

HAMPTON'S

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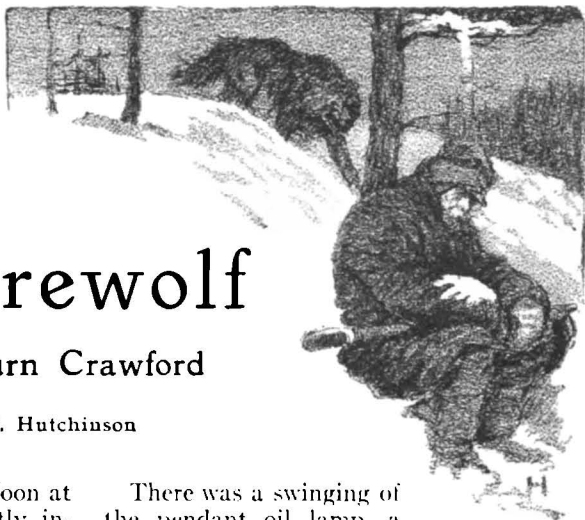
Percy Shaw *Back of Frontispiece*

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The Werewolf

By Frank Hepburn Crawford

Illustrations by D. C. Hutchinson



THE door of Cassidy's Palace Saloon at Gros Corbeau slammed violently inward. There was a tumult of snarling and a shriek of icy wind and through the doorway catapulted out of the night a tangle of fur and fangs and legs and gleaming eyes. Two rough tables crashed sidewise from the impact, and dice scattered on the sawdust of the floor.

Victor Descartes leaped to his feet and aimed a shrewd kick among the table legs at the bigger dog. Torkel Knutsson heaved his great bulk out of his chair with an ugly expletive.

"That's my dog you kick!" he growled.

"Sacré! He is wan beeg devil! Get heem out eef you don' want heem keel!"

Descartes struggled to hold back his own light-footed wolfish beast, still keen for conflict, while the big, shaggy hybrid circled the bristling outworks of table legs with whimpering eagerness, but with an eye wary for a second kick in the muzzle.

"Fine chance!" sneered Knutsson as the uproar lessened, and some one righted the tables and the dogs were banished. "You let him go that time, my dog kill *him*. Had him down under already."

"Bah! Weight, jus' weight. My dog he get dat beeg devil som' night, quick, lak a cat. *Après*—you get wan new dog."

Torkel Knutsson grunted his disbelief as he picked up a pair of dice from the floor, and the two men resumed their seats at the table, one opposite the other.

On Torkel Knutsson's ninth consecutive throw, one of the dice tumbled off to the spruce floor.

"Four —," called Victor Descartes.

There was a swinging of the pendant oil lamp, a scraping aside of the sawdust, and a peering at the shadowed floor.

"And three makes——"

"—Seven, at las'," concluded Descartes evenly. "Again you lose, Knutsson."

"What? Not me! No t'row!" Knutsson started up, and one of his great hairy hands grasped the table edge, while the other smote its surface till the gold went jingling.

"You lose, I say."

"An' Ay say off th' board, no t'row!"

"Eet was not so agree'."

"What of it? My play still an' I need eight to win, an' here goes——"

"One leet-tle moment! *Voilà!* So fas' you go, almos', *al-mos'* we forget wan hour ago on firs' t'row of two ace', wan on de floor, I los' wan hundred jus' dis same way, *an' you took de hundred*. Aha! How close we com' forget one leet-tle t'ing lak dat! Eh, Torkel?"

"Did Ay? Keep out a hundred, then."

"Ha, ha! You mak' such fon, Torkel!"

"Fun! Take your hundred."

"My hundred? Undoubt' I misunderstan'! You ask Victor Descartes tak' back w'at he have los' fair? But undoubt' I misunderstan'— He will explain. . . . We are not chil'ren. Eh? We play for keep'. Not so?"

"Sure. But off th' board no t'row, I'm tellin' you. Sure. So, ain'd lost, an' you ain'd lost th' hundred, an' you take it back—I'd sure forgot—an' that squares us, so——"

"You welcher," interrupted Descartes

in a cool fury. "Every chance I geeve you to be a man, but you—will not be it. You have t'row' seven; so have you los'. But I, I t'ink of wan odder t'ing. You t'row again. You may win anyhow. It may be eight you t'row. But—a t'ousan' more agains' your silver claim you t'row seven before de eight!"

During the momentary hush could be heard the excited breathing of the watching group, the faint swish of frozen snow against the windows, the crackle of fire in the huge iron stove, and the moan of the March wind through the gaunt pines outside.

"Ay got no claim, or Ay'd take you up quick," the Swede cried quickly with the clumsy caution of the bad liar.

"A t'ousan' more agains' dat silver claim up Temiskamming way."

"Ay say Ay got no claim!" maintained the Swede.

"A t'ousan' more agains' dat silver claim I say you have got up Temiskamming way on de Minnesegh where de tamarack point' across water to de dead spruce where de eagle go'," the relentless monotone continued.

"Damn you! You're on!"

"You all hear? T'row den!" bade Descartes, and he tossed out a thousand more in green Dominion paper.

The Swede's right hand had been resting in his coat pocket for a moment, but now it went, palm downward, to the table where the ivory cubes lay together, closed over them, raised them, held them an instant, then with a backward cast sent two dice rolling along the smooth table. His hand went back to his pocket.

A heavy sigh rose around the gaming board. Two fours lay side by side.

Glancing upward with his quiet smile, Victor Descartes suggested to an onlooker, "Now I will trad' you a cigarette for an-odder match." He had lost two thousand dollars at one sitting. His cigarette was out.

But Torkel Knutsson, bestowing his winnings about his clothes, struggled into his overcoat and, as he turned to go, laughed heavily at Descartes, the vanquished. In his own heart was the joy of a great success, and the blood ran fast and warm within him. He was thrilled with a sense of masculine need.

Alouette, the comely Algonquin, who neither toiled nor spun, was the only girl of

Gros Corbeau. And that she might be half averse, having promised herself to Descartes, but added an exquisite zest to the man's primordial avarice.

That night she fled with Knutsson northward across the snow. He was so big and strong and unafraid! And the shaggy hybrid dog in the harness fled, too, but as though half in fear of a Thing-behind. Once it even stopped in its tracks and swerved about with bared fangs ready to face the Thing-behind, but only the sled and its harmless soft burden slid forward upon him, and no sound betokened a pursuer.

Reassured by the sting of Torkel Knutsson's whip, the brute went on again. And when at last the Thing-behind did detach itself from the surrounding darkness, it was with such precision as is the result of a perfect economy of effort. It came out of the night from the left, slashed at a vein in passing, leaped and slashed again, and was gone back into the darkness. The dog in harness had been given no chance to attack, to use the advantage of his weight and strength. The thing happened too suddenly. For a while the trail behind him was stained by his spurting blood, and then the trail ended where he lay. The girl laughed. Knutsson put the harness to his own shoulder. The sled went on.

And the next morning a dog was gone from Gros Corbeau, but it was not the wolf dog of Victor Descartes.

That day also, Father Regan rode back to St. Anne's. For to Gros Corbeau the priest of St. Anne's is called only at birth, or at death, or at times by those who, like Descartes, are fastidious in such affairs, to unite in marriage. And it had so chanced that morning, when he and Descartes had come through the trail-obliterating, falling snow to the cabin of Alouette, that Alouette, sole maid of Gros Corbeau, was flown where no man knew, though all men knew with whom. So, as there had been nor birth nor death, why should the priest of St. Anne's still tarry at the shrine of Cassidy's saloon?

He bade his long-time friend, Descartes, the gambler, good-by. "So long, Victor! Better luck next time. Perhaps—that was not all bad. Who knows? Eh?"

"*Le bon Dieu*—perhap'— Lak a maple leaf—a maple leaf in autumn—an' the leet-tle win's come, an' the maple leaf glow' an' blush' that th' leet-tle win's fin' her beautiful——"

"Alouette? And along comes some other blustering big wind to tear her away—and where's your maple leaf, then?"

"Well, dat is not onriz'nable, no. But de big win' may grow afraid, an' the pretty leaf grow sear an' die, but al-way' shall be de leet-tle light win' lef' to w'isper an' laugh—an' laugh."

Victor Descartes reëntered the saloon and, sitting alone, reached for the dice that had ended the game of the night before, and softly, idly shook and cast and caught again, while, with eyes half alight, he thought of another thing. Gently fingering the little well-worn cubes, he turned them end on end, watching their faces form consecutively higher combinations. Only, when he had passed the one and five, two and four, three and three that make the six, he leaned over curiously, and deftly matched them over again.

"May-be you can t'row seven wit dese den, *Meestaire* Cassidy?" And Descartes, approaching, gave the fixed dice a fling that sent them rattling the length of the glitter-

ing bar. "I will be please' to be show' how."

When repeated attempts on the part of those who lined the place failed to show any combination of dots on the twelve faces of the two cubes that resulted in a total of seven, Cassidy stared over at Descartes with troubled eyes.

"Victor, if I'd a know'd that Knutsson was playin' you crooked——!"

"*Bâ oui*, he did trick me. Me! An' eet was so ver' clumsy! But while I t'ought of—anodder t'ing, he chang' de dice. But com' som' day, I play wit heem again. Dis tam de stake' will be ver' beeg. An' dis tam I win."

"But they say—when he went—he took along with him—mind ye, it's only what I'm hearin'; mebbe she—mebbe it ain't——"

"Yes! But eet is true w'at dey say, an' de man will die for eet. He will be fright' to deat'."

"Scared? Yah! That Knutsson now, he would fight a bear with just his own big hands, an' he might kill the bear, just that way, an' laugh."

"An' yet I say he will be fright' to deat'." There was a glimpse of white teeth as Descartes moistened his lips.

"Have you hear' of *le loup-garou*?"

"*Loup-garou*—what's that?"

"*Le loup-garou*, he is *le loup-garou*," explained Victor Descartes.

Came to the Canadian woods at last the laughter of belated spring, came again the rush of unlocked waters, came again the plash of paddles to the ancient waterways, while down their fretted courses churned the winter's cut of spruce.

Came the gracious summer; but to the cabin of Alouette came but empty memories, and her father Këwanah, the Algonquin, was poor as he had never been before,

and lizardlike, he slept daylong in the sun beside his cabin wall.

Came many months till nine had passed since that March day when Victor Descartes had played at dice with Torkel Knutsson, and now within a



"THE DOG SWERVED, READY TO FACE THE THING-BEHIND."

one-roomed cabin up Temiskamming way, an Algonquin girl, heavy with child, crooned dreamily to herself, in savage plaintive minors, an ancient lullaby of her race, the while each flicker from the open fire by which she cooked cast its gleam athwart the bronze of her comely features.

And outside the little shack in the cold twilight, Torkel Knutsson with his breath frozen in his square red beard, chopped at a fallen tamarack that lay in the December snow. Mingled with the rhythmic sound of the biting steel was the grunt of the man's exhaled breath as each stroke went deeper in the tamarack trunk. Once he caught his breath sharply. For a moment he leaned quietly on the ax handle, but he did not turn. He only listened. Behind him he knew was the frozen river, beyond it another little range of rocky hills, tree-fringed, and, ever beyond, an interminable stretch of more hills and pools and forest and little rivers, all ice-bound, snow-ströwn, lonely and desolate.

The man leaned his ax against his leg and slowly fumbled with heavily mittened hands at the flap of his cap till the ear covering was turned up. He was listening now, listening with curious wondering, grim intentness, holding his breath for long intervals, or letting it out with labored silence. There was no sound. Only the eagle came down through the thickening air and swung to its accustomed eyrie. Only a dusky snow flake sifted down from a mournful sky, with others slowly following it in monotone of thickening gray. There was little wind, but the cold was piercing. Reassured at last, the man again drew down his ear covering. Yet in that moment, without accent or pause, like the sifting snow that fell from upper space, came again the certainty of a voice, though he knew no sound.

"*Torkel - Knutsson - you - fear - the - Thing - behind - you!*"

The big man contemptuously, slowly, scanned the encircling, narrowing horizon. When his eye rested again upon the eyrie across the frozen river, the eagle still perched there unalarmed.

Gathering up his firewood and the ax, the man returned to the cabin. When he had let fall behind him the bar across the door, the girl flashed at him a quick look of questioning.

He answered carelessly, "Ay t'ought Ay heard—somet'ing."

"Wolf?"

He shook his head.

"Man?"

He hesitated an instant, and shook his head again.

"*Le loup-garou?*"

"*Le loup-garou*—what is that?"

"*Le loup-garou*—mebbe so you call heem, sometime wolf—sometime man—sometime wolf?"

"Maybe—so," assented the man. He voiced at last her thought. "The were-wolf!"

The girl was on the verge of dreams before she heard again the voice of the man.

"I am *not* afraid!" she mimicked him in drowsy wonder. "*Mais non*. Who says it? You are the bravest man in seven province'; brave and very strong," the voice trailed off.

Next day within the cabin the leaping fire and the stealthy cold struggled for mastery. The girl brooded in patient silence, or crooned her ancient lullaby above the simple tasks of day. The man worked at the snowshoes that must bear him out in quest of food before all food was gone. Outside the cabin the snow piled up in deepening drifts.

In the wan afterpart of this second day the Swede struggled out to chop more fuel. He scraped away the fallen snow from the prostrate tamarack and hewed his wood. He gathered the wood in his arms and carried it to the hut. Then he returned for his ax, and, leaning on its handle, listened somberly. Faint, yet penetrating, there seemed to come again, through the all-en-shrouding dust of falling snow, that sinister call, "*Torkel - Knutsson - you - fear - the - Thing - behind - you!*" Yet he knew there was no sound.

"I am *not* afraid!" he said to himself that night as by the leaping light of the rushing tamarack he wrought late over his snowshoes.

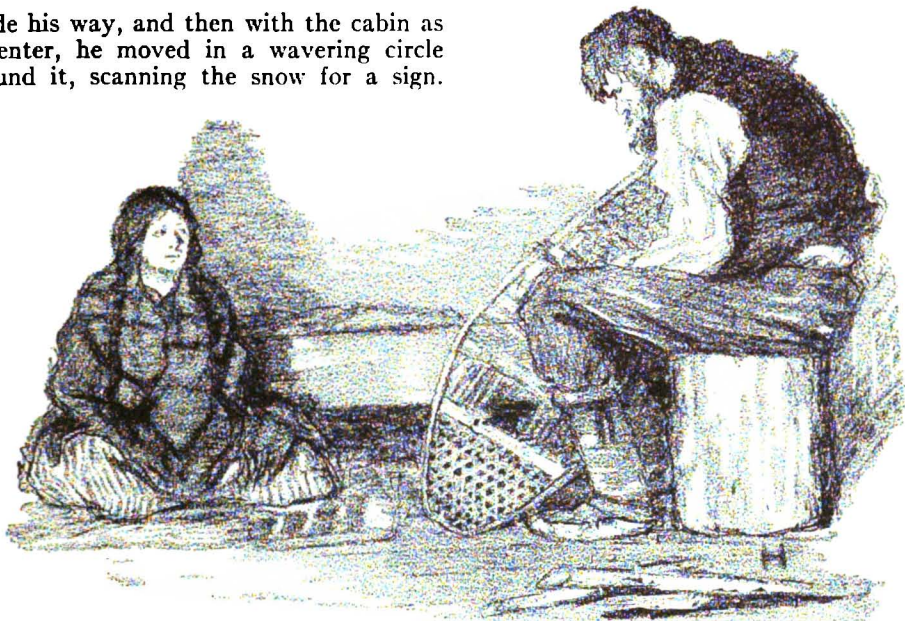
The girl stirred in her place.

"Now twice have I heard you say that," she protested sleepily in her native tongue, "and twice a man may say that, and say truth, but the third time—he lies."

By day the fall of snow had stopped, but the cold had increased. The eagle had forsaken his eyrie and had winged his way toward his Southern haunts. The weaker things of the forest had cowered in their coverts, and death still sought them there.

A mile from his shack Torkel Knutsson

made his way, and then with the cabin as a center, he moved in a wavering circle around it, scanning the snow for a sign.



"'I AM NOT AFRAID!' SHE MIMICKED HIM IN DROWSY WONDER."

When the circle was complete he had found no man-made trail, but he stopped and listened. From far away, faintly voicing the world-old hunger-grief of the wild, came slurring across the frigid waste the avid howl of an unseen wolf.

The man cuddled his rifle beneath his cold-numbered arm and moved in toward the cabin some hundred yards, and then stolidly trudged again in a circle from right to left. When the end of day drew near he had traced the line of a spiral that had its base a mile away, and that ended at the snow-banked cabin. The area he had traversed had been untracked and silent save for the weird wolf voicing; desolate and lifeless.

That night, as the man stooped to lift his firewood, a shudder of a dread without a name seized him and the cold of it smote home to his heart. To his ears came again the avid howl of hunger-grief, and then with all the wistful savagery of the wolf tone, there followed:

"Torkel - Knutsson - you - fear - the - Thing - behind - you!"

But the wolf howl was a sound, menacing yet real, while this—

As he whirled involuntarily to peer behind him, there gathered in the man's face the look of one who tries to shriek out words, but is made dumb by horror.

At night the girl slept, though at times a gust of coughing shook her savagely. For an hour, the man crouched, staring at the crumbling embers, and then wearily arose, and leaned against the cabin side, gazing strangely down at the girl who slept. He mittened his hands and drew his cap down within his upturned collar, and reaching for the rifle, he stepped outside his door, stopped a moment to close it tight, and moved off toward where a baby pine on the hillside near the frozen waterway cast its shadow in the dim starshine over the pallid snow. The deep hole his pick had torn in the wonderfully rich silver-bearing rock was near at hand, snow filled.

At the edge of the hole he crouched on his haunches, leaning against the baby pine, with the rifle lying across his knees, and his right hand buried in his breast to keep the trigger finger warm and supple. In the rifle was a cartridge he had tipped with a silver ball. For his need no other might avail.

"I am *not* afraid!" he whispered to his soul, but even as he told the brave lie, the baby pine shuddered profoundly from its roots, so that the snow was loosed from one of its branches and fell upon the man's arm like a death-white hand, and in that instant something sucked the blood from beneath

his cheeks and around his spine, and spewed it out again upon his heart, all cold. It was fear, exquisite, perfect, and foreordained.

And it chanced that a gaunt and monstrous wolf followed his scent up the wind across the starlit snow and came upon him very quietly in this moment of inertia.

Two days thereafter the blue smoke rose from the snow-banked cabin. But on the third no smoke arose. And at the third day's ending, Victor Descartes, limping slightly, approached the cabin from its unwindowed side, shoved back the unbarred door, and stepped quickly inside.

Gloom oppressed his eyes. The fire was dead. No stir of life was evident. The bunk of Torkel Knutsson was empty, and its blankets gone. Stools and table had gone for fuel. And the place was cold.

To the left of the empty bunk, the empty fireplace. About it, the cooking pots, empty of food and eloquent of famine. To the left of the fireplace, a second sleeping place. Muffled in many blankets something lay there but did not move.

Descartes advanced to the recumbent form and jerked the covering down from its hidden features. Alouette lay face to wall, scarce breathing, in that cold sluggishness that is the beginning of the end of life. A single blanket lay across her now, but many skins and blankets were enwrapped about a thing that lay within the shelter of her updrawn knees, tenderly enfolding arms, and offering breasts.

For the soul that had gone to its north-land gods the gods had given a soul.

This elemental bargaining of earth-born love with infinite avarice, the man, irresolute, watched in silence. To Victor Descartes, what should be the love of yesteryear, or the brood of another man, or the life of a girl who could forget? Each had been given its chance to live, and here in the cold was each one dying. *Bien!* 'Twas fate. He could not interfere.

But while he stood, the woman turned and saw, and in her eyes was born a great wonder, and then she breathed a long, shivering sigh.

"Always I knew that you must come!"

Shielding with her arm her eyes, she turned from him, and gathering her child to her swollen breast, lay silent beneath the furs.

And the man, unmoved, impassive, stood beside her place, staring down at the crumbled, fireless ash near his feet.

"Victor!"

His glance flashed somberly up at the tense challenge of her voice. She had drawn herself to a sitting posture, with head thrown back and black hair falling about her bared, smooth shoulders, and in her outstretched hands she held the tiny thing of life, that she had whelped in utter loneliness. Upon its back, and just behind the heart, was a dull red birthmark. This mark bore a curious likeness to a running wolf.

"Victor!"

"I see. Eet is a child."

"Victor!"

The word had risen to a penitent, passionate wail of entreaty, of vain entreaty that just one little feeble life might yet endure, and the word broke suddenly in a great gust of coughing—and it was the last word.

"Two," counted Descartes, in a level, uninterested voice. "The big win' grew afraid, an' the pretty leaf grew sear an' died."

Without bitterness and without compassion he leaned to draw the covering up over the quiet face.

"What, little brat! Still here?"

The child's tiny soft hand groped uncertainly into his, and touching an ungloved finger closed instinctively about it with curious tenacity.

"Whelp of a wanton, an' son of a t'ief!"

He caught the unwhimpering infant in his two hands, swung it on high—and brought it slowly, wonderingly, down to the level of his lips, enthralled by the world-old charm of so new a thing; and in the end he gently kissed the satiny little helpless hands

that reached confidently for him without fright.

"T'ief an' wanton, thou 's stole' my heart!" protested Victor Descartes. And he turned to the woman.

