

Leonard Bradley and the Wolves

A Story for Young Folks

By Virginia Woodward Cloud

I have learned more about dead generations from the attic than from the many-branched Family Tree hanging in the wide hall, under the original grant of land signed by Cecil Calvert, Lord Baltimore. The last time I undertook the attic I was armed with a bunch of keys (wardens to the more valuable heirlooms) and accompanied by Grandmamma. For Grandmamma delights in talking "old times" to one who loves to listen. Therefore, when Grandmamma was seated upon a little, low chair with a very high back, belonging, no doubt, to a spinning-wheel and a chimney-corner, I proceeded to look at the contents of a brown hair trunk.

"What an extraordinary garment!" I said, holding up to view a coat with the tails torn or chewed directly off. "It looks as if it went with a powdered queue and knee-breeches and buckles, and all that sort of thing. But why are there no coat-tails?"

"That coat belonged to your great-great-uncle, Leonard Bradley, on your mother's side. The Bradley things are in the trunks, and the Herberts' in the chests—"

"But the coat-tails?" I said, closing the trunk and spreading the garment upon it. I settled myself beside it, and Grandmamma smiled at me.

"It'll not take long to tell, for it didn't take long to happen. I am very proud of those lost coat-tails. It happened this way—and I've heard my father tell about it so often that I can close my eyes and see it. Your great-great-uncle, Leonard Bradley, was a famous huntsman in his day, and used to make excursions into the heart of the mountains near which he lived, and bring back game, and plenty of pelts besides. That part of the country was so wild and lonely then, and the little settlement so near the foot of the mountain, that for years the sheep pens were not safe at night from a prowling bear or wolf. I heard many a story, as a child, of the creatures which inhabited those mountains and never showed themselves by light of day.

"One evening, Leonard Bradley, who was quite a young man, returned, at dusk, with two of his friends from a hunting expedition in the mountains. A 'town meeting' had been called for that evening, and was to be held in the school-house. The school-house stood some distance from the group of houses which formed the settlement, it having been built near the foot of the mountain, because the village seemed to be growing in that direction. It was a bitterly cold evening, and the ground was covered with snow. The huntsmen, who had not brought back much game, determined to stop at the school-house and await the several townsmen, who, with themselves, would form the meeting of the principal men of the village. One of Leonard Bradley's friends had shot a bear's cub shortly before dusk, and, returning, had grown tired, and dragged it after him over the snow to the door of the school-house. The third man of the party was the schoolmaster, who, having a duplicate key of the door, let them in, and they proceeded to build a fire preparatory to the meeting to be held later.

"They sat around it, getting warm and chatting, and by and by one said:

"The wind is rising. Hear it coming down the mountain!"

"Yes," said another, 'tis like a human voice. It will be bitterly cold to go home in."

"Harken!" said Leonard Bradley, suddenly. Then they sat silent for a moment, and in that moment the wind's voice took a strange and terrible note. Nearer and more loud it came. Nearer and more terrible.

"The men sprang to their feet with blanched faces. Then a prolonged and fearful sound swept down the mountain through the night, and wrapped them round with a terrible nearness.

"Wolves!" said Leonard Bradley. "They are starved out and have followed our track. There must have been blood dropped from the game!"

"An instant of listening showed that he was right. The wind-like sound that, at a distance, seemed to come from one throat, broke suddenly from a multitude, and in a moment later a frenzied pack of wolves hurled itself, dashing and leaping, upon the door of the little school-house.

"The mark of the cub's blood," said Leonard Bradley, briefly. "How many charges have you?"

"Two," said one man, examining his gun. "One," said the other, looking at his. "None," said Leonard Bradley, snapping his flintlock, "and the door is not over strong."

"Between the chinks of a shutter they could see the howling forms, black against the snow, making vain dashes upon the door-sill, over which the body of the cub had been drawn. The door shook ominously as they hurled themselves against it.

"We cannot shoot from here," said one of the men. Then

Leonard Bradley leaped up a low flight of steps to a little landing, where hung the bell-rope, the long end of which lay coiled upon the floor. On this landing was also a window, and to this window the three men pressed.

"Far off they could see a gleam of light here and there from the houses in the settlement. The moon had risen, and all around them was a world of snow, with the darkness of the mountain in the background, and beneath was a panting, ravenous pack of wolves—how many they did not dare conjecture. The tracks of blood in the snow had fairly frenzied the beasts. They were howling like mad, and leaping upon the door of the school-house.

"One of the men fired from the window, and a huge wolf sprang upward and dropped back dead. A second shot entered the pack and infuriated the animals all the more. The third missed fire.

"That is all, and the door will not hold much longer," said Leonard Bradley, at a sound from below. He seized the bell-rope and commenced to ring with all his might.

"This may stir them in the village, and show that something is wrong!"

"'Twill soon be too late," said one of the men, leaning from the window; "they must smell the blood yet!"

"Throw out the game and keep them off the door!" cried Leonard Bradley. So, while he pulled the bell-rope, his friends carried upward the game, which they had piled within the door, and cast it out the window, piece by piece, into the pack below. There were but four pieces in all, and these were fallen upon and ravenously devoured. But the portion of the hungry wolves which had gotten none tore upon the school-house door in a fury, evidently scenting the blood which had crossed its threshold.

"Then there came a sudden sound of cracking timbers. The two men fell upon their knees, and Leonard Bradley dropped the bell-rope.

"The door is giving way!" he said. "If there was but a little more time, help might come."

"If there were but more game to throw out!" cried one of the men.

"And again there was the sound of cracking timber. Then, suddenly, Leonard Bradley seized the coil of bell-rope and sprang upon the window-ledge. In a twinkling, before his friends dreamed of his intention, he was outside, hanging over the heads of the howling wolves. "The door is giving!" he called back. "You both have families. Maybe I can keep them off—"

"Then there was a howl. Two black forms leaped into the air, and there was a sharp cry from Leonard Bradley and a pistol-shot. The foremost wolf fell back dead, and a volley of shot poured into the pack, scattering them right and left. They dashed backward in a panic towards the mountain, followed by a rain of bullets and shot.

"The bell had rung the alarmed neighbors thither, and the first shot had caught the wolf which leaped upward after Leonard Bradley.

"They picked Leonard Bradley up, unconscious but really unhurt. It was found, however, that his coat-tails had been seized and torn off by the fangs of the wolf.

"And this is the coat," said Grandmamma, stroking the garment, which lay on the trunk. "Leonard Bradley's mother kept it, and afterwards his wife, for it means that, after all, soldiers do not always fight with a sword, and all the heroes are not written down in history."