

Weird Tales

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THE WOLF

BY SEWELL
PEASLEE
WRIGHT



"Through the leaping flames the monster sprang for him."

FROM across the lake, clearly and with eery distinctness through the stillness of the night, came the fearsome notes of a hungry timber wolf trailing some straining, panting deer.

Startled, I leaned forward, my pipe cold between my teeth, and listened to the hellish music of that tawny demon of the woods.

The eager, savage hunting cry changed suddenly to a demoniac pæan of victory, broke into a slaving yapping—and then the pulsing silence settled down on us once more.

"Got her!" I said, giving voice involuntarily to my thoughts.

George nodded gravely.

"The timbers seldom miss making their kill," he remarked thought-

fully. "It's no wonder the people of olden times used to believe——"

"*Hello the camp!*" The ringing, unexpected hail from the dark lake caused us both to start like frightened children. The weird hunting cry of a timber wolf does things to the nerves of even the men who spend all their days in the bush.

Our visitors proved to be two in number: the first a tall chap in the uniform of the Provincial Police, who introduced himself as Tieg McDonald, and a tall, slender man with a professional beard and black, restless eyes, whom McDonald introduced as Dr. Saunders.

It was instantly evident from their attitudes that the doctor was McDonald's prisoner, but aside from the

fact that the doctor carried no weapons of any kind, there was nothing tangible to indicate the fact.

Dr. Saunders was in a pitifully nervous state; his eyes roving constantly, searching the surrounding blackness with an intense and never-resting gaze that bordered on the insane glare of a madman. When he spoke, his voice was jerky and high-pitched, and although his remarks were utterly rational, it was easy to see that he was near the breaking point. McDonald kept a cautious eye on his prisoner at all times, but I somehow caught the impression that there was more of pity than sternness in his regard.

For some time we chatted quite casually, and then I dropped a remark that proved to be a bomb-shell.

"The timbers are ranging south early this year," I said. "I suppose you heard that big boy——"

"God!" groaned the doctor in the voice of a damned soul. "Will I never get away from the voice of those hellish beasts?"

"That's all right, Doc," said the big policeman soothingly. "There's three of us here to see that no wolf comes around the camp." Then McDonald turned to us. "Doc had a mighty bad experience up on Tennesip Bay," he exclaimed. "Ran up against a mad wolf——"

"No!" cried the doctor, his wild eyes searching our faces. "No! It was not a mad wolf. It was not, I tell you! Listen, and I will tell you myself all that happened. "We were——"

"It'll get you all nerved up to tell the story again, Doc," interrupted McDonald. "Better turn in and get some sleep, eh?"

"No. I want to tell these men also, and see what they think," returned the doctor stubbornly. "You think I am mad, McDonald; I am not blind, you know."

The policeman colored a little

under his bronze, but he simply shrugged his mighty shoulders and said nothing.

"IT WAS this way," began Dr. Saunders, as calmly as though he were about to relate the most commonplace event. "I came up into the woods on a long hunting trip, seeking not so much a trophy as my health. My practise had worn me down in body and mind, and I knew from experience that a month or so up here in the bush would make another man of me.

"I made the decision to come, and left that same night, trusting to chance to find an outfitter and a guide after I got to the jumping-off place. There had been a lot of hunters this year, however, and the only guide I could find was a French-Indian breed known only as Victor. He had not been long in the country, and I gathered that he was pretty generally hated and mistrusted, but he had trapped last year in the very country I wished to hunt in, and so I took him.

"He was surly, silent, and at times almost savage, but had a most uncanny knack of finding his way in the bush, and of locating game. I saw him discover game on several occasions when it seemed that only the power of scent could have served him. Once or twice, upon awaking late at night, I found him missing from the tent, and always the following mornings he was more sullen and morose than ever. However, I am silent by nature myself, and my guide's disposition, while it caused me some wonderment, gave me no concern whatever. Most of these men of the bush are odd characters.

"One night we were sitting around our fire just as we are sitting here now. It was very dark, without even a star showing through the heavy clouds overhead. I had become weary of my own thoughts, and gave

the brooding Victor a verbal poke to see if I could not rouse him.

“‘I heard old man Martin, down at the post, giving some of the fellows the very devil for telling stories of werewolves in this country,’ I remarked casually. I knew very well that Victor would be possessed of all the superstitions of his breed, and that old Martin and Victor were bitter personal enemies, but I was utterly unprepared for the sudden hatred that flared up in Victor’s eyes.

“‘Across the fire I saw my guide’s deep-set eyes light up with sudden hatred.

“‘Ol’ Martin, he ees a fool! He ees crack’; he ees a child the secon’ time! Who is he to laugh at better men, I ask you?’

“‘Then you think there are werewolves in this country?’ I asked, amused (God help me!) at the sudden ferocity of the man.

“‘How can one know for sure?’ shrugged Victor. ‘My own people, the French’—he was about one thirty-second French, the rest being several breeds of Indian—‘they say for sure that there be werewolves. I have met men who have seen them. Where there ees so much sign, there must be game. Ees eet not so, *M’sieu?*’ He smiled ingratiatingly, revealing flashing white teeth beneath his stiff and bristling mustache.

“‘I sent a cloud of tobacco smoke swirling through the chill night air, and watched it merge with the hurrying wreaths from the fire.

“‘Bosh!’ I rejoined, more for the purpose of seeing what he would say than for any great interest in the matter under discussion. ‘Werewolves have long since been proven nothing but myths, Victor. Only ignorant people believe in such things these days.’

“‘I was surprized at the effect of my words. Victor’s dark eyes lit up with a peculiar flickering light such as I had never before seen except in

animals; the kind of weird, green glint you see in the eyes of a dog or a cat at night. His eyes narrowed until they were scarcely more than evil slits, and his thin, red lips drew away from his gleaming teeth until his face was utterly bestial in its expression of demoniac, insane hatred.

“‘*M’sieu* thinks so?’ he asked, and his voice was low and silky, like the purring of a cat or the soft guttural notes of a fawning dog. ‘Well, *M’sieu* should know. He ees educate’, and I am but a poor French bushman.’ And he stalked off into the darkness toward the tent.

“‘I started to apologize, as I had not meant to offend the man, but he was gone. Oh well, I thought, let him turn in and sulk if he wanted to! I would finish my pipe anyway before following him. I leaned back comfortably against a big tree and, watching the weaving tongues of yellow and red, lost myself in reverie.

“‘My thoughts drifted into many channels; almost I was dozing, when suddenly, sharp and clear as the note of a bugle on a winter morning, the hunting cry of a wolf shivered through the night’s silence. Once, twice, three times the eery, hellish call cut through the air; something maniacal, something threatening, something exultant, something pleading in the long, undulating notes. Despite myself I shivered, and drew closer to the glowing coals.

“‘Hear the wolf, Victor?’ I called to my guide, to break the uncanny silence that followed the challenge of the wolf.

“‘There was no answer.

“‘Victor!’ I cried sharply, suddenly apprehensive. Only palpitant silence answered me.

“‘I scrambled to my feet and ran to the tent. It was empty! Victor had disappeared.

“‘Suddenly the banshee wailing of the wolf again splintered the deathly stillness. It was nearer now, much

nearer. It came racing down a long slope, then ran up back of the camp, evidently headed directly toward me.

“**H**ASTILY I piled dry wood on the dying fire. The fresh fuel smoldered a moment and then little tongues of eager flame began licking through. All the time the demoniac bugling of the wolf was becoming louder, fiercer; was drawing ever nearer. Was the animal crazy? What little breeze there was was blowing directly toward him, and surely he must have scented the camp. And where had Victor gone while I napped? And *why* had he gone? Had he deserted me, as Indian guides not infrequently do?

“These and a hundred other questions flitted through my mind as I fed the fire and fanned it eagerly until it blazed. No wild animal, I knew, would come close to a fire. Carefully I piled the pitchy wood, and in a minute or two the flames were leaping high into the overhanging darkness, spilling red light like blood over the rocky ground, and setting a thousand shadows springing and dancing like ghoulish imps.

“The threatening, savage cry of the foraging wolf stopped suddenly, and a hushed, expectant silence settled down over the woods. Even the lap-lapping of the water on the shore a few yards away seemed to die to an inaudible murmur.

“‘Old boy changed his mind!’ I chuckled. ‘Fire is the one thing—’

“There was a soft rustle in the bushes just behind me. I gave a startled exclamation and turned sharply in my tracks. There, not two yards away, a pair of blazing green eyes were watching me narrowly. Even as I turned they came slowly, unwinkingly nearer.

“I jumped for my rifle. It was leaning against a tree on the other side of the fire; I remembered putting it there, where I would be

sure to see and clean it before I turned in. I knew just where it was—and yet when I reached for it, it was gone. Frantically, thinking it might have fallen down, I looked around for it. It was not there. And across from me, on the other side of the fire, a huge, tawny timber wolf stalked into the circle of fire and stood with its malevolent green eyes fixed unwinkingly upon me.

“The brute was larger than any timber wolf I had ever seen or heard of, and much darker in color. The lips were curled in a hellish caricature of a smile, and a low snarl came from its slavering mouth. For one long moment I eyed the brute and it eyed me back. And then, suddenly, through the leaping flames and the showering sparks, the monster sprang for me!

“Instinctively I crouched, protecting my throat. The movement was the only thing that saved me, for the long white fangs sank into the fleshy part of my upflung forearm. Desperately I threw myself upon the writhing beast, my hands seeking his throat. Useless, useless! The beast unloosed his hold on my arm and reached for my throat. I leaped backward as quickly as I could, and the shining, cruel teeth clicked savagely together not an inch from their mark.

“Snarling with rage, the animal sprang again, but as he did so a sudden thought struck me, and I cursed explosively. Why hadn’t I thought of my revolver before? Hastily I snatched it from its holster under my arm, and as the wolf flung at my throat I fired.

“The result was instantaneous. A look of fear blazed suddenly in the smoky green eyes, and the beast seemed to stop its leap in midair. Before I could fire a second time, the wolf had disappeared into the shadows of the surrounding forest.

"It was limping badly, its left hind leg being apparently badly hurt, and in the firelight I saw several drops of blood gleaming blackly on the rocks at my feet.

"I MADE NO effort to follow the animal. I was exhausted with my terrible struggle, and my brain was throbbing dizzily with excitement. I am no hero, and that great beast, bigger than any wolf and with a light of hellish intelligence burning in its eyes, had chilled the very blood of me. Weakly, with a little trembling sigh of relief, I seated myself beside the fire.

"A moment later I started apprehensively. Something was coming through the bush! Was it——? A familiar voice hailed me from the darkness. It was Victor!

"Smiling, his teeth gleaming white-ly under his black mustache, Victor came up to the fire.

"*M'sieu* is awake, eh?" he remarked. "I have been out hunting for a wolf that I hear while *M'sieu* sleeps. I am so bold as to take the gun, but *sacré!* Of the wolf I do not even catch sight. Shrewd ones, those wolves, *M'sieu!*" He was smiling amiably, but as his glance met mine, I would have sworn there was something mocking in the depths of his dark eyes, and for an instant it seemed that they gleamed with smoky, green fire.

"'I saw him,' I remarked shortly. 'He attacked me.'

"'So!' exclaimed Victor in surprise. 'The wolf, he attack you, here by the fire? Eet ees imposs'!"

"'Impossible or not, he did just that,' I declared. 'I shot and wounded him or he would have torn my throat out. Only hit him in the leg, but that was enough.'

"'And tomorrow we will be back in town! Eet ees too bad you have not the time to stay so we could hunt heem!' said Victor, a peculiar note

in his voice. 'Even though you do laugh at the werewolves of my fathers, you would like to shoot a timber wolf, ees eet not so?'

"Again the smoky green light seemed to flicker in his eyes. A thousand tumultuous, impossible thoughts swirled through my brain. The smile on Victor's face seemed to turn to a menacing grin, like the snarling visage of a wolf . . . with gleaming white fangs . . . slaving jaws——

"Some instinct caused me to look down. Victor followed the direction of my glance with a smile half of fear, half of hatred.

"*His left leg, from the knee down, was covered with blood!*

"'It was in the left leg that I shot the wolf,' I said musingly, almost unaware that I was thinking aloud.

"'And eet ees the left leg that I hurt when I fell in the dark!' smiled Victor. 'Eet ees what you call a coo-incident, ees eet not, *M'sieu?* Something eet ees hard to believe?' And he chuckled mockingly, triumphantly.

"My overwrought nerves gave way then. I felt something snap out of place up here"—the doctor indicated his head with a vague gesture—"and a dizzy, light-headed feeling swept over me.

"I remember seeing Victor as through a bloody fog, across the fire, but his face had changed to the face of a wolf—the wolf that had leaped through the flames, straight for my throat.

"I think I shouted something as I drew my revolver and fired at that leering caricature of a human face. I am a good shot, and I did not miss, for Victor crumpled in his tracks."

The doctor paused for a moment and stared moodily into the fire.

"I do not remember just what happened after that," he resumed after a few minutes, during which none of

us broke the oddly strained silence. "I left Victor where he fell, I think, and paddled to one of the fishing camps on the lake. Mr. McDonald happened to be there, and he consented to take me back with him. I guess, gentlemen, that is all my story. Do you think I am mad, as Mr. McDonald does, I am sure, or do you think that I know what I saw?"

With a pitiful eagerness he glanced from one face to another.

George was the first to speak.

"I think, Doctor, that you have had a most unusual experience," he said thoughtfully. "And I think Shakespeare was indeed right in saying that there are more things in heaven and earth than are dreamt of in the philosophy of most of us."

I nodded. "That is undoubtedly so, Doctor," was the only remark I could think of, although I knew in

my heart, of course, that the doctor was a madman.

It was not until after the doctor had retired that I learned the rest of the story. It was McDonald who threw the last light on the strange tale the doctor had told.

"The funny thing about it," remarked McDonald as we were smoking a last pipe around the fire, "is that when I went back to the doctor's camp, Victor had two bullet holes in his body; one through the leg and one through the head, and the one through the leg was tightly bandaged with a blood-soaked handkerchief—and to the wound were sticking a number of black and yellow hairs—wolf hairs!"

George said nothing, and I said nothing. There are lots of things in the woods of the far north that man is foolish to attempt to explain.