

## THE WOLF BATTLE

By Jacob B. Bull

On the upper Rendal farm of minister Storm, there once was a high fence made of fence posts around the doghouse on the corner of the farmhand's house. This fence was erected after a wolf attack that ended the life of the minister's dog. He was killed outside the door of the farmhand's hut and dragged into the forest.

In my father's time, the old dog house still stood there, but there were only traces of the fence left and father never thought of putting it up again, as it had been a quiet time for wolves in the valley.

At the ministers farm we had two dogs Ajaks and Hektor.

Ajaks was a common hound used for rabbit hunting, with black and white fur, and was a smaller dog. He was the wildest animal I have ever known, always in good spirits and in the mood to play. A stone that had been thrown or a rag that had been thrown was enough to bring him to the wildest joy. With frisky jumps and unrestrained bites, he ran around the farm and we small boys followed.

With his head between his paws and his eyes shining mischievously, he laid waiting for us to come. When we tried to catch him, he leapt out nimbly, running here and there, under the stabbur, under the barn and then across the fields till we were finally so worn out that we sat down and couldn't manage more. Then he came running, grabbed onto our pants leg or a piece of a skirt and rolled around. And we never heard a snap or growl, no matter how roughly we played.

Ajaks was a real fighter. Never did a dog come walking on the road without Ajax attacking him, big or small. He was beaten many times, but more often than not he won the fights because he was as fast as lightning, had a sharp bite, was unfailingly persistent and so brave that he often won in the end. And if he got trouble, Hector would come by and growl, and the matter was settled.

Hector was a large St. Bernard that had long yellow-white fur with brown spots. He would tolerate anything from us children. We would even ride him around, and all day he would follow us like a shadow. When unfamiliar people came to the farm, he sent a message with a couple of sharp barks, but would quiet down and let Ajaks make the music. He never bit smaller dogs and there were no bigger dogs in the valley. For Ajaks he felt a true and patient friendship, and at night, Ajaks usually slept inside the old doghouse and Hektor outside.

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In February of 1858, it was an ice-cold winter night, with stars shining out of a clear sky. Up on Bergsli hill, north of the minister's farm, we were out sledding as usual, with our hats down over our ears and our frozen mittens on our hands. The snow crunched underneath our feet as we walked up the hill and creaked under the steel runners of our sleds when we went down. The moonlight cast sharp shadows that sparked our fantasy against the bluish snow, and Hektor and

Ajaks, who always followed, mostly looked out into the mysterious shadows. Down from the woodshed on the minister's farm shone a warm, red light. The comfort from that gave the feeling of safety peoples' presence always gives. But otherwise the sound of a crunching snow from a single load that comes driving, or the sound of a door being shut a long ways away is the only thing one hears in the snowy winter stillness.

All at once my brother grabs my arm and pauses.

"Listen," he says.

And from the strip of woods up on Grova we hear a long, hungry howl call out from the stillness. There is an answer from a hill longer away, and a little while later from far off on the other side of the valley.

Hektor stands with his head lifted high and listens. Ajaks snaps to his feet and growls.

We knew this sound from when we were small boys. We had often heard them on winter nights, but it made us shudder all the same. It rang so strangely wild and dangerously through the loneliness of the forest.

"I think we'll go home," my brother said and turned his sled.

Then they called from the farm. We sat in the sled and headed there on the path.

Down on the farm stood father.

"Did you hear the wolves, boys?" he asked.

We paused and listened again, but now it was completely quiet.

"It's all the same. Inside with you both." He patted Hektor on the head and made sure that we stood the sled up, brushed the snow off ourselves and came in.

"They are there again," he said to mother as he sat down and picked up the newspaper.

"Humph, it's beginning to be purely sinister," mother said as she looked up and set down her book. "Did you hear anything, children?" she asked and stood up.

"Yes, we had heard it, sure enough.

And so there was a telling of stories non-stop about Bok Simon who had met a wolf north on the Ellevolls road, and the beast was so fearless that it sat and bared its teeth at him right on the main road. And about Nils the shoe maker who had raced with two wolves along the entire Lomnes Lake. And about the son of the sexton who surely thought he had seen one in a pig barn one Sunday morning, but when he ran in to get his father, and they came out with a gun, it was gone.

"Yes, children, now you see that is best to be careful," said mother.

Then she went to the opening between the kitchen and the living room and asked the girls to come for supper.

The large paraffin candle with the mild, gold light was moved. The food was placed on the table, and we all sat down. Little Johannes said grace and there was quiet in the room.

Right as we sat, Ola Jonsen, the farm hand, came in from the woodshed, cold from the weather and with sawdust and snow on his frozen socks. He stood in the open door.

"It might be best to bring the dogs inside tonight, as we aren't exactly free of wolves," he said.

"Have you seen any?" asks father and stands up.

"No, but I heard two or three of them up on Groven recently," answers Ola Jonsen and takes off his hat.

"You'd better take Ajaks in the farm hand's cabin, and Hektor can stay in the childrens' room – that is probably safest," said mother.

"Woo hoo!" We boys said right away, as having Hektor for a sleepover was indescribably fun and comforting.

And between us children as we were leaving the table came many excited tales about what Hektor would do to the wolves if they came to get us. Because Hektor was the strongest dog in the whole world, and he could kill one or two or three – yes, ten, twenty, one hundred wolves; many more than there were in the whole valley.

But despite our courage, when the wolves howled and the night's mystical sounds with their spontaneous fear, we ran, the next more scared than the first, up the stairs, while we should be sleeping, and then Marit, the nanny, came with Hektor, we screamed in terror – we thought it was the wolf its self who had gotten into the house. And thoughts of wolves, being scared of the forest and quivering in loneliness, the ice-cold night followed us long after we were in bed, we wondered about behind the frozen trails, the sound of animal paws on the dark paths died out after the stillness of the evening had come with its crackling warmth from the oven and Hektor's heavy, comforting breaths from over by the door where he laid on guard. Finally sleep took hold and we dreamt our half hazy dreams.

I don't know how long I lay like that before all at once I jolted awake in indescribable fear. A ways outside I heard a strange wild group of wolves and howls, and out the window I saw the silhouette of an animal's large, dark head with an open mouth.

I let out a scream and covered my eyes with my hands. The nanny, who was sleeping in the next room came in alarmed and asked, still groggy with sleep, what was happening.

"Don't you see it?" I shouted and pointed.

At the same time, Hektor, who was also there, growled and stood up tall with both his paws on the window.

Marit came to the window and rubbed off the frost to see out, and stood frozen looking out into the ice-cold winter night. I stood beside her barely clothed and shivering. Because outside, north of the house, I saw a sight I will never forget.

Out in the snow were writhing masses of animals that were fighting, large and small, yelping and howling, that shrank and grew as the night went on.

"Wolves!" whispered Marit and turned away, took me in her arms, and took me away. But Hektor put both of his large paws high up on the door and pushed against it, wanting out.

Then Mother opened the door. Hektor ran out the door, down the stairs, but was stopped by the main door, which was closed.

"Put your clothes on, children," said Mother. "Something atrocious is happening," she said, went to the window and looked out, but quickly turned away so she couldn't see any more.

Within a few minutes everyone in the house was dressed and was up, staring and listening to the north, waiting for everything to finish.

And in that hour, the famous battle between six or seven wolves and all the fiercest dogs around, who came following the noise and commotion. Long howls and sharp yelps cut through the air; fierce barking and strangled howls ensued when a throat was bit! The strong, lean backs of the wolves that were there, and the lightning fast, angry pack of dogs that were thrown around and flipped over, jumped up and attacked again – the whole thing was so exciting my entire body trembled.

All at once we heard a shout and saw a man come running from the farm hand's cabin and up towards the woodshed. It was Ola Styggpåjord, the farm hand.

Father opened the window.

"Don't go out there!" he shouted.

"Ajaks is with!" shouted Ola and stood bareheaded and half dressed in the cold.

"Let Hektor out!" he shouts, makes for the woodshed, grabs an axe, planning on going north.

"You're off your rocker! You are talking like a mad man!" shouts father with all his might.

Ola stops in his tracks and doesn't know what to do.

Then, through the noise, we heard a loud, helpless yelp recognized by all dogs. In the beginning strong, but then weaker and in agony, and in the end only a gurgling howl from the frightening noise.

"They're going to kill him!" shouted Marit. She grabbed hold of the window with both hands and cried aloud.

"That will never happen," we hear Ola say through the commotion and see him take off.

In the same second, a rough bark rings out down the road, and a commotion ensues.

Hektor had heard Ajaks's bark. He pushed against the front door with all its might, scratching and biting with its paws and teeth and looked completely wild.

"In Gods name let the dog out," shouted father – and Marit down the stairs.

With its head lifted high, the large dog took huge leaps North, past Ola Styggpåjord who was out of breath and running with an axe in his hand, and right into the pack of wolves. He bit here and there with its large head before he found his mark. But then he got a hold of one, and Ola Styggpåjord stops and stares, and we in the window stand enthralled by the drama of uncontrollable power and wildness that now began.

A tall, skinny wolf was lifted and thrown so that we could see its entire back against the sky. He lost his grip, but with a powerful leap,

Hektor was over him, and bit him in the neck and tossed him around here and there so the snow flew high into the air.

For one long minute he held fast while the wolf kicked and wiggled in its final spasms. It went limp all at once and Hektor lifted his head proudly and looked after Ajaks.

And when he heard the wail from the nearest group – four dogs and one wolf – he went there and tried again and again to find a spot where he could take hold, and finally got hold of the wolf's back, just as it got Ajaks under it – and now cut him.

Ola Styggpåjord, who was standing nearby but did nothing, told us all the same.

The other dogs stopped as if they were scared and ran away when Hektor got hold of it. The wolf, which was a large and powerful animal, shook violently to try to free its self. But Hektor stood up to his full height and brought the wolf down so hard that Ola Styggpåjord heard its backbone crack. A long dying howl followed. Hektor took a new hold farther up the wolf's neck and began to shake and toss the around furiously. He lifted his head – the wolf was dead.

But off by the farm hand's cabin door, Ola Styggpåjord stood with Ajaks in his arms. Hektor looked around a couple times and came leaping in huge bounds with his ears pulled back, sniffed Ajaks, who was shaking and bleeding, heard some commotion and took off again. Ola Styggpåjord took Ajaks into the farm hand's cabin, put on more clothes, and went north with two boys, each with an axe.

But when they made it there the battle's outcome was decided. Of the wolves, four lay dead or dying between dogs that had been torn to pieces. The others had slinked away, and one could hear their howls up in the patch of forest where they sat. Hektor went around from group to group, sniffing the dead and wagged his tail for those that shamefully sat and licked themselves in the snow. There came the dog from Bru limping and trembling to Ola Styggpåjord. Its ear was ripped off and it had a large cut on its loin, but its spiked collar had saved its life. There laid the Enkegard dog with its throat ripped open, still living. Ola Styggpåjord gave it a merciful blow with the hammer of his axe. Of the Sve dog there was only the head and a bit of the back left. But the Hårsett dog stood with flaming eyes and blood dripping from its mouth, staring up towards the woods and listening.

Ola Styggpåjord got a hold of Hektor and tried to bring him in, but he was just wild. It growled and showed its teeth so he had to stop. And for over a half hour he walked back and forth across the ground, laying down and getting up again. Finally, when the other dogs one after another had gone home, he gave a bark at the door and wanted in. Then he went over to Ajaks, sniffing and wagging, and licked his wounds, finally laid down with a long exhale and looked after his own wounds.

Ajaks shook as he made it to his feet, went a couple times around in a circle and lay there. It had a deep wound in its back and a long, gaping scratch on its neck.

The morning after there was a big investigation on the minister's farm.

The snow was widely speckled with red and had tracks and scratches from a thousand claws. Here and there was discovered a mangled dog that lay stiff and straight with frozen eyes and gaping throats.

From crisscrossing the farm ran trails, large and small, and grey-black tufts of hair blew in the morning wind.

Soon people came from all the area farms to see and hear what had happened. Some stood in the woodshed where Ola Jonsen told the story as he skinned wolves. Others searched among the dog corpses around the farm until they found what they were looking for. But Ajaks lay in the farmhand's house, shivering from blood loss and a fever. In front of him lay Hektor motionless and on guard while its dark, dangerous eyes went slowly from one to the next that came.

As we stood there in the woodshed, almost blue from the cold, us boys standing and watching, a little girl came up to us, sobbing.

"Have you seen my dog Flink?" she asked.

"What did you say?" said Ola Jonsen a little sharply.

"Have you seen my dog Flink?" she repeated, bit her mittens and saw around helplessly while her tears ran.

"You should look to the North," said Ola Styggpåjord as he pulled the wolf pelt so that it creaked as it pulled from the lean body.

She looked at him helplessly, turned and started walking slowly north.

I don't know why, but I shared the little girl's sorrow. I knew her and I knew Flink, a little brown-black dog grown small and thin coming from one of the cottager's places. Almost without knowing it I followed at a distance, stood beside the kitchen, and watched her walk from pile to pile, always with her mittens over her face and her head down.

All at once she stopped beside something farthest to the north, stared and dropped down to her knees, lifted her head high in desperation, and then threw her head quickly forward into the snow.

She had found Flink.

I couldn't move from my spot.

I thought I should go over to the little girl, who was so alone; but I just stood there.

She stood up after a while, but fell again and remained sitting. Then came Ola Jonsen out of the woodshed and over to the stream to wash off his fingers. He turned to where I was looking and saw the girl.

"Hmm," he mumbled, wiped off his fingers in the snow and slowly walked towards her.

I pulled myself together and followed.

When we got to her, Ola Jonsen stood quietly and watched for a while.

Then he said softly and quietly, "You'd best get up now, my little friend!"

The girl turned part ways and looked away so strangely, so strangely.

"You'll freeze and get sick," he says, even gentler and walks up to lift her up.

"Be quiet," she answers, as if afraid, and sinks down again.

"Is that your little doggie there, maybe?" He bends over her and speaks nicely.

"Ye-ah," comes out in a trembling breath.

Ola stands for a while and chews his chewing tobacco hard. Then he bends down over the girl again.

"Maybe I can help you," he says. She looks up at him surprised; she doesn't know him.

So he carefully grabs beneath the frozen, dead animal to lift it and carry it. But as soon as he sees what is left, he stops quickly.

"What's left here is nothing for you – anymore," he says quietly and takes her carefully by the arm.

The girl looks at him, afraid, but follows. She stops at once, begins to cry, and says:

"Will Flink just be left to lay there?"

"I suppose your father will come and take care of him," answers Ola and takes her with him.

She stops a few more times and stares with big, longing eyes northwards, then follows weakly.

Her mother was inside the farm hand's cabin, and there they talked about the night's horrors, large and small, all throughout the day. And Hektor, the night's hero, was petted and boasted of, as he lay, looking with his large, sensible eyes from one person to the next, now as a motionless guard in front of Ajaks.

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Two days later we boys were strangely solemn on the minister's farm. Ola Styggpajord had carried the body of Flink down to the yard, and there it had lain unmoved behind the shed for two days, as nobody had come to get him. And so we children had decided to hold a funeral for him. With axes and hoes we had dug a grave in the ice and snow north of the stream. An old pig trough was used as a coffin, and the procession went along. Hektor in front of the iron sled with jingle bells on it, the coffin in the sled, and us three boys followed mourning behind.

There was singing beside the grave, and a few words were spoken. Then the cold dirt was piled into a mound with ash shovels and spades. Our small caps came off and were held in front of our eyes, and we felt strange and sorrowful when we walked away.

In the afternoon, father went down to see. He found the wood cross in the snow and read the clumsy children's writing:

Here lies the dog Flink  
dead from  
the huge wolf battle  
that took place on  
Rendalen's minister's farm

The 18<sup>th</sup> of February  
1858

Peace to your ashes,  
Blessed are your  
memories

And when he came back again, he stroked my head so gently,  
so gently, where I stood and waited to see the expression on his face.

Now many years have gone by. Father and mother have been  
dead for many years, Ajaks and Hektor long before them. But if you go  
by the north end of Rendalen's minister's farm, the garden will be to  
your right. Close to the gate you will see a hill, low and neglected.  
There are Hektor's and Ajaks's graves, and longer up, beside the gate  
post, under the withering rowan tree, lays the little doggie.

To English 2009 by Alex Huntrods and Arild Røed.