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out warning?

# Wolves in Our Wanigan

*by Lois Crisler*



My husband Cris and I went to the Brooks Range, the wild, uninhabited mountains of Northern Alaska, to make a motion picture of caribou. During our stay there, we adopted two wolves and tried to raise them as pets. It was quite an experience.

Eskimos had taken the wolves from their den when they were puppies three weeks old and given them to us. We penned them at night. By day they roamed the tundra with us, a boundless expanse flowing for thousands of square miles, uninhabited except for a few Eskimo families camped ninety miles away.

Here the little wolves began to teach us wolf nature. They disappointed us because they were not submissive like dogs; and they charmed us because they were more graceful, sensitive, and intelligent than dogs. They became our pals. Still, there was a question in our minds: Would they turn on us some day without warning?

When Trigger and Lady were pups, and we were the stronger ones, all was well. But by October, when they were more than half grown and weighed about sixty-five pounds each, we began to feel uneasy. Trigger, especially, mystified me. He was a lordly, handsome, gray wolf, but there was something sidelong about him. His sister Lady, a black wolf, was gay and fearless and



utterly straightforward. No shyness hid her native intelligence.

Lady was nobody's wolf; she chose when she would play with us. Trigger was Cris' wolf. A rare, strange companionship grew up between these two males, but no day passed that Trigger did not growl at me.

One day in October, in a blue-and-white world, I was following Cris along an old caribou trail when I became aware that Trigger was trailing me closely. When I glanced back, his eyes slid away from mine, and he drifted aside as if he had no purpose in the world. But the instant I turned my head he was at my heels again. Suddenly, sharp fangs sank into my wool mitten. Trigger snatched it off and ran. He had a trophy for a romp! I felt relief. We had a free-for-all chase over the sunny snow. Daily after this, the wolf played "mitten" with me. He gauged his bite to a nicety and never broke my skin.

The wolves turned on us the day the chartered plane came to take us out for the winter. The plane landed on a frozen lake a mile or more from our camp. We shouldered our final back packs, put leashes on the wolves, and went toward the lake. To our surprise, the wolves led easily.

A high bank concealed the plane. I waited with Lady, out of sight of the alien activity. Taking Trigger, Cris went down to help the pilot load our pile of dunnage.

Lady strained against the leash to escape. If I had fallen, she would have dragged me. Then she stood still, staring over the tundra and the bright moun-

tain world that had been her home. Here she had leaped with Trigger in play; here they had dug for the mice called voles. Wild with delight, they had shoveled their noses in the first snow and found treasure to race with—the dropped eagle's feather, the shed caribou antler.

Suddenly Lady whirled and leaped despairingly at my face. I shouted for Cris. He put Trigger's leash in the pilot's hand and rushed back. He dragged Lady to the plane. Meanwhile Trigger had bitten the pilot twice. Our wolves had changed—how deeply and permanently we did not then realize.

On the flight out Lady lay motionless, her face in a corner. Trigger crouched by Cris' knee. We came to Bettles airstrip, south of the range, and waited there a few days for a plane to Point Barrow<sup>1</sup> where we were to winter. The two wolves refused to eat, refused to let us touch them.

At Barrow Cris chained the wolves in front of our wanigan, one of a row of four or five wanigans beside the airstrip. A wanigan is a narrow shack on runners; it can be drawn by tractor across snow or tundra. Ours had been the cook's galley. One end was nearly filled by the cookstove, the other by an improvised bed. A counter stood between bed and stove. There was a narrow aisle; tight quarters these, for two people and all their gear.

Outdoors, there was constant activity during the "day," which was dark

<sup>1</sup>*Point Barrow* (bar'ô), the most northerly point in Alaska.



except for a few hours of twilight. Eskimos from Barrow village four miles away worked at the airstrip, snow weasels<sup>2</sup> roared, on some days a plane or two landed—all terrified the wolves.

Cris said, "Lois, I'm going to bring them inside." He dragged the wolves, one at a time, toward the open door. They shot under the bed, seeing it in a flash as a den. Cris, talking quietly to them, ventured a hand and unsnapped their chains. The two hostile wolves were at liberty with us in the wanigan.

They lay quietly under the bed, except that each time we sidled past, Trigger bit our ankles. The den had become his property, and he resented encroachment. Cris hung a tarp over the side of the bed, giving the wolves and our ankles more seclusion.

The next night we were awakened by cold noses touching our faces. There was the smell of wolf fur, like the smell of clean hay. Shadowy forms prowled about our bed.

"Is that you, Lady?" we quavered.

"Is that you, Trigger?"

Cris got the light on. The wolves, thoroughly recovered from the horrors of their plane ride, were prepared to take the wanigan to pieces. Trigger stood on his hind legs and pulled clothes from overhead shelves, tipped over Cris' cameras, reared almost to the ceiling, with his paws on the counter, and looked purposefully into the kitchen end of the wanigan. Then he burrowed his chin in the softness of our

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<sup>2</sup>*weasel*, a kind of tracked vehicle which can travel on land or water and is probably used here for packing snow on the airstrip.

sleeping bag. One leg, then all four legs snuggled on top. Trigger, always a luxury lover, had found new luxury.

At first we were amused. Cris got up and fed the wolves; for the first time in days they ate. Trigger, with his bloody bone, leaped onto the bed. He felt me move inside the sleeping bag and lunged at my face, snarling. His eyes flared black and brilliant.

There was no time to think. I instantly began to talk "wolf." In Lady's complaining voice, like that of a peevish woman, I said, "Do-o-n't, Trigger!"

The wolf's clear, intelligent eyes brushed mine. Cris took the cue. He began to coax. Trigger caught on. He got off the bed. Luxurious as it was, he understood that it was for us alone.

Another strange adventure occurred at Christmas time. I had received several bottles of perfume. Before retiring, I stroked some on my forehead. I was awakened in the night by a hard, hairy jaw stroking my forehead. Then a wolf's chest began rolling over my face. Cris got the light on. It was Trigger, in ecstasies over the perfume.

Cris was interested. "Get some of that stuff for me," he said.

We perfumed our hands and let the wolves roll on them. Their eyes flashed, their white teeth showed. "I like to see them enjoying themselves," Cris said. "Let's get a pint for the wolves."

One morning Lady was in the wanigan when Kobuk, a white dog she liked, came by. She darted out after him into the blackness, dragging her short chain. We were not much concerned, knowing she would not desert Trigger.



What we didn't know was that Kobuk occasionally ran away to the Arctic Research Laboratory, a mile off, where other dogs lived.

Lady did not return. After some hours, Cris put on his parka and went to search for her. When he came back, he said soberly, "I didn't realize the Eskimo fox traps were so near. They're lined up all along the airstrip and the lab area."

He searched again, returning once in a while to see if Lady had come home. He looked tired and white. At noon he telephoned a fifty-dollar reward notice to Barrow village. At 4:00 p.m. when darkness had come again, he raised it to seventy-five dollars.

Dean, our only neighbor, came over in the evening. He said, "A wolf is worth eighty-five dollars dead in the village."

Cris raised his offer to a hundred, and Dean went home to telephone the new amount to the native store in Barrow. Half an hour later he came back. "A native boy saw a 'big black fox' in a trap," he said. "The boy doesn't speak English. An Eskimo is bringing him here in a snow weasel."

The two Eskimos, with Dean and Cris, set out into the night, riding the weasel. I waited and prayed. If it really was Lady in the trap, when she saw the yellow headlights of the weasel rolling toward her in the night, she might tear her leg loose and escape, injured, never to return.

After a while Dean's rosy face appeared at the door window. "Do you want to come, Lois?"

"Is she badly hurt?"

"No."

Outside, the snow weasel stood at Dean's door. Cris, in the back, pushed a dark mass toward me. "Can you take Lady?"

I wrapped her chain around the wrist of my leather-and-wool mitten. For an instant I held the dear, huge, bushy form in my arms. Now Lady rushed me along the row of empty wanigans, lunged uncertainly at the first one, then recognized ours. The powerful wolf leaped at the small window, smashing it. I dragged her down, wrenched open the door, and Lady shot in and under the bed.

Cris told me what had happened. In the beam of the weasel headlights, they had seen the black wolf standing, one paw held in the trap. Her chain was wrapped around it. Cris went to her, talking gently. He lifted the trap and foot to his knee. The trap was too strongly set for him to open. He called an Eskimo to help. The man was afraid to approach, so Dean came up and tugged the trap open while Cris held Lady.

"She never whimpered or uttered a sound," Cris told me with pride. "A dog would have gone crazy."

The wolves still seemed strange to me. Would they ever turn on us violently, unpredictably? Up to now when they had turned on us, it had been under pressure and understandable.

At the end of January the sun rose. Change was ahead again for us and the wolves.

We flew back to our old camp in the Brooks Range where we had adopted





the wolves as pups. The chartered plane set down our supplies on the snowy tundra. We penned the wolves while we back-packed the supplies to the tent. On the day we finished this work, Cris opened the gate of the pen. In the genial, gruff voice the wolves had always seemed to like, he sang out the old question, unused since November: "Want to go for a walk?"

It was a radiant arctic spring day, twenty below zero. The hummocks on the tundra, and the marble mountains around us cast azure shadows. The free, collarless wolves raced around us. Happiness purred in me. But would Trigger and Lady come back to camp with us? They did.

Then one day on a walk they did not return. Two days later, when Cris had gone out at twilight for one more long sad look over the tundra, I heard him speaking gently, "Here, Lady. Here, Trigger." The wolves had come home.

A week later Cris propped open the gate for good; we now lived with free wolves. Trigger came home sometimes with his tawny face and long legs tinted with blood. They had made a kill. But they came home! "A wolf has more authority after he has killed a caribou," Cris said.

Two Eskimos with a dog team pitched camp half a mile from our camp. They killed a caribou and threw the meat down near their tent. Trigger discovered it; it was now "his" meat. We saw him toiling up a distant ridge with a caribou leg in his mouth, seeking to cache it.

When we went down to the tent, fol-



lowed by our wolves, an Eskimo was harnessing the dogs to bring in a second caribou he'd shot. His dogs were eating the old meat. Trigger's meat! The wolf was enraged. To him, those dogs had become enemies. Cris and I ran to stand between Trigger and the dogs. As the dog team started to move, Trigger rushed in to attack. Cris, fending him off, said, "Get sticks!" I brought slender willow branches.

The scared driver held the dogs to a walk so we could keep up. Trigger had gone crazy. He uttered strange half howls. Again and again he circled to evade us and rush the dogs. We ran to intercept him. His eyes flashed, measuring me and my little willow stick.

When the dogs were tied at camp once more, Cris said, "Ask if they have a rope I can try to lead him home with."

I brought the rope. Now began a strange, unequal struggle. On one side was the man, armed only with love for this animal; on the other side was the crazed wolf, full-grown, a killer. His fangs were twice as long as a big dog's. His jaws could open to encompass a caribou's throat.

The wolf evaded Cris. Cris followed. Finally he got his hand on Trigger. He snatched for Cris' hand as the rope went swiftly around his neck. Cris gripped the rope at the nape of the wolf's neck to make it harder for Trigger to bite his hand.

Holding the wolf this way, he patiently led him over the snow and bare tundra, speaking to him in a friendly voice.

Cris brought the wolf to camp and

waited while I ran to get meat. "Go into the pen with the meat," he said. Both wolves followed along.

In the cabin at last, Cris said, "He nearly burned up when he saw them taking 'his' meat." Then solemnly he added, "Trigger didn't want to bite me. He tried to bluff me."

It was true. Trigger had actually been half permissive; he had pulled his punches. I never mistrusted the wolves again. If Lady growled at me, I hugged her. The margin of mystery was gone. We felt that we knew our wolves to their hearts, that they would never be hostile to us except under pressure of circumstances.

One evening several days after the Eskimos had left, a strange wolf passed camp, uttering a mournful cry. Lady ran to her; Trigger followed. The stranger bit both on the flanks; wolves have little courtesies and ceremonies, and Trigger and Lady had omitted them. Then the wild wolf courted Trigger and Lady.

She was the most beautiful wolf we had ever seen, with a wide silver cape, black-edged. We gave her a name—Silver-mane. By night she hunted with Trigger and Lady; by day she lay on a low ridge overlooking camp, a quarter of a mile away.

Wolves do not breed till nearly two years old, but they start choosing mates when a year old. Silver-mane, an older wolf, chose Trigger. But Lady wanted Trigger too. She chased Silver-mane, who ran—at first. Then Lady played with Trigger, leaping over him as wolves do, easily and gracefully.





Trigger rejected her one evening just as they started the night's hunt. Leaving camp, they sang the deep hunting call together. It turned out to be Lady's death song. Silver-mane answered from the ridge. That night Lady and Silver-mane fought. In the morning Trigger and Silver-mane came home alone. Lady lay dead on the tundra, a patch of torn fur.

Now Silver-mane and Trigger hunted nightly on the arctic slope. Each morning on their return, she uttered grieving howls as he left her for the camp, and trotted off to her old vantage point. She went with Trigger and me on walks, a hundred yards or more to the side. If I stopped and looked at her, she scratched defiance at me with her hind legs. Trigger could not get the human and the animal parts of his family together. I followed a short way in the evening sometimes as the wolves left for the hunt. When I stopped to go back, Trigger would glance around, expecting me to continue with them.

Early on the morning of July 30 we saw Trigger coming home. Waiting, we called softly to him. In another five minutes the big, gray wolf would have

his bowl of warm, powdered milk and be stretched out to sleep.

Suddenly we realized that he was not alone. Out on the tundra, following him, came Silver-mane and three other wolves. At last the two had found companions, and Trigger had brought them home.

The wolves saw us and froze. Then they sped westward, away across the vast bright tundra. Trigger paused and glanced back at them. We saw him make his decision. He stood motionless, his side toward us, his jaw firm, choosing. Then he was gone, following the wild wolves. We never saw Trigger again.

### Talking it over

1. How do Trigger and Lady differ in appearance and personality?
2. In what ways do both Trigger and Lady behave like untamed wolves?
3. In what ways do Trigger and Lady act like family pets?
4.
  - a. Do you think the wolves were ever truly tamed? Why, or why not?
  - b. Do you think the Crislers were wrong to make pets of the wolves? Why, or why not?