

The Grey Master

How Kane the Schoolmaster Captured the Long-jawed Marauder of Quah-Davic

By CHARLES G. D. ROBERTS

(Illustrations by Arthur Heming.)

WHY he was so much bigger, more powerful, and more implacably savage than the other members of the grey, spectral pack, which had appeared suddenly from the north to terrorize their lone and scattered clearings, the settlers of the lower Quah-Davic Valley could not guess. Those who were of French descent among them, and full of the old Acadian superstitions, explained it simply enough by saying he was a *loup-garou*, or "wer-wolf," and resigned themselves to the impossibility of contending against a creature of such supernatural malignity and power. But their fellows of English speech, having no such tradition to fall back upon, were mystified and indignant. The ordinary grey, or "cloudy," wolf of the east they knew, though he was so rare south of Labrador that few of them had ever seen one. They dismissed them all, indifferently, as "varmin." But this accountable grey ravager was bigger than any two such wolves, fiercer and more dauntless than any ten. Though the pack he led numbered no more than half-a-dozen, he made it respected and dreaded through all the wild leagues of the Quah-Davic. To make things worse, this long-flanked, long-jawed marauder was no less cunning than fierce. When the settlers, seeking vengeance for sheep, pigs, and cattle slaughtered by his pack, went forth to hunt him with dogs and guns, it seemed that there was never a wolf in the country. Nevertheless, either that same night or the next, it was long odds that one or more of those same dogs who had been officious in the hunt would disappear. As for traps and poisoned meat, they proved equally futile. They were always visited, to be sure, by the pack, at some unexpected and indeterminable moment, but treated always with a contemptuous scorn which was doubtless all that such clumsy tactics merited. Meanwhile the ravages went on, and the children were kept close housed at night, and cool-eyed old woodsmen went armed and vigilant along the lonely roads. The French *habitant* crossed himself, and the Saxon cursed his luck; and no one solved the mystery.

Yet, after all, as Arthur Kane, the young schoolmaster at Burnt Brook Cross-Roads, began dimly to surmise, the solution was quite simple. A lucky gold-miner, returning from the Klondike, had brought with him not only gold and an appetite, but also a lank, implacable, tameless whelp from the packs that haunt the sweeps of northern timber. The whelp had gnawed his way to freedom. He had found, fought, thrashed, and finally adopted, a little pack of his small, eastern kin. He had thriven, and grown to the strength and stature that were his rightful heritage. And "the Grey Master of the Quah-Davic," as Kane had dubbed him, was no *loup-garou*, no outcast human soul incarcerated in wolf form, but simply a great Alaskan timber-wolf.

But this, when all is said, is quite enough. A wolf that can break the back of a full-grown collie at one snap of his jaws, and gallop off with the carcass as if it were a chipmunk, is about as undesirable a neighbour, in the night woods, as any *loup-garou* ever devised by the *habitant's* excitable imagination.

All up and down the Quah-Davic Valley the dark spruce woods were full of game—moose, deer, hares, and wild birds innumerable—with roving caribou herds on the wide barren beyond the hill-ridge. Nevertheless, the great grey wolf would not spare the possessions of the settlers. His pack haunted the fringes of the settlements with a need-less tenacity which seemed to hold a challenge in it, a direct and insolent defiance. And the feeling of resentment throughout the Valley was on the point of crystallizing into a concerted campaign of vengeance which would have left even so cunning a strategist as the Grey Master no choice but to flee or fall, when something took place which quite changed the course of public sentiment. Folk so disagreed about it that all concerted action became impossible, and each one was left to deal with the elusive adversary in his own way.

This was what happened.

IN a cabin about three miles from the nearest neighbour lived the Widow Baisley, alone with her son Paddy, a lad under ten years old, and

little for his age. One midwinter night she was taken desperately ill, and Paddy, reckless of the terrors of the midnight solitudes, ran wildly to get help. The moon was high and full, and the lifeless backwoods road was a narrow, bright, white thread between the silent black masses of the spruce forest. Now and then, as he remembered afterwards, his ear caught a sound of light feet following him in the dark beyond the roadside. But his plucky little heart was too full of panic grief about his mother to have any room for fear as to himself. Only the excited amazement of his neighbours, over the fact that he had made the journey in safety, opened his eyes to the hideous peril he had come through. Willing helpers hurried back with him to his mother's bedside. And on the way one of them, a keen huntsman who had more than once pitted his woodcraft in vain against that of the Grey Master, had the curiosity to step off the road and examine the snow under the thick spruces. Perhaps imagination misled him, when he thought he caught a glimpse of savage eyes, points of green flame, fading off into the black depths. But there could be no doubt as to the fresh tracks he found in the snow. There they were—the footprints of the pack, like those of so many big dogs—and among them the huge trail of the great, far-striding leader. All the way, almost



from his threshold, these sinister steps had paralyzed those of the hurrying child. Close to the edge of the darkness they ran—close, within the distance of one swift leap—yet never any closer!

Why had the great grey wolf, who faced and pulled down the bull moose, and from whose voice the biggest dogs in the settlements ran like whipped curs—why had he and his stealthy pack spared this easy prey? It was inexplicable, though many had theories good enough to be laughed to scorn by those who had none. The *habitants*, of course, had all their superstitions confirmed, and with a certain respect and refinement of horror added: Here was a *loup-garou* so crafty as to spare, on occasion! He must be conciliated, at all costs. They would hunt him no more, his motives being so inexplicable. Let him take a few sheep, or a steer, now and then, and remember that *they*, at least, were not troubling him. As for the English-speaking settlers, their enmity cooled down to the point where they could no longer get together any concentrated bitterness. It was only a big rascal of a wolf, anyway, scared to touch a white man's child, and certainly nothing for a lot of grown men to organize about. Some of the women jumped to the conclusion that a certain delicacy of sentiment had governed the wolves in their strange forbearance,

while others honestly believed that the pack had been specially sent by Providence to guard the child through the forest on his sacred errand. But all, whatever their views, agreed in flouting the young school-teacher's uninteresting suggestion that perhaps the wolves had not happened, at the moment, to be hungry.

AS it chanced, however, even this very rational explanation of Kane's was far from the truth. The truth was that the great wolf had profited by his period of captivity in the hands of a masterful man. Into his fine sagacity had penetrated the conception—hazy perhaps, but none the less effective—that man's vengeance would be irresistible and inescapable if once fairly aroused. This conception he had enforced upon the pack. It was enough. For, of course, even to the most elementary intelligence among the hunting, fighting kindreds of the wild, it was patent that the surest way to arouse man's vengeance would be to attack man's young. The intelligence lying behind the wide-arched skull of the Grey Master was equal to more intricate and less obvious conclusions than that.

Among all the scattered inhabitants of the Quah-Davic Valley, there was no one who devoted quite so much attention to the wonderful grey wolf as did the young school teacher. His life at the Burnt Brook Cross-Roads, his labours at the little Burnt Brook school, were neither so exacting nor so exciting but that he had time on his hands. His preferred expedients for spending that time were hunting, and studying the life of the wild kindreds. He was a good shot with both rifle and camera, and would serve himself with one weapon or the other as the mood seized him. When life, or his dinner, went ill with him, or he found himself fretting hopelessly for the metropolitan excitement of the little college city where he had been educated, he would choose his rifle. And so wide-reaching, so mysterious, are the ties which enmesh all created beings, that it would seem to even matters up and relieve his feelings wonderfully just to kill something, if only a rabbit or a weasel.

But at other times he preferred the camera.

Naturally Kane was interested in the mysterious grey wolf more than in all the other prowlers of the Quah-Davic put together. He was quite unreasonably glad when the plans for a concerted campaign against the marauder so suddenly fell through. That so individual a beast should have its career cut short by an angry settler's bullet, to avenge a few ordinary pigs or sheep, was a thing he could hardly contemplate with patience. To scatter the pack would be to rob the Quah-Davic solitudes of half their romance. He determined to devote himself to a study of the great wolf's personality and characteristics, and to foil, as far as this could be done without making himself unpopular, such plots as might be laid for the beast's undoing.

Recognizing, however, that this friendly interest might not be reciprocated, Kane chose his rifle rather than his camera as a weapon, on those stinging, blue-white nights when he went forth to seek knowledge of the grey wolf's ways. His rifle was a well-tried repeating Winchester, and he carried a light, short-handled axe in his belt besides the regulation knife; so he had no serious misgivings as he trod the crackling, moonlit snow beneath the moose-hide webbing of his snowshoes. But not being utterly foolhardy, he kept to the open stretches of meadow, or river-bed, or snow-buried lake, rather than in the close shadows of the forest.

But now, when he was so expectant, the wolf-pack seemed to find business elsewhere. For nights not a howl had been heard, not a fresh track found, within miles of Burnt Brook Cross-Roads. Then, remembering that a watched pot takes long to boil, Kane took fishing-lines and bait, and went up the wide, white brook-bed to the deep lake in the hills whence it launches its shallow flood towards the Quah-Davic. He took with him also for companionship, since this time he was not wolf-hunting, a neighbour's dog that was for ever after him—a useless, yellow lump of mongrel dog-flesh, but friendly and silent. After building a hasty shelter of spruce boughs some distance out from shore,