

THE WEREWOLF

In the Fausses-Reposes Woods at the bottom of the Picardy hill, there lived a very handsome adult wolf with a black coat and big red eyes. His name was Denis, and his favourite pastime was watching the cars from Ville-d'Avray accelerate as they approached the glistening climb on which, after rain, shimmering puddles sometimes formed, reflecting the olive green of the tall trees that lined the road. On summer evenings he also liked to roam the forest in order to catch impatient lovers in the act of struggling with the complicated elastic clasps that, unfortunately, are fitted to most undergarments these days. He philosophically observed the outcome of these occasionally successful attempts and modestly withdrew, shaking his head whenever it appeared that a willing victim, as you say, got laid. Descended from a long line of civilised wolves, Denis lived on grass and blue hyacinths, pepped up in autumn with a few select mushrooms, and in winter, much to his disgust, with bottles of milk taken from the large yellow truck that belonged to the Co-operative. He loathed milk because it tasted of animal, and from November to February he cursed the inclemency of a season that forced his stomach to endure such unpleasant things.

Denis was on good terms with his neighbours because, due to his discreet nature, they were unaware that he existed. He lived in a small cave that had been dug out many years earlier by a disillusioned gold prospector. The miner, having known bad luck all of his life, was sure he was never going to strike it rich and find the pile of gold nuggets that Louis Bousenard had described as a "basket of oranges". Towards the end, he had decided he might as well carry out his excavations, which were as frenetic as they were futile,

in a warmer climate. Denis had created a comfortable retreat for himself in the cave, furnishing it over the years with hubcaps, nuts and other car parts that he had collected from the road where accidents frequently occurred. Being passionate about mechanics, he loved to survey his spoils, and dreamed of the workshop that one day he would own. Four light alloy connecting rods supported the car boot lid that served as a table. The bed was made from leather seats from an old Amilcar that had had a brief encounter with a big sturdy plane tree, and two tyres formed gorgeous picture frames for the portraits of dearly beloved parents. Everything blended in tastefully with the more ordinary pieces previously collected by the miner.

One beautiful August evening, Denis was out on his usual after-dinner stroll. The light of the full moon was filtering through the leaves, creating a lacework pattern of shadows, and under the bright moonlight, Denis's eyes had assumed the mellow ruby red colour of the wine from Arbois. Denis was approaching an oak tree, the usual end to his walk, when fate intervened and he stumbled upon the Magus of Siam, whose real name was Étienne Pample, and young Lisette Cachou, the dark-haired waitress from the Gronœil Restaurant, who had been led to Fausses-Reposes by the magus under false pretences. The Magus of Siam had spent hours trying to tear apart the brand new "Obsession" girdle that Lisette was wearing for the first time, and it was to that particular circumstance that Denis owed this late encounter.

Unfortunately for Denis, his arrival turned out to be badly timed. It was right on the stroke of midnight and the Magus of Siam was on edge. All around there abounded forgive-me-nots, lycopus bugleweed and white lupins, which in recent years have become the mandatory accompaniments to lycanthropy, or rather anthropolicy, that we are about to read. Enraged by Denis's arrival — although, discreet as ever, Denis was already withdrawing, mumbling an excuse — the Magus of Siam, disappointed with Lisette, and with a surplus of energy demanding to be released one way or another, threw himself on the innocent creature and savagely bit him below the shoulder blade. With a yelp of anguish, Denis took off like a shot. Once back home, he was overcome with an unusual feeling of fatigue, and fell into a deep sleep broken by troubled dreams.

If I Say If

Over time he forgot the incident, and things returned to the way they were, with some days being the same and others different. Autumn was approaching, as were the September tides, which have the funny effect of turning the leaves on the trees red. Denis stuffed himself with field mushrooms and boletus, and occasionally plucked a scarcely visible peziza off a piece of bark, but he avoided the indigestible ox-tongue like the plague. The woods were now emptying of walkers more quickly in the evening, and Denis was going to bed earlier. However, it seemed that this hardly made him feel any less tired and, after nights troubled by nightmares, he would wake up with a heavy head and aching limbs. He even lost his passion for mechanics, and at midday you would sometimes catch him daydreaming, clutching in his limp paw the rag with which he was to polish a piece of brass coated in verdigris. His sleep was becoming increasingly disturbed and he was surprised not to have found out why.

On the night of the next full moon, he emerged with a start from his slumber, gripped with fever, shivering, overcome by an intense sensation of cold. Rubbing his eyes, he was surprised at how strange he felt, and he looked around for a light. He had soon hooked up the superb headlight that he had inherited from a wayward Mercedes a few months earlier, and the dazzling light from the device lit up all the nooks and crannies of his cave. He made his way unsteadily to the rear-view mirror mounted above the washstand. He was amazed to find himself standing upright on his back legs, but he was even more surprised when his eyes fell upon his reflection in the small round mirror. A strange face stared back at him — whitish, devoid of hair, with only two beautiful ruby red eyes to remind him of his former appearance. Letting out an inarticulate cry, he looked at his body, and understood the reason for this icy cold feeling that gripped him all over. His splendid black coat had disappeared, and before his eyes stood the deformed body of one of those men whose awkwardness he usually ridiculed as they attempted to make love.

Time was of the essence. Denis sprang to the car-boot crammed with articles of discarded clothing gathered at random from accident scenes. Instinctively, he selected an elegant grey suit with white stripes, and chose a plain rosewood-tinged shirt and burgundy tie to go with it. As soon as he had put on these clothes, he felt better and his teeth stopped chattering. He was

surprised at how he had managed to maintain his balance. It was then that his troubled gaze fell upon the small pile of black fur scattered around his bed, and he lamented his lost looks.

Nevertheless, through sheer determination, he regained his composure and tried to size up the situation. His books had taught him many things and the matter seemed clear. The Magus of Siam was a werewolf and, conversely, he, Denis, having been bitten by the beast, had just turned into a man.

At first he was filled with great terror at the thought of having to live in an unfamiliar world. Living as a man amongst men, what dangers would he not face! He recalled the futile struggles that the Picardy hill drivers were involved in day and night, and this provided him with a small insight into the atrocious existence that, whether he liked it or not, he would have to adapt to. Then he thought it over. In all likelihood, and if his information was correct, the transformation would probably not last long. So why not take advantage of the situation and venture into the town? It must be admitted that, at that moment, certain scenes he had glimpsed in the woods sprang to mind without making him feel the same way about them as he had before. He found himself licking his lips and noticed that, despite all the other changes, his tongue had remained just as pointy as before. He went over to the rear-view mirror and took a closer look at himself. His features didn't displease him as much as he had feared. When he opened his mouth, he saw that his palate had retained its beautiful black colour. Also, he still had control of his ears, that were perhaps a touch too long and hairy. In the small spherical mirror, he contemplated his oval face, with its matt complexion and white teeth, which seemed to compare quite well to the other faces he was familiar with. After all, why not make the most of the inevitable and learn some valuable lessons for the future? Before going out, however, a lingering sense of caution prompted him to reach for a pair of dark glasses to cover the erubescence of his eyes, if the need arose. He also grabbed a raincoat, which he threw over his arm, and he strode to the door with determination. A few moments later, equipped with a light suitcase and breathing in the morning air that seemed strangely devoid of odours, he found himself standing by the side of the road, turning his thumb confidently towards the first car he saw. He had decided to head for Paris, having learned from everyday experience that cars rarely stop as they go up the hill. They are

more inclined to stop on the descent, because the downward slope makes it easier for them to take off again.

Due to his stylish appearance, he was soon picked up by someone who wasn't in too much of a hurry. Comfortably ensconced on the right-hand side of the driver, Denis gazed for the first time with his fiery eyes at the big wide world. Twenty minutes later, he got out at the Place de l'Opéra. The weather was cool, the sky was clear, and the traffic was still within the limits of decency. Denis boldly dashed across the pedestrian crossing and headed along the boulevard in the direction of the Scribe Hotel, where he took a suite with a bathroom and living room. Leaving his bag in the care of the hotel staff, he immediately went out again to buy a bicycle.

The morning passed by as if it were a dream. Overwhelmed, Denis didn't know where to pedal next. From deep within, he felt the burning desire to look for a wolf to bite, but he didn't think it would be very easy to find a victim, and he wanted to avoid being overly influenced by what he'd read in all the books. He knew that, with a bit of luck, he could get close to the animals in the Jardin des Plantes, but he reserved this possibility for a time when he might be overcome by a more powerful urge. The new bicycle occupied all his thoughts. This nickel-plated thing fascinated him and, what is more, it would be very useful for when the time came to return home to his cave.

At midday, Denis parked his bike in front of the hotel under the somewhat astonished eye of the porter. But Denis's elegant appearance, and especially his ruby red eyes, seemed to prevent people from saying anything to him. Carefree, he set off in search of a restaurant. He chose one that looked nice and quiet, because he still felt uncomfortable around large groups of people and, despite the level of his overall refinement, he was afraid that his manners were still a little countrified. He asked to be seated somewhere out of the way and to be served promptly. However, Denis was unaware that, in this place that seemed so peaceful, on that very day, the monthly meeting of the Rambolitaïn Fresh Water Amateur Fishing Club was being held, and it so happened that, in the middle of his meal, he witnessed a procession of jolly gentlemen with ruddy complexions stream in, who, in one fell swoop, occupied seven tables with four diners at each. Denis frowned at this sudden intrusion and, as expected, the head waiter politely came over to his table.