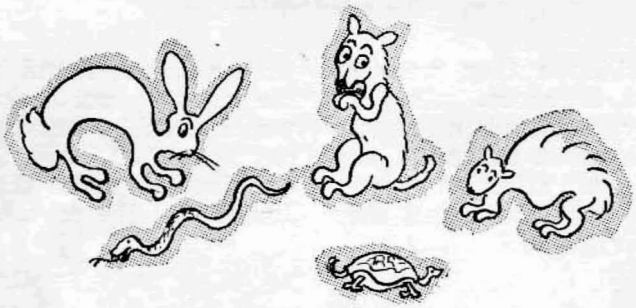


COYOTES WILL GROW UP

By HILAIRE DU BERRIER

WHEN Spring came back over the brown hills of the North Dakota countryside, there was no limit to the little animals a boy could hunt. There was a good supply of water snakes in the creek, south of the town, for taking to school. You caught gophers with a snare, and baby rabbits you didn't have to catch at all. You just fed them lettuce and they came with you.

Badgers were all right too, if you got them young enough and tamed them, but no one was ever known to catch a prairie dog, one of those rodent-like animals that burrow into the earth and ruin fields with their tunnels and their appetites. In fact you couldn't even get a dead one, because if you shot one he lived long enough to reach a hole, or if he didn't his friends and neighbors would come out and pull him in.

Prairie dogs were just plain unsociable and after a while little boys gave them up.

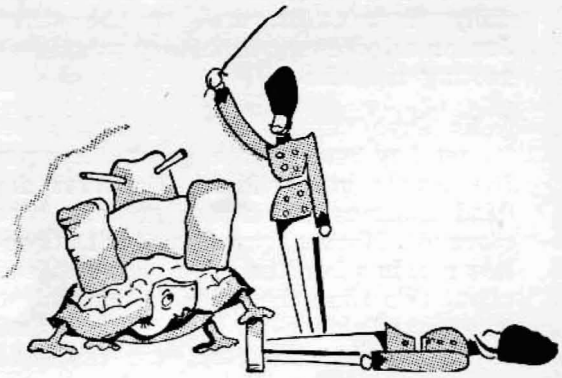
Mud turtles were much better. They didn't eat much, they made no noise, you never became too attached to them, and when you got bored you dumped them in with the goldfish till you needed them again. For playing soldier they were ideal. With a little plasticine you could model a superstructure on their backs that made fine tanks of them.

But the chances are that the finest thing in the eyes of a youngster in that country—such game as monkeys, lions, and baby elephants being non-existent in their scheme of things—was to get a young coyote in the spring, usually too young to feed itself, and raise it on a bottle.

Easterners and professors pronounce them *ki-otays,* but the cowpunchers out in that country called them *ki-otes,* and to a small boy there was nothing like them.

They were little balls of fur when you got them. Farmers would trail some female coyote that had been raiding their hen yards and when they found her den they dug it up. There would be a litter of young inside, baby cousins to a fox, with cute, wise little faces that pulled at the heartstrings of small boys. But love for one of them was about as tragic as the fatal fascination girls in the "front row" have for gentlemen on the stock exchange.

You couldn't tame them and you couldn't teach them. About anything



that wasn't instinctive they were as dumb as a herd of sheep. As they grew older they acquired a certain amount of confidence in the small boy that fed them, but affection never. Put them in the front yard, and they started to dig their way under the house; if you left them in the living room they crawled under pillows, furniture, blankets, or whatever was handiest and darkest.

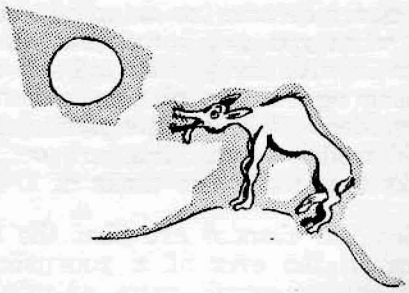
A den was their home, and nowhere else were they happy. Once in or under what looked and felt like a den they stayed there until night came or they got hungry. If the former, they came out and bayed at the moon. In the latter case, they eased out to scout around the neighborhood for a chicken coop. The embarrassing part of this business was that they always came back to the front porch or their makeshift "den" under the parlor sofa, to eat the chicken.

Parents of a boy who had given his heart to a coyote were in a quandary: on one side irate neighbors threatened daily to shoot it, and, on the other, Junior cried every time they mentioned getting rid of it.

As days passed and the bonds between boy and coyote grew stronger, the coyote got wilder. Damages for dead chickens and bitten grocery boys mounted. Nerves grew frayed with sleepless nights when the moon was out, and about this time the voice of temptation was heard loudest. For all you had to do was hit the pest over the head with a hammer and take his scalp to the county courthouse, and not only would trouble cease but they would pay you $2.50 bounty, a condition that combined to make things look bad for Junior and the coyote.

Coyotes were best adopted around May or June, and it was a strong parent who could resist the pressure of noise, trouble, and bounty past November. "Doc" Spielman, too soft-hearted to shoot his coyote and sell its scalp to the sheriff, put it in a buggy and drove twelve miles out of town to what he thought would be a good coyote country, up along Heart River. It was the sort of place where even a mug coyote that had been spoiled by soft living could get along. Luxury had come on his animal too suddenly. Doc realized that any hunter could make a fool out of it now, so he decided to take it out where its chances of longevity would be at least fifty-fifty.

As they drove along, Doc clicking his tongue at the horses and thinking alternately of the new deal he was



giving his coyote and a girl back in Flasher with hair like the mane of a sorrel horse, the yellow-green eyes of the coyote were taking in the country and not liking it. It was frightened stiff. Town life had got it.

They stopped at a point up beyond where the Congregational Ladies' Aid Society held their picnics, and here, with a friendly pat for the coyote and one for himself for having done a good deed at the cost of $2.50, Doc sent it on its way and drove back to town.

It was a noble gesture and a good idea, only the coyote got back before Doc did. It was waiting on the front porch, with the finest Plymouth-Rock hen in its mouth you ever saw, and

Doc gave up. A day or two later Mr. Coyote's ears went to the courthouse.

The trouble with coyotes was that they wouldn't stay babies. Everyone had different ideas about how they should be handled to make environment overcome heredity, but in the end coyotes they were and coyotes they remained.

I thought that if I let mine sleep with me it would civilize him, so with Mother standing at the bottom of the stairs like a customs agent at the Canadian border I used to bootleg him into bed. But it wasn't any use. He burrowed his way down to the foot as far as he could get, and nothing could induce him to come back and sleep with his head on the pillow, like a gentleman.

Still, boys are hopeless optimists. In spite of failure after failure nothing could convince us that somehow, sooner or later, we would not strike one that would be different. One coyote must react to such kindness some time.

Maybe if we didn't know they were coyotes and so didn't expect them to be wild, they wouldn't be. This was an idea; what if no one told us what they were, just let us go on treating them as though they were dogs? Why, confound it, they might grow up like dogs!

It was about 1924 when Ronnie and I reached this conclusion in our study of coyote psychology. German police dogs were then the breed of the moment, and all the high-class magazines were full of advertisements of them and articles about them, their intelligence, loyalty, and wolf ancestry. Prices ranged from five dollars to a couple of hundred, depending on how many ribbons the dog had or how big a liar the seller was, and everyone who had five dollars or could find a police dog for sale was trying to get in the swim.

Things reached a stage where police-dog owners were as boring as proud mothers, and you couldn't get past one on the street without admiring his canine and listening to how many little girls its father had saved from drowning and the number of small boys its mother had whisked off railway tracks with the Limited just around the corner, headed for the blind crossing.

I think it must have been our own frustrated longing for a police dog—in a world where there weren't enough police dogs to go round — that gave Ronnie and me our big idea. Humanitarian motives and need of some pocket money made us put it into practice.

A farmer boy from out north of town came in one May morning with eight baby coyotes, just big enough to lap milk out of a saucer. It seemed a shame to kill those innocent little things without giving them a chance, especially when so many people wanted police dogs and couldn't buy them, people who loved animals and would give them a good home.

As a matter of fact, the farmer boy had been reluctant about bringing them in himself and wanted to keep them all, but his father insisted on killing them for their bounty. All the boy was interested in was getting $2.50 apiece to take back to his father, so Ronnie and I made him a proposition.

Ronnie had to go to school, but I had been expelled for the rest of that

year, so I was to take care of the business angle. We got a few boxes and made a stand down near the filling station where passing cars stopped for gasoline and a free map.

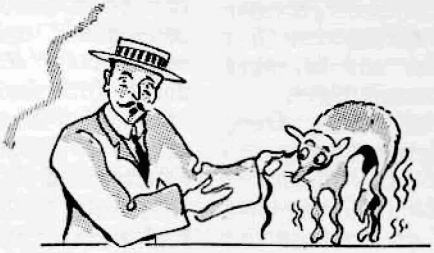
It was the dawn of the tour and trailer era, when every string of towns was putting up highway markers with fancy names on them and trying to lure unsuspecting Easterners fifty miles out of their way to sell them lunch and a tank of gas. Our trail was marked by an Indian head, replete with war-feathers and everything, and the storekeepers who had chipped in to pay for it called it Metagoshe Trail. Outsiders who couldn't pronounce it just called it the Indian Head.

It made a fine Western background for our kennel of "blooded, pedigreed, genuine German police dogs." Over their box was a card that read: "$5.00 apiece while they last."

While their gas tanks were being filled, the tourists would stroll over to my box of coyotes, I would pour some more milk in their saucer, and the coyotes, looking for all the world like German police dog pups with their little fox faces, if not cuter than police dogs, would obligingly start licking it up.

We thought for a time of feeding them moonshine, to stunt their growth, because if you could only make coyotes remain static they would be all right. But in the end we said: What the heck! and left the outcome to heredity, environment, and the laws of chance, without any tinkering.

Ronnie and I did pretty well on that business. I told the story about the father of those pups saving a drowning girl and their mother pulling children off the railway track so often that I was beginning to believe it myself, and then we ran out of coyotes.

Just as a matter of curiosity, I have always wished I could meet with one of the dog-lovers who bought them, to see which parent they took after.

Amateur dog-fanciers are a doting lot. They were probably well satisfied, innocently explaining to complaining neighbors: "The breed is too young, that is all. It is a fine, blooded dog all right; there is nothing wrong with the dog, but . . . ." — and here he would lean over knowingly—"the wolf ancestry is too near. He is a throwback. That's all . . . ."—with the air of Barnum explaining a rare specimen—"a throwback!"