

The Alien

John G. Neihardt

Table of Contents

<u>The Alien</u>	1
<u>John G. Neihardt</u>	2
<u>I</u>	3
<u>II</u>	5
<u>III</u>	7
<u>IV</u>	8
<u>V</u>	10
<u>VI</u>	11
<u>VII</u>	12

The Alien

The Alien

John G. Neihardt

This page copyright © 2001 Blackmask Online.
<http://www.blackmask.com>

- I
 - II
 - III
 - IV
 - V
 - VI
 - VII
-

The Alien

I

THROUGH the quiet night, crystalline with the pervading spirit of the frost, under prairie skies of mystic purple pierced with the glasslike glitter of the stars, fled Antoine.

Huge, and hollow-sounding with the clatter of the pinto's hoofs, hung the night above and about, lonesome, empty, bitter as the soul of him who fled.

A weary age of flight since sunset! And now the coming of midnight saw the thin-limbed, long-haired pony slowly losing its nerve, rasping in the throat, tottering.

With pitiless, spike-spurred heels the rider hurled the beast on into the empty night.

"G'wan, you blasted cayuse, you over-grown wolf-dog, you pot-bellied shonga! Keep up that tune; I'm goin' somewheres! What'd I steal you fer? Pleasure? Ho, ho, ho! I reckon! Pleasure for the half-breed! G'wan!"

Suddenly rounding a bank of sand, the pinto sighted the broad, ice-bound river, a stream of glinting silver under the stars. Sniffing and crouching upon its haunches at the sudden glow that dwindled a gleaming thread into the further dusk, the jaded beast received a series of vicious jabs from the spike-spurred heels. It groaned and lunged forward again, taking with uncertain feet the glaring path ahead, and awakening a dull, snarling thunder in the under regions of the ice.

Slipping, struggling, doing its brute best to overcome fatigue, the pinto covered the ice.

"Doin' a war-dance, eh?" growled the man with bitter mirth; and gouging the foaming, bloody flanks of the animal: "G'wan! Set up that tune; I want fast music, 'cause I'm goin' somewheres — don't know where — out there in the shadders. Come here, will you? Take that and that and that! Now, will you kick the scen'ry back'ards? By the — "

The cries of the man were cut short as he shot far over the pommel, lunging headlong past the pinto's head, and striking with head and shoulders upon the ice.

When he stopped sliding, he lay very still for a few moments. Then he groaned, sat up, and found that the bluffs and the river and the stars and the universe in general were whirling giddily — himself the dizzy center.

With uncertain arms he reached out, endeavoring to check the sickening motion of things by sheer force of his powerful hands. He was thrown down like a weakling wrestling with a giant. Then he lay still, cursing in a whisper, trying to balance the disturbed universe, until the motion passed.

With great care, Antoine raised himself upon his elbows and gazed about with a foolish grin.

Then he remembered — remembered that he was hunted; that he was an outcast, a man of no race; remembered dimly, and with a leer, a portion of a long series of crimes; remembered that the last was horse-stealing, and that some of the others concerned blood.

And as he remembered, he felt with horrible distinctness the lariat tightening about his neck — the lariat that the men of Cabanne's trading-post were bringing on fleet horses, nearer, nearer, nearer through the silent night.

Antoine shuddered and got to his feet, looming huge against the star-sprinkled surface of the ice as he turned a malevolent face down trail and listened for the beat of hoofs.

There was only the dim, hollow murmur that has its habitation at the heart of silence.

"Got a long start," he observed with the chuckle of a man whom desperation has made careless. "Hello!"

A pale, semicircular glow, like the flare of a burning straw-stack a half a night's journey over the hills, had grown up at the horizon of the east. And as the man stared, still in a maze from his recent fall, the moon heaved an arc of tarnished silver above the mystic rim of sky, flooding with new light the river and the bluffs. The man stood illumined — a big brute of a man; heavy-limbed, massive-shouldered, with the slouching stoop and alert air of the habitual skulker.

The refugee moved uneasily, as though he had suddenly become visible to a lurking foe. He glanced nervously about him, fumbled at the butt of a six-shooter at his belt, then catching sight of the blotch of huddled dusk that was the fallen pinto, the meaning of his situation flashed upon him.

"That cussed cayuse! Gone and done hisself, like as not! The whole creation's agin me!"

He made for the pinto, snarling viciously, as though its exhausted, lacerated body were the visible self of the inimical universe. He grasped the reins and jerked them. The brute groaned and let its weary head fall heavily

The Alien

upon the ice.

"Get up!"

Antoine began kicking the pinto in the ribs, bringing forth groans of pain.

"Oh, you won't get up, eh? Agin me, too, eh? Take that and that and that! I wished you was everybody in the world and hell to wunst; I'd make you beller, now I got you down! Take that, and pass in!"

With a roar of anger, he fell upon the pinto, swearing, striking, kicking. But the pony only groaned faintly. Its outworn limbs could no longer support its body.

The Alien

II

WHEN Antoine had exhausted his rage, he got up, gave the pony a farewell kick upon the nose, and started off at a dog-trot across the ice toward the bluffs beyond.

Ever and anon he stopped and whirled about with hand at ear. He heard only the sullen murmur of the silence, broken occasionally by the whine and pop of the ice and the plaintive, bitter wail of coyotes somewhere in the hills, like the heart-broken cry of the lonesome prairie yearning for the summer.

"Oh, I wouldn't howl if I was you!" muttered Antoine, apostrophizing the coyotes. "I wished I was a coyote or a gray wolf, knowin' what I do. I'd be a man-killer and a cattle-eater, I would. And then I'd have people of my own. Wouldn't be no cussed half-breed, a runnin' from his kind. Oh, I wouldn't howl if I was you!"

He proceeded at a swinging trot across the half-mile of ice and halted under the bluffs. He listened intently. A far sound had grown up in the hollow night, as if from the bottom of a deep well.

It was the clatter of hoofs far away, but clear in faintness, for the cold snap had made the frozen prairie a vast sounding-board.

A light snow had fallen the night before, and the moonlit trail of the refugee stood out upon it as clear as a wagon-track.

Antoine felt the pitiless pinch of the approaching lariat as he listened. Then his accustomed bitter weariness of life came upon him.

"What's the use in me runnin'? What am I runnin' to? Nothin' — only more of the same I'm runnin' from; lonesomeness and hunger and the like of that. Gettin' awake, stiff and cold and half-starved, and cussin' the daylight 'cause it's agin me like everything else, and gives me away. Sneakin' around till dark, eatin' when I can, like a dern gray wolf; then goin' to bed agin a snow-drift, like as not, hopin' it'll never get day. But it always does!

"It's all night somewheres, I reckon, spite of what the missionaries says. That's fer me — night always! No comin' day, no gettin' up; some place to hide in always."

He walked on with head dropped forward upon his breast, skirting the base of the bluffs, now seemingly oblivious of the sound of hoofs that grew momentarily more distinct.

As he walked he was dimly conscious of passing within a foot of the dark mouth of a hole running back into the clay of a bluff. He proceeded until he found himself again at the edge of the river, staring down into a broad black fissure in the ice, caused, doubtless, by the dash of the current crossing from the other side.

A terrible, dark, alluring thought seized him. Here was the place — the doorway to that place where it was always night!

Why not go in?

There would be no more running away, no more hiding, no more hatred of men, no more lonesomeness and hunger. Here was the place! He stepped forward, and stooped to gaze down into the door of night.

The rushing waters made a dismal, moaning sound. He stared, transfixed. Yes, he would go!

Suddenly a shudder ran through his whole body. He gave a quick exclamation of terror.

"No! No! Not there!"

He leaped back and raised his face to the skies. How kind and good to look upon was the sky! He gazed about — it was so fair a world! How good it was to breathe! He longed to throw his great brute arms about creation and clutch it to him, and hold it, hold it, hold it!

The hoofs!

The distant and muffled confusion of sound had grown into a series of sharp, distinct, staccato notes. The outlaw's pursuers were now no farther than a mile away. They would soon reach the river.

With the quick instinct of the hunted beast, Antoine grasped the means of safety. He remembered the hole in the bluff. His footprints led to the ice-fissure. He decided that none should lead away. He could not be pursued under ice.

Stooping, so that he could look between his legs, he began retracing his steps backward, placing his feet with infinite care where they had fallen before. Thus he came again to the hole in the clay bluff, and disappeared. A jutting point of sandstone had kept the quiet snow from falling at the mouth of the hole. The man left no trail as he

The Alien

entered on hands and knees.

When he had entered, he stopped and listened. He could now hear distinctly the sharp crack of hoofs upon the ice and the pop and thunder of the shaken surface.

"Here's some luck for me, anyhow," mused Antoine.

The Alien

III

HE crawled on into the nether darkness of the hole, which grew more spacious as he proceeded.

As he crawled, the sound of pursuing hoofs grew dimmer. Antoine half forgot them. His keen sense had caught the peculiar musty odor of animal life. He felt a stuffy warmth in his nostrils as he breathed.

Suddenly out of the dark ahead there grew up two points of phosphorescent light. Antoine fell back upon his haunches with a low growl of surprise. Years of wild, lonesome life had made him more beast than man.

The lights slowly came closer, growing more brilliant. There was a harsh, rasping growl and a sound of sniffing.

Antoine waited until the contracting pupils of his eyes could grasp the situation with more distinctness.

"Can't run," he muttered. "Lariat behind; somethin' growlin' in front. It's one more fight, and here goes fer my damnest. Rather die mad and fightin' than jump into cold water or stick my head through a leather necktie."

Then, of a sudden, came a sharp, savage yelp, and Antoine's cheek was ripped open with a stroke of gnashing teeth!

He felt for an instant the hot breath of the beast, the trickle of hot blood on his cheek; and then the last of the human in him passed. He growled and hurled the body of his enemy from him with a swing of his bearlike paw.

The dark hole echoed a muffled howl of anger, and in an instant the two rolled together in the darkness. The man had forgotten his six-shooter. It was a primitive struggle — the snapping of jaws, the grating of hoarse throats that labored with angry breath, snarls, growls, whines!

At last the man knew it was a wolf he fought. He reached for its throat, but felt his hand caught in a hot, wet, powerful trap of teeth. He grasped the under jaw with a grip that made his antagonist howl with pain. With his other hand he felt about in the darkness, groping for the throat.

He found it; seized it with a viselike clutch; shut his teeth and threw all the power of his massive frame into the struggle.

Slowly, slowly, the struggles of the wolf became weaker. The lean, hairy form fell limply, and the man laughed with guttural mirth, for he was master.

Then again he felt the trickle of blood upon his cheek, the ache of his bitten hand. His anger returned with double fury. He kicked the limp body as he lay panting beside it, never releasing his grip.

Suddenly he ceased kicking; he forgot his conquered enemy for the moment. There were sounds.

He heard the thump, thump of hoofs passing his place of refuge. Then they ceased. A sound of confused voices came dimly. Then after a while the hoofs passed again, and there was a distinct voice that said: "Saved hangin', anyway." The hoofs grew dimmer, and Antoine knew by the hollowness of the sound that his pursuers had begun to recross the river.

He again gave his attention to the wolf. It lay very still; it seemed dead. A feeling of supreme comfort came over Antoine. He had fought and conquered, and now he was weary but safe. He laid his head upon the body for a pillow.

The Alien

IV

HE awoke, feeling a soft, warm rasping on his wounded cheek. A faint light came in at the entrance of the place; it was morning. In his sleep Antoine had moved his head near to the mouth of the wolf. And now, utterly conquered, bruised, unable to rise, the brute was feebly licking the blood from the man's face.

A sense of mastery made the man inclined to be kind to a fellow being for once. He was safe, and something had caressed him, although it was only a beaten wolf.

"You pore devil!" said Antoine, with a sudden softness in his voice. "I done you up, didn't I? But you hain't so bad, I guess. But if I hadn't done you, I'd got done myself. Hurt much, you pore devil, eh?"

He stroked the side of the animal, making it cry out with pain.

"Pretty sore, eh? Well, as long as I'm bigger'n you, I'll be good to you, I will. I ain't so bad, am I? You treat me square and you won't never get no bad deals from the half-breed. Mind that, I tell you.

"Let me hunt you up a name. Susette! That's it — Susette! You're Susette now. I hain't got no people, so I'm a wolf, and my name's Antoine. Antoine and Susette — sounds good, don't it?"

"Say, I know as much about bein' a gray wolf as you do! Can't show me nothin' about sneakin' and hidin' and fightin'! Say, old girl, hain't I a pretty good fighter? Oh, I know I am, all right! And when you need it ag'in you're goin' to get it strong, Susie. Mind that!

"Hain't got nothin' to eat about the house, have you? Then, bein' head of the family, I'm goin' huntin'. Don't you let no other wolf come 'round here; you know me! I'll wear his hide when I get back, if you don't mind!"

And he went out.

Before noon Antoine returned bringing three jack-rabbits, having shot them with his six-shooter.

"Well, Susette," said he, "got any appetite?"

He passed his hand over the wolf's snout caressingly. The wolf flinched in fear, but the man continued the caress until she licked his hand.

"Now we're friends, and we can live together peaceable, can't we? Took a big family row, though. Families needs stirrin' up now and then, I guess."

He skinned a rabbit and with his knife cut off morsels of meat.

"Here, Susette, I'm goin' to fill your hide first, 'cause you've been so good since the row. There, that's it! Eat! Does me good to see you eat, pore, sick Susette!"

The wolf took the morsels from his hand, and a look that was almost tame came into her eyes. When she had eaten the better part of a rabbit, Antoine skinned another and had a meal of raw flesh.

Then he sat down beside her and stroked her nose and neck and flanks. There was an air of home about the place. He was safe and sheltered, had a full stomach, and there was a creature near that showed him kindness, although it had been won by a beating.

"Susette," he said in a soft voice, as he stroked the wolf, "don't get mean ag'in when you get well. I want to live quiet and like somethin' fer wunst. If you'll be good, I'll see that you get enough eatin'. Oh, I'll get you rabbits and antelope and birds, and you won't need to hunt nor run about whinin' with your belly flappin' together.

"And I know how to make fire — somethin' you don't know, wise as you be — and I'll keep you warm, and pet you lots. Is it a bargain? All you need to do is be just good, keepin' your teeth out'n my cheek.

"I've been lonesome always. I hain't got no people. Do you know who your dad was? Neither do I; we're in the same boat there. Some French trader was mine, I guess. My mother's an Omaha.

"Wagah peasha — bad white man — that's what the Omahas called me ever since I was a little feller. And the white men says, 'darned Injun.' And where am I? Hangin' on the edge of things — gettin' orn'ry and nasty and bad. I've stole horses and killed people and cussed fer days, Susette. And I want to rest. I want to love somethin'! I don't care what; somethin' that'll just let me. Cabanne's men down at the post would laugh to hear Antoine sayin' that. But I do. I want to love somethin'.

"I tried to, wunst. Her name was Susette, same as your'n. She was a trader's daughter — a pretty French girl. That was before I was very bad. I talked sweet to her, and she liked it. But the old man Lecroix — that was her dad — he showed me the trail, and he says: 'Go that way, and go fast, you damn Injun!'

The Alien

"I went, Susette, but I made him pay, I did. I saw him on his back, after that, a grinnin' up at the stars. And since then I hain't cared much. I killed several in my time, and I called 'em all Lecroix!

"Be a good girl, Susette, and I'll stick to you. I'm a good fighter and a good grub-hunter, too. I learned all that easy."

He continued caressing the wolf, and she licked his hand when he stroked her muzzle.

The Alien

V

DAYS passed, the winter deepened, the heavy snows came. Antoine nursed his bruised companion back to strength. Through the bitter nights he kept a fire burning in front of the hole.

The depth of the snow made it improbable that any would learn of his whereabouts; and the news must have spread from post to post that Antoine, the outlaw half-breed, had drowned himself in the ice-fissure in order to escape hanging.

The man had used all his ammunition, and his six-shooter had become useless. So, with the skill of an Indian, he wrought a bow and arrows. He made snow-shoes, and continued to hunt, keeping the wolf in meat until she grew strong and fat with the unaccustomed luxurious life. Also, she became very tame. During her weakness, the man had subdued her fierceness. When the snow crusted, the two went hunting together, Susette trotting at Antoine's heels like a dog.

One evening in late December, when the low moon threw a shaft of cold silver into the mouth of the lair, Antoine lay huddled in his furs, listening to the dirgelike calls of the wolves, wandering inward from the vast night. Susette also listened, sitting upon her haunches beside the man, with her short ears pricked forward.

When the far-away cries of her kinspeople arose into a compelling major sound, dying away into the merest shadow of a pitiful minor, she switched her tail uneasily, shuffled about nervously, sniffing and whining.

Then she began pacing with an eager swing up and down the place to the opening and back, sending forth the long cry of kinship whenever she reached the mouth of the lair.

"Night's cold, Susette," said Antoine; "'tain't no time fer huntin'. Hain't I give you enough to eat?"

He caught the wolf, and by main force held her down beside him. She snarled savagely and snapped her jaws together, struggling out of his arms and going to the opening, where she cried into the stillness; whereat the answer of her kind floated back in doleful chorus.

"Don't go!" begged the man; "Susette, my pretty Susette! I'd be so lonesome."

Finally, as the chorus died, the wolf gave a loud yelp and rushed into the pale night.

A great passion seized Antoine. He leaped from his furs and ran out after the wolf. She fled with a rapid, swinging trot over the scintillating snow toward the concourse of her people. The man fled after, slipping, falling, getting up, running, and ever the wolf widened the glittering stretch of snow between them.

To Antoine, the ever-widening space of glinting coldness vaguely typified the barrier that seemed growing between him and his last companion.

"Susette, oh, Susette!" he cried at last, breathless and exhausted. His cry was dirgelike, even as the wolves'; thin and sharp — the voice of the old world-ache.

She had disappeared in the dusk of a ravine. Antoine, huddled in the snow with his face upon his knees, sobbed unmanfully into the winter stillness.

The Alien

VI

AT last, with slow and faltering step, he returned to his lair. He threw himself down upon the floor of the cave and cursed the world — cursed everything in it, individually and generally; and then he cursed Susette.

"It's some other wolf," he hissed; "some other gray dog she's goin' to see! Oh, darn him! Darn his gray hide! I'll kill her, if she ever gits back!"

He took out his knife and began whetting it viciously upon his boot.

"I'll cut her into strips and eat 'em! Wasn't I good to her? Couldn't I have killed her? Oh, I'll cut her into strips, I will!"

He whetted his knife for an hour, cursing through his teeth. At last his anger grew into a foolish madness. He hurled himself upon the bunch of furs beside him and made himself imagine that they were Susette. He set his teeth into them; he crushed them with his hands. Then, in the impotence of his anger, he fell upon his face and sobbed himself to sleep.

Strange visions passed before him. Again he killed Lecroix, and saw the dead face grinning at the stars. Again he sat in his mother's lodge and wept because he was a stranger. Again he was fleeing, fleeing, fleeing from a leather noose that hung above him like a black cloud, and circled and lowered and raised and lowered, until it swooped down upon him and closed about his neck.

With a yell of fright he awoke from his nightmare. His head throbbed, his mouth was parched.

At last day came in sneakingly through the opening — a dull, melancholy light and with it came Susette, sniffing, with the bristles of her neck erect.

"Susette! Susette!" cried the man joyfully.

He no longer thought of killing her. He seized her in his arms; he kissed her frost-whitened muzzle.

She received his caresses with disdain; whereat he redoubled his acts of fondness. He fed her and petted her as she ate; then the bristles on her neck dropped. She nosed him half fondly. And Antoine, manlike, was glad again. He contented himself with touching the frayed hem of the garment of Happiness.

He ate nothing that day. He said to himself: "I won't hunt till it's all gone; she can have it all." He was afraid to leave Susette; he was afraid to take her with him again into the land of her people. Antoine was jealous.

All day he was kind to her with pitiful kindness. He whispered softly into her ear:

"Susette, I hain't a goin' to be jealous no more. You've been a bad girl, Susette; don't do it again. I won't be mean, less'n you let him come skulkin' around here."

The next morning Antoine did not get up. He felt sore and exhausted. By evening his heart was beating like a hammer. His head ached and swam; his burning eyes saw strange, uncertain visions.

"Susette," he called, "I ain't feelin' right. Come here and let me touch you again."

VII

NIGHT was falling, and Susette sat sullenly apart, listening for the call of her people. She did not go to him. All night the man tossed and raved.

After a lingering age of delirious wanderings, dizzy flights from huge, pitiless pursuers, he became conscious of the daylight. He raised his head feebly and looked about the den. Susette was gone.

A fury of jealousy came upon Antoine. She had gone again to find that other wolf; he felt certain of this. He tried to arise, but the fever had weakened him so that he lay impotent, torn alternately with anger and longing.

Suddenly a frost-whitened snout was thrust in at the opening.

It was Susette. The man gave a feeble cry of joy, and his eyes were filled with a soft light. Susette entered, sniffing strangely and switching her tail as she came. At her heels came another gray wolf — a male — larger-boned, lankier, with more powerful jaws. He whined and moved his tail nervously at sight of the man.

Antoine lay staring at the intruder.

"So that's him!" thought the man. "I wisht I could git up!"

The gray intruder approached him with a sinuous movement of the tail. His jaws grinned hideously with long, sharp teeth displayed. The rage of hunger was in his eyes, fixed steadily upon the sick man.

Antoine stared into the eyes of his enemy, already crouching for the spring. On a sudden, a strange exhilaration seized him. He seemed to be drinking in the essence of life from the pitiless stare of his adversary. His great limbs, devitalized but a moment before, now tingled to the extremities with a surging of the wine of life. His eyes, which the fever had burned into the dulness of ashes, flamed again with the eager lust of fight.

He raised himself upon his haunches, and with the lifting of a sneering lip that disclosed his grinding teeth, he gave a cry that was both a snarl and a sob.

In that moment these many centuries of artificial life were as a vanished dream. From the long-slumbering dust of the prehistoric cave-man came a giant spirit to steel the sinews of its far-removed and weaker kin.

Antoine met the impetuous spring of the intruding wolf with a downward blow of his fist, and sprang upon his momentarily worsted foe. Never before in all his bitter, pariah life had he fought as now he fought for the possession of his last companion. His antagonist, bigger than Susette, was the survivor of many moonlight battles to the death in the frozen, foodless wilderness of hills.

Antoine struggled not as a man; he was now merely the good, glorious fighting beast — masterful, primitive, the taker of his own. Lacerated by the snapping of powerful jaws, bleeding from his face and hands, the man felt that he was winning. With a whining cry he succeeded in fixing his left hand upon the hairy throat, crushed the wolf down upon his back, and, using prodigious strength, began to press the fingers of his right hand under the protruding lower ribs. He would tear them out! He would thrust his hand in among the vitals of his foe!

All the while Susette, whining and wagging her tail nervously, watched the struggle with glowing eyes, and waited for the sign of the victor. But at this juncture she arose with a threatening sway of the head, approached the two cautiously, then hurled herself into the encounter. She leaped with a savage yelp upon him who had long been her master.

The man's grip suddenly relaxed. He fell back and threw out his arms, into which once more there came the weakness of the fever.

"Susette!" gasped Antoine; "I was always good to you! I — —"

His cry was choked into a wheeze. Susette had gripped him by the throat, and the two were upon him. She had gone back to the ways of her kind, and the man was an alien.