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THE MUSICAL COYOTE

by
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"How wonderful," remarked a traveler staying at a ranch in the wilds of the West, "to hear the Indians chanting as they ride at dawn!" A cowboy sitting on a fence winked at another, for both were used to being awakened by the early morning coyote chorus, and there were no Indians who might be greeting the sunrise with a song nearer than sixty miles. Numerous famous musicians have vouched for the definitely musical characteristics of the Indian chants, but as yet no one has written a symphony with a coyote motif. To one addicted to a pillow under a tree in the deep forest or on the shore of a lonesome lake, it seems that a great chance has been lost to record the quavering, yearning notes of the wild dog who pours out his soul to the moon and the mystery of the night.

Some say that the howl of the coyote sounds like the wail of a dying woman. Others hold equally uncomplimentary views, but that weird cacophony of vocal over-strain somehow posesses much in common with the untamed surroundings of the West, along with the ancestral tuneless throb of Indian chants, and with the spirit that pervades that mystic hour before dawn throughout the world. For most of us, possessors of neither sheep nor chickens to worry lest they fall prey to the canine musicians, we can lie in bed and listen and be grateful that the little wild dog is afoot. That is, be grateful until some farm "Bowser" feels called upon to contribute his bit to the wild chorus. No domestic dog can compete and Bowser's notes are those of civilization. Vainly and vaguely they challenge the unknown with a sub-conscious feeling of jealousy toward a mystery they cannot fathom. The bark of a dog before dawn clashes stridently. The charm is shattered, and one bounces out of bed with a shout: "Shut up, Bowser! You may wish you were a darn coyote again, but you certainly are not!"

Did I say "darn" coyote? That adjective, and an even stronger one, has been so long associated with the name of this four-legged night-raider who

isn't quite a wolf, or quite a German shepherd dog, or quite a fox, that it is as natural as the John that comes before Smith. The coyote is a predatory animal blamed for half the calamities that befall ranchers and farmers. It must be admitted that he thinks the farmer raises fat chickens for his special benefit. So do the robins think we raise cherries for them. But what would the orchard be without the robin, and the desert without the coyote?

Yes, yes, all very well. There was Mr. S. who thought just that. He was a very definite and vociferous conservationist, so steeped in the doctrine that he hardly had time to do anything but fill his dates for speeches on the subject. He was also a home lover and gardener. How he did love home grown golden bantam corn! In those young green days of early May he inspected his two-inch rows daily. And others were also watching those tender ribbons pushing out of the brown earth. One morning the patch had changed its orderly appearance. It looked a little moth-eaten. There were bare spots here and there as if some one had gone along and gouged holes in the rows. Ah, ha, the old black crow! And not a caw out of him to give it away.

Well, this was different. The crow was not at the point of final disappearance. There were plenty of them to keep up the race. So he replanted the empty spots, and the next morning he would lay for the black villains. The alarm went off in the groggy hours. He dragged himself out of bed and sneaked out behind the garage to get a squint at the corn patch. There was one - and another- five of them! How busy and dead silent they were. He raised his gun and let out a blast, and as the birds got up squawking he gave them another. A little later he came in lugging four glossy black forms and deposited them on the garbage can. For a minute he stood looking down at the big blue-black birds, the long pointed wings, the big heads and heavy bills. "A magnificently built bird," he mused, "lots of power and sagacity."

But the coyote, wild dog of the desert, has less chance of conservation and more need of sagacity. And he has it. He can't be spied upon and shot down, and only the innocent babes of the tribe will fall for poisoned traps. Hundreds of professional trappers and poisoners have been after him for

years with every means they can think of, and Mr. Coyote (I'll give him a more honorable title for his cleverness) laughs at the lot. Yes, they trap him and poison him, they collect bounties and salaries on thousands of skins every year. But the coyote still roams the hills in summer and the valleys in winter, and alone or in groups he sings to the rising sun.

Long ago the coyote ranged over the prairies, the Rocky Mountain and western states. And he still does. Indeed, the coyotes are now working eastward to claim the whole country for their own. And westward they are threading new trails out of the high deserts into the more populated districts. They are an adventuresome race and full of curiosity. Not long ago on a June midnight, a motorist was winding down the highway from Hood River to Portland. Suddenly into the path of his headlights trotted unmistakably out of a green field a wild coyote. He stood there a moment looking the car over, then vanished, leaving a remembrance of cold clear nights on the desert of eastern Oregon and juniper burning on the hearth. And that same night, I am sure some Hood River farmer cursed the "fox" that robbed his hen roost so skillfully.

The very fact of persecution seems to have made the coyote even more persistent. The less clever and less strong of his species have been killed by man, and only the most intelligent and strongest have survived. Natural selection by violent death seems to have gone so far that Nature takes a hand. Where a few years ago a female coyote might have six or seven pups a year, now ranchers report digging out dens to find a dozen or more pups in a single litter.

It would also appear from the evidence available that modern coyotes are more destructive than their forebears of fifty years ago, and that is perhaps also due to man's persecution. Originally the coyote was considered to be largely a scavenger, feeding on dead carcasses, prairie dogs, and rabbits, even though he frequently could not resist raising merry-hell with a bunch of blatting sheep. There is something about the mad mass fright of sheep that inspires even civilized dogs with the lust to kill. And who can blame the coyote? Sheepherders and trappers used poisoned carcasses to get rid of coyotes and the method

seemed for a while to be moderately successful. But somehow modern coyotes no longer fall for such easy bait. Somehow the survivors have learned and imparted to their successive generations the idea that those who eat dead meat pay the penalty. "Do your own killing" was the answer the coyote found, and while every year some animals still fall for bait, others seem to practice the new theory to the point where they seldom return to their own kills for a second time.

"The trouble with trappin' coyotes," says Buck, "is that you got to be cleverer than they are, and most men ain't that bright." Buck traps some every winter, visiting his trap-line early each morning, for no coyote will remain long even in a trap. He prefers to bite his own foot off as the price of freedom, and strangely enough three-legged coyotes often live for many years. Like all good trappers, Buck sometimes uses scent from coyote glands rather than meat bait, the sex curiosity of a coyote being greater than his hunger. But even coyotes learn control. One big male visited a trap four nights in succession leaving plenty of trade marks and apparently just sassing Buck by showing him that he knew exactly where the hidden spring lay and exactly how close he could go without stepping on the pan. Yet Buck had worn gloves when he set the trap, stepped and knelt only on an old piece of sacking, covered his tracks with untouched dirt - and no lady will be wearing that coyote's fur disguised as Russian wolf.

A story is told of a "big bad wolf" that excited and tantalized sheep and cattle ranchers in a remote region. He was not a rabbit hunter, and he disdained even a glance at a trap. His main meat was new born calves left alone on the range and stray lambs. He was described as a big rangy fellow mottled in white and tan, and the feeling grew that he was the product of a mesallience between a coyote and a sensible good-natured house dog at one of the ranches. This dog was a mixture, Newfound-saint-setter-collie hound, but mostly white collie. The "wolf" offspring was larger than a native coyote and diabolically clever in avoiding traps. Crosses of this kind are common, especially

between a German police dog and a coyote, which produces the most realistic and destructive "wolf" any one can ask for, and one that seems to combine unusual boldness with a very practical knowledge and fear of the wiles of mankind.

It is all a story of the wide, lonely spaces where life is lean and punishment is harsh, where there is a ring around the moon when a storm is brewing. The Indians chant to their gods for a good corn crop, the coyote sings to the rising sun a devil-may-care "I'll-get-along-anyway."