

The She-Wolf

Saki

Leonard Bilsiter was one of those people who have failed to find this world attractive or interesting, and who have sought compensation in an “unseen world” of their own experience or imagination—or invention. Children do that sort of thing successfully, but children are content to convince themselves, and do not vulgarise their beliefs by trying to convince other people. Leonard Bilsiter’s beliefs were for “the few,” that is to say, anyone who would listen to him.

His dabbings in the unseen might not have carried him beyond the customary platitudes of the drawing-room visionary if accident had not reinforced his stock-in-trade of mystical lore. In company with a friend, who was interested in a Ural mining concern, he had made a trip across Eastern Europe at a moment when the great Russian railway strike was developing from a threat to a reality; its outbreak caught him on the return journey, somewhere on the further side of Perm, and it was while waiting for a couple of days at a wayside station in a state of suspended locomotion that he made the acquaintance of a dealer in harness and metalware, who profitably whiled away the tedium of the long halt by initiating his English travelling companion in a fragmentary system of folk-lore that he had picked up from Trans-Baikal traders and natives. Leonard returned to his home circle garrulous about his Russian strike experiences, but oppressively reticent about certain dark mysteries, which he alluded to under the resounding title of Siberian Magic. The reticence wore off in a week or two under the influence of an entire lack of general curiosity, and Leonard began to make more detailed allusions to the enormous powers which this new esoteric force, to use his own description of it, conferred on the initiated few who knew how to wield it. His aunt, Cecilia Hoops, who loved sensation perhaps rather better than she loved the truth, gave him as clamorous an advertisement as anyone could wish for by retailing an account of how he had turned a vegetable marrow into a wood pigeon before her very eyes. As a manifestation of the possession of supernatural powers, the story was discounted in some quarters by the respect accorded to Mrs. Hoops’ powers of imagination.

However divided opinion might be on the question of Leonard’s status as a wonderworker or a charlatan, he certainly arrived at Mary Hampton’s house-party with a reputation for pre-eminence in one or other of those professions, and he was not disposed to shun such publicity as might fall to his share. Esoteric forces and unusual powers figured largely in whatever conversation he or his aunt had a share in, and his own performances, past and potential, were the subject of mysterious hints and dark avowals.

“I wish you would turn me into a wolf, Mr. Bilsiter,” said his hostess at luncheon the day after his arrival.

“My dear Mary,” said Colonel Hampton, “I never knew you had a craving in that direction.”

“A she-wolf, of course,” continued Mrs. Hampton; “it would be too confusing to change one’s sex as well as one’s species at a moment’s notice.”

“I don’t think one should jest on these subjects,” said Leonard.

“I’m not jesting, I’m quite serious, I assure you. Only don’t do it to-day; we have only eight available bridge players, and it would break up one of our tables. To-morrow we shall be a larger party. To-morrow night, after dinner—”

“In our present imperfect understanding of these hidden forces I think one should approach them with humbleness rather than mockery,” observed Leonard, with such severity that the subject was forthwith dropped.

Clovis Sangrail had sat unusually silent during the discussion on the possibilities of Siberian Magic; after lunch he side-tracked Lord Pabham into the comparative seclusion of the billiard-room and delivered himself of a searching question.

“Have you such a thing as a she-wolf in your collection of wild animals? A she-wolf of moderately good temper?”

Lord Pabham considered. “There is Louisa,” he said, “a rather fine specimen of the timber-wolf. I got her two years ago in exchange for some Arctic foxes. Most of my animals get to be fairly tame before they’ve been with me very long; I think I can say Louisa has an angelic temper, as she-wolves go. Why do you ask?”

“I was wondering whether you would lend her to me for to-morrow night,” said Clovis, with the careless solicitude of one who borrows a collar stud or a tennis racquet.

“To-morrow night?”

“Yes, wolves are nocturnal animals, so the late hours won’t hurt her,” said Clovis, with the air of one who has taken everything into consideration; “one of your men could bring her over from Pabham Park after dusk, and with a little help he ought to be able to smuggle her into the conservatory at the same moment that Mary Hampton makes an unobtrusive exit.”

Lord Pabham stared at Clovis for a moment in pardonable bewilderment; then his face broke into a wrinkled network of laughter.

“Oh, that’s your game, is it? You are going to do a little Siberian Magic on your own account.

And is Mrs. Hampton willing to be a fellow-conspirator?"

"Mary is pledged to see me through with it, if you will guarantee Louisa's temper."

"I'll answer for Louisa," said Lord Pabham.

By the following day the house-party had swollen to larger proportions, and Bilsiter's instinct for self-advertisement expanded duly under the stimulant of an increased audience. At dinner that evening he held forth at length on the subject of unseen forces and untested powers, and his flow of impressive eloquence continued unabated while coffee was being served in the drawing-room preparatory to a general migration to the card-room.

His aunt ensured a respectful hearing for his utterances, but her sensation-loving soul hankered after something more dramatic than mere vocal demonstration.

"Won't you do something to *convince* them of your powers, Leonard?" she pleaded; "change something into another shape. He can, you know, if he only chooses to," she informed the company.

"Oh, do," said Mavis Pellington earnestly, and her request was echoed by nearly everyone present. Even those who were not open to conviction were perfectly willing to be entertained by an exhibition of amateur conjuring.

Leonard felt that something tangible was expected of him.

"Has anyone present," he asked, "got a three-penny bit or some small object of no particular value—?"

"You're surely not going to make coins disappear, or something primitive of that sort?" said Clovis contemptuously.

"I think it very unkind of you not to carry out my suggestion of turning me into a wolf," said Mary Hampton, as she crossed over to the conservatory to give her macaws their usual tribute from the dessert dishes.

"I have already warned you of the danger of treating these powers in a mocking spirit," said Leonard solemnly.

"I don't believe you can do it," laughed Mary provocatively from the conservatory; "I dare you to do it if you can. I defy you to turn me into a wolf."

As she said this she was lost to view behind a clump of azaleas.

“Mrs. Hampton—” began Leonard with increased solemnity, but he got no further. A breath of chill air seemed to rush across the room, and at the same time the macaws broke forth into ear-splitting screams.

“What on earth is the matter with those confounded birds, Mary?” exclaimed Colonel Hampton; at the same moment an even more piercing scream from Mavis Pellington stampeded the entire company from their seats. In various attitudes of helpless horror or instinctive defence they confronted the evil-looking grey beast that was peering at them from amid a setting of fern and azalea.

Mrs. Hoops was the first to recover from the general chaos of fright and bewilderment.

“Leonard!” she screamed shrilly to her nephew, “turn it back into Mrs. Hampton at once! It may fly at us at any moment. Turn it back!”

“I—I don’t know how to,” faltered Leonard, who looked more scared and horrified than anyone.

“What!” shouted Colonel Hampton, “you’ve taken the abominable liberty of turning my wife into a wolf, and now you stand there calmly and say you can’t turn her back again!”

To do strict justice to Leonard, calmness was not a distinguishing feature of his attitude at the moment.

“I assure you I didn’t turn Mrs. Hampton into a wolf; nothing was farther from my intentions,” he protested.

“Then where is she, and how came that animal into the conservatory?” demanded the Colonel.

“Of course we must accept your assurance that you didn’t turn Mrs. Hampton into a wolf,” said Clovis politely, “but you will agree that appearances are against you.”

“Are we to have all these recriminations with that beast standing there ready to tear us to pieces?” wailed Mavis indignantly.

“Lord Pabham, you know a good deal about wild beasts—” suggested Colonel Hampton.

“The wild beasts that I have been accustomed to,” said Lord Pabham, “have come with proper credentials from well-known dealers, or have been bred in my own menagerie. I’ve never before been confronted with an animal that walks unconcernedly out of an azalea

bush, leaving a charming and popular hostess unaccounted for. As far as one can judge from *outward* characteristics,” he continued, “it has the appearance of a well-grown female of the North American timber-wolf, a variety of the common species *canis lupus*.”

“Oh, never mind its Latin name,” screamed Mavis, as the beast came a step or two further into the room; “can’t you entice it away with food, and shut it up where it can’t do any harm?”

“If it is really Mrs. Hampton, who has just had a very good dinner, I don’t suppose food will appeal to it very strongly,” said Clovis.

“Leonard,” beseeched Mrs. Hoops tearfully, “even if this is none of your doing can’t you use your great powers to turn this dreadful beast into something harmless before it bites us all—a rabbit or something?”

“I don’t suppose Colonel Hampton would care to have his wife turned into a succession of fancy animals as though we were playing a round game with her,” interposed Clovis.

“I absolutely forbid it,” thundered the Colonel.

“Most wolves that I’ve had anything to do with have been inordinately fond of sugar,” said Lord Pabham; “if you like I’ll try the effect on this one.”

He took a piece of sugar from the saucer of his coffee cup and flung it to the expectant Louisa, who snapped it in mid-air. There was a sigh of relief from the company; a wolf that ate sugar when it might at the least have been employed in tearing macaws to pieces had already shed some of its terrors. The sigh deepened to a gasp of thanks-giving when Lord Pabham decoyed the animal out of the room by a pretended largesse of further sugar. There was an instant rush to the vacated conservatory. There was no trace of Mrs. Hampton except the plate containing the macaws’ supper.

“The door is locked on the inside!” exclaimed Clovis, who had deftly turned the key as he affected to test it.

Everyone turned towards Bilsiter.

“If you haven’t turned my wife into a wolf,” said Colonel Hampton, “will you kindly explain where she has disappeared to, since she obviously could not have gone through a locked door? I will not press you for an explanation of how a North American timber-wolf suddenly appeared in the conservatory, but I think I have some right to inquire what has become of Mrs. Hampton.”

Bilsiter's reiterated disclaimer was met with a general murmur of impatient disbelief.

"I refuse to stay another hour under this roof," declared Mavis Pellington.

"If our hostess has really vanished out of human form," said Mrs. Hoops, "none of the ladies of the party can very well remain. I absolutely decline to be chaperoned by a wolf!"

"It's a she-wolf," said Clovis soothingly.

The correct etiquette to be observed under the unusual circumstances received no further elucidation. The sudden entry of Mary Hampton deprived the discussion of its immediate interest.

"Some one has mesmerised me," she exclaimed crossly; "I found myself in the game larder, of all places, being fed with sugar by Lord Pabham. I hate being mesmerised, and the doctor has forbidden me to touch sugar."

The situation was explained to her, as far as it permitted of anything that could be called explanation.

"Then you *really* did turn me into a wolf, Mr. Bilsiter?" she exclaimed excitedly.

But Leonard had burned the boat in which he might now have embarked on a sea of glory. He could only shake his head feebly.

"It was I who took that liberty," said Clovis; "you see, I happen to have lived for a couple of years in North-Eastern Russia, and I have more than a tourist's acquaintance with the magic craft of that region. One does not care to speak about these strange powers, but once in a way, when one hears a lot of nonsense being talked about them, one is tempted to show what Siberian magic can accomplish in the hands of someone who really understands it. I yielded to that temptation. May I have some brandy? the effort has left me rather faint."

If Leonard Bilsiter could at that moment have transformed Clovis into a cockroach and then have stepped on him he would gladly have performed both operations.

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