winds through the lakes and barren country? It was almost an insult, if it wasn't an insult to the strength and endurance of Black Jem for Couray to take the hard way, when he had won the right to the easy way. Black Jem spoke up quickly:

"We'll take turn and turn—east and west!"

"All right, Jem—as you say!" the big fair-haired man assented. "Jes' as you say, Jem!"

With no good-byes—with no "good luck" on their lips—they strode away, each on his lonely tour to meet at one of the side camps a hundred miles away, on the far side of their circle.

When they met they were in a better mood. Being alone had softened their asperity and smoothed the edge of their watchful temper. No snow had fallen, but they had their snow-shoes lest they be trapped on their way. They greeted almost cordially, and they smoked side by side in the little camp, telling of the luck on the line.

It had been a great trip. They had a score of mink, five fishers, seven martens, three lynx, and Black Jem had hung up a black bear not five miles from the main camp, cut up ready to take in when Big Couray should go that way.

Black Jem's evil genius, which had lurked with him when he was alone, now seemed vanquished.

He was the merry Black Jem of the North, who could sing and dance and carry a huge pack and shoot game in spite of the racket he made in the wilds. All was well till he came to his trap on a log where Big Couray had set a trap under the ledge.

There was nothing in either, but Black Jem paused before the trap he had placed and a shade of anger crossed his face. The trap had been reset—it had been set farther in the cubby and the fence stick moved closer to the jaw! Black Jem sniffed in the little house of death, and then drew back—angry.

"I told him this was the place! So it was! There was marten caught here—and he—he did not say it! Bah! What a man not to say he was wrong. Up comes his trap. It's no good!"

He took up the other trap and dropped it into his pack for resetting. He marched with lighter step, if anything, proud to be right.

He found a mink, a fisher, a lynx, and again he shot a bear, which he hung up. Fortune was with him.

He reset the trap where a marten track showed in a whiff of snow.

So the partners came to the main camp again, and the profits rolling up well-nigh smothered the resentment that Black Jem felt because Big Couray had not told of his own mistake back there in Two-trap Gap. But Jem said nothing—which was unfortunate.

The deep snow came and the men had to strap on their web shoes. The great toil of the line was now at hand. They had built their line-camps as far apart as they could make them, comfortably, in fair weather, and now, when the snow was loose and the webbing sank in almost a foot, the day's work was long, and it was up before day and into camp after dark most of the time on the trips round.

Two trips passed and Big Couray had made no comment on the taking up of the ledge trap in Two-trap Gap. He seemed not to have noticed it—but Black Jem knew that he had.

His big partner was just soothing his temper, was just letting him have his way, was treating him like a little baby who must be humored. Black Jem could better have stood a cursing than this calm tolerance.

There came a barren trip when they reached the half-way house, and neither had any fur to report, no stories of good luck, and nothing to talk about but the dead lift through loose snow and the terrible

pull from camp to camp.

"Nothing!" Big Couray told his partner. "Jes' one leetle marten pulled out the trap in the—in the Two-trap Gap."

"He pulled out, you say? I set that trap over again. He could not pull out!"

"Well, he did, just the same—a leetle feller—not wort' much!"

"But he couldn't pull out!"

"Well, he did—three times now I find a marten has pulled out that trap!"

"By gar—it can't be! I reset that trap after you monkey with it each time—and tell me nothing is there!"

"Well, I set it, too. You make the twig too far back from the pan. The marten stepped over it and on the edge of the trap-pan—up go the jaw and pinch his toes!"

"You lie!" Black Jem screamed. "You got one marten this trip—where—where?"

The color left the big man's cheeks in places, but he made no move.

"I say the truth, Jem!" he choked out with difficulty. "Three times I found that trap sprung, and just toenails——"

"You took a marten out the first time—you know it!"

"I found it sprung—I set it right—perhaps—perhaps the wind blew the twig-fence—but—but—Jem, I told you what is true!"

The big man had turned and faced his partner, and Black Jem saw his fingers twitching and his jaws clanking. Black Jem knew that he would be torn into small pieces then and there—he had seen those hands tear the paunch out of a wildcat that had struck the man. The little man subsided, and not another word was spoken that night, nor for the weeks that followed.

The common bonds of food, shelter, business, cold, and loneliness held them together, and held them to the task that they had undertaken. They marched round the lines, met at the far camp, passed on after the night of gloom, and remet at the main camp.

They were unswerving in their regularity. They rested three days at the main camp, cared for the furs, cooked their meals, kept the fires, and even hunted down in moose yard, where they put down big bait and some good meat besides.

It was wolf and fox time—especially the latter.

They were plenty, and to put out poison for them meant rich fur, and perhaps a silver or black fox that would mean a thousand dollars some day. Perhaps a black fox was what they needed to break their antagonism—but there was nothing they could think of doing.

Black Jem, cowed by the bitter and just anger of his partner saw many things as he sat alone in one of the little side-line camps. He felt humiliated and degraded—for once he saw that he was not the equal of the big man.

Always the little man had lifted his end of the pole, tramped his miles of line, kept his end of the canoe straight—he had felt the equal of any man and the superior of most. Now he cowered beneath the calm and lofty supremacy of mere huge physique—and then came the temptation to use his brains.

He could kill with a bullet, or even poison with fox-pills—but he shrank from those things as murder. No, he could not kill Big Couray that way. He wondered if there was not some accident that could happen?

Out of the silence came the running howl of a hungry wolf pack, and when the first moment of doubt had gone by Black Jem's thoughts thumped with the fact of the wolf hunger.

Alone in the little side-line camp, he glanced swiftly behind him, lest there be something there to read his thoughts. Then he went to his pack-basket and drew out the little vial of medicine—the scent that afflicts the famished wolf with reckless hope.

Black Jem shook the bottle toward the fire and grinned leanly at the color, and he even loosened the cork to catch a whiff of the not unpleasant odor of anise and musk and other things.

He was on his way early in the morning; all day he lunged ahead, and that night he sharpened, his knife to an even sharper edge. The next night he came into the meeting-camp and found it cold. This did not signify anything, and it gave Jem opportunity to plan what he had in mind to do.

The wolves were plenty, their tracks came down to the trap line in scores, and they might have been taken in numbers had it been worth while to bait and poison them. Their hides, however, were heavy; it would be better to let them work down to the canoe waters, and thus save lugging them.

After dark Big Couray came in, dead tired and hardly able to set one foot before the other. It had

been a bitter half-line trip for him—Jem saw that. His face was frosted on one side from bucking the wind through the barrens, and he had carried in two lynx—because he had found them too cold to skin—and their weight on his shoulders had borne him down, strong and big as he was.

All this was as Jem would have had it. Weary men are not attentive, but there was more to come.

From a distance came the howling chorus of a great wolf pack, racing with hunger across the snow. There were so many of them that even Jem slipped the cross-bar more firmly in its hooks behind the door, and Couray felt in his pouch to make certain that he had a pocketful of shells ready in case the pack should assail the cabin.

Closer came the pack, and the wilds were filled with its rolling chorus. The echoes reverberated from the frozen hills and trembled in the brittle timber. They came nearer, and the men could not distinguish the echoes, they were so close, yelping on a trail.

“Good thing I got in when I did!” Big Couray exclaimed, speaking for the first time in weeks. “They followed me in.”

At that the face of Black Jem suddenly grew dark with evil inspiration, and he listened more intently while the wolves swept through the timber.

Howling with baffled rage, the pack charged past, splitting to pass by the lighted and smoking cabin. The trappers heard them gnashing their teeth as they snapped by.

“They’re bad!” the big trapper continued. “They’re meaner an’ hongrier ‘n ever!”

Black Jem snarled assent, thinking of his opportunity, for his mad hate had found a way to overcome the superiority of the big man who had cowed him with a look, a growl, and a twitch of his fingers.

Big Couray was up long before dawn, and he spoke again as if the common peril of wolves and storm was more than their own differences—but Black Jem scorned the big man's good nature and endeavor to bring peace between them. He hid the exultant anger in his heart by silence, turning his head to catch the distant roll of a wolf slinking from the dawn.

“Let's hit back together!” the big man cried eagerly, as if some omen of impending terror had affected him.

Jem, not without some superstitious dread,

shuddered under his furs, for he believed the big man had some prevision of the death—but the shudder went out in angry spite.

“What,” he demanded, “and leave half the line uncovered?”

Big Couray flinched under the scorn—the implied epithet of cowardice—and said no more. Black Jem lashed on his snow-shoes and strode away on the back track of his partner, rejoicing in the wide swath the wolf-pack had made in the snow.

He strode on, his heart thumping and his face dark with the evil smile that parted his lips in thin blue lines. If Big Couray was a stronger and better man, he was in the long run no match for Black Jem—or for wolves!

There was no avarice in Black Jem’s heart—no thought of the great catch of furs that would be his if Big Couray disappeared on the long trap-line. His mind was set to revenge.

A wolverine had lugged away the third trap out and Black Jem took up the rascal’s trail, and three miles out of his way had the luck to shoot it.

Skinning it, he returned and reset the trap—six miles behind his schedule.

In the twelfth trap was a lynx, and this put him half an hour more behind—more than three hours, and with twelve miles yet to go he began to lope along, hurrying.

He found a marten, which he impatiently threw into his pack.

Then he found a fisher swinging alive on a well-sweep—a monstrously ugly and tough animal, hard to kill with his hatchet handle. This fisher dead and skinned, he glanced back on his shadowy trail with apprehension.

He was thinking of Big Couray tramping through the wilderness. He himself was late on his trail and he must hurry.

It was colder. There was not much wind and the sky was clear.

It would be a terrible night in the Dark North.

He loped on, springing and stepping far, falling into the snow-shoe run, which a hardened man can keep up for hours.

For the first time he was glad to find some traps empty, but this was another banner trip apparently, for he found martens and another fisher. He paused to snatch off the skins of the animals that were alive and tossed the two frozen martens into his pack.

He was on the run when a sound stopped him short.

It was more than an hour to sunset—and yet he heard the hunting cry of a wolf. If the famished wolf is a horrid creature in the night, still more fearsome, more terrible, is its cry in the day. When the wolf hunts by day its caution, its fears, its cowardice, are all gone—lost in the bitter pangs of famine.

Unable to sleep, driven from its rest, a wolf was hunting, and Black Jem glanced back his own trail and caught his breath. The best he could do, he would be out two hours after nightfall—the wolves were abroad already!

Then he thought of Big Couray—and laughed! The wolves were on Couray’s trail, too!

But it was no time to exult. Black Jem turned and began to run again, and when he next heard the wolf it was nearer and somewhere behind. For one wolf he did not care—he could take care of one—five—a dozen.

But in his ears was the roar of the pack of the night before, and he could almost hear again the gnashing of their teeth as they passed by the camp, baffled by the fire and the smoke.

The sun dropped behind the timber, out of sight, and the long twilight set in. The traps were all empty, and Black Jem flew by them with only a glance. He was gaining—never had he traveled like that before. He would make camp long before he had dreamed he could make it.

Along the edge of the barren the snow was packed and his snowshoes did not sink in. It was there that Big Couray had faced that wind—and the fight had worn him down.

In the half-obliterated snowshoe trail were fresh wolf-tracks. Black Jem exulted, thinking of the wolves eager in Big Couray’s trail.

He ran up a long slope, pitched over the edge down a steep sag in the timber, and one snow-shoe toe bridged the side of a fallen tree-trunk just as in the tail of his eye he glimpsed a gray form in the gathering gloom.

He felt the rush of a wolf not yet nerved to attack. Howl answered howl in all directions.

Black Jem drove down his foot for a farther leap—then his moccasin went through the webbing of his snowshoe and, twisting, he plunged headlong in the snow.

With a thrill of terrible surprise, Black Jem as he fell realized that when he had slashed the

webbing of snow-shoes with his keen knife it was his own and not Big Conray's, that he had cut, and now he saw that he had poured wolf-bait medicine on his own snow-shoes and not on his partner's.

He screamed, for he saw the wolves that had been trailing him through the timber came swinging toward him with savage exaltation. Struggling to one knee, he fired, and the shot drove them back for a moment.

He unlashed his crippled shoe and then with frantic haste, strung snare-wire though the webbing across the knifed gap—cursing his mistake.

He could not work for long. Wolf answered wolf, and there were black wolves among the gray milling round him, edging in.

"It'll have to do," he gasped, and, swinging his pack into the limbs of a tree, he started on again, rifle in hand. There was still daylight, and the wolves hesitated to charge in—but they might charge at any moment now. In the night they would certainly come.

The arctic breeze died out of the woods and the gray breath of the wolves circling round him was plain in the open timber. They circled him, barking and growling, and he could hear their teeth snapping.

From the distance other wolves were coming—from the north and from the south came running cries, exultant and eager, but still cautious, biding their time. They knew they had the man on the run, and they could wait.

It was Black Jem's crowded hour. He could see the flash of fading eyes turning away from him in the mist. Then he heard a snap behind him, and, turning, was just in time to drive a bullet home in an old dog wolf that was creeping close, too famished not to be willing to set upon a man.

The wolf turned back with a wild yelp, and its mates set upon his wounded sides, mad with blood-hunger.

With that taste of blood, a new note came into the chorus which was taken up with hoarser yells the moment the wounded wolf was torn to pieces and gulped down—now they charged.

Black Jem understood he must tree, unless he preferred a quick death to the long, slow agony after belting himself in a tree, with the cold creeping over him and the wolves waiting round for him to fall out, like a ripe Ontario apple!

He climbed, and hardly was the tail of his

snow-shoe drawn up when the first wolf came charging under, throwing himself clear of the ground with a snap in the air.

Black Jem took off his snow-shoes then and hung them on a branch. He loosened his belt and passed it round the tree, which was not large. Then, as the wolves gathered round, he shot one and had the satisfaction of seeing the whole pack chase it out of sight, and hearing its squalls.

If a score of wolves ran away two score returned, and Black Jem shot another—shot it through the flanks, just to hear the beast scream and hear its mates tear it to pieces.

He fired and fired again till his rifle was empty, and then he reached for his cartridges. His head chugged painfully as he remembered that the cartridges were all in his pack. He had forgotten to fill his pocket. He could shoot no more. He must wait there while the gaunt wraiths of the night sat round, snapping at one another for choice places under the tree.

He buried his nose in his jacket when he found it hard and he plunged his fingers into his bosom when they stiffened, and the rifle, now useless, dropped from his grasp.

The wolves leaped to seize it, and three that seized the barrel were frozen to it by their tongues and lips. At that the others, seeing their helplessness, ate them with growling and eager gusto. It was a sound to quicken the blood of Black Jem, but not for long.

He drew up his feet, he curled down his head, and wrapped his hands.

He fought sleep in a night-long battle—a battle that must have seemed hopeless to the wolves, for they curled down on the packed snow under the tree to wait till the man should fall.

There was no wind that day—just the still cold. The sun shone and it was bright against the black lump in the low tree beside the trap-line.

It was a terrible sight to Big Couray when he came pounding along on the trail of his little partner.

Big Couray had started out as his partner had done, but when half-way on to the next line-camp his forebodings, his anxiety, and the mesh-work of wolf-tracks had turned him back, and after another night in the half-way camp he started out to overtake his partner, for company's sake and to speak at last about the things they never should have

kept silent about.

Jem's pack hanging in the tree frightened Big Couray, but the white-frosted lump in the tree was a thousandfold worse. With an impatient half-dozen shots Big Couray cut down the waiting wolves and sent the others scurrying away.

He tore his partner down from the tree, built a huge fire, and with snow rubbed the white flesh back to life. Then he drove the little man on to the

next camp, whipping him into sensibility.

In a few days they could travel on again.

Big Couray went ahead to break the trail, and Black Jem had no pang of jealousy.

The bitterness in his own heart had been frozen out, and Big Couray, who never had understood the matter, said nothing and thought nothing more.