

“Four-Legs”

by Tom McGowen

Tall-Tree had killed a fine, fat bird and was on his way back to the tribal caves when he came across the wolf cub. It was lying with the back of its body pinned among the branches of a fallen tree. There had been a storm during the night, and a howl of wind had torn the dead trunk in two and sent it crashing to the ground. The frightened cub, although unhurt, had been trapped among the branches when the tree fell.

It was a very young cub and quite small, but meat was meat. Tall-Tree lifted his spear. Then he paused. It had come to him that babies have a way of growing bigger. If he kept the cub until it grew to full size, it would provide a great deal more meat. The thought seemed a good one, so Tall-Tree unwrapped a strip of leather that had been twined around his forearm and tied the cub's front legs together. It growled and snapped at him, but its teeth were too small to damage his tough skin. Then, Tall-Tree heaved the branches aside and yanked the cub free. It scabbled at him furiously with its back legs until he tied them, too. Then Tall-Tree strode on his way.

Coming to the place of caves, he went to the great fire to turn over the results of his hunt as was the law. Old Bent-Leg sat before the fire, his good leg tucked beneath him. The withered one, crushed by a bison many snows ago, was stretched out. Bent-Leg kept tally on the game that young hunters brought. Tall-Tree dropped the bird on the small pile of animals near the old man's leg. Bent-Leg nodded, then jerked his head toward the wolf cub that hung from Tall-Tree's hand. "What is that?" grunted the old hunter. "A small four-legs night-howler," Tall-Tree replied, giving his people's name for the animal. "It came to me that I could keep it tied in my cave and feed it scraps from my own food. When it is full grown, we can kill it for its meat." Bent-Leg frowned, but realized the cleverness of Tall-Tree's thinking. "That is good!" he exclaimed. "It is little meat now, but it will be much meat later!"

Food was always a problem for the tribe. Daily, the men hunted for animals and birds while the women and children searched for roots, berries, and insects that could be eaten. Everything that was found was shared by the tribe, and often there was hardly enough.

Tall-Tree went to his cave. Near the entrance was a large boulder, beside which he dropped the whining, squirming cub. Then from the cave he brought several thin strips of animal hide. These he knotted together to make a rope, which he quickly tied around the cub's neck, avoiding its snapping teeth. Then, with a grunt, he tipped the boulder up and kicked the free end of the rope beneath it. Letting the boulder settle back with a thump, he untied the animal's legs. The cub rolled to its feet, shook itself, and made a dash for freedom, only to have its

legs jerked out from under it as the rope pulled it to an abrupt stop. Seeing that the four-legs was firmly tethered, Tall-Tree nodded and reentered his cave.

In a short time, Tall-Tree noticed that the cub was thirsty and he made a hole in the sandy soil. He lined the hole with an animal skin, weighting down the edges with small rocks. Then he emptied his water bag into the hole. The skin held the water. The cub growled faintly, but inched forward and began to lap the water. Tall-Tree grunted in approval and left. The four-legs now had its own water hole, which would keep it from getting thirsty. When he returned, he carried several meaty bones, left from his share of food at the tribal fire. He dropped these before the four-legs, although it growled at him. Later, from within his cave, he could hear its teeth scraping on the bones.

Every day Tall-Tree put fresh water into the four-legs' water hole, brought it scraps of meat, and cleaned up after it. As the days passed, he noticed a change. The four-legs no longer growled at him when he came near. In fact, when it saw him-coming now, it would stand and watch him, moving its tail back and forth in an odd way. Tall-Tree realized the four-legs no longer feared him. He found it pleasant to have the little animal acting friendly toward him. He was surprised to find himself talking to it as though it were a child. "Here is your meat, Four-Legs," he would call as he approached with a handful of scraps. "Are you thirsty, Four-Legs?" he would ask as he filled its water hole. The animal's ears would twitch and its tail would move back and forth at the sound of his voice.

And Tall-Tree no longer had to guard against the cub's teeth. Instead of tossing the meat and bones to the animal, he now let the cub take them from his hand. And once, as he was filling the water hole, the four-legs pushed its nose against his hand and licked it. Tall-Tree jerked his hand back in surprise. But then, hesitantly, he held it out again. Once more the pink tongue flashed out and the bushy tail fanned the air, furiously. Tall-Tree grinned. After that, he began to play a game with the wolf cub. Whenever he approached the cave, he would try to surprise the animal by coming from a different direction or by moving stealthily. But always, the four-legs would be staring straight at him, straining at the rope and beating the air with its tail.

Then, one day when Tall-Tree was bringing the catch from his hunting to the fire, Bent-Leg peered up at him. "Is the four-legs fat enough?" asked Bent-Leg. Tall-Tree hesitated. He had nearly forgotten his reason for keeping the cub. "Not yet," he said, uncomfortably. "But soon, eh?" queried Bent-Leg. Tall-Tree nodded and hurried away.

At his cave he squatted and looked anxiously at the wolf cub. It had grown, and before long it would be as big as it was going to get. Then he would have to turn it over to be meat for the tribe, as he had promised. But he didn't want the four-legs to die. He knew that something had happened to him and to it. Perhaps because it had been so little when he found it, it had not grown up to

be like other wolves that showed their teeth at men and then ran from them. Instead of being a wild animal, Four-Legs was more like a child that liked him. And he liked it!

The next day, Tall-Tree went hunting. He was determined to bring back more game than ever before. Perhaps, he thought, if he brought plenty of meat, Bent-Leg would forget about the wolf. But the hunt went badly. He returned with only a young squirrel. And, to his dismay, none of the other hunters had fared well, either. The pile of animals by the fire was smaller than usual.

"It is not enough!" said Bent-Leg. "We must have the four-legs now, Tall-Tree." "Wait a few more days," said Tall-Tree. "The hunting may grow even harder. We may need the four-legs even more then." Bent-Leg did not press him, so he hurried away. At his cave he knelt beside the wolf and rubbed its head. It nudged him with a cold nose and swept the ground with its tail.

That night, lying beside the fire in his cave, he knew that the next day, or the day after that, he would have to give the wolf to the tribe. Dreading the dawn, he fell asleep. It seemed only seconds later that something suddenly awakened him. It was Four-Legs, snarling furiously. Tall-Tree was up and on his feet in an instant. Snatching his spear, he peered over the nearly dead fire. In the moonlight Four-Legs stood before the cave, snarling and showing its teeth, its fur bristling. Beyond it, green eyes gleamed and scales glinted on a long, sinuous body. There was an evil hiss and a rattling sound. The hair at the back of Tall-Tree's neck rose as he saw the great snake, poised to sink its poisonous fangs into the wolf's body.

Tall-Tree exploded into action. Leaping over the fire, he swung his spear forward like a club, slamming it into the snake's body, just below the swaying head. The heavy blow knocked the serpent writhing to the ground. Springing after it, Tall-Tree pounded his spear on the snake's head again and again. After a time, Tall-Tree leaned on his spear, panting heavily. Although the snake's body still feebly twisted, he knew it was dead. Four-Legs knew it was dead, too, and stopped growling. Tall-Tree knew what had happened. Drawn by the heat of the fire, the deadly snake had crawled toward the cave. If it had been attracted by the warmth of Tall-Tree's body, it probably would have coiled itself next to him. Had he jostled it, the creature would certainly have bitten him. He recalled when just such a snake had bitten a man. The man had raved with pain, and then died. Tall-Tree shivered. If Four-Legs had not growled and wakened him, he also might have died.

Tall-Tree fed the fire until it blazed up again. Then he dragged the snake into the cave and began to skin it. When he had finished, he gazed thoughtfully at the thick coils of white meat.

At dawn, he hurried to the tribal fire, carrying the snake meat. Bent-Leg was already there, as were several hunters waiting for a lighter sky before starting

on their way. Among them was Green-Leaf, the tribe's leader. Tall-Tree dumped the coils of meat near Bent-Leg's feet. "I have meat for the tribe," he said, looking at Green-Leaf. "I will hunt for other meat this day, but I bring this meat now."

The men stared at the white coils. "Where did you find this long-crawler?" asked Green-Leaf. "It came to my cave, seeking the warmth of the fire as long-crawlers do after sundown," Tall-Tree replied. "I killed it." "Were you bitten?" asked Green-Leaf, looking at him anxiously. Tall-Tree shook his head. "I might have been bitten," he said "But the four-legs tied at my cave woke me with the noise of its anger. It saved my life." He looked into Green-Leaf's eyes. "I was going to give the four-legs as meat for the tribe. Let me give this meat instead, Green-Leaf. Let the four-legs live!" Green-Leaf considered his words. "I do not know what an animal is good for, except to eat. What will you do with the four-legs?" "I will set it free," answered Tall-Tree. The chieftain thought. "It is well," he said at last. "You promised the tribe meat, and you brought meat as you promised. The four-legs saved you to hunt for the tribe. Let it go then, if that is your wish."

Tall-Tree walked slowly back to his cave. He was glad that the wolf would not have to die. Yet he felt as though a big stone sat heavily inside his chest. He knew that the moment he untied Four-Legs' rope, the wolf would run off into the forest. Tall-Tree did not like this thought, but he felt he must set Four-Legs free. It was the only way he could repay the animal for saving his life. At the cave, he knelt, loosened the knot in the leather rope, and pulled it off Four-Legs' neck. The wolf shook itself and looked at him strangely. Tall-Tree turned and went into the cave. He felt a wetness in his eyes, something he had not felt since he was a boy.

Something pattered over the cave floor behind him. Tall-Tree turned. Four-Legs stood just inside the cave opening. Its tail drooped and it held its head low. Its brown eyes stared into Tall-Tree's black ones. Then the animal moved into the cave. It was a strange movement. Its stomach was flat on the ground, but the back part of its body was pointed upward. It inched forward with little pulls of its front paws. Slowly, it crept toward Tall-Tree until its nose was only inches from the man's face. Then it licked Tall-Tree's nose. Tall-Tree yelled with delight. Four-Legs didn't want to leave; it had said so as plainly as if it could talk! Tall-Tree rubbed the animal's head with both hands. Four-Legs flopped onto its back, and Tall-Tree rubbed its stomach. The wolf's tongue lolled out of its mouth, and its lips were pulled back into what seemed to be a grin as wide as the one on Tall-Tree's face.

After a while Tall-Tree jumped to his feet. "Come, Four-Legs," he said. "Let's go hunting!" Four-Legs rolled to its feet and shook itself. Then the world's first pet and its two-legged friend happily hurried off together.