The Draw

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Abstract

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A pair of magpies, flashing black and white and crying nasal alarms, veered away from the thicket of cedar where Eric Williams sat motionless. He scowled after them as they flapped heavily away, thinking of his undertaking with the Custer wolf. He had long since concluded that the renegade had been underestimated. It had been seven months now, seven months of constant tracking, following the white wolf’s trail. But the final, infallible trap was set, here at the head of Lindsey Draw. If nothing went wrong, the Custer wolf would be dead before nightfall.

Oh, there would be compensation for the seven months. Eric reflected. A fat payroll from the Biological Survey, besides the 500 dollar bounty on the white scalp. A nice sum to take back to St. Louis. But still, seven months of hunting on glimpses of a white shadow, or torn steer carcasses, or three-toed prints in the dust and rock of this God-forsaken country. It was almost an insult to his skill.

It had looked easy then, back in March. The branch office had assigned him to a renegade wolf around Custer, South Dakota, after receiving a plea from the cattlemen of that area. He had been assigned to other renegade wolves, and they hadn’t been hard to track down. He had packed his gear and taken the next train to Custer.

A large crowd had greeted him at the little railroad station. They all looked wildly hopeful when he stepped off the coach, carrying his equipment. The excitement alarmed Eric, bringing an odd whirl to his mind, but he shrugged it off. He grinned at the pack of boys that pushed around him, full of questions and shouting gleefully. “He’s gonna get ol’
Custer.” The women held back, smiling: ranch women, hardened and worn, with smiles of relief; shy young girls, trying to hide their disappointment, for he was not as handsome as they had imagined a professional hunter would be. The town officials, pompous and laughing, had patted him on the back warmly, pouring out greetings and approval. Muttering ranchers, big, hardworking settlers, had taken his hand firmly, with broad grins. It made him feel heroic to be so welcome, and he spoke confidently of his task. But the strange suspicion remained in his mind.

Squatting on the shadowed west bank of the draw, Eric leaned back and eased onto the rough clay gravel. He was alternately squatting and sitting to ease the long stiffening wait. The sun was low now, disappearing over Thompson’s Butte, and the red light was mirrored on the crumbling clay of the opposite slope as a dirty orange glow. This end of the draw was not far from Elkhorn water hole. A scrubby brush grew bravely up the walls—cedar, sage, and a few junipers. The clumps of buffalo showed blue and yellow splotches of late-blooming asters and rabbit brush.

A spot of dark juniper partially obscured the object of Eric’s vigil. Arroyos slashed the ridges bounding the draw, deep gullies cut in the clay and sandstone by heavy rains. Rounded mounds were formed between arroyos, fat fingers jutting from the walls of the draw. And opposite Eric, where the east ridge and its promontories overlooked the approaches on all sides, the Custer wolf had dug a den. The wide, black mouth lay on the side of a mound, near the top.

Eric scanned the ridge, his eyes glinting dull blue. Professional hunting kept his body lean and tough, and the sun burned a healthy duskeness on his face and bleached streaks in the sandy shock of hair. But the past seven months had taken a toll. When he squinted now, the permanent furrows on his leathery face deepened.

It was the waiting, always waiting for another chance at the Custer renegade. But this was the last wait; it had to be. Eric had exhausted his knowledge to trick the wolf within range of his Springfield. He lifted the rifle from his lap
and jerked out a dirty handkerchief to wipe the dust from the barrel and stock, exposing the blue-black steel and hickory finish. Carefully winding a corner of the rag around his finger, he lightly cleaned the lenses of the sight, pulling the gun to his shoulder to check the alignment and range on the den. He tucked the handkerchief into a pocket and reverently laid the rifle on his lap again.

Turning back to the ridge, Eric smiled and shook his head. It seemed so simple, now. He had soaked his boots in female wolf urine. Ol’ Custer thought he had a girl friend on his run and had started denning with the prospect of a family. He would pass here this evening, Eric knew. Lindsey Draw opened in the bottomlands of Rapid Creek, where Larson ran his livestock, and Custer would intend to make a kill tonight. He would stop off for some half-hearted work on the den when he passed, and Eric was waiting, a loaded Springfield-1903 on his lap.

Yes, the white renegade would be dead, Charlie Adams and his cohorts would stop hounding him, and he could go home with some cash in his pockets. Charlie Adams wanted the hide to hang over his mantel — something to brag about or to scare his grandchildren with. Eric grinned vengefully. A renegade’s skin was usually well scarred, and there wouldn’t be much left of Custer’s pelt after a soft-nosed slug tore a hole in it. He would throw the mangy remains in that windbag’s face before he left.

He knew from the talk they had had in the hotel the evening he arrived that Adams was no hunter. Just a porch-step hawk shooter with a cannon.

“Well, Mr. Williams, now you know why us members of the Custer Livestock Association had to call you in,” he had said, drawing his body up to its full height and puffing on a black cigar. He served as president of the Association, and was especially aware of his position and his short stature. “The Custer wolf is ruining this country for ranching, and Mr. Purdy, here, is running out of money to make loans.” His fat, red face had waggled. “We want his scalp. The 500 dollars the county and us cattlemen have offered for him still
stands. That cattle menace has got to be killed.”

Eric had agreed earnestly. “Yes, I sure can’t blame you. It’s hard to believe he’s killed $23,000 worth of stock in six years.”

Adams had nodded knowingly. “Yep, he’s really a devil. I hope he don’t outwit you like he did Mr. Jensen here. Nothing against old Sam, but did you know, Mr. Williams, he’s spent five months trying to get that wolf? He’s tried everything. I’m sure you won’t take that long, but that just shows you how crafty that devil is. Maybe Sam could help you out—you know, tell you what he’s tried that don’t work. By the way, do you have any special plans in mind on how you’re going to get that renegade?”

Eric scrambled to his haunches for a better view of the den and ridge top. How he hated that inflated jackass, acting like killing a wolf was a cattle deal he could settle in a few days. Oh, he and the other members of the organization had been friendly the first couple of months, with them praising him highly when he shot Custer’s traveling companions, a pair of coyote bodyguards who warned the wolf and gleaned his kills. Then they became sullen when he reported he had found the renegade at a kill but had over-shot him. After that, meetings with the Custer Livestock Association members became more and more unpleasant. Now he went in for supplies as little as possible, reporting his progress through nearby ranchers, who were equally hostile.

Time was the most important factor. Sam Jensen had agreed with that. Jensen was no longer a professional hunter; he could only work part-time at some trapping. But if it hadn’t been for him, it would have taken more than seven months to get the Custer wolf. He had shown Eric the renegade’s run, two hundred miles of cowpaths, water holes, day beds, and prairie, forming an oval around Custer. He knew all of the wolf’s traits, what he looked like, why he was trap-shy and wouldn’t pick up poisoned bait and saw the best-dug pits a mile away. Jensen knew wolves, and probably could have gotten the Custer Wolf, too, if it was not for his age and Charlie Adams. They had talked much, as Jensen
showed him the territory, about the rogue wolf and Adams and the old days when wolves fed on buffalo and deer and rabbit, instead of cattle and horses.

Eric sat back on the ground again, checking the wind with a wet finger to make sure his scent could not reach Custer's sharp nose. The chilling shadows of dusk alerted his sense. The flatlands of the ridge, so somber and deathly in the day, were shaded purple from the refracted sun rays filtering through heavy clouds in the West. A flock of geese, gabbling instructions in flight, streamed in a V-formation over the draw, floating southward. Harney Peak rose ominously in the South, a hazy, snow-tipped cone in sharp contrast to the violet glow of sky and land.

The time was coming, Eric thought, pushing his strong fingers through his hair. Seems kind of sad. He grinned; he was thinking talk at the white wolf again. He had caught himself doing this often lately. Well, after all, I've gotten to know him pretty well, even better than old Sam does. I know he likes tongue best, and liver second. I know how he hamstrings horses and chops the tails off range calves when he throws them over. Can't say I blame him for not liking rabbit after all that prime meat he's eaten.

No, you can't fool me anymore, Custer. I can tell where you are and what you'll do next. I know where you sleep, and — why, I even know where you urinate. Almost like a brother, you rebel. You and Sam and me, like brothers. Too bad you got a weakness for beef and she-wolves. Kind of a dirty trick, using a woman to trap somebody as smart as you, but even the best of men falls short when it comes to women. Too bad I've got to . . .

Sharply, the thought of actually killing the Custer wolf tugged at his mind. All these months, it had been a question of getting near enough — no time to think of shooting.

Now, the white wolf stood at the top of the east ridge, sniffing the air. Eric stiffened with surprise. The wolf had approached over the flatlands of the ridge, appearing suddenly over a rise from a coulee. Satisfied with the conditions, the renegade paced over the mound to the den mouth and inspected the bank around it, pawing and snuffing the loose
clay. Eric lifted the Springfield to his shoulder, watching the wolf through the 'scope. The animal looked like a large white dog, hazy in the dusk. The rifle seemed harder and heavier now, and the trigger was cold and stiff. Finally a resounding crack split the quiet air. Custer dropped, rolling down the slope in a flurry of dust.

Eric crashed out of the cedars and stumbled over the rocks and through the brush on stiff, sleeping legs. He scrambled up the opposite side, slowing as he approached the wolf.

Custer lay against a grass clump on a rocky ledge which had stopped his fall. Eric stood over him, his heart thumping in his ears. The animal kicked convulsively, whining and lunging. Blood still gushed from the hole in his chest, and flowed thickly through the coarse, gray-white hair. His breath bubbled from his mouth in a red foam.

Eric watched the renegade for a few minutes after it died. "The Custer Wolf," he pronounced. He felt sick. Turning, he strode back across the draw, his legs weak, the rifle bouncing against his thigh.


She sat alone,
Reposed against the rusty brick,
Her hair a silky warp and woof
Falling through the fingers of the undulating breeze,
Weaving to an airy coverlet,
Dissolving —
Finest, softly golden meal
Sifting past her eyes;
Softest, childspun loomthreads
Misting past her sleeping eyes.

—Larry Syndergaard, Ag. Sr.