

The Severed Arm

Or, The Wehr-wolf of Limousin

By Anonymous

The ancient province of Poictou, in France, has long been celebrated in the annals of romance, as one of the most famous haunts of those dreadful animals, whose species is between a phantom and a beast of prey; and which are called by Germans, wehr-wolves, and by the French, Bisclavarets, or Loups Garoux. To the English, these midnight terrors are yet unknown, and almost without a name; but when they are spoken of in this country they are called, by the way of eminence, wild wolves. The common superstition concerning them is, that they are men in compact with the arch enemy, who have the power of assuming the form and nature of wolves at certain periods.

The hilly and woody district of the Upper Limousin, which now forms the southern division of the Upper Vienne, was that particular part of the province which the wehr-wolves were supposed to inhabit: whence, like the animal which gave them their name, they would wander out by midnight, far from their own hills and mountains, and run howling through the silent streets of the nearest towns and villages, to the great terror of all the inhabitants; whose piety however, was somewhat increased by these supernatural visitations.

There once stood in the suburbs of the town of St Yrieux, which is situate in those dangerous parts of ancient Poictou, an old, but handsome *Maison-de-Plaisance*, or, in plain English, a countryhouse, belonging, by ancient descent, to the young Baroness Louise Joliedame; who, out of dread to the terrible Wehr-Wolves, a well-bred horror at the *chambres à l'antique* which it contained, and a greater love for the gallant court of Francis I, let the chateau to strangers; though they occupied but a very small portion of it, whilst the rest was left unrepaired, and was rapidly passing to decay. One of the parties by whom the old mansion was tenanted, was a country surgeon, named Antoine du Pilon; who (according to his own account) was not only well acquainted with the science of Galen and Hippocrates, but was also a profound adept in those arts, for the learning of which some men toil their whole lives away, and are none the wiser; such as alchemy, converse with spirits, magic, and so forth. Dr du Pilon had abundant leisure to talk of his knowledge at the cabaret of St Yrieux, which bore the sign of the Chevalier Bayard's arms, where he assembled round him many of the idler members of the town, the chief of whom were Cuirbouilli, the currier; Malbois, the joiner; La Jacquette, the tailor; and Nicole Bonvarlet, his host; together with several other equally arrant gossips, who all swore roundly, at the end of their parleys, that Dr Antoine du Pilon was the best doctor, and the wisest man in the whole world! To remove, however, any wonder that may arise in the reader's mind how a professor of such skill and knowledge should be left to waste his abilities so remote from the patronage of the great, it should be remarked, that in such cases as had already come before him, he had not been quite so successful as could have been expected or desired, since old Genefrede Corbeau, who was frozen almost double with age and ague, he kept cold and fasting to preserve her from fever; and he would have cut off the leg of Pierre Faucile, the reaper, when he wounded his right arm in the harvest time, to prevent his flesh from mortifying downwards!

In a retired apartment of the same deserted mansion where this mirror of chirurgeons resided, dwelt a peasant, and his daughter, who had come to St Yrieux from a distant part of Normandy, and of whose history nothing was known, but that they seemed to be in the deepest poverty;

although they neither asked relief, nor uttered a single complaint. Indeed, they rather avoided all discourse with their gossiping neighbours, and even with their fellow inmates, excepting so far as the briefest courtesy required; and as they were able, on entering their abode, to place a reasonable security for payment in the hands of old Gervais, the Baroness Joliedame's steward, they were permitted to live in the old chateau with little questioning, and less sympathy. The father appeared in general to be a plain, rude peasant, whom poverty had somewhat tinctured with misanthropy: though there were times when his bluntness towered into a haughtiness not accordant with his present station, but seemed like a relique of a higher sphere, from which he had fallen. He strove, and the very endeavour increased the bitterness of his heart to mankind, to conceal his abject indigence; but that was too apparent to all, since he was rarely to be found at St Yrieux, but led a wild life in the adjacent mountains and forests, occasionally visiting the town to bring to his daughter Adele a portion of the spoil, which as a hunter, he indefatigably sought for the subsistence of both. Adele, on the contrary, though she felt as deeply as her father the sad reverse of fortune to which they were exposed, had more gentleness in her sorrow, and more content in her humiliation. She would, when he returned to the cottage, worn with the fatigue of his forest labours, try, but many times in vain, to bring a smile to his face and consolation to his heart. "My father," she would say, "quit, I beseech you, this wearisome hunting for some safer employment nearer home. You depart, and I watch in vain for your return; days and nights pass away, and you come not!—while my disturbed imagination will ever whisper the danger of a forest midnight, fierce howling wolves, and robbers still more cruel."

"Robbers! girl, sayest thou?" answered her father with a bitter laugh, "and what shall they gain from me, think ye? Is there aught in this worn-out gaberdine to tempt them? Go to, Adele! I am not now Count Gaspar de Marcanville, the friend of the royal Francis, and a knight of the Holy Ghost; but plain Hubert, the Hunter of the Limousin; and wolves, thou trowest, will not prey upon wolves."

"But, my dearest father," said Adele, embracing him, "I would that thou wouldst seek a safer occupation nearer to our dwelling, for I would be by your side."

"What wouldst have me to do, girl?" interrupted Gaspar impatiently; "wouldst have me put this hand to the sickle or the plough, which has so often grasped a sword in the battle, and a banner-lance in the tournament? Or shall a companion of Le Saint Esprit become a fellow-hand-worker with the low artisans of this miserable town? I tell thee, Adele, that but for thy sake I would never again quit the forest, but would remain there in a savage life, till I forgot my language and my species, and become a wehr-wolf or a wild buck!"

Such was commonly the close of their conversation; for if Adele dared to press her entreaties further, Gaspar, half frenzied, would not fail to call to her mind all the unhappy circumstances of his fall, and work himself almost to madness by their repetition. He had, in early life, been introduced by the Count de Saintefleur to the court of Francis I, where he had risen so high in the favour of his sovereign, that he was continually in his society; and in the many wars which so embittered the reign of that excellent monarch, de Marcanville's station was ever by his side. In these conflicts, Gaspar's bosom had often been the shield of Francis even in moments of the most imminent danger; and the grateful king as often showered upon his deliverer those rewards which, to the valiant and high-minded soldier, are far dearer than riches—the glittering jewels of knighthood, and the golden coronal of the peerage. To that friend who had fixed his feet so loftily and securely in the slippery paths of a court, Gaspar felt all the ardour of youthful gratitude; and yet he sometimes imagined, that he could perceive an abatement in the favour of de Saintefleur as that of Francis increased. The truth was, that the gold and rich promises of the

king's great enemy, the Emperor Charles V, had induced de Saintefleur to swerve from his allegiance; and he now waited but for a convenient season to put the darkest designs in practice against his sovereign. He also felt no slight degree of envy, even against that very person whom he had been the instrument of raising; and at length an opportunity occurred, when he might gratify both his ambition and his revenge by the same blow. It was in one of those long wars in which the French monarch was engaged, and in which de Saintefleur and de Marcanville were his constant companions, that they were both watching his couch while he slept, when the former, in a low tone of voice, thus began to sound the faith of the latter to his royal master.

"What sayest thou, Gaspar, were not a prince's coronet and a king's revenue in Naples, better than thus ever-toiling in a war that seems unending? Hearest thou, brave de Marcanville? We can close it with the loss of one life only!"

"Queen of Heaven!" ejaculated Gaspar, "what is it thou wouldst say, de Saintefleur?"

"Say! why that there have been other kings in France before this Francis, and will be, when he shall have gone to his place. Thinkest thou that he of the double-headed black eagle, would not amply reward the sword that cut this fading lily from the earth?"

"No more, no more, de Saintefleur," cried Gaspar; "even from you who placed me where I might flourish beneath the lily's shade, will I not hear this treason. Rest secure that I will not betray thee to the king; my life shall sooner be given for thine; but I will watch thee with more vigilance than the wolf hath when he watcheth the night-fold, and your first step to the heart of Francis shall be over the body of Gaspar de Marcanville."

"Nay, then," said de Saintefleur, aside, "he must be my first victim"; and immediately drawing his sword, he cried aloud, "What, ho! guards! treason!"—whilst Gaspar stood immovable with astonishment and horror. The event is soon related; for Francis was but too easily persuaded that de Marcanville was in reality guilty of the act about to be perpetrated by de Saintefleur; and the magnanimity of Gaspar was such, that not one word which might criminate his former friend could be drawn from him, even to save his own life. The kind-hearted Francis, however, was unable to forget in a moment the favour with which for years he had been accustomed to look upon de Marcanville; and it was only at the earnest solicitation of the courtiers, many of whom were rejoiced at the thought of a powerful rival's removal, that he could be prevailed on to pass upon him even the sentence of degradation and banishment.

Gaspar hastened to his chateau, but the treasures which he was allowed to bear with him into exile, were little more than his wife Rosalie and his daughter Adele; with whom he immured himself in the dark and almost boundless recesses of the Hanoverian Hartz, where his sorrows soon rendered his gaunt and attenuated form altogether unknown. In this savage retirement he drew up a faithful narration of de Saintefleur's treachery; and, in confirmation of its truth, procured a certificate from his confessor, Father Ægidius— one of those holy men, who of old were dwellers in forests and deserts—and directing it "To the King", placed it in the hands of his wife, that if, in any of those hazardous excursions in which he was engaged to procure their daily subsistence, he should perish, it might be delivered to Francis, and his family thus be restored to their rank and estates, when his pledge to de Saintefleur could no longer be claimed. Years passed away, and, in the gloomy recesses of the Hercynian woods, Gaspar acquired considerable skill as a hunter; had it been to preserve his own life only, he had laid him down calmly upon the sod, and resigned that life to famine, or to the hungry wolf; but he had still two objects which bound him to existence, and therefore in the chase the wild buck was too slow to escape his spear, and the bear too weak to resist his attacks.

His fate, notwithstanding, preyed heavily upon him, and he often broke out in fits of vehement passion, and the most bitter lamentations; which at length so wrought upon the grief-worn frame of Rosalie de Marcanville, that about ten years after Gaspar's exile, her death left him a widower, when his daughter Adele was scarcely eighteen years of age. It was then, with a mixture of desperation and distress, that de Marcanville determined to rush forth from his solitude into France; and, careless of the fate which might await him for returning from exile unrecalled, to advance even to the court, and laying his papers at the foot of the throne, to demand the ordeal of combat with de Saintefleur; but when he had arrived at the woody province of Upper Limousin, his purpose failed him, as he saw in the broad daylight, which rarely entered the Hartz Forest, the afflicting changes which ten years of the severest labour, and the most heartfelt sorrow, had made upon his form. He might, indeed, so far as it regarded all recollections of his person, have safely gone even into the court of Francis; but Gaspar also saw, that in the retired forest surrounding St Yrieux, he might still reside unknown to his beloved France; that under the guise of a hunter, he could still provide for the support of his gentle Adele; and that, in the event of his death he should be considerably nearer to the sovereign's abode. It was then, in consequence of these reasons, that de Marcanville employed a part of his small remaining property, in securing a residence in the dilapidated chateau, as it has been already mentioned.

It was some time after their arrival, that the inhabitants of the town of St Yrieux were alarmed by the intelligence that a wehr-wolf, or perhaps a troop of them, certainly inhabited the woods of Limousin. The most terrific howlings were heard in the night, and the wild rush of a chase swept through the deserted streets; yet the townspeople—according to the most approved rules for acting where wehr-wolves are concerned—never once thought of sallying forth in a body, and with weapons and lighted brands, to scare the monsters from their prey; but adding a more secure fastening to every window, which is the wehr-wolf's usual entrance, they deserted such as had already fallen their victims, with one brief expression of pity for them, and many a "Dieu et benit!" for themselves. It was asserted, too, that some of the country people, whose dwellings came more immediately into contact with the Limousin forests, had lost their children; whose lacerated remains, afterwards discovered in the woods, only half devoured, plainly denoted them to have fallen the prey of some abandoned wehr-wolf!

It is not surprising, that in a retired town, where half the people were without employment, and all were thoroughbred gossips, and lovers of wonders, that the inroads of the wehr-wolf formed too important an epoch in their history, to be passed over without a due discussion. Under pretence, therefore, of being a protection to each other, many of the people of St Yrieux, and especially the worthy conclave mentioned at the beginning of this history, were almost eternally convened at the Chevalier Bayard's Arms, talking over their nightly terrors, and filling each other with such affright, by the repetition of many a lying old tale upon the same subject, that, too much alarmed to part, they often agreed to pass the night over Nicole Bonvarlet's wine flask and blazing faggots. Upon a theme so intimately connected with a magical lore as is the history of wehr-wolves, Dr Antoine du Pilon discoursed like a Solomon; citing, to the great edification and wonder of his hearers, such hosts of authors, both sacred and profane, that he who should have hinted, that the wehr-wolves of St Yrieux were simply like other wolves, would have found as little gentleness in his hearers as he would have experienced from the animals themselves.

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“Well, my masters?” began Bonvarlet, one evening when they were met, “I would not, for a tun of malmsey wine now, be in the Limousin forest tonight; for do ye hear how it blusters and pours? By the ship of St Mildred, in a wild night like this, there is no place in the world like your hearthside in a goodly submerge, with a merry host and good liquor; both of which, neighbours, ye have to admiration.”

“Ay, Nicole,” replied Courbouilli, “it is a foul night, truly, either for man or cattle; and yet I’ll warrant ye that the wehr-wolves will be out in it, for their skin is said to be the same as that the fiend himself wears, and that would shut you out water, and storm, and wind, like a castle wall.”

“Hark, neighbours, did ye hear that cry? It is a wehr-wolf’s bark!” exclaimed Jerome Malbois, starting from his settle.

“Ay, by the bull of St Luke, did I, friend, Jerome,” returned Bonvarlet; “surely the great fiend himself can make no worse a howling; I even thought ’twould split the very rafters last night, though I deem they’re of good seasoned fir.”

“There is the cry again!” exclaimed Malbois, and as the sounds drew nearer, the doctor’s audience evinced symptoms of alarm, which were rapidly increasing, when a still louder shriek was heard close to the house.

“What ho, within there!” cried a voice, evidently of one in an agony of terror, “an ye be men, open the door,” and the next moment it was burst from its fastenings by the force of a human body falling against it, which dropped without motion upon the floor.

The confusion which this accident created may well be imagined; the doctor, greatly alarmed, retreated into the fireplace, whence he cried out to the equally scared rustics, “It’s a wehr-wolf in a human shape; don’t touch him, I tell you, but strike him with a fire fork between the eyes, and he’ll turn to a wolf and run away.”

“Peace, Doctor,” said Bonvarlet, the only one of the party who had ventured near the stranger; “he breathes yet, for he’s a Christian man like as we are; so come, you prince of all chirurgeons, and bleed him; and when he comes to, why school him yourself.”

The doctor advanced from his retreat, with considerable reluctance, to attend upon his patient, who was richly habited in the luxuriant fashion of the court of Francis, and appeared to be a middle-aged man, of handsome features, and commanding presence. As the doctor, somewhat reassured, began to remove the short cloak to find out the stranger’s arm, he started back with affright, and actually roared with pain at receiving a deep scratch from the huge paw of a wolf, which apparently grew out from his shoulder. “Avaunt thee, Sathanas!” ejaculated the doctor, “I told thee how it would be, my masters, that this cursed wehr-wolf would bleed us first. By the porker of St Anthony! Blessed beast! See he hath clawed me from the biceps flexor cubiti, down to the Os Lunare, even as a peasant would plough over a furrow!”

“Ha, ha, ha,” laughed Bonvarlet, holding up the dreaded wolf’s paw, which was yet bleeding, as if it had been recently separated from the animal. “Here is no wehr-wolf, but a brave hunter, who hath cut off his goodly forepaw in the forest, with his couteau-de-chasse; but soft,” he added, throwing it aside, “he recovers!”

“Pierre!—Henri!” said the stranger, recovering, “where are ye? How far is the king behind us? Ha, what place is this? And who are ye?” he continued, looking round.

“This, your good worship, is the Chevalier Bayard’s Arms, in the town of St Yrieux, where your honour fell, through loss of blood, as I guess, by this wound. We were fain to keep the door barred for fear of the wehr-wolves; and we half deemed your lordship to be one, at first sight of the great paw you carried, but now I judge you brought it from the forest.”

“Ay! yes, thou art in the right on’t,” said the stranger, recollecting himself. “I was in the forest! I tell thee, host, that I have this night looked upon the arch demon himself!”

“Away, Lucifer!” ejaculated the doctor, devoutly crossing his breast; “and have I received a claw from his forefoot? I feel the enchantment of lycanthropy coming over me; I shall be a wehr-wolf myself, shortly; for what saith Hornhoofius, in his Treatise de Diabolus, lib. xiv. cap. xxiii. They who are torn by a wehrwolf—Oh me!—Oh me!—Libera nos Domine. Look to yourselves, neighbours, or I shall raven upon ye all.”

“I pray you, Master Doctor,” said Bonvarlet, “to let his lordship tell us his story first, and then we’ll hear yours.—How was it, fair sir?—but take another cup of wine first.”

“My tale is brief,” answered the stranger: “The king is passing tonight through the Limousin, and with two of his attendants I rode forward to prepare for his coming; when, in the darkness of the wood, we were separated, and, as I galloped on alone, an enormous wolf, with fiery flashing eyes, leaped out of a brake before me, with the most fearful howlings, and rushed on me with the speed of lightning. As the wolf leaped upon my horse, I drew my couteau-de-chasse, and severed that huge paw which you found upon me: but as the violence of the blow made the weapon fall, I caught up a large forked branch of a tree, and struck the animal upon the forehead: upon which, my horse began to rear and plunge; for, where the wolf stood, I saw by a momentary glimpse of moonlight the form of an ancient enemy, who had long since been banished from France, and whom I believed to have died of famine in the Hartz Forest.”

“Look you there now,” said du Pilon, “a blow between the eyes with a forked stick—said I not so from Philo-Diamones, lib. xcii? Oh, I’m condemned to be a wehr-wolf of a verity, and I shall eat those of my most intimate acquaintances the first. Masters look to yourselves:—O dies infelix! Oh unhappy man that I am! and with these words he rushed out of the cottage.

“I think the very fiend is in Monsieur the Doctor, tonight,” cried the host, “for here he’s gone off without dressing his honour’s wounds.”

“Heed not that, friend, but do thou provide torches and assistance to meet the king; my wound is but small; but when my horse saw the apparition I told you of, he bounded forward like a wild Russian colt, dragged me through all the briers of the forest—for there seemed a troop of a thousand wolves howling behind us—and at the verge of it he dropped lifeless, and left me, still pursued, to gain the town, weak and wounded as I was.”

“St Dennis be praised now!” said Bonvarlet, “you showed a good heart, my lord; but we’ll at once set out to meet the king; so neighbours take each of ye a good pine faggot off the hearth, and call up more help as you go; and Nicolette and Madeline will prepare for our return.”

“But,” asked the stranger, “where’s the wolf’s paw that I brought from the forest?”

“I cast it aside, my lord,” answered Bonvarlet, “till you had recovered; but I would fain beg it of you as a gift, for I will hang it over my fireplace, and have its story made into a song by Rowland the minstrel—and, mother of God! What is this?” continued he, putting into his guest’s hand a human arm, cut off at the elbow, vested in the worn-out sleeve of a hunter’s coat, and bleeding freshly at the part where it was dissevered.

“Holy St Mary!” exclaimed the stranger, regarding the hand attentively, “this is the arm of Gaspar de Marcanville, yet bearing the executioner’s brand burnt in his flesh; and he is a wehr-wolf!”

“Why,” said Bonvarlet, “that’s the habit worn by the melancholy hunter, whose daughter lives at the chateau yonder. He rarely comes to St Yrieux, but when he does, he brings more game than any ten of your gentlemen huntsmen ever did. Come, we’ll go seek the daughter of this

man-wolf, and then on to the forest, for this fellow deserves a stake and a bundle of faggots, as well as ever Jeanne d'Arc did, in my simple thinking."

They then proceeded to Adele, at the dilapidated chateau; and her distress at the foregoing story may better be conceived than described; yet she offered not the slightest resistance to accompanying them to the forest; but when one of the party mentioned their expected meeting with the king, her eyes became suddenly lighted up, and retiring for a moment, she expressed herself in readiness to attend them. At the skirts of the forest they found an elderly man, of a strange, quaint appearance, crouching in the fern like a hare, who called out to them, in a squeaking voice, that was at once familiar to all, "Take care of yourselves, good people, for I am a wehr-wolf, and shall speedily spring upon ye."

"Why, that's our doctor, as I am a sinful man," cried Bonvarlet; "let's try his own cure upon him. Neighbour Malbois, give me a tough forked branch, and I'll disenchant him, I warrant; and you, Courboulli, out with your knife, as though you would skin him"—and then he continued aloud, "Oh, honest friend, you're a wehr-wolf, are you? Why, then, I'll disposses the devil that's in you. You shall be flayed, and then burnt for a wizard."

With that the rustics of St Yrieux, who enjoyed the jest, fell upon the unhappy doctor, and, by a sound beating, and other rough usage, so convinced him that he was not a wehr-wolf, that he cried Out, "Praised be St Gregory, I am a whole man again. Lo, I am healed, but my bones feel wondrous sore! Who is he that hath cured me?—By the mass, I am grievously bruised!—Thanks to the seraphical Father Francis, the devil hath gone out of me!"

Whilst the peasants were engaged in searching for the king's party and the mutilated wolf, the stranger who was left with Adele de Marcanville, fainted through loss of blood; and, as she bent over him, and stanchd his wounds with her scarf, he said, with a faint voice—"Fair one, who is it, thinkest thou, whom thou art so blessedly attending?"

"I wot not," answered she, "but that thou art a man."

"Hear me, then, and throw aside these bandages for my dagger, for I am thy father's ancient enemy, the Count de Saintefleur."

"Heaven forgive you then," returned Adele, "for the time of vengeance belongs to it only."

"And it is come!" cried a loud hoarse voice, as a large wolf, wounded by the loss of a forepaw, leaped upon the count and put an end to his existence. At the same moment, the royal train, which the peasants had discovered, rode up with flambeaux, and a knight, with a large partisan, made a blow at the wolf, whom Adele vainly endeavoured to preserve, since the stroke was of sufficient power to destroy both. The wolf gave one terrific howl, and fell backwards in the form of a tall gaunt man, in a hunting dress; whilst Adele, drawing a packet from her bosom, and offering it to the king, sank lifeless upon the body of her father, Gaspar de Marcanville, the wehr-wolf of Limousin.