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WEIRD TALES ISSUED 1st OF EACH MONTH

"Elof! Elof! Oh, Elof!" it whimpered.



The Hand of the O'Mecca

By HOWARD WANDREI

A strange, uncanny story about the weird figures that beset Elof Bocak one night in the fog, and the courting of a witch-woman

IT WAS Elof Bocak, large and unmistakable. Like the two figures that waited for him in the lane, he most nearly resembled an erect shadow. His formidable stature alone identified him. Unlike those two shadow-fig-

ures, which were still, his body gyrated remarkably above his feet. Elof had that in him tonight which was stronger than himself. In John Colander's kitchen behind him the whisky ran. They had filled him with drink tonight, for was he not questing after the hand of Kate O'Mecca? A hazardous quest, perhaps, on this night. Fog trapped the land; the murky skeins of it crept stealthily southwest over the Colander farm, over the rolling Minnesota hills as though they needed to be concealed.

While Elof profoundly calculated through which of the thirty-two points of the compass lay the O'Mecca farm, he plucked a quip of felt from his head as one would skin a grape and wrung the whisky out of it. And a brace of still phantoms awaited the mighty, befuddled Bocak in the lane. Naïve Elof!—there were more shadows in his head tonight than walked abroad. In back of him the drinking Finns made the Colander kitchen echo and re-echo like a giant's hall.

"On the head of himself!" the Colander had roared, upon which six farmers had lifted their brimming tumblers to the O'Mecca. The seventh, who was John Colander himself, crowned Elof's pate with a full glass. This, the farmers agreed, was an efficacious, Finnic means of expediting Kate and Elof's troth.

White, inland fog brimmed the hollows with ghostly pools and phantom lakes as Elof reeled across Colander's acres. The spirit of the corn hummed in his veins; there seemed to be a bumblebee locked in his skull, a bee that droned and strove to escape as he mounted the lane through the east hill pasture, singing. Elof had a short throat, but he could send up the staggering notes of his love song high enough with it. It was a fool's defiance, and a fool's lusty passion. Diminutive owls hooted at him

and fled back through the woods. When Elof sang the night was only big enough for himself.

On the far side of the hill a long slough sprawled in ambush, drowned in a lake of fog and darkness. The fog was too heavy to breathe. It was the thickest fog that any man had ever seen, but it would take more than a slough to mire the feet of him. His headlong gait steered him down into the slough, and then the two figures that had been standing and waiting for him disengaged themselves from the fog. They joined him so that they were three abreast, with Elof between. The hill rose behind them and blinked out the rollicking lights of John Colander's kitchen. Hereupon Elof halted, puzzled. He thought he had heard someone chuckling in the fog. Either that, or the fog itself had taken a voice. Summer insects clicked and chattered in the wet grass; the silences were flooded with strange low sobbings and stilly whispers. Elof moved on warily. Suddenly he found himself set upon.

Sometimes, belike when you have the cosmic night and the foggy silences to yourself, it becomes fatal to advertise. Highwaymen amongst the Minnesota hills are few, to be sure, but down that dingle lurks the hobo and his kind, and other creatures not so easy to lay your hands on.

The two strangers had a damned familiar way about themselves. When Elof realized that these shapes were solid and not figments of fog, he stopped short with his legs astraddle. He looked first at one and then at the other; he hunched his shoulders ominously; then he raised his hands and turned his hat completely around once. The two shapes took hold of his arms at the biceps. Thereupon Elof growled, as beast speaks unto beast; for the scruff bristles at the tail of the scalp

when things accost one in the dark with their own silence.

The grips on his arms strengthened. Bocak answered by spreading his hands. He spread them flat with his thumb ends resting lightly on his thighs. While he peered into the eyes of these alien shapes, thunderstruck, his churning wits plunged back into the murky lore of his people.

Werewolves loped over Kalevala's moors, indeed, in Finland. His own grandfather, with a long and lucky shot, had brought down a thing in the vale of Woinemoinen. The thing his grandfather slew left black blood and drowned itself in running water before it could be captured. In the morning they dragged the naked body of a handsome farm girl from the stream, a human being with a bullet through her breast. No one doubted that this girl was a werewolf. Elof's grandfather swore that he had shot a hairy thing running on all fours.

But the shadows which had taken the Bocak prisoner were standing erect. It was difficult to see one's own feet in this fog; nevertheless Elof perceived the things were not wolves. True, they might be vested in a hide of short black hair, and he could truly see the gleam of a pointed tooth, but they were never wolves. Then he saw, indeed, that each freaked a short, broad tail like that of the fallow deer, but shorter. The things had tails that flicked and frolicked in the fog in a rhythmic dance of their own. When Elof saw the tails frisking he howled like a wild dog that has newly discovered the moon.

They heard him howl down there in Colander's ribald kitchen. They laughed with rural gusto and they drank high, tumbling, flat-footed jokes across the Colander board. "Ha!" said John Colander. "Himself has run into himself in the fog!"

A BRIEF, terrible conflict began at the edge of the slough, a savage conflict in spite of the fact that it was one-sided from the first. Confronted with sinews which he thought must be like his own, Elof turned berserk. He methodically set about tearing the fog to shreds. A suddenly born army of shapes in the fog nibbled mischievously at his flanks. He lifted a young poplar out of the ground and whirled with it, snapping the tree short to wield it like a club. The ball of earth at its roots described a meteoric arc over his head, showered sand on the streaming grass. It thumped on something with the sound a football makes when it hits one's stomach. Armor might have cracked under that mace.

Elof's legs became entangled in solid shadow, which he seized forthwith. This mass he lifted on high; he sent it rioting round and round his head in endless, giddy revolutions while he twisted off a troublesome skein of fog that had clutched his windpipe.

"Elof! Elof!" The thing barked softly at him with a sound like palms clapping. "Elof! Elof! Oh, Elof!" it whimpered.

Elof didn't hear it. He brought the soaring, twisting shape to earth with a crash of finality. He planned to dispatch the first shape in like manner, but when he searched for it on the ground on hands and knees it had vanished.

Continuing his search, at the same time getting earth stains on his fresh trousers, he came to the conclusion that the shape he had just felled had managed to absent itself from his ken also. Whereupon he assumed his feet, marvelously unsteady. With the easy transit of intoxication from one mood to another, once more he conjured up thoughts of the O'Mecca and this night's mission. As victor, he could not determine just whom he had beaten.

He saw mocking lights in the distance and stumbled through the slough toward the O'Mecca farm.

THE history of events leading up to those of this foggy night was of a singular order. Three farms, the Bocak's, the Colander's, and the O'Mecca's, lay in a direct line southwest of Mankato in the Minnesota hills. Two Fridays preceding this, Elof had rested on his plow at dusk. He narrowly considered the fact that he lacked a wife. The old fogies having gone their way, he had a rich farm of his own with a red, hip-roofed barn filled with cattle. Elof's brother Frankel, in reality the elder son, had forfeited his birthright two years past. This deed Frankel executed easily by capping a wheat-stack, tobogganing down its golden side and spitting himself on seventeen inches of pitchfork. Two years Elof and his sister Edna had turned the earth, sowed and harvested alone; intolerably alone with Edna, for that valkyrie of a woman was dumb. The Bocak house was silent.

Elof had abandoned the plow, tossing the reins to Edna, and stamped across the furrows to the kitchen of John Colander. Was not that the shortest way to the O'Mecca?

"Ho, John, I am in need of a wife," said Elof.

"Then sit you down and eat," said John, his mouth crammed with bread and potatoes. "A woman can always wait until afterward."

The Colanders were pillaging their evening board—John himself, his slaved rag of a wife that he was plowing into the ground to join the first one, and his two stalwart sons. Elof set to with no delay. He sacked his frame tight with fried potatoes drowned in sorghum, three tender chops from the carcass of a freshly slaughtered pig, and fat pie made from

the pregnant purple berry that grows on the hillsides.

Colander tossed his knife and fork into his plate.

"Kate O'Mecca has no kin but her old mother," said John, "and this year she plows but one field. Her cattle are dry, her land chokes with weeds. The O'Mecca man is dead."

Elof nodded. It was Severin O'Mecca whom John spoke of: Kate's brother. Elof had known him well, had matched speed and strength with him hoeing down the long rows of young corn. It had happened in the spring. The O'Mecca windmill was old, and Severin had set about repairing it. He had climbed the tower, disconnected the pump shaft below the windmill in order to repair the vanes. From that height he had fallen; the metal shaft pierced his stomach, skewered him down to the lock nut on the pump before he could stop himself. Kate and her husk of a mother could never hope to till the broad O'Mecca acres alone.

"We are ripe for each other," said Elof, tremendously pleased within himself. It was the wife he wanted. The Colander had named the one who walked in the distance like thistledown, with her fleet grace and yellow hair. Elof cultivated a hill that rose against Colander's northwest acreage. Twice it had been seeded in clover, and not long since he had plowed the field in for wheat. Elof never grudged the time required to plow in that stony hill, for it had a far view of the O'Mecca farm and the road she used. It had a nearer view of the brook that fed the slough, where Kate bathed like a blond angel in the sight of God. Elof wondered what the dark stains were which she washed from her naked body on the stroke of dawn. "When I am an old fogy," said Elof to the Colander, "I must have sons like yours after the plow."

"She will never refuse you," said the Colander, eyeing his neighbor up and down with a show of envy. "You will sell me some of your land . . . and I will let some of mine so that all your fields, yours and Kate's, will lie together."

They clapped each other on the back, as though by the turn of a phrase the marriage had been consummated. They drank clear corn liquor that was three summers old. When Elof traversed the O'Mecca farmyard an hour later he found it difficult not to trample on the flight of bats that skirmished next to the ground around the weather-torn farmhouse—leather shadows flirting next to the ground, a phenomenon to consider well, whether one is drunk or sober.

KATE and her mother, a hawk-eyed wisp who reminded one of a corn-stalk with her twist of scant dry hair, received him with considerable but guarded interest.

"The bats are aground tonight," Elof grinned. "In Finland, then, the werewolves are running. It is the sign."

Kate and her mother nodded. They looked at each other, making some knowing sign with their eyes. But they beckoned Elof in, withal, not choosing to turn a suitor away because the Colander kitchen lay between the two farms. Having gained entrance, then, and been set among a pile of fine cushions in the parlor, Elof bent himself to the close task of talking easily of earth and cattle.

For forty minutes Elof spoke confidently and with that specious eloquence furnished by corn. There is a rural method of making a point sidewise. By treading on its skirts, by firing a word or two nigh it but not at it, by speaking of himself in terms of someone else, Elof gave the mummied ancient and the corn-maiden to understand precisely what he wanted. It was the courtship oblique. He

departed with his proposal unspoken, yet stated in classic restraint with unmistakable clarity.

Outside the rotting farmhouse the eccentric shadows still moved in darts and flurries over the ground. The sidelong statement of his argument for Kate's hand had gone far toward untangling his wits. A cool hand played across his shoulders. His skin roughened. Untilled, the O'Mecca farm was yielding a fine harvest of burdock and rank grass which had become speedily populated with mice. There was a kind of squeaking, quasi-cannibalism going on here. The bats flew next to the ground at their nocturnal feasting. It was time indeed that the sinews of the Bocak furrowed this wretched crop into the ground. So he delivered a lordly, proprietary kick at the leather wings that frisked in the moonlight. Very likely he sundered a shadow or two.

Next Friday Elof had perched on the high stone steps of his woodshed and fretted with impatience. The engine he balanced on one extended forefinger was the rifle he had been shooting rats with. It was a heavy repeating weapon which he wielded with terrible efficiency. The last clean shot, indeed, had not only parted the rat's vital thread, it had ricocheted off the boulder supporting the corn crib and, save for a negligible string of feathered hide, decapitated a prize black Minorca. The cock still sprang into the air in its bewildered, mortal dance; Elof continued to sit on the stoop of the woodshed, bent on solving the casuistries of courtship. His elbows rested on a blurred crease in his trouser legs. A crease, nevertheless. He was freshened for the chase, against his will. Clean trousers—the distant smell of raw gasoline was still among them. A black cloud of hair on his bared forearms—the reward of wonderful toil with boiled yellow soap. Edna looked up at him regularly from

the doorway of the summer-house as she whisked the handle of the separator. She was a kind of female clockwork. She knew well enough what ailed him. She was a woman.

Through the woods beyond Bocak's stock yard came sounds from the busy kitchen of the Colander. The two houses were only the long cast of a stone separated. The voices of field men who had toiled and were now in their cups—the sounds stormed Bocak's simple imagination with illimitable promise. He thought of his neat, clean, cold bed of down, cursed once in Finnish. The rhythmically rising and falling whine of the separator was intolerable. He stood the gun in a corner. He made off for the Colander kitchen with Edna, the dumb one, standing in the doorway looking after him. She would stand there with her eyes on nothing for a time. Edna dreamed. Edna, having no tongue, held converse with nature alone. By one of those common caprices of providence, she knew hidden things. She knew, for example, that Kate O'Mecca would never sleep in her brother's bed. She herself could not say how she knew this. Presently she would make a slow shrug, lug the can of cream into the cool depths of the root cellar. It was uncommonly heavy cream this year, rich in fat.

COLANDER and his men welcomed Elof with a tumbler brimming with the clear fire of the corn. Afterward, when the Bocak mounted the lane that lifted over the east hill pasture, he was well fortified against the hell's-play of low-flying bats that came half-way down to meet him. Bats earthbound, perilous to walk among.

It had been his sober intention to give the O'Mecca two full weeks of grace. If this was haste, the guilt would lie with John Colander and his corn whisky in

the morning. They had made him drunk. Well, one week was sufficient. Now that his wits had been given a stiff prodding, he knew that he would have hung fire only one week anyhow. Was he not his father's son, and was he not master of his father's acres? Having addressed himself at length and aloud, Elof swore that he was. He swooped low with a hand outspread like a flail and whooped as he sent the bat-like shadows tumbling. Bats. He thought again of the werewolves of Finland, whose appearance must be announced by these grounded bats. Werewolves and vampire-wolves. Some time ago a young man was buried in a near-by town, a handsome boy who had his throat torn open one night by a wild dog. It was an odd thing that no blood was found on the ground. The dog must have been a ranger, since all known dogs in the community were chained at night.

The bats flicked somberly among Elof's feet like Satan's own hellish skirts as he traversed the O'Mecca farmyard and clubbed his knuckles on the door. It was a moderate sound, comparatively. There was a certain elephantine elegance in his love.

If Kate and her mother had received him with guarded interest on one occasion, on this it was a covert eagerness before which he stood abashed, even with his head spinning at this pace. Elof set his frame amongst Kate's fine cushions with immense precision; the two women rested delicately before him on straight walnut chairs, their heads cocked at precisely the same angle. There was something gracefully wing-like in their white hands as they folded them in their laps. These were no ordinary farm women. They did not look as though they toiled. On this second visit Elof dared to look upon his woman directly. It was a thirsty appraisal, as though he would take her down at one draft. You scarcely knew

whether you were safe to have her within reach of your hands. Elof could stand his team on the hill and covet her puff of yellow hair at a distance of a hundred rods with no immediate consequences.

Kate was a smooth white filly with narrow hips like a panther, like a woman who had never labored and never would. Elof frowned somewhat at that. She was as slender as a city woman. But he remembered that his own mother had such hips. Her three children had come easily and unharmed save for Edna, whose voice, when it sounded at all, had a unique kinship with the owl's. The tiny nipples of Kate's breasts stood up through the fine woolen cloth of her dress. That was a good sign. The O'Mecca had side-long, subtle gray eyes that forced one into speech.

"John Colander," said Elof, "has land against mine which he will bargain for with me."

The O'Mecca smiled, whether with amusement or agreement he could not determine. But it was a neat, correct speech, compact and well phrased. When you considered it, you knew there was a plan afoot to stagger the acres of the three farms. This plan could be realized best by marriage. You knew that John Colander was going to slip to the southwest and get somewhat the better of the bargain in the end. You knew that Kate O'Mecca was going to sidle back around him so that her land would meet that of the Bocak's.

THE third Friday came with the fog. It was presupposed by those testing the wind that it was to be a courtship in three tries. On the third Friday Edna trimmed Elof's duster of black hair with the long, sharp shears in her sewing-kit. Edna wanted to say to Elof, "You want Kate O'Mecca's long white body in your bed. Much good may it do you." She

wanted to say, "Where is Kate tonight? Where will she be? Do you think a woman like that rests in her own parlor after nightfall? Have you never looked into those slant gray eyes of hers?" She wanted to tell Elof that marrying Kate was fatal, that Kate O'Mecca had pointed teeth and a scarlet tongue; but Edna was dumb.

The fertile black soil of the fields that had stained Elof's nails a full summer disappeared under the carving-knife, after prodigious scraping. Edna watched the futile toil with a curious smile on her mouth. When the door closed after Elof, Edna made her singular slow shrug again, but her face was uneasy.

When Elof announced to the assembly of farmers in John Colander's kitchen that he was inquiring after the O'Mecca's hand tonight, his ears rattled and his back stung with their approval. In two weeks' time! They had to drink to this Finn who could not contain himself. They had to drink to his lucky woman, too. And they drank again. They envied him in the only way they knew. By saturating him with liquor, and themselves with him, they conferred their own kind of regard on him. Corn whisky flowed like a treacherous brook. They poured it into Elof's gullet up to his throat level.

Elof sat in their midst with the thick glaze stealing into his eyes. He was not joking this night, nor smiling at the jokes of others. Nor would he ever do so afterward. He was thinking of Kate's straight, pale yellow hair that rested in a knot on her shoulder. It was the hair that should flood across his pillow at night like sunlight. He thought of her high breasts and the sound color in her cheeks, her scarlet mouth. She looked strong. Their children would be the sturdiest that ever sat on a peg stool to take a lesson in milking. He would show them how to knuckle the udder, the knack that shot

milk into the pail so that it filled with foam. Yet neither of the O'Mecca women had ever spoken a word to him. Like the dumb Edna. Elof thought of that, but never thought it was singular. Well, then, he had never asked a question that needed to be answered. Tonight was the third Friday and the night of troth. He would ask his question and take his answer at last. Yet here he stalled in the Colander kitchen while the corn went round in uproarious drafts. A stronger thirst brought him to his feet. Elof used a particular Finnish curse and shouldered his way through the door into the creeping festoons of fog. Two shapes on the hill looked down at him, and then looked at each other.

The most tremendous fog within memory was on him, the thickest that had ever moved over the land. He mopped his narrow forehead with a yard of red kerchief when he reached the hill's base. They had saluted his queer hat with a full glass of whisky back there. It stank. He took the round, sopping skim of felt from his head and crushed it in one hand. The night was against him. All the way up the lane he quarreled with his feet. Farther on, shadows set upon him, and though Colander's whisky had nearly mastered him he defeated those scavenging shadows with certainty and dispatch. In his drunkenness the Minnesota hills and the Finnish moors were one. He thought the bats had grounded and the wolves were abroad. He thought they had tried to take advantage of him, and that he, in the full lustihead of his prowess, had torn a forepaw from one of them.

His visions were alternately clear and chaotic, like those of dreams. The fog was magically embodying itself. When he tripped in it he purposefully dismembered it as though he were matched against human antagonists. It became

impossible for him to distinguish between the true and the false. His wits felt heavy as a grindstone, a stone that shot off sparks in all directions as he bore down heavily on it—bore down on it with *something*. What was it? He shook his head. He had done something important on the hill, something to tell Kate about. Someone on the hill had called him by name. He could hear the thin echoes mocking him. Elof! Elof!

He thrashed through the slough with a million muck-demons sucking and snapping after his heels, and raised the O'Mecca farmhouse, vaguely and gingerly patting himself as though he had been beaten on the way or had forgotten something. It was probably the thing he was bringing to bear against the metaphorical grindstone. There was a thing in his pocket. The lights in the O'Mecca parlor still welcomed him dimly in the fog, though it was past twelve, just past twelve by the clock. Love waits on time when it goes spinning in drink.

It was that *thing* he had picked up on the way, the trophy that would prove his prowess and his fearlessness to Kate O'Mecca. Had not two werewolves leaped on him and been defeated? That was it. For he was not in the least damaged by his encounter at the edge of the slough. He had neither scratch nor bruise, nothing but the fresh earth stains on his knees, a spattering of muck from the slough. Something pressed against his thigh in the pocket that confined his handkerchief. When he brought his knuckles down on the door he was remembering what it was. He had fought with a pair of werewolves across the slough. That was it.

KATE was looking down at him long before he knew she was there. Drunken and bewildered, the Bocak had taken a terrible object from his pocket

and was glaring at it. It was the bloody paw of the werewolf. When the fog in the slough turned solid, an erect beast with a frisking tail had tried to throttle him. He had twisted off its offending claw as he would behead a chicken—by whipping its wild body around his head like a limp club. The werewolf's bloody claw, indeed! Without giving it much thought, as is the way with mighty men, he had deposited the claw in his pocket for safe-keeping along with his kerchief. At the time, he had been vaguely aware that it was a fairly large claw, one with a stiff scrub of black hair and short toes mounted with panther-like nails. He remembered that the claw was singularly naked between the toes. But now, as he stupidly regarded it with supreme and swiftly mounting horror, he saw that it was a claw no longer. It was smooth and slim and white, a human hand. It was, in fact, Kate O'Mecca's hand; of that he could not be mistaken. He had plucked the O'Mecca's hand out of the fog.

Kate stood in the doorway, and to her Elof raised his eyes fearfully. Her arm was outstretched toward the terrifying object Elof still held. Her arm was graceful and perfect, the flesh smooth and creamy, but it ended at the wrist. Kate's scarlet mouth was fixed in a smile. Elof knew now why neither Kate nor her mother had ever spoken to him. It was because they were afraid of showing their teeth. Kate's teeth were pointed like slim ivory needles. Only the two dainty front incisors met squarely. The gums were not the moist pink color of a human be-

ing's. They were scarlet, the glistening, jeweled red of the wolf's. And though he could not see it, he knew that she had a long, slim, red tongue like a ribbon. He knew it now. Kate O'Mecca was a werewolf. He knew that he had killed her mother, crushed her skull back in the slough, and that Kate must have drowned the skinny carcass when she fled.

Elof stepped back; the werewolf's hand slipped from his clasp and bounced down the wooden steps in front of the door.

Kate's long, sleepy eyes slanted into Elof's with an expression of profound scorn, pity, and hatred, as though she were imparting secret knowledge. He was hearing her cool, husky voice for the first time, and there was mockery in it:

"Then you have asked——" she began.

It was a lie. The night, the fog and the corn whisky had played a ghoulish prank on him. It never happened. Yet Kate O'Mecca once had two hands like anyone else, for he had seen them when he courted her the last two Fridays. And now her right hand was lying on the ground at his feet. She was a werewolf, as he had proved by twisting off her hand across the slough. She had called to him then. Her voice now was the same that had wept "Elof! Elof!" at the edge of the slough, wept when he had hurt her so.

He took yet another step back. And he turned and fled with the cool, inexorable voice pursuing him, haunting him for ever. "Then you have asked for my hand, Elof!" said Kate. . . .

