

Garou the Cast

By W. A. FRASER, Author of "Thoroughbreds," etc.

MY log shack hung like an eyebrow on a bulging clay bank of the Athabasca; just below me the huge river pushed with the fury of mountain flood at the mud abutment. From the door wound a flesh-coloured foot-trail, soon lost in a muskeg from which isolated tamaracks leaned toward the river as though anticipating its eroding force.

Presently along this ribbon of trail came Gabriel—Phillipe Gabriel, the morose, solitary half-breed, whom his Cree people had named Lone Man.

I could hear the soft suck of his moccasined feet on the hard earth at my door; then his huge figure crumpled itself through the narrow, low-topped entrance, and Gabriel slouched awkwardly to a three-legged stool, growling the salutation: "Ho, boy! Mewasin?"

He swung one long leg across the other, spat voluminously upon the floor, took from his sash a beaded fire-bag, and filled his pipe with thoughtful deliberation. Then picking the blue-headed end of a match with his thumbnail till it sputtered yellow, his vast lungs kindled the tobacco to a blaze.

I wondered why had Lone Man come. With this breed travelled the essence of evil always; the sign manual of his craft was in the wolfish jaws, and gorilla arms, and restless, shifting eyes.

Lone Man smoked silently for a time; at last he spoke, saying, "M'sieu Ogama, s'pose I lak some potat' me."

I stared in astonishment. The bag of potatoes, brought a hundred miles of trail, was not for these red-skinned eaters of meat, so I refused his request sharply.

The heavy, wolfish face took on a deeper shadow of fierceness as the red-brown giant rose, dipped under the door crown, and swung sullenly over the pencilled trail. Going, I could hear the slipping catch of his huge feet; it was like a muffled imprecation. I almost regretted my refusal, for it was not good to stand ill with Lone Man.

Three days later Joe Savarin wandered into my shack and said: "S'pose me you hear dat Gabriel's brudder he's die las' night."

I hadn't.

"He can't eat not'ing—jus' mak' face at de damn sow belly de Comp'ny sell. Dat Gabriel he's try for mak' he's brudder eat, but he can't. Is M'sien's potat' good for sick mans?"

Then I knew that I had misjudged Lone Man. But why had he not told me his brother was ill? Bah! the way of an Indian is but that of a wayward child; and, no doubt, Gabriel had reviled me to the others, for Savarin's allusion to the potatoes was the glint of a hidden trail.

Living with me for a time was Henly, a young Mission school teacher, on his way to Wapiscaw, and the boy's death gave him chance for zealous occupation. He was English, and seven times a juvenile. Six months of Canada had not blunted his self-sufficiency, and he arrogated to himself full vicarage over burying Lone Man's brother.

Out of remorse I sent by Henly a tribute of tea and tobacco to the wolf-like man who sorrowed.

For ten days I saw nothing of Gabriel; on the eleventh day his heavy-shouldered form shut from my doorway the sunlight that for hours had glinted up from the glassed surface of the river. As his shadow fell across the floor I looked up. A sinister smile curved the breed's face into ravines till his teeth showed like fangs.

"Come in, boy," I said, thrusting the one stool forward with my foot.

Gabriel entered. From his hand a shaganappi cord led to something that clung with persistence to the open; but with a wrench of the breed's strong arm, the something, large and black, hurtled through the air to the floor of my shack.

"For M'sieu the Ogama," Gabriel explained. "I hear me dat de Ogama want for mak' bully good train ob dog."

I nodded comprehendingly.

"Here's de bes' damn dog for leader in Alberta; an' I don' want no train dog me dis time, so I s'pose I mak him for presen' my fren'."

It was the old story of a half-breed's present, which is the dearest kind of a bargain. But because of the dead brother I took the dog, as a tenderfoot might have done, and returned his value doublefold—gave Gabriel

thirty skins, and passed the large plug of tobacco that is the crowning grace of a bargain in the Northland.

And when he had gone back by the trail between the hermit tamaracks. I sat and tortured my mind over Gabriel's latest move.

Could a bad Indian soften to compunction and bring me as a present a good dog, just because I had shown regret and dowered him with gifts? I put the troublesome thing from me; there was the dog, whatever was in the heart of Gabriel.

Yes, most certainly there was the dog; huge, and gaunt out of starvation. The letter page of his breeding had been crossed and recrossed until it was unreadable. There was the broad, flat, brainless forehead, studded on either side by a short, thick, rounded ear—which part was "huskie." The black, long-haired coat, white-streaked on muzzle and legs, was of indefinite origin. The dog's lofty stature might have held from a Scotch stag-hound sire, but there was no corroborative evidence of this strain. The legs carried the cannon-bone of a mastiff; the tail short as a bear's, suggested the rudimentary narrative of an English sheep dog. And over this fret-work of canine tracery dominated the spirit of a wolf; it lighted the eyes with malevolence, and twitched the nervous snarling lip with suggestion of blood thirst.

Gabriel had not named the dog to me; and, somehow, through my mind flitted an embodiment of the impression the animal created, the name "Garou."

I threw Garou scraps of bacon, bannock, a tin of fat; he snapped everything with famished eagerness.

When Henly saw Garou his eyes smiled with joy. A train dog! The very thing he had longed for. And he had thought Lone Man bitter against me at the boy's death, but this showed that the poor fellow was all right. In my mind was something I did not speak of; I knew this breed and Henly did not.

From the first Garou was content. Instinct told him that he had come to a place of rich feeding. His hard skull carried the war map of a sanguinary life; scars left by the loaded dog-whip traversed his scalp like mole-furrows in a field of loam. All day he lay in the sun on the chip yard at my door and ate and slept; and sometimes sought with strong-clawed feet to dislodge the army of fleas that homed in the thick hair-forest that crowned his back like a wolf's crest. He was almost voiceless—having neither the wolf's howl nor the dog's bark, nothing but the low "Ghur-r-rh" of a guttural growl.

Garou was a solitary. When Indians passed our way with their dogs of burden he took no notice of the canine pack animals. When they snapped at him the provocation did not even excite retaliation.

One night my little log storehouse was looted by train dogs. The starved brutes had dug an entry below the sill log and wrought destruction. The storehouse looked as though fiends had played havoc with my supplies; the bacon was gone utterly; flour bags were ripped, and their contents plastered the earth, floor and walls.

Garou, sleeping in the chip yard, had evidently taken no interest in the proceedings. I was tempted to shoot him.

One day I acquired another unit for my team of four dogs—a rare huskie. His yellow-white coat hung in huge rolls, for he was taking on his winter garment and casting off the old.

When I brought the huskie to my shack, Garou looked at him ominously.

"He's as big as the other," said Henly joyously, and of course he's hungry."

I sat and smoked my pipe while the Englishman broke bannock into a pan and decorated it with bacon fat.

"Better put it outside," I advised; but I had spoken too late, for Henly had placed the dish on the floor.

The huskie shoved his white nozzle into the food with eagerness.

I heard a low gurgle in the throat of Garou, and yelled, "Marse! A'tim!" I might as well have called to the Athabasca.

The dog became a black incarnation of ferocity; his rush was demoniac in its sudden fierceness. The huskie had fought for food all his life; each white fish had remained in his possession because of his strength. For