

# WEIRD CRIMES

## No. 6. *The Werewolf of St. Bonnot*

THE long European twilight was dying, and darkness crept stealthily across the fields and pasture lands as three horsemen trotted slowly along the forest road of St. Bonnot. Two of the riders carried lutes slung across their shoulders, which marked them as *trouveurs*—ballade singers—while the third rode slightly to the rear, balancing a portmanteau on his saddle bow, by which token he was labeled attendant of the other two. All three jangled long swords from their hips, for France was under the reign of the weak and vacillating Charles IX, and he who would bring his life and property safely to his journey's end must needs travel prepared to defend them.

"'S'wounds," swore one of the minstrels, drawing his scarlet cloak more tightly about his shoulders, "but this abominable wood is colder than the tomb of the blessed Louis! With winter a good two moons away, methinks this chill i' the air hath more o' the Devil's flavor than of God's good weather."

His companion grunted a reply and sunk his chin deeper in his tippet. The speaker looked right and left at the pale, new moonlight sifting eerily between the tree trunks, and continued, "A flagon of the Count's wine would like me well enough the now. What with a twenty-mile ride, and no provender for man or beast along the way, I'd sing of Alexander the Greek and Arthur the Briton from now till sunup for a single stoup of wine and a morsel of bread and cheese."

Again an inarticulate reply from his mate.

"'S'death," the conversationally inclined singer went on, "didst ever see such a lonesome, uncanny place as this accursed *bois*? Methinks *Monsieur Loup-Garou* himself would like no better place for his questing."

He flung back his bearded chin with a ringing laugh and began the opening lines of *Bisclaveret* in a deep baritone. The poem, one of France's oldest, dealt with "the multitudinous herd not yet made fast in hell"—the people of the

*loup-garou*, or werewolf, who had sold their souls to the devil in return for the power of transforming themselves into wolves, to kill and devour their enemies. All Europe trembled at the very name of these men-monsters, but no country was more plagued by them than France.

"Hush, hush, Henri!" the taciturn minstrel suddenly broke his silence as the singer expanded the theme of his terrible song. "*Pour l'amour de le bon Dieu*, cease that singing. Suppose a werewolf were in this twenty-times-damned wood—" he glanced fearfully among the shadows—"we should all be torn to bits!"

"Bah!" the other replied. "The *loup-garou* would be lucky if I did not eat him, famished as I am.

"*Hola, Monsieur Werewolf*," he cried mockingly, "come out of the forest. Come out and be eaten by the hungriest song-singer who ever kissed a tavern wench or drank a gallon of Burgundy at a draught!"

It was as if his challenge had been waited for. From a low clump of bracken beside the road rose such a marrow-freezing howl as no man had heard before, and a huge, gray, shaggy form, larger than any wolf that ever fought a pack of hounds, launched itself straight at the astonished *trouveur's* throat.

The horses reared in sudden terror, plunging futilely to beat off his assailant. "*A moi, Louis; a moi, Francois. Quick, for the love o' God, or I perish!*"

But the other singer and the servant could give no aid. Encumbered by their cloaks and trappings, their horses plunging and rearing in panic fear, they could but fight desperately to retain their saddles and cry supplications to the Virgin.

"Help, help!" the attacked man called again, then, with a shout of desperation, he fell from his saddle, the great, gray thing's teeth fastened in his shoulder near the base of his neck.

For a moment he thrashed among the underbrush, unable to draw his long sword and powerless to thrust back the creature with his bare hands. In the struggle his hand brushed against the

hanger in his girdle. He dragged the short cut-and-thrust blade from its scabbard with frantic haste and struck once, twice, three times at the foul creature snarling at his throat. A cry of rage and pain sounded amid the monster's growling, and with a deep, angry bay it rushed off into the forest depths.

"*Mon Dieu!*" gasped the minstrel as he regained his saddle. "Would that I'd heeded thy warning, Louis. Never again will I challenge one of those tailless hounds from the Devil's kennel. Tomorrow morning, if it please our Lady we see the light of another day, this matter goes before my Lord Duke. Holy Church and the secular government must combine to rid the province of these changeling wolves."

The three riders set spurs to their mounts, nor did they slacken rein till safe within the fortifications of the city of Dôle.

NEXT morning the two singers and their lackey appeared before the provincial officials and made formal complaint that they had been set upon, and one of them all but killed, by a *loup-garou*, or werewolf, in the forest of St. Bonnot.

The officials looked grave when they had heard the complainants through. This was not the first account of werewolf depredations to come before them. Farmers living in the territory contiguous to the city had brought in accounts of sheep stolen from the fold at dead of night, of dogs killed as they watched the flocks, even of little children found dead and horribly mangled along the roadside and beneath the hedges. Now came these three wayfarers, all of them veterans of the wars, and two of them men of learning and respect, to tell of being boldly attacked on the royal road as they journeyed through the wood. This thing must not be. The "power of the country" must be raised, and the werewolf, or werewolves, responsible for the outrages sent forthwith to the fiery hell where their master, the Devil, waited the coming of their forfeited souls.

France of 1573 was in no condition to police her country districts. The long and devastating wars between Huguenots and Catholics had made a sort of no man's land of large districts; Charles IX, the king, was a man of wax, molded now by this favorite, now that, and giving no thought to the welfare of his people. Every available sou that taxation could wring from rich or poor was spent to gratify or further the ambitions of the most corrupt and conscienceless politician who ever debased a government, the Queen Mother, Catherine de Medici.

In these circumstances, the Court of Parliament at Dôle might pass as many enactments as it chose, but, lacking force with which to make its mandates effective, its acts were but mere scraps of unavailing paper. One power still remained to the court. This was a *levee en masse*—a general calling to arms of the countryside.

Tradesmen and residents of the towns of those days stood bareheaded when titled swaggerers rode forth, and the agricultural classes were little more important to the nobility than the earth they tilled. For one not holding a patent of nobility to engage in the gentlemanly sport of hunting was to court immediate and merciless punishment. Game must be preserved for the nobles to hunt, though the peasant's stomach went empty and his flocks and herds were depleted by wolves till poverty crushed him to the ground.

Now was a chance to declare an "open season," give the peasants the thrill of engaging in the noble pastime of the chase, rid the country of the dreaded werewolves and save the sorely needed public funds, all at once. Accordingly, the following proclamation was issued by the Court of Parliament at Dôle:

"According to the advertisement made to the sovereign Court of Parliament at Dôle, that in the territories of Epagny, Salvange, Courchapon and the neighboring villages has often been seen and met, for some time past, a werewolf, who, it is said, has already seized and carried off several little children, so that they have not been seen since, and since he has attacked and done injury to divers horsemen in the country, who kept him off only with great difficulty and danger to their persons and lives, the said Court, desiring to prevent any greater danger, has permitted, and by these presents does hereby permit all those who are now abiding and dwelling in said places and others,

notwithstanding all and any edicts concerning the chase, to assemble with pikes, halberts, arquebuses and other weapons, to chase and to pursue the said werewolf in every place where they may find him; to seize him, to tie him, or, if necessary, to kill him without incurring any pains or penalties of any sort, kind or nature whatsoever.

"Given at the convocation of the said Court on the Thirteenth Day of the month of September, 1573."

Mounted heralds were despatched throughout the territory adjacent to Dôle, and within a few days the court's proclamation was known to every dweller in the vicinity.

Soon quaint processions were seen issuing from all the villages in the neighborhood. Headed by their parish priests, with sacred statues borne before them, the people sallied forth to hunt down the dreaded *loup-garou*. Solemn high mass had been sung, the weapons of the huntsmen had been formally laid in the chancels of their churches and blessed by the *curés*; and now the hunt commenced.

Separating into parties of two, the peasants ranged the fields and woods, seeking everywhere for their accursed prey. It must be admitted that many of them had no stomach for their task, and would have dropped their weapons and fled incontinently at the first sight of anything resembling a werewolf in the most remote way. Others so far forgot the sacred and official duty with which they were charged as to devote themselves to the hunting of edible game, and many a luckless bunny found its way into the pouches (and later to the kettles) of the werewolf hunters. Still others routed forest wolves from their lairs and killed them, so not a few wolves' scalps were brought before the provincial authorities.

But these were all natural wolves, as incapable of assuming human shape as the peasants were of becoming wolves, and, though their deaths doubtless added greatly to the safety of the neighborhood sheepfolds, they brought the werewolf menace no nearer a termination than when the Court of Parliament first issued its proclamation.

Interest in the hunt began to slacken. The peasants had their farmlets to attend, and the great landed proprietors were heartily sick of having their game preserves raided by those supposedly bent on public service. Except among those who had lost children or sheep, the *loup-garou* became little more than a hazy recollection.

And then suddenly, unexpectedly, he

was found. On the eighth of November, 1573, when the fields were all but bare of vegetation and the last leaves were reluctantly parting company with the trees, three laborers, hurrying from their work to their homes at Chastenoy by a woodland short-cut, heard the screams of a little girl issuing from a dense tangle of vines and undergrowth. And with the child's screams mingled the baying of a wolf.

Swinging their stout billhooks, cutting a path for themselves through the tangled wildwood, the laborers hastened toward the sounds. In a little clearing they beheld a terrifying sight. Backed against a tree, defending herself with a shepherd's crook, was a ten-year-old girl, bleeding from a half-dozen wounds, while before her was a monstrous creature which never ceased its infernal baying and howling as it attacked her, tooth and nail.

As the peasants ran forward to the child's rescue the thing fled off into the forest on all fours, disappearing almost instantly in the darkness. The men would have followed, but the child demanded all their attention, for, weakened by loss of blood and exhausted with terror, she fell fainting before they could reach her.

The child was carried home and the workmen reported their adventure to the authorities. Their astonishment had been too great and the night too dark for them to make accurate observations, so there was a conflict in their testimony. Two affirmed the thing possessed the body of a wolf, the third swore positively it was a man, and, what was more to the point, *he recognized him*.

The clerical authorities cast their vote with the peasants, asserting the child's assailant a wolf, and there the matter rested for a time.

ON the fourteenth of the month the disappearance of a little boy about eight years old was reported. The child had last been seen within an arrow's flight of the gates of Dôle, yet he had vanished as completely as though swallowed by the earth.

Now the civil authorities decided on action. They were not inclined to discount the werewolf theory entirely, for to deny the existence of such monsters in those days was treading dangerously close to the skirts of heresy. But neither were they minded to overlook any clue which pointed a natural explanation to the mystery. The Frenchman is curiously logical and direct, even in matters of superstition.

Two days after the little boy's disappearance was reported, a *sergeant de*

*vill*e set out from Dôle, armed with a writ of attachment and a very business-like sword, and accompanied by six stalwart arquebusiers. Guided by the peasant who claimed to have recognized the little girl's assailant, the party hastened through the forest of St. Bonnot to the home of one Gilles Garnier, which stood beside the banks of a woodland tarn not far from the village of Arnanges.

Gilles Garnier, the man they sought, was a sombre, ill-favored fellow, surly and taciturn. He walked with a pronounced stoop and a shuffling gait, looking neither to right nor left, and usually muttering half crazily to himself. His pale face, repulsive features and livid complexion repelled all advances from those who met him, and little was known of his personal habits. But because of his long, unkempt beard, his filthy and ragged clothing (uncleanliness was next to godliness in those days) and his solitary life, he was popularly known as the hermit of St. Bonnot.

This title, however, carried with it no implication of sanctity. Quite the reverse. Persons with property to lose were wont to lock it up securely when the hermit was known to be in the vicinity, and many a hen roost owed its depreciated population to his evening visits.

The hermit's hut was as dilapidated as its tenant. Its crude roof was made of squares of sod laid across rickety rafters, and its walls of uncemented stones, irregularly piled one upon another, were encrusted with lichen. The floor was of trodden clay and the rough timber door hung crazily on hinges of rawhide. The windows were unglazed, and stopped against the weather with aprons of untanned skins.

The sergeant deployed four of his half-dozen followers in an enveloping movement about the hut, while, accompanied by the remaining two and his guide, he approached the hut and knocked thunderously on its sagging door with the hilt of his sword.

"Who calls?" Gilles Garnier peered evilly from a window.

"I do," the sergeant answered, "Open in the name of the law!"

"What seek ye here?" the hermit parleyed.

"I seek thee, accursed of God—werewolf, slayer of little children," the officer replied. "Come forth and yield ye, or, by'r Lady, I'll come in for thee."

Gilles Garnier bared his long, yellow teeth in an ugly snarl and hunched his rounded shoulders as if to spring upon the messenger of justice, but a second look at the arquebusiers showed him the futility of resistance.

The arquebus was grandfather to the flintlock musket of Revolutionary days, and great-great-grandfather to the modern rifle. It was nearly as tall as a man, had a bore larger than the modern twelve-gauge shotgun, and was fired by its bearer thrusting a glowing fuse, or gun-match, into a touchhole at its breech. Even with the inferior gunpowder of those days it had a range twice that of the strongest crossbow, and though it was anything but accurate in aim, it carried a charge of leaden slugs and broken nails which scattered almost over a half-acre lot. If one of the soldiers had opened fire at point-blank range, Gilles Garnier would have been mangled almost beyond human recognition.

Gilles Garnier thought it prudent to come out and surrender.

His arms and legs firmly manacled, an iron chain about his neck binding him fast to the sergeant's stirrup, the werewolf of St. Bonnot was brought to Dôle.

FOR a time there was a controversy whether state or ecclesiastical courts should take jurisdiction. The clerics maintained that the prisoner had committed his crimes in the form of a wolf, and, since he had sold his soul to the Devil in order to become a werewolf, it was a matter cognizable only in the courts spiritual.

The civil authorities declared it had not yet been proven that the accused had committed any crime, and so, if he had committed any, whether as man or beast, it followed he must be tried before the temporal courts.

The civil lawyers won and the trial commenced.

Witnesses were summoned to prove the deaths of children and the condition in which their bodies were found; shepherds appeared to tell of their missing sheep; the two minstrels and their servant told of the attack made on them the previous September.

The little maid rescued by the peasants identified the prisoner positively as her assailant, and showed the court the scars left by his teeth and nails.

Then came the examination of the prisoner. In anticipation of his claims to innocence, a choice collection of racks, thumbscrews, leg-crushers and branding irons was made ready, and the official torturers looked forward to a busy morning. But the prisoner not only confessed all the crimes charged against him, but volunteered information concerning a number of others unknown to the court.

On the last day of Michaelmas (September 29), near the wood of La Serre,

while in the form of a wolf, he had attacked and slain with his teeth and claws a little girl of ten or twelve years, drawn her into a thicket and gnawed the flesh from her arms and legs.

On the fourteenth day after All Saints (November 14), also in the form of a wolf, he had seized a little boy, strangled him, and partially eaten him.

Asked how he could have strangled the child if he were in wolf's form at the time, he was at first vague in his replies, but finally recollected that his hands had not been changed, so he still had the use of his fingers.

On the Friday before St. Bartholomew's Day he had seized a boy of twelve or thirteen near the village of Perrouze and killed him, but was prevented from eating him by the approach of some peasants. These men were found and corroborated the prisoner's statement.

Although the little girl whose rescue was the cause of his arrest declared the prisoner had been in human form when he attacked her, Gilles Garnier stoutly maintained he had been in wolf's shape at the time. And to prove his power to change into a wolf at will, he suddenly sank to his all-fours on the court room floor, began capering about in grotesque imitation of a wolf, and emitted a series of howls, yelps and growls which perfectly simulated those of a ferocious beast of prey.

The court deliberated over his case, decided he had imitated wolf calls only to terrify his victims, but had never actually assumed wolf's form, and consequently voted him guilty of simple murder, unaccompanied by sorcery. As a murderer, he was punishable only by the civil authorities.

Sentence followed hard upon the verdict. On the tenth day following his arrest, Gilles Garnier, the self-confessed werewolf of St. Bonnot was dragged by ropes attached to his ankles over a rough road for a distance of nearly a mile, bound to a stake and burned to death.

NOTE: *The reader must be aware that Gilles Garnier was the victim of that form of insanity known as zoomania, where the patient believes himself an animal. Zoomania, or that branch of it known as loupomania, where the lunatic imagines himself a wolf, is, fortunately, relatively uncommon today, yet frequent enough to be recognized by medico-legal authorities. If it be remembered that Gilles Garnier was obviously a man of feeble intellect, and that all France, indeed all Europe of that day reeked with terror tales concerning the LOUP-GAROU, which tales Garnier had heard (and implicitly be-*

lieved) since earliest infancy, it can readily be seen how, when his poor wits finally broke down, he came to imagine himself a werewolf.

The fact that he was lucid enough on every subject save this one delusion, stamps his ailment as paranoia, or monomania, one of the commonest forms of insanity among the young and middle aged. The man must have been quite

powerless to restrain himself when seized with one of his attacks, and, in any modern court, he would have been committed to an institution without even being brought to trial.

It does not appear that he ate the flesh of his victims because of hunger. On the contrary, this shocking act must be regarded purely as a symptom of his derangement. When under the spell of

his disease the lunatic frequently resorts to the most unlikely diet. The author was once present at an autopsy performed on a paranoiac's body when no less than half a dozen ten-penny nails were extracted from the unfortunate man's stomach, several of them almost entirely eroded by the natural hydrochloric acid of that organ.

—SEABURY QUINN.

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