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FARNSWORTH WRIGHT, Editor



WEIRD TALES ISSUED 1st OF EACH MONTH

The Fisherman's Special

By H. L. THOMSON

An odd little tale about lycanthropy

“AND so,” said my lean-jawed share-of-a-seat on the Fisherman's Special from New York to Montauk, “there's more—much more, to it than backwoods superstition. Man—” he leaned over and pounded my knee with his hard, brown fist. “I tell you, I know.”

I laughed. I had to. This big, hulking chap, who had seated himself beside me when the Special pulled out of Pennsylvania Station, had me jittery with his talk about the supernatural powers of man. He'd been at it for over an hour. I shivered, Patchogue and the Hamptons were behind us and the wind blasting through the opened windows of the coach was cold. Besides, this talk of werewolves and other things which I had relegated to my adolescence caused goose-bumps to shoot along my spine.

“I'll tell you a queer story,” commenced my seatmate. “Back in my country—”

I looked at him quickly. He didn't look like a foreigner to me.

He grinned. “I've been here a long time,” he said.

“You certainly have no trace of an accent,” I said. “English?”

“No. Swedish. A man who has to travel a lot—first in one country, then another—soon loses his accent.”

“I suppose so,” I told him.

“I come from a small town in the extreme northern part of Sweden,” he said. “Many queer and unnatural things happen there. There are werewolves—men who, at will, turn themselves into wolf-men and

roam the countryside, bringing death, misery, and stark, wild-eyed horror.” He shuddered and continued. “It's nothing new. It's old—old. It's been going on since the beginning of time. It's written of in musty books and talked of furtively as darkness falls. Every year at the beginning of the Christmas season, that's when it happens. It's when the snow burns blue with the coming dark, and squeals beneath your boots. The conversion of men into beasts! It has always been so. They descend upon the helpless inhabitants of ancient villages and destroy them.”

“A lot of good yarns have been spun around that sort of thing,” I said. “Interesting reading. Good stuff!”

His steady eyes stared straight ahead and he didn't answer me for a minute or two. Then he jerked his head impatiently. “Up there—just before night—when the snow is so white it turns blue and squeals beneath your boots like a living thing—” His voice died away as if he were living a million miles away.

He continued in the same singsong voice, “There in the town where I grew up, lived two brothers. Both were tall, straight and strong. They loved the same girl, but she preferred the older brother. He was good and steady, and the young one—his voice became harsh—“was a fool. Selma—that was her name. She married the older brother early one spring, and the three of them lived together in their old, whitewashed house near the end of the village. But, the happiness of his brother and Selma kept misery gnawing at

the innards of the younger brother. He grew morose and ugly. He spent his nights in the town tavern. He'd stay there until all the lights in the little house were out. Then he'd go in and throw himself into bed and fall into drunken slumber."

I commenced to fidget. I wished soundly that I was at Montauk or back in New York. This fellow got on my nerves, dreamily. I made up my mind to check him fast during the rush from the train. I must have missed part of the conversation. I caught myself up short when I hear him say "werewolves."

"What's that?" I asked.

"I said, that the stranger he met in the tavern one winter's night told him he could change himself into a wolf-man and join the other werewolves on the eve of Christmas."

I shoved my tongue in my cheek. "He told the younger brother that?"

He nodded. "Yes. He told him how it might be done."

"Did he do it?" I asked.

My somber friend nodded again.

"How?" I asked, smirking. "I might try it myself if the fish aren't biting out here."

He gripped my arm. "My friend, if you value your sanity, if you would not rove the world with the screams of the innocents in your ears, if you value your hope of immortality—never try it. The poor misguided younger brother was a victim of jealousy—fancied wrongs."

"We all have 'em," I said. "How's it done?"

"It is done," he said, glancing over his shoulder, quickly, "by muttering certain words——"

"What words?" I interrupted.

"Those I shall not tell you. By muttering certain words and drinking a cup of ale to a man-wolf. If he accepts, it renders the man-natural worthy of acceptance of the werewolf state."

"I'll have to remember that," I said. "I've had many a cup of ale with strangers. All of which reminds me—how about a drink?" I reached for my gunny sack.

"I never drink."

"Well, here's to you," I said, peeling off the top of my "jug." Whether the road bed was rougher than usual, or whether the train went around a curve, I don't know. But, suddenly, my friend fell, almost in my lap, and my bottle of rye went out of the window.

Old gloom-face smiled. "I'm sorry," he said. "Possibly, I can make it up to you by finishing my story.

I GRINNED with only one side of my mouth. "Forget it. Shoot. Did the younger brother turn himself into a werewolf?"

"He did. On the eve of Christmas, when they strung the tree with popcorn and red cranberries, his hatred and jealousy boiled over. He tore out of the house and went to the tavern. There he filled himself with spirits and brooded over his loss of Selma. After a time, he got to his feet and went into the forest. There, in his drunkenness, he pronounced the words and assumed the wolf form."

"What'd he do? Go back and gnaw up his brother?"

"He came back, but first he traveled to the spot which had been made known to him by the stranger in the tavern. It was many miles north, beneath the wall of a ruined castle of some feudal lord. There he joined hundreds of others, who, in natural form, were weak, frustrated men such as he.

"Then the pack set out *en masse*. Strong doors were paper before them, white, unprotected throats their aim. Shriil gurgling screams of their victims on the still, cold air whetted their appetites."

"What about the younger brother—our hero?" I asked.

"I haven't forgotten the younger brother. He ran with great, leaping bounds straight to his home. His red tongue lolled from his gaping mouth. His eyes were green—green in their madness."

I frowned. This fellow certainly threw himself into his story like a professional. He had goose-flesh on my neck.

"This werewolf—this beast—attacked his brother and the lovely Selma as they lay in their bed. He felt his own brother's hot blood in his dry throat. He shook him as a terrier does a rag.

"The lovely Selma screamed and tore at him with her little hands."

"And no one came to help them?" I asked.

"You forget. The town was in an uproar. The whole pack attacked."

"And—Selma?" I said.

"Yes—Selma. Selma grabbed the other brother's hunting-knife from his belt on the back of the chair and stabbed at the werewolf, screaming curses."

"My God, how ghastly! Did she kill him?"

He shook his head. "No, she didn't kill him—she only tore off his right ear with the sharp knife, and, in the manner of all things who attack in the night his own pain defeated him. He ran out of the house and from the village. He disappeared into the dark forest. His red blood stained the white snow for miles."

"They could have trailed him that way."

He shook his head. "No. He assumed the human form once he was in the forest and staunched the flow of blood."

"But the wound," I protested. "How could he explain that to the townspeople—to Selma?"

"He never went back. He ran away. The people of the town must have thought he too was a victim of the werewolves that bloody, gory night."

THE conductor pulled the door of the coach open. "Montauk! Montauk!" he called.

All around us men started whooping and grabbing up their equipment. I sat quietly for a minute.

"What a story!" I finally managed to say. "What a story to tell a man when he's out at the end of nowhere! I've got the creeps."

He shrugged. "It was merely to pass the time. Any sort of conversation to pass the time. Good luck—good fishing." He got up to get his stuff.

"Same to you," I said, sticking out my hand.

As my eyes met his, I started, and my hand dropped nervelessly to my side.

He grinned crookedly, but that lopsided twitching of his face only accentuated the horror of the livid hole where his right ear should have been.

