

TOP - NOTCH

TWICE - A - MONTH MAGAZINE

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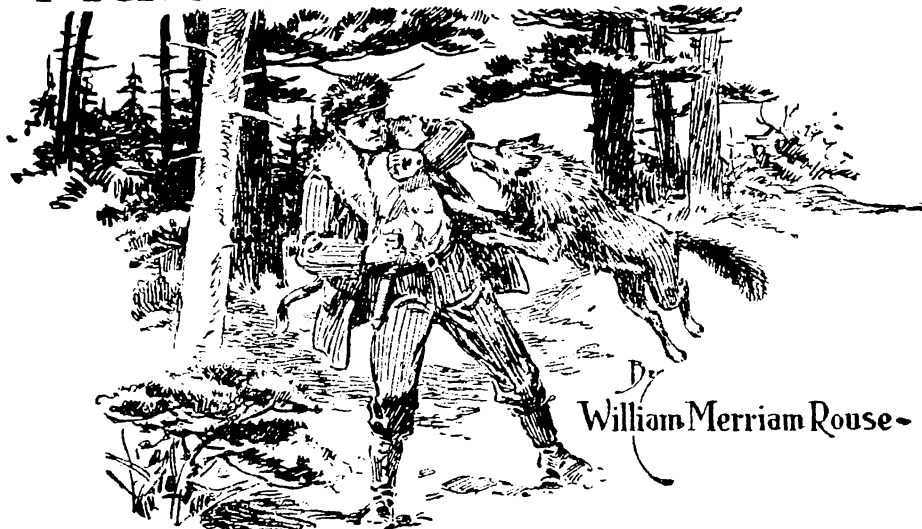
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Menace of the Man-Wolf—



By William Merriam Rouse-

(A NOVELETTE)

CHAPTER I.

WITH BARED FANGS.

THE loup-garou, or man-wolf, as it is called, is an idea. It cannot be said, however, that it is no more than an idea; nor, on the other hand, would it be entirely prudent to make the bold statement that every man who does not do his religious duties becomes a loup-garou.

According to the assertions of many, a man who does not go to confession at least at Easter for seven years turns into a wolf by night thereafter—a wolf of unimaginable ferocity, whose only hope of liberation as he ranges the woods is that he will be wounded by the hand of man. That alone will set him free, it is said, and that is the reason why men are so often attacked by these unfortunate ones.

It was to be expected that the people of Lac St. Jacques would believe in the loup-garou, for the village lies far north, even beyond the railroad, and at the time there was no priest there. It was one parish with Ste. Flavie, where the church and *presbytère* were.

The winter of the loup-garou was exceedingly severe. Snow lay four, five, and six feet deep upon the long, narrow

fields which the habitants had cleared. The fences were hidden completely, and in the forest where there is neither wind nor sun the snow was even deeper than in the open. The oldest men in the parish could not recall a colder winter.

Amédée Cloture was the first to raise the cry of loup-garou. Although every one was ready to admit the possibility of the man-wolf, there were a few in the beginning who thought it was an ordinary wolf.

Cloture came staggering home to the village one afternoon, just at dark, so palsied with fear that he could hardly manage his snowshoes, and burst into the blacksmith shop in a manner to silence the gossip there instantly.

His muffler was torn open at the throat—not untied, but hanging in shreds—the mitten was gone from one hand, and there was crimson upon his fingers. As for his face, it was the color of the face of a dead man. Except for his eyes, one might have thought him a walking dead man.

"The loup-garou!" he gasped, when he could speak. "It has come to Lac St. Jacques! *Mon Dieu Seigneur!*"

This was something to stir the hearts of the men there and to chill them, too.

It appeared that Cloture had been coming in from the woods when he met the monster, and he was armed only with the long staff which he used for measuring. If he had been carrying his ax, he might have wounded the beast and given it release, when it rose out of the ground in front of him with eyes of fire and a mouth flame red, its fangs bared.

It seemed to him that he fought for hours, holding off the attacks of the loup-garou with the stick, until his arms were so tired that they seemed ready to separate from his body.

At last it had him down; its breath was upon his face and its teeth at his throat. Then he closed his eyes, believing that the end had come, and prayed. The weight that had held him half buried in the snow was suddenly removed.

When he opened his eyes, there was nothing to be seen of the man-wolf. Cloture rushed swiftly away, coming to the blacksmith shop of Urie Legris, mayor of the village and leader in most of its affairs, still shivering with fright.

The story was well started when in came young Valère Turcot, breathing hard as though he had been running, but with a smile upon his good-natured face. He was a fine-looking man, in love with life and as active as a sled dog. The smile deepened as he listened, spinning the bar of a vise as though the loup-garou were nothing to him.

"It was at the corner of your field that it happened," concluded Cloture, turning to him. "Parbleu! I would not cross that field again to-night! No; not for the best farm in the parish!"

"Poof!" exclaimed Turcot. "Without doubt it was no pleasant experience, Amédée, but you are more scared than hurt! It was a wolf made mad by hunger that attacked you! This is a hard winter in the forest, my friend!"

CHAPTER II.

SOMETHING OF A HERO.

AT the moment, Cloture was too shaken to do more than to snort incoherently at this discrediting of his great experience, but the other men there raised a cry of protest, and grizzled, iron-

musled Urie Legris took up the defense at once.

"Don't talk like a crazy man, Valère!" he growled. "Whoever heard of a single wolf coming out of the forest to attack a man? By threes, they will attack and in the woods and at night; yes! But, *sacré!* Either this was the true loup-garou or there is no such thing!"

An older man than Valère Turcot, or one less impulsive and brave, would have kept silent; but to youth, folly comes naturally.

"Name of a dog!" he exclaimed. "Of course there is no such thing! It is the talk of old women!"

"No such thing as the loup-garou!" squeaked old Jean-Baptiste Papineau, who had been living in Lac St. Jacques since before any one else could remember. "Me, I remember Tacite Grouard, who became loup-garou and was killed by the blow of an ax in the hands of François Paradis. He dragged himself back to his own doorstep to die, and there the monster was found in the morning, frozen so that he was as brittle as ice!"

"You mean that a dead wolf was found on the doorstep!" declared Turcot, grinning.

"Ah, no! I mean that François Paradis fought with a man-wolf and hit him with his ax! I mean that Grouard was found dead and frozen with just such a wound as Paradis had given the beast! That is what I mean! And there were wolf tracks halfway from the forest to the house!"

"I thought the loup-garou could not be killed with anything except a silver bullet, *mon vieux*," said Turcot gravely.

"You are making fun of me!" snapped Papineau. "Just because you have been to Ste. Anne de Beaupré and to Quebec and Heaven knows where else! Nevertheless, it is true that only a silver bullet will slay the monster. In this case, you see, he was wounded by man, became a man again, and died afterward of the wound. It is quite plain and simple for those who have any intelligence at all!"

The men about the shop nodded and muttered approval although they did not let their tongues loose like the old man. Valère Turcot was a person of some con-

sequence. He had a good house, a good piece of land, and Thérèse Legris, the daughter of Urie, was betrothed to him.

They were to be married in the spring, and it seemed destined that Turcot should grow rich, raise a fine family, and eventually become the mayor of Lac St. Jacques.

"Valère," said Legris, kicking with much displeasure at a pile of horseshoes, "it seems to me that you are exceedingly foolish. An evil-minded man might even say that you were the loup-garou from the way you came bursting in here after Amédée and the insane things you have said. It is well known that a witch will deny the existence of witches! And, tell me this, if there is no such thing as a loup-garou, then why does all the world believe that there is?"

"All the world does not!" replied Turcot stoutly. "In a city——"

"That is because there are no forests in the cities!" croaked old Papineau. "The loup-garou lives in the forest. It is perfectly simple!"

"Ask Father Côté!" cried Turcot.

"He will agree with you," declared Cloture bitterly. "Was there ever a priest who admitted that the devil had any power?"

"You are not the man to appeal to Father Côté!" barked Legris. "How long is it since you have been to Ste. Flavie to church?"

"Yes!" cried Papineau, whose ancient being was now warming to anger. "How long since you have confessed yourself, infant? Is it, by any chance, a matter of seven years?"

Valère Turcot changed color and laughed and regretted somewhat that he had begun the argument, for he could not remember when it was that he had last made confession. In far places men become careless, and it is the women who hold them to their duties.

It was a good twenty miles to Ste. Flavie and Turcot had been an orphan for ten years. He told himself that when he was married to Thérèse he would settle more seriously to the business of so living in this world that he would be prepared for the next.

"He can't answer!" triumphed old Papineau, with a degree of malicious

pleasure. "It is always thus with these children under thirty who know more than the rest of the world!"

Turcot thought it an excellent time to leave, particularly as he had no desire to get into a quarrel with his father-in-law, yet he wanted to carry the affair off jauntily. So at the door of the shop he turned and hurled a last defiance at old Papineau. "It's seven years since I've been to church, Jean-Baptiste! Smoke that with your *tabac Canadien*!"

It was a foolish thing for him to say, yet nothing might have come of it if the matter of the loup-garou had rested where it was. All the world went out next day to Turcot's field and there found ample proof of the story of Amédée Cloture. The snow was trampled over a great space; there were tracks of a creature much bigger than the ordinary wolf and scattered bits of the knitted muffler. One does not tear up a serviceable muffler merely to make a good story, the habitants decided. Amédée Cloture had certainly been in danger of his life.

He became something of a hero. He told the story often, and it lost nothing in the telling. The good people of Lac St. Jacques were seized by a fear that struck to the marrow of their bones.

CHAPTER III.

A TERRIBLE ACCUSATION.

IT was Thérèse Legris who made Valère Turcot take the matter of the loup-garou with a degree of seriousness. He took her and her little sister, Rosine, out to the trampled spot where Amédée Cloture had fought his fight, and as they walked back home Turcot saw that Thérèse's blue eyes were clouded with trouble.

She was of that delicate beauty which the clear cold of the North so often produces when it deals with a woman of purely French extraction—black hair, eyes of a living color, and skin like white porcelain, touched with pink.

"Never should you have laughed, my dear," she said gravely. "My father is angry. Others say that you are mad—foolish—Heaven alone knows what they say!"

"Eh bien!" he exclaimed. "I will keep

a weight upon my tongue for your sake, but it annoys me that grown men should be so stupid. You, Thérèse, you do not believe in this fable with the others?"

"Promise me, Valère," she said softly, without replying to his question, "that you will go to Ste. Flavie to church with me at the end of Lent!"

Turcot laughed and swung little Rosine up in his arms, higher than his head. They were the best of friends, these two, and Rosine already regarded Turcot as a brother.

"Do you hear that, my Rosine!" he cried. "Your very beautiful sister thinks that I am the loup-garou! Shall I promise her? Certainly! A man who is going to be married should make his peace with Heaven as well as his wife!"

"Tell me, Valère," said Rosine, "why is the loup-garou?"

"There is no such thing in all the world, my little one!"

"Do you hear that, Thérèse!" exclaimed Rosine. "And my brother, he knows more than any one else!"

"It does not matter," said Thérèse, "for I know that Valère is not the monster. He is too strong and brave and good! That is enough!"

"I shall get such ideas out of your head," declared Turcot. "On our wedding journey we will go to Quebec and you will learn, my angel, that the old women's stories of Lac St. Jacques are laughed at there."

"Quebec!" she murmured. "I wish that time were here now, for—I am frightened!"

"Nonsense!" Turcot laughed. "We are the happiest people in the world!"

It seemed, after a day or two, that Valère Turcot had the right of the matter. Although the women and children of the village did not go out of doors after the early dusk had come, and the men went armed by night if they walked abroad at all, nothing happened for nearly a week.

Then, just as the people were getting ready to smile at their own fears, the monster struck a second time. Strangely enough it was Jean-Baptiste Papineau, the most firm believer, who was attacked.

One evening he heard sounds of distress from his pig. Forgetting the loup-

garou, Papineau rushed out into the darkness. A terrible shape, which he said afterward was as big as a well-grown calf, bounded toward him in the starlight—a creature with gleaming eyeballs and a strength and power beyond that of any wolf which Papineau had ever seen in all his years in the woods.

It bore him down, it tore at his throat, and but for the courage of Céleste, his wife, that would have been the end of him. She had lighted a lantern and was following him when the attack came.

She rushed forward and thrust the lantern into the face of the beast. Both she and her husband swore, calling all the saints to witness the truth of what they said, that the loup-garou vanished in a flash of light as the devil's own should.

Céleste managed to drag her husband into the house. She barred the door, and they waited, shivering with dread, through the long night—afraid to go for help and in terror at every crack of a frost-bitten timber.

The throat of Papineau had been torn, but as none of the wounds were deep, and as he was tough from many years' seasoning by whiskey *blanc* and tobacco, he was able to sit in his chair next day and receive the village of Lac St. Jacques.

The tracks of the man-wolf led to the back door of Valère Turcot's house.

There was, therefore, a double sensation in the village. Up to this time the more level-headed people had thought that Turcot's professed nonbelief was mere bravado; now, they found something more sinister in it.

When Turcot hurried to the *maison* Papineau with expressions of sympathy, the terrified old man pointed a wavering finger at him and made an open accusation.

That was enough proof for the villagers. Who ought to know, if not the man who had nearly lost his life? The pig had escaped unscathed, which proved that it was no wolf. The tracks were conclusive.

In vain, Turcot, arguing with Legris, pointed out that the wind had blown hard during the night and that tracks leading away from his house were filled in. Turcot said that the wolf had prob-

ably wandered to his house and away again before attacking Papineau, that it had been frightened at the lantern and so had failed to get the pig.

"Confess, Turcot!" urged Legris. "Admit that you are accursed, and let us take you to Ste. Flavie. Perhaps something can be done. Do not persist in clinging to this madness!"

"I tell you again and again that there is no such thing as the loup-garou!" retorted Turcot stubbornly.

Urie Legris went away, muttering, and later Thérèse came without the knowledge of her father to beg Turcot to yield to the pressure of the village and go to Ste. Flavie with half a dozen men as an escort and let Father Côté settle the matter.

"Never!" cried Turcot. "Why, Father Côté would laugh at them, and all the world would look upon me as a strange animal from that time forth! Neither you nor I would ever hear the last of it! This madness will pass shortly. I myself will kill this wolf, and when I have nailed the pelt to the side of my barn, they will call me a great hunter as loudly as they now call me a devil!"

CHAPTER IV.

CRAZED BY HATE AND FEAR.

THAT night Valère Turcot patrolled the single street of Lac St. Jacques with his rifle until nearly dawn. He knew that people would watch him from darkened windows, but he did not know that he had done himself only harm by his bravery. That he was not afraid of the monster proved more conclusively than anything else that he and the monster were the same. Old hunters who had fought the she-panther with nothing but a knife would not have dared to invite an attack from the loup-garou.

Two nights of this and then, just after dark and when Turcot was still sleeping in preparation for his vigil, the end came. The distance was so short between the house of Urie Legris and his blacksmith shop that Rosine had been allowed to continue her custom of bringing him home to supper, in spite of the fear that was upon the village.

Urie himself heard her cries and found

her a hundred yards from the shop. She was dying.

"Valère——" she whispered, and that was all.

It was enough. Legris did not stop to think that naturally the name of one of those whom she loved best would have been the last upon her lips.

Upon Valère Turcot the tragedy came like a thunderbolt. He awakened to find the hands of Thérèse shaking him. She was sobbing, bareheaded, crying out fragments of prayers as she begged him to fly for his life.

Turcot was dressed except for his sheep-lined coat and his shoe-packs, and he stumbled awkwardly into them at her commands before he became awake enough to understand more than that some dreadful things had happened.

"They are coming to kill you, Valère!" she moaned. "Oh, try to understand me! Rosine has been killed! Just now! Hurry, Valère, or they will surely kill you!"

He was in the kitchen in a moment, still struggling with the dead weight of sleep. He lighted a lamp, slung his snow-shoes over his shoulder when Thérèse thrust them at him, snatched his rifle and a box of cartridges.

Then the door burst open, and the room was flooded with men. They growled that growl of the mob, which is like nothing else in the world. At sight of Valère those in front bore back a little, all but Urie Legris, and wavered and snarled.

Their faces were made black and terrible by hate and fear. The whips of fear made them press forward, a hundred times more dangerous than the truly brave, for the brave always have mercy in their hearts.

For Legris, the leader, there was some excuse in that hour. Of the two children who were all that were left to him, one lay dead in the snow, and the other was clinging to the man or devil who, he believed, was responsible for the death of her sister.

"Beast!" cried Legris in a voice that was not human. "Devil! If you can still pray, make your peace with Heaven now! Get away from him, Thérèse!"

Legris leaped and struck with an iron

bar which he carried in his hand. Turcot caught the blow upon his gun barrel, jammed the butt into the stomach of Legris, and leaped into the middle of the human pack, striking right and left.

They gave before him, as much from fear as because of the blows. The room cleared. Legris staggered to his feet, and Turcot hurled him through the door with a well-directed kick. Turcot turned, panting, and saw Thérèse leaning against the wall with her hands over her ears.

"Come!" cried Turcot. "Come with me, Thérèse, where there are civilized people!"

For an instant she seemed to hesitate, holding out her hands toward him. Then she shrank against the wall again, shaking as with a chill from head to foot. "*Dieu Seigneur!*" she moaned. "Oh, my Valère, I love you, but I cannot!"

CHAPTER V

LEAPING FLAMES.

BROKEN glass sprinkled upon the floor of the room, and a bullet flattened against the wall behind Turcot. From outside, the voice of Urie Legris came, roaring orders.

"Fire the house, Cloture! You, Tite Fessette, go to the front side with half a dozen men. And come on now, mes braves! I'm going in there again!"

"Thérèse!" cried Turcot. "It's death to stay another minute! Will you come?"

He saw flames leaping up about his outbuildings, heard the cries of the animals. What devils these human beings had become! The girl sank down upon the floor and hid her face.

"I cannot!" she sobbed.

"Then let them finish it!" cried Valère Turcot in a voice that filled the room and pierced with its sharp agony all the medley of other sounds. He turned and walked through the house toward the front door deliberately, as though there were nothing in the world to hurry him. As he went, he began to laugh.

Peal upon peal of laughter left his lips, struck bell-like through the night as he went out, and for an instant held motionless the men bent upon his death. His strange laughter held them until he got out into the road.

Then the pack was after him. It seemed to be a game for him; he fired at them, ran, and turned to fire again. A mob is neither brave nor steady, and they wasted much powder that night without doing more than to lodge a few bird shot in Turcot's sheepskin coat.

They followed him to the woods, but when he knelt behind a tree there at bay, they drew off and returned to the burning of his house. He watched the glare upon the sky for a long time, muttering to himself and now and again throwing his rifle up to his shoulder as though he would send a futile bullet in the direction of Lac St. Jacques.

Back there in the village the red rage burned down with the fire and became embers. When nothing but the bare stone walls and the chimneys of Valère Turcot's house were left standing, the men of Lac St. Jacques sneaked home, avoiding each other, ashamed, relieved, fearful more than a little of what might come upon them for that night's work.

Urie Legris went back to his stricken home grimly, half carrying the daughter who was left to him, but who did not seem now to be wholly alive.

News of the disaster traveled swiftly. Before the end of a week, Father Joseph Côté made the long trip from Ste. Flavie to look into the tale of sudden death, burning, and attempted murder that had reached him. It did not take him long to get at the truth, and he made the ears of that little village ring, its cheeks burn with shame.

In vain they swore to him that the devil had indeed taken possession of the soul of Valère Turcot and that he still came back by night to torment them. The priest assured them that they were much better savages than Christians and that with all speed they would make amends to Valère Turcot.

The second night of Father Côté's visit was clear and fine, and a huge moon floated in the sky. It was almost as bright as day.

Father Côté and Urie Legris were sitting in the dark *parloir* of Urie's house, the priest letting the memory of the mayor's loss somewhat modify his admonitions. Suddenly Legris sprang up with a cry of terror.

"Look!" he cried. "There is the devil that has taken the life of one of my children and destroyed the happiness of the other! Now perhaps you will believe, mon père!"

There, running along the hard-packed snow, was a creature with the form of a wolf, but much larger than any wolf the priest had ever seen. The animal stopped and looked back along the way he had come.

"Get me your rifle!" said Father Côté. "I'll soon show you whether this is wolf or devil!"

Before Legris could turn to obey, a man bounded into sight and stopped a dozen feet from the wolf. A knife gleamed in his hand, but otherwise he was unarmed.

"Madness!" breathed the priest. "That beast is the grandfather of all wolves, and he is crazed with hunger or he would never have come here!"

CHAPTER VI.

NOT THE SAME MAN.

THE wolf sprang, and together man and beast went down in the road. They tumbled over and over, locked together, and at the end of a time that seemed unendurably long the man rose to his feet. The wolf lay still. His conquerer began to drag him by the hind legs toward the house of Urie Legris.

"No!" whispered Legris, gripping the arm of Father Côté. "That is not a human being—that out there! Keep him out, mon père!"

"Come with me!" thundered the priest. "The bravest man in this parish is going to do you the honor of entering your house!"

He dragged Legris into the lighted kitchen. Thérèse sat there alone, listless as she had been ever since the night of the attack upon Turcot and the death of Rosine. She sprang up as they rushed into the room.

Legris stood paralyzed, staring at the door. Father Côté took down the bar and stepped back, waiting. They heard the sound of steps crunching upon the snow, slowly, retarded by a dragging weight; the latch lifted before their strained gaze. Then the door was flung

open and Valère Turcot staggered into the room, pulling after him the carcass of the wolf.

Turcot had been wounded; the stout sheepskin of his coat was slit and torn. His eyes looked dead and sunken, and when he spoke there was no more life in the tone of his voice than there was in his white face.

"There is your loup-garou," he said, "and here am I, Valère Turcot. We are not the same. Voilà!"

He turned to go, weaving upon his feet. He did not seem to see Thérèse, although she held out her arms and would have gone to him at a word.

"My son!" cried Father Côté. "Wait!"

Turcot turned and stared at him, but without any emotion whatsoever. Let the head of a snake be cut off, and the body will respond to a touch long afterward. Thus it was with Turcot. The priest shuddered.

"Valère!" Thérèse had found her voice. "You—you are going away."

"Why not?" The lips which framed the words were those of Valère Turcot, but that was not the voice which Thérèse had known and loved, the voice which had rung so cheerfully in Lac St. Jacques.

"Forgive me!" said Thérèse, taking a step toward him. "Forgive all of us, Valère!"

"Forgive?" he echoed, looking at her as he might have observed a stranger. "I am not angry."

She stood silent then, amazed, helpless, suffering.

"He has gone mad!" muttered Urie Legris. "More than any one else I am to blame, and I will take care of him as long as he lives."

"I am not mad," said Turcot. "I am dead."

"Ah, *Dieu Seigneur!*" moaned Thérèse, now convinced that his mind was gone. "I have deserved this, perhaps, but he—he has not!"

"At least stay here with your friends," said Father Côté, soothingly. "You have proved, and with great bravery, your case against the people of Lac St. Jacques. Urie Legris and I will see to it that amends are made to you in all things. Thérèse loves you, my son. There is a long life of happiness awaiting you, with

many children and the blessing of Heaven."

"Ah, yes!" cried Legris eagerly. The thick and hairy blacksmith, of an extraordinary roughness, became as penitent as a child who has been bad. "Every man, woman, and child in this village shall do you honor, my son! You shall become mayor at once! Your house shall be rebuilt better than ever!"

"Valère!" Thérèse went to him and lifted one of his torn, crushed hands, lifted it and held it against her lips. She smiled at him bravely, but there was no answering smile in his eyes, no pressure of the fingers. She let his hand fall and drew back, frightened. "Either he is mad," she sobbed, "or he no longer loves me! He hates me—all of us!"

"I hate no one," said Turcot slowly. "I love no one. Why do you bother me, you people?"

"Mad, of a certainty!" muttered Legris.

"At least stay with us," said Father Côté. "Have pity upon those who love you and who suffer because of that love!"

"That," replied Turcot in his flat voice, "is nothing at all to me. Why should I care?"

"Ah!" murmured Thérèse. "He does hate us!"

"I hate no one; I love no one—nothing. I have a good cabin in the woods."

"Wait!" cried the priest, as Turcot turned to go. "For the sake of your soul, my child! To forgive is to be forgiven!"

"How can I forgive when I am not angry?" asked Turcot. "As for my soul—it is like the loup-garou. I cannot find it—nor can you. You chatter. *Bon soir et bonne nuit!*"

He was gone, leaving them there with the dead wolf and the memory of a living dead man.

Legris made the sign of the cross. "It is the work of the devil! The loup-garou——"

"Stop!" cried Father Côté. "Have you not had enough of such superstition? Oh, mon Dieu! Do you not see that the folly of this belief in the man-wolf has in truth made you people of Lac St. Jacques like wolves? Yes; and you have made a wolf of this man! His soul

sleeps with a deep sleep! If this wolf of your own creating does not turn upon you it will be nothing less than the mercy of Heaven!"

Father Joseph Côté spoke true words. The people of Lac St. Jacques made ample repentance, but their repentance could not restore to Valère Turcot that which they had taken from him.

CHAPTER VII.

BACKED BY SHOTGUNS.

TURCOT lived in a chopper's cabin that had been abandoned, a good five hours' march from Lac St. Jacques. He ate and slept, but in that way alone could he be said to be like other men, for he felt nothing at all.

He protected his body from the cold and fed it mechanically, but without interest in what he was doing. He went on like a toy that is wound up and cannot stop running, because it is wound up.

Turcot felt no emotion. Hate, love, fear, regret, hope, anger, greed, sorrow, desire—all were strangers to him. He realized this and did not care, because he could not care.

As the body is sometimes numbed by a dreadful wound, so his soul had been made numb by the events of that night when everything had been taken from him in a little ten-minute interval.

When Thérèse had said that she could not go with him, a strangeness had taken possession of his being; the morning after that night he had found himself in the cabin where he now lived, wrapped in a calm that was like the stillness of a thick fog. Nothing penetrated it.

Through the months that followed the slaying of the great wolf, Thérèse Legris and her father and the people of Lac St. Jacques did what they could; which was nothing in the nature of real help to Valère Turcot.

They restored his house, and it remained empty. Legris let out his land, but the money for the crops remained unused under the floor of the Legris kitchen with Urie's own hoard. Nothing could be given to a man who desired nothing.

White threads appeared in the hair of Thérèse Legris, grew into a broad white

band that ran back from her forehead, and made her more beautiful than ever. She remained unmarried, nor would she become a *religieuse* as some counseled. She was betrothed to Valère Turcot, she said, and if ever it pleased *le bon Dieu* to restore him to her, she would be ready.

Ten years passed, and in that time the people of Lac St. Jacques had largely forgotten their sin against Valère Turcot. He did not come to the village, but his story was so well known that it ceased to be of interest.

The youngsters spoke of him with a laugh, unproved, and the older people with a shrug. Only Thérèse and her father cherished him in their hearts and Urie alone, of all those who had wronged Turcot, went once each month to see that he had met with no harm.

Time at length brought another hard winter, as bitter as that of the loup-garou, to the country beyond the rivers. The snow lay deep, great branches cracked in the frost, and the starved wolves grew so bold that they ventured into the villages by night. With it all came another evil, worse than cold or wild beast; an unseen enemy against which little but the help of God would prevail.

Variole—a virulent disease—appeared and went from choppers' camp to farm and village with the swiftness which the scourge knows so well how to manage. Before there was any warning in Lac St. Jacques, a woodsman came home to the village, moaning as he used the last of his strength to drag himself to his door.

The next day he was dead. Three cases appeared on the same day, and the village knew that it was laid by the heels.

There was no doctor in Lac St. Jacques, and no supply of medicines to meet an emergency like this. In such situations whole villages had been reduced to a dozen survivors. Urie Legris, therefore, put a horse to his *traineau* and started for Ste. Flavie, where it was likely that he could at least get proper medicines.

A mile from Ste. Flavie, Legris was stopped by two men, armed with shot-guns—men who stood well away from his sleigh, with their guns held in readiness, and told him that he must go back the way he had come.

Ste. Flavie had escaped so far, and there were certain of the people who intended to take no chances; they would not even part with a share of such remedies as they had. Legris was sure that Father Côté did not know what was being done, but he could not get to the priest.

Legris turned back, dazed by the picture which his imagination created of the fate of Lac St. Jacques. It would be bad enough with a priest to give courage and a doctor to give medicines; without either, the coming weeks promised a nightmare of hopeless death.

CHAPTER VIII.

"NO BETTER THAN WOLVES!"

BACK into his doomed village drove Urie Legris. At his coming the people ran out, bareheaded, coatless, following the sleigh with shouted questions which grew more urgent as they were not answered.

Urie Legris kept silence. He wanted to say it once and be done with it. So he looked straight ahead, whipping his horse, until he drove into his own yard.

He could not meet their eyes as they crowded about him. Slowly he kicked himself out of the robes, put aside the hands that clutched at him in an effort to make him speak, and walked up to his doorstep where he could face all of his people at once.

They were all there, even to children carried in the arms of their mothers, except those already stricken by the *variole*. Thérèse came out and stood beside him; he could feel her hand seeking his as he stared into the faces of those who waited.

"They turned me back with guns at Ste. Flavie," he said thickly. "They will not let any man go there from a place where the scourge is. They will not give any help at all!"

A dark and heavy silence rested upon the people for the length of time it would take a man to count ten. It was that long before they realized the fullness of despair, understood clearly how cut off they were from human aid.

Then they knew that before a messenger could make a journey to a place more distant than Ste. Flavie, they would

have suffered the worst of the disease. A groan of anguish came from the people of Lac St. Jacques, as though from one throat.

"Fine Christians, they are!" squealed Jean-Baptiste Papineau, now so old and bent that he could not do without an extra leg in the form of a cane.

"No better than wolves!" yelled Amédée Clouture. "We ought to go there in the night and take what we want!"

"There's nothing in that, worse luck!" growled a man next to him. "They outnumber us, three to one!"

The people muttered sullenly, began to grow savage and snarling from fear. Urie Legris looked upon them with sorrow and with understanding. He was thinking in that moment of the quality of mercy which he and the rest of them had shown Valère Turcot on that winter day ten years before.

He glanced along the road that stretched white and gleaming toward the woods, rubbed his eyes, looked again, and choked back a cry that rose in his throat. Valère Turcot had come back to Lac St. Jacques.

"Look!" cried Legris hoarsely, as he pointed. "There is the man whom we, like wolves, tried to kill ten years ago this winter! The same mercy that we showed him is the mercy of Ste. Flavie now, in our time of need! It is the judgment of Heaven!"

Along the road came Valère Turcot, older but unbent by the years, with the same blank look of indifference upon his face. With him came back to Lac St. Jacques the memory of what had been done to him.

The people huddled together, desiring greatly to flee behind closed and barred doors and yet not daring to leave the protection of each other. A whole village drew in upon itself, shivering, terrified by the memory of a living sin.

On and on came Valère Turcot, with strong, slow steps, until he was close enough for them to see his lusterless eyes. Then he stopped and stood with his legs braced apart, his rifle in the crook of his arm, his face as expressionless as the stone wall of a house.

"Valère," said Legris, after a minute, as he felt the fingers of Thérèse dig into

his arm. "We are outcasts now, as we once made you an outcast!"

Turcot stared, then moved his shoulders indifferently. From a trapper he had heard that the *variole* was in Lac St. Jacques. He had not cared at all, either to rejoice or feel pity, but in the cold depths of his being something had moved him to go and look upon the death and suffering of those who had taken away from him everything which made him human.

There in the village, gazing at them and hearing the words of Legris, he felt no hot flush of satisfied vengeance, no joy, no triumph.

"It is nothing," Turcot said at last, speaking with the difficulty of one who rarely uses his voice.

Suddenly Thérèse Legris flung herself down from the doorstep and ran between Turcot and the cluster of her people who stood in the shadow of death. She dropped to the snow, upon her knees, and raised her hands to Valère Turcot.

"You can help us!" she cried. "They will let you go into Ste. Flavie, for you have not been in our houses here, and you will not carry the scourge! You can bring us Father Côté—he will give you medicines! You, of all the world, can help us! Have mercy!"

The men and women and children of Lac St. Jacques stirred. They moved a little forward, hesitatingly. A woman knelt beside Thérèse and held out toward Turcot the baby that she carried.

Then, by twos and threes and half dozens, the people of Lac St. Jacques fell upon their knees and silently implored the mercy of that one to whom they had shown no mercy.

For many seconds, Valère Turcot stood facing them like a man of ice, giving no sign. Then, slowly, the long numbness that had held his soul as winter holds *beau Canada* melted. A strange, ancient feeling touched his breast, his throat. Hot tears blurred his eyes.

"Thérèse!" he cried, and his voice rang joyously as it had in the former years. "I—I will go!"

She leaped up and ran to him, with the true light of heaven shining in her face. "Thank God, my well beloved!" she cried. "Thou art a man again!"