

Weird Tales

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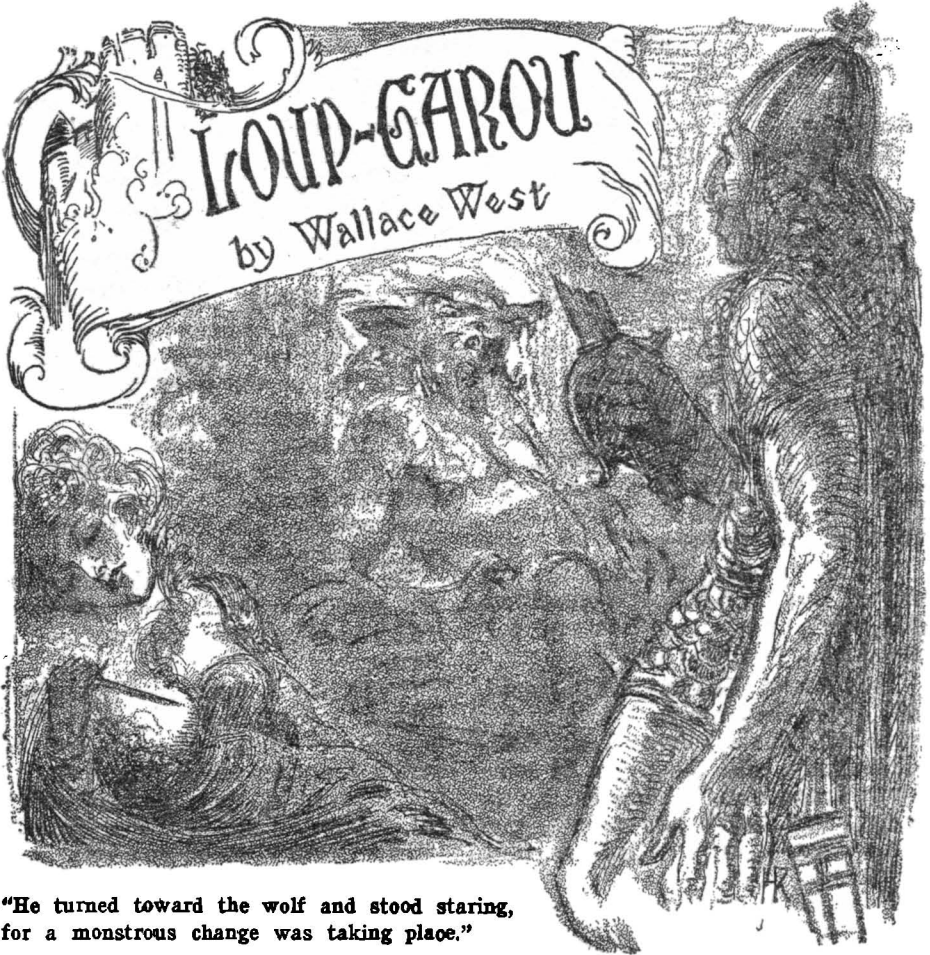
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"He turned toward the wolf and stood staring, for a monstrous change was taking place."

GIL COUTEAU sat in the warm sunlight of the courtyard industriously polishing his long, straight sword. It was a good sword, he ruminated, scraping industriously at the dark stain which insisted on sticking in the crevices of the scrollwork hilt, but it was becoming thirsty from lack of use. His superstitious eye seemed to detect some subtle lessening of the keenness of the edge; some slight dullness in the polish of the blade since he had used it almost daily against the cursed Saracens in Palestine.

With the sword across his knees he

leaned back against the wall and relaxed into sleepy comfort. It was good, he decided, to be done with wars, and with slicing heads from infidels; it was good to be in Merrie England, where nothing much had happened since his arrival; it was good to have the stout walls of Castle Randall about him, and a real bed to sleep on once more.

With half-closed eyes he watched the golden flash of flies across the sunlight and listened to the hum of wasps who had their nest somewhere up the tower. Two grooms were asleep against the stable wall. Two

more were trying to work up interest in a desultory cockfight near the portcullis. Ho hum! Life was good. His head nodded forward on his breast.

He was awakened by a ragged thunder of hoofs upon the lowered drawbridge. He leaped to his feet, all his sleepy content shattered, as a wild-eyed horse charged into the courtyard and plunged to a stop before him, in a great lather of sweat. From its back slid a bleeding bundle of a man whom he recognized as the serf Gomar. "Oh, sir," gabbled this one, in a mixture of Saxon and English which Gil still found hard to understand, "oh, sir; Lady Constance! I must to Lord Robert. Gray Henry, the Wolf, has stolen——"

Without pausing to finish, the serf started into the castle at a slouching, staggering run, and Couteau followed him, sword in hand.

They found Sir Robert Fitzgerald, lord of the castle, in an alcove off the main hall. He was dressed in a dust-colored robe, like the priest of some occult order, and, surrounded by an array of test-tubes and retorts, was poring over a huge volume as they rushed in.

He leaped to his feet, however, and strode forward with a step which belied his sixty-five years.

"Oh, sir," cried the serf, throwing himself at the old man's feet, "your daughter, Lady Constance, has been stolen——"

"By whom?" thundered Sir Robert, jerking him to his feet as though the burly Saxon had been a feather.

"By your foster-brother, Gray Henry," sobbed the man.

"Henry the Wolf," whispered the old man, his face growing pale beneath his long beard. "But that's impossible," he cried, shaking the serf savagely. "She had three men-at-arms with her. Where are they?"

"Dead! We were put upon in the forest," came the answer.

Sir Robert returned slowly to his seat behind the test-tubes. He seemed older—grayer. "Call my son Brian," he commanded at length. "This matter will require fighting, methinks. Couteau, stay with me."

He busied himself arranging his apparatus as the others departed. "You have heard of my foster-brother since you returned with us from Palestine?" he finally inquired.

"Merely his name, sir," replied the other, "and that he holds Castle Barnecan, up the river."

"There is more to it than that," said Sir Robert. "Henry has an evil reputation. He dabbles in sorcery as I do in alchemy. Perhaps he has had more success than I. So 'tis said by the country-folk."

He paused, paced back and forth for some moments, then resumed: "You have heard of the gray wolf of Barnecan?"

"Aye, sir, I have even thought a little of a hunt to kill it, since there is nothing else to do here, and the wolf's deviltries are so numerous."

"'Tis lucky you haven't tried, Gil," retorted the old man fiercely. "He killed my uncle, you know, and people say—well I must out with it—the people say that my cursed foster-brother is——"

They were interrupted by a clatter of spurs on the flagstones. Young Brian, heir and only son of Sir Robert, rushed in.

"I have heard, Father," he cried. "Constance has been stolen by that fiend. Why do you stand there so quietly? Come! We must find her; we must storm Castle Barnecan at once."

He looked very handsome as he stood in his hunting clothes, for he was tall and blond and very, very young, or at least so it seemed to Couteau, who had fought seven weary years in Palestine.

"Sir Henry is too strong for us, boy," reasoned his father. "We

could never capture the castle. We must try other measures. Let us ride at once, and try to reason with him. I have known for years that he wished to marry Constance so that he might have a claim on my lands at my death, but I never thought he would try this scurvy trick. If parley fails then we shall try other measures."

YOUNG Brian fumed and raged at this, but he was no fool, so that afternoon the three of them, with fifty yeomen at their backs, rode through the dense forests which separated the two fiefs. Toward sunset they halted before the drawbridge of Castle Barnecan. In answer to a trumpet-blast Sir Henry himself appeared at a turret, but made no offer to lower the bridge.

"We have come to demand Lady Constance of you," shouted Brian.

"I know naught of her," came the answer in a deep, resonant voice. "I would ask you to enter, but the drawbridge is never lowered here after sunset; and the sun is almost down." He turned to face the sinking orb, which was gilding him and the castle with a lurid glow.

"Then you refuse to give us news of our lady?" shouted Brian.

"I have said I know naught of her. Is not that enough, young sir? Let you come again tomorrow. You may examine Castle Barnecan from turret to dungeon. But tonight, I regret to say, dear nephew, that you can not enter. Tomorrow I will send men into the forest to search for her, since I greatly admire Constance, as you well know. But tonight we can do nothing in the dark."

As he finished speaking the sun sank slowly out of sight. At the same time Sir Henry turned and strode from the turret without a farewell, leaving his visitors hesitating on the edge of the moat.

Brian cursed and fumed as they

rode back through the dark woods. His horse, which felt the distress of his rider, plunged and fretted.

At last Brian pulled to a halt. "Father," he said firmly, "I am remaining here tonight to watch the castle. God knows what Gray Henry may try to do. I will keep Gomar with me, since he knows the country roundabout. We will keep a watch together. Come," he called to the serf. Together they wheeled and disappeared into the dusk.

The others rode in silence. The path under the trees grew darker at each moment. Besides the shuffle of the horses over the fallen leaves there was no sound except now and then the twitter of a sleeping bird, or the far-off howling of a lonely wolf.

"I like it not, Gil," said the knight, drawing his horse close to that of the Frenchman. "I would that I had not let him stay, but he is his father's son. Ah, I wish I were twenty years younger! Sir Henry would not have bearded me thus. Aye!" he cried fiercely, "and he shall not, even today. I'm not a do-tard yet."

They were interrupted by the concerted baying of several wolves which had closed in upon the calvalcade. "A pack of them—and in September, too," murmured the old man, noting the gleaming eyes back among the trees. Note how bold they are. Truly, this means a bleak winter, unless—unless——" He grew silent.

They rode on, the horses nervous and shivering as the quavering call of the pack rose about them, the men-at-arms whispering among themselves; the wolves following them at a judicious distance, until the gray towers of Randall showed against the stars.

THERE was no sleep in the castle that night, but a hurried preparation for battle. Sir Robert realized there was no use appealing to

the king in far-away London, and prepared to take the law into his own hands, although he well knew that Castle Barnecan was better garrisoned than his own stronghold. Weapons were overhauled, equipment inspected and the fighting men given instructions.

The castle had sunk into comparative quiet at sunrise, but was immediately roused by a shouting at the drawbridge. Rushing to a turret they saw Gomar, his clothes again in ribbons, clinging to his horse's neck to steady himself and doing his best to attract the attention of the guards.

The bridge was lowered and he stumbled over, a pitiful figure, his body covered with long scratches and jagged rents; his horse a lather of sweat and blood, almost spent.

"Oh, sir," he babbled, sinking down at the knight's feet, "again I bring bad news. Your son Brian is dead."

"How?" croaked Sir Robert.

"By the wolves," wailed the man, shuddering and covering his face with his hands. "Hundreds of them. Gray devils! We had no chance, though we killed scores. And the great gray wolf of Barnecan led them. Oh sir, it is true Gray Henry is a werewolf, or a devil! The great wolf killed Brian, dragged down his horse, and tore the lad's throat out as I watched. I fled—they followed—miles and miles. Oh God!" He collapsed in a dead faint.

There was a hush in the castle that day. All had loved Brian. Now they waited for some action from Sir Robert. But he sat, old and gray, in his alcove, slowly thumbing the pages of his books on alchemy and staring at his impotent retorts.

At last he roused himself and sent for Couteau. "My friend," he said gently, when the latter appeared, "I saved your life once in Palestine. I have treated you as my foster-son

since that day. You swore eternal devotion to me then. You are the only hope I have now, and I ask your aid."

"Sir," replied Gil, "I will give my life gladly to help you. Also you must know that I have loved Lady Constance since first we met. Therefore I am doubly bound. Command me." He stood, tall and dark, before Sir Robert.

"I would that we might storm that cursed castle," continued the old man, "but we are not strong enough to try, except as a last resort. Besides, many whom I love would be killed. Therefore, let us use strategy. Do you know aught of werewolves?"

"A little," replied Gil briefly. "They are called *loups-garoux* in my country."

"Then from what you have seen and heard, you must know that my foster-brother seems to have discovered that devilish art of changing himself into a wolf at will."

"I feared as much."

"Listen carefully, then. The nature of werewolves is such that they are allied to the powers of darkness. Therefore they can never appear in the light. One imbued with such powers, therefore, can, and at last must, change into the wolfish form at sundown—but—and here is what I wish you to remember, my son—he must change back into his normal shape again at sunrise."

"So I have heard."

"One thing more. Gray Henry had the fingers of his right hand injured years ago in the wars. This makes it hard for him to wield a sword, though on account of his giant stature no man could stand against him in his youth.

"Think well over these things, my boy, and do as you think best, but remember that the werewolf has killed my uncle and now my son, two of the best swordsmen of the country."

THAT afternoon Gil Couteau sat again in the courtyard with his sword across his knees while the people of the castle stared wonderingly at his set face and fixed expression.

At sunset, when the shadows were creeping out of the forest and when the howling of the wolves, with which the countryside seemed alive, had set the teeth of every man in the castle chattering with vague but awful horror, he strapped his long sword across his back, untied a skiff at the riverside and rowed slowly away toward Barnecan.

Dawn was faintly streaking the sky when he reached his destination. The fortress rose steeply out of the river on one side, but the stones of which it was built were so roughly laid that it was easy for him to tie the boat securely. Feeling his way inch by inch, he crept up the steep wall. There were ivy and a few window-slits to help him, but many times he was forced to retrace part of his way, thinking each move would be his last.

His fingers were torn and bleeding; his limbs ached as though he had been on a torture-rack, when at last he arrived at an embrasure for which he had been making since he had seen a light gleaming dully there as he approached the stronghold.

Carefully he raised his eyes above the bottom of the slit and peered within. What he saw there set his heart thumping, half with terror, half anger. On a stool in one corner of a small bare room crouched Lady Constance, her clothing torn and disheveled; her blond curls blood-smearred and tangled.

At the other side of the room, before the door, crouched a gigantic gray wolf. Couteau felt his scalp stir as he looked, for this was something uncanny; something dreadful that chilled his French blood, though he had heard of such horrors since his childhood.

Occasionally the beast would rise and pace stealthily back and forth before the door, walking with a slight limp of the right front leg, he noticed, and at such times its head was fully five feet above the floor. Then it would stop, and, sitting on its haunches, leer wickedly at the crouching girl, but never approach her.

Wondering at this, Gil looked at her again, and saw that she held against her breast a needlelike dagger, ready to press it home, should the beast come nearer. He felt his heart swell with pride in her, at her brave spirit and fearless courage.

It was quite light now, and daring to wait no longer, Gil loosened his sword and squeezed himself through the embrasure as quickly as the narrow space permitted. Quick as he was, the monster had heard him, and was upon him instantly as he leaped to the floor. Then began a struggle, the remembrance of which would sometimes, even years later, wake Couteau from sleep, sweating with terror.

It was like no fight he had ever had, nor was it like the wolf-hunts and boar-stickings in which he had taken part. The *loup-garou* fought with human intelligence, dodging Gil's swordthrusts with the speed of light, and always, always, parrying for a leap at his throat, which, if successful, would mean an instant end to the battle.

Gil's long sword was almost an impediment in that crowded space. He longed for a dagger as he felt himself slowly but surely giving ground before the plunges of the werewolf. Then, almost before he was aware, the end came. He aimed a slashing stroke at the animal's neck, just where it joined the shoulders, but the other, with an almost impossible contortion, jerked itself out of the way,

and the already-battered blade, striking the tiles of the floor, snapped short off.

In the same breath the devil was on him, hurling him to the floor and worrying at his arm, which he had flung up to protect his throat. The slavering fangs were but a few inches away; he knew that his time was short and that sunrise would come too late.

At that moment he heard a wild scream. Lady Constance, who had been crouched paralyzed with fear, in a corner, sprang forward, and picking up the stool, brought it down upon the beast's head with all her force.

The animal howled with pain, and reeled away, allowing Gil to retain his feet and—the first rays of the sun passed through the embrasure, splashing the chamber-wall with pale gold—like a blessing—like an aureole—Gil thought.

He turned toward the wolf and stood staring, for a monstrous change was taking place. The animal's outline seemed to blur, just as when strong sunlight strikes a translucent vase and changes its color and structure. The thing's fur disappeared, its snout shortened and ran together, it staggered upright, and, as the Frenchman watched spellbound, the blur again coalesced into the figure of Gray Henry, the knight whom he had seen at the turret two days before. But a Gray Henry naked and

unarmed, still almost stunned by the blow and the agony of his metamorphosis.

Gil did not wait for him to recover but grappled again. This time the fight was not unequal. Gray Henry, although strong and agile, was no match for the younger man, who had spent much of his spare time in Palestine wrestling, and who now gave thanks for some things he had learned from Saracen prisoners.

Shifting from grip to grip on the writhing body, he at last slipped both his arms under his antagonist's arms from behind, and, clasping his hands behind the other's head, exerted a steady, ever-growing pressure. The werewolf fought valiantly, but could not break the hold. At last he tried to shout for help, but Gil forced his head forward, so that only a low moaning was heard. Another effort! There was a loud crack, like the snapping of a dry stick, and his opponent rolled loosely to the floor, his neck broken.

OF HOW Gil rescued Lady Constance and returned with her to Castle Randall, there is little more to tell. They arrived safely, and that ladies in distress are always gracious toward their protectors is well known.

Gil Couteau one day became master of Castle Randall, and a very worthy knight in his own right, but his greatest feat, so he sometimes said, was a certain battle with the devil.

