The man killed Granny, stole her fur to make a coat, stole her ears to make a hat and turned her muzzle into a mask.

"And what happened after that?"

"You'll find out when I tell you the rest tomorrow. It's time for bed now, children."

The cubs complained, but Black Flame was firm. Gradually drowsy sounds filled the lair. Blue Wolf always waited for this moment to ask his question. And he always asked the same thing.

"Was that a true story, Black Flame?"

Black Flame would pause and consider before giving the same strange reply. "Let's just say, more true than not."

IV

The seasons came and went, and the cubs grew into young wolves and skilful hunters. But they'd never seen a human being. Not close up, at any rate. They'd heard the noises humans make. On the day Great Wolf fought his battle against them, for example. They'd heard Great Wolf howling, and a man roaring with pain at fangs sunk into his backside. They'd heard the shouts of panic, the orders barked out, something that sounded like a clap of thunder and then ... nothing. Great Wolf never came back.

So they found themselves on the run again.

They'd seen them from a distance. No sooner had they left a valley than the humans settled in. The valley would begin to smoke like a cauldron.

"They're dirtying the snow," complained Black Flame.

They watched them from the top of the highest

hill. They could see them walking on two feet at the bottom of the cauldron. But what did they look like close up?

"Grey Cousin, you've seen them close up before, haven't you?"

"I've seen some of them, yes." Grey Cousin didn't talk much.

"What do they look like?"

"Humans? Two legs and a gun."

That was all they could get out of him.

And Black Flame told them stories they no longer believed in now they were grown up. "Humans eat everything: the grass that caribou eat, as well as the caribou themselves. They'll even eat wolves if they haven't got anything else to fill their bellies!" Or, "Human beings have two skins: the first is naked without a single patch of fur, and the second is like ours." Or, "What is a human being? A human being is a collector." (Nobody understood what she meant by this.)

One day, while they paused for a moment to catch their breath, someone asked, "Why is it always the *same* band that's after us?"

Grey Cousin licked his bruised paws. "They've

heard about a little she-wolf with golden fur—"

Black Flame cut him off in mid-sentence with a withering look. But it was too late. All the Redheads were looking at Shiny Straw. And Shiny Straw was looking at everybody else, her ears pricked up.

"What do you mean? They're looking for *me*?"

The sun chose precisely that moment to burst through the clouds. A ray fell on Shiny Straw and everyone glanced away. She looked stunning: a golden she-wolf with a black smudge on the tip of her muzzle. Her nose was so black against the gold, she seemed to squint a bit.

She's simply gorgeous, thought Black Flame. My daughter is gorgeous. And then she added, But a complete dreamer. She sighed and a voice deep down inside her whispered, Honestly, Great Wolf, why did you have to give me the most beautiful she-wolf the world has ever seen? Don't you think we've got enough to worry about?

V

"What do you mean? They're looking for *me?"*

The strange voice in which Shiny Straw asked her question hadn't escaped Blue Wolf's ears.

"They're looking for *me?"*

Don't be so silly, of course they're not... But it was worrying, all the same...

Blue Wolf didn't know what to make of his sister. She was a beautiful she-wolf, of course. So beautiful she took your breath away. And as a hunter she was in a league of her own. She was much quicker than the Redheads, who were no mean hunters themselves. She had a better eye than Black Flame. A better ear than Grey Cousin. And, Blue Wolf was forced to admit, a more sensitive muzzle than me. She would come to an abrupt halt with her nose in the air and say, "There's a prairie mouse!"

"Where?"

"Over there!" She would point to a specific

spot three hundred metres away. When they reached it, they would find a family of red-backed prairie mice as plump as partridges tucked underground.

The Redheads could never get over it. "How did you guess?"

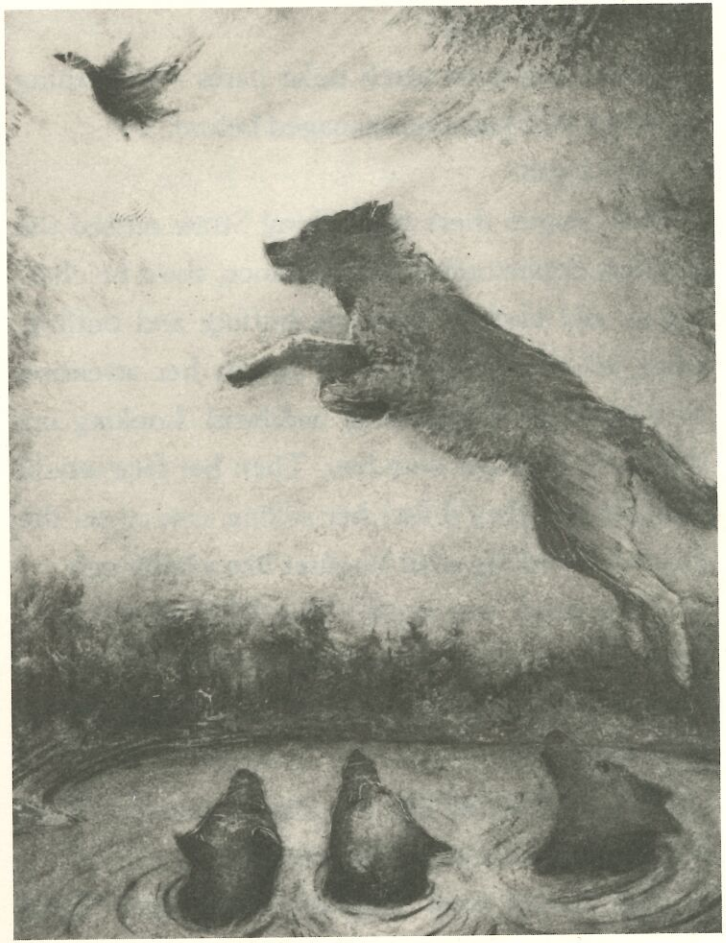
"My nose," she would reply.

Or in the summer, when they were hunting ducks... The Redheads would swim soundlessly towards their prey, with only the tips of their noses sticking out. They never made a ripple. But nine times out of ten the ducks would fly away from right under their noses. Shiny Straw would stay on the river bank, flat as a cat in the yellow grass. And she would wait. The ducks would take off heavily, skimming the water. When the fattest duck flew over her head – action! One leap, one snap of her teeth.

"How did you manage that?"

"My eyes!"

And when it was time for the caribou to migrate and the herd was spread right across the plain... The wolves would climb to the top of the highest hill, and Shiny Straw would say, "The sixth on the right from the big rock is sick." (Wolves have a rule



that they only eat sick caribou.)

"He's sick? How can you be sure?"

"My ears! Listen," she would add. "He's having difficulty breathing."

She could even catch polar hares – something no other wolf had ever managed before.

"My legs!"

But despite these feats Shiny Straw missed the simplest opportunities. For instance, she'd be chasing an old caribou that was huffing and puffing, when all of a sudden she'd switch her attention to a snow partridge flying overhead. Looking up, she'd trip over her own feet. Then her face would crumple and they'd find her rolling around on the ground, shrieking with laughter like a baby cub.

"You laugh too much," Blue Wolf would complain. "You don't take anything seriously."

"And you're too serious; you never see the funny side of things."

Blue Wolf didn't like this kind of answer. "Why do you laugh so much, Shiny Straw?"

She would stop laughing, look Blue Wolf straight in the eye and reply, "Because I'm bored." And she would explain. "Nothing ever happens in this stupid country; nothing ever changes!"

And then she would repeat, "I'm bored."

VI

And it was because she was bored that Shiny Straw wanted to see something new. She wanted to see what human beings looked like close up. One night she finally got her chance. The same band of hunters was still hot on the family's trail. They had pitched camp in a grassy basin three hours away from the lair. Shiny Straw could smell the smoke from their fires. She could even hear the dry wood crackling.

That's it, I'm off, she said to herself. I'll be back before dawn. I'll get to see what they look like at last. I'll have a story to tell to make life more interesting for everyone. I'm the one they're looking for, after all...

She seemed to have plenty of good reasons. And off she went.

• • •

She had already been gone an hour when Blue Wolf

woke up in the night, sensing that something was wrong. He guessed straight away. She was crafty enough to dupe Grey Cousin, who was on watch, and she would have headed off towards the men.

I've got to catch up with her, he thought.

But Blue Wolf didn't manage to catch up with her.

When he reached the hunters' camp, he saw the men dancing in the firelight around a net tied with a thick rope to a sort of wooden gallows. Shiny Straw was caught in the net and was furiously gnashing her teeth. Flashes of gold glanced off her fur in the darkness. Dogs jumped up and down in a frenzy of excitement below the net. They were yapping and yelping. The men let out great cries as they danced. They were clad in wolfskins.

Black Flame was right, thought Blue Wolf. He paused. If I bite the rope, the net will land in the middle of those dogs. She's too fast for them, and we'll make our getaway.

He had to jump over the fires, which is something wolves don't like doing. But it was the only way, and it had to be done quickly. There was no time to be scared. He had to catch them by surprise.

He was already high in the burning air, above the flames, above the men (whose faces looked very red in the firelight) and above the net. He ripped the rope with one tug of his teeth and shouted, "Run, Shiny Straw!"

The men and their dogs were still looking up in the night air, confused.

Shiny Straw hesitated. "I'm sorry, Blue Wolf, I—"

And then it was pandemonium. Blue Wolf drove two dogs into the flames. "Run, and look after the family!"

Blue Wolf saw Shiny Straw take an enormous leap. Then he heard those thunderclaps. The snow around her was splattered with little craters. Missed! She disappeared into the night.

Blue Wolf didn't have a second to celebrate. A bear-sized man was standing in front of him waving a flaming branch. The blow came as a shock. Blue Wolf felt his head was exploding. Then there was darkness. It was a darkness filled with stars, and he was falling, falling, falling and spinning round.

VII

When he woke up he could only open one eye. They hadn't killed him. His fur had been too badly damaged in the struggle to be sold, so he ended up in the zoo. Or rather, in several zoos. Over the next ten years he stayed in five or six. Sometimes the ground was concrete and the roof was made of corrugated iron. Sometimes the ground was bare earth and there was clear sky above. He'd been in small cages and behind thick bars, in large enclosures and penned in by wire meshing. His meat was thrown to him from a distance. People came to paint him on Sundays; children were scared of him. The seasons came and went...

He was all alone. Surrounded by animals he didn't know, who were also caged off.

"A human being is a collector."

Now he understood the meaning of Black Flame's words.