



# Men-Wolves

John Theophilus Naaké

Polish

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*Intermediate*

*8 min read*

I.

On a beautiful hill near the river Vistula, a company of young countrymen and countrywomen came together to celebrate the harvest-home with music and dancing. There was plenty to eat and drink, and they helped themselves freely. In the midst of the merriment a terrible cry was heard which drowned the music and jovial songs.

The young people left off dancing, ran to the spot whence the cry came, and found with horror that an enormous wolf had seized one of the handsomest girls of the village in his mouth, and was dragging her away. The most courageous among the youths followed and soon overtook the wolf; but the furious monster, his mouth foaming with rage, having dropped his prey on the ground, stood over it ready to fight.

The men, unarmed and terrified, knew not what to do. Some of them ran home to fetch fire-arms; the rest, quite unnerved, stood aloof, and awaited their return. The wolf, seeing the fear of those who remained, again seized the poor girl, and disappeared with her into the adjoining forest.

Fifty years had passed away since the occurrence of this terrible scene. Another feast was being held on the same hill, and an old, grey-headed man approached the merry-makers. The people invited him to join in their revels, but he, gloomy and reserved, sat down to drink the proffered glass of brandy in silence.

A peasant, of nearly the same age as the guest, approached, saluted him, and tried to engage him in conversation. The stranger, after looking at him for some time, demanded with emotion: "Is it you, indeed, John?"

The countryman then recognised in the stranger his elder brother, who had been lost fifty years before. The wondering peasants soon surrounded the old visitor, who told them how, having been changed into a wolf by a witch, he had carried his betrothed away from that same hill during a harvest-home festival; how he had lived with her in the forest for a year, when she had died.

"From that moment," he continued, "savage and furious, I attacked every one, and destroyed everything I fell in with. The blood I then shed I cannot even now wipe away."

Here he showed them his hands covered with bloodstains.

"It is now four years since, again changed to human shape, I have wandered from place to place. I wished to see you all once more—to see the hut and village where I was born, and grew up to be a man. After that—Ah, woe is me! Fly! Fly from me! I shall become a wolf again!"

As soon as he had uttered these words, he was changed into a wolf. He howled piteously, rushed past the astonished peasants, and disappeared in the neighbouring forest for ever.

## II.

A witch, having fallen in love with a young peasant, tried all her magic arts in vain to make him return her affection. At last, offended at his indifference, the furious woman resolved to take a terrible revenge.

Meeting him once, she said, "When you next go to the forest for wood, at the first stroke of your axe you shall be changed into a wolf."

The peasant slighting her threats, put his oxen to the wagon and drove to the forest. But no sooner had he struck a tree than the axe fell to the ground. Surprised and terrified he looked at his hands—they were changed into wolf's paws! Almost maddened with fear and distress, he ran about the forest. He looked into a pool of water, and saw that he was changed into a wolf; only here and there some portion of his clothes remained, the transformation not being yet quite complete. He hastened to his oxen, but they, frightened at the sight of him, turned and ran. He tried to stop them by the sound of his once familiar voice, but instead of speaking he could

only howl. Then, alas! with pain and terror he fully understood that the threats of the despised witch were carried into effect.

Unable, in spite of the change, to depart from his native place, he wandered about in the neighbourhood. In vain he tried to accustom himself to raw meat; he could not eat it; he had an especial horror of human flesh. In order to obtain food, he used to frighten away the shepherds and harvestmen, and eat their bread, milk, and other provisions.

Having spent some years in this manner, he one day felt an unusual desire to sleep, and accordingly laid down in the grass. But what was his surprise, when, on awakening, he perceived that he was again changed into a man. Delighted beyond measure, and forgetting that after breaking the spell, and changing from the state of a wolf to that of a man, people are left without clothes, the happy peasant ran swiftly home.

Happiness, they say, does not last long. The truth of this saying the peasant experienced only too soon. On arriving home he found his parents were dead; Kate, the girl whom he had loved before all others, was married, and had four children; most of his friends were either dead or had removed to distant parts.

The unfortunate peasant bore his misfortunes bravely. He tried to forget his troubles by the tillage, in the sweat of his brow, of a small piece of land. Sometimes, especially on holidays, he would go to the village public-house, and there, surrounded by his neighbours, would tell the story of his adventures, and the trials he had suffered through the cruel vengeance of the despised witch.

III.

A peasant, having been a wolf for seven years, was permitted by the witch who had transformed him to resume his natural shape. Although hungry and without clothes, he walked the whole day to reach his home where he had left his wife and children. He arrived late at night before his hut, and knocked at the door.

“Who is there?” demanded a voice from within; and the peasant at once recognised it as that of his wife.

“It is I—your husband; open the door, quick!”

“Heaven help us!” cried the terrified woman. “Here, husband, get up!” The wondering peasant soon saw before him his former servant, who, having married his wife, had come into all his property. The new husband rushed out of the hut armed with a pitchfork, determined to drive away its rightful owner. The unhappy man-wolf,

exasperated at his wife's inconstancy, cried out in his anguish,—

“Oh, that I were again a wolf, that I might punish my faithless wife, and never feel my misery!”

His wish was gratified on the instant: he was changed again into a wolf. Maddened with rage, he attacked his wife, who stood by holding a child of the second marriage in her arms. He pulled her down to the ground, devoured the child, and revenged himself upon its mother by mangling her body in a fearful manner.

At the cries of the wounded woman the neighbours ran to her assistance and set upon the furious animal. The wolf did not long defend himself; he soon fell beneath the repeated blows of his assailants. When the peasants, shouting with joy at their victory, began to examine the creature by the light of the burning pine splinters, they found to their surprise and horror, that instead of a wolf, they had killed their countryman who was lost seven years before, and was supposed to have been changed into a wolf. They tried to restore him, but it was too late. Whilst they were lamenting his unhappy end, the faithless woman, his wife, died of the wounds she had received.

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