

A moment later everyone's heart leaped into their throat. They heard a horrific scream from out back of the church, followed by a hideous growl. A second later everything was quiet. The silence was even more terrifying than the noise had been.

Everybody kept swinging their heads around, trying to watch both doors and all the windows at once. A moment later the back door began rattling. Slowly it opened.

The sheriff's gun was the first thing to appear, then the sheriff. The shadows were pretty deep by that time, but they could see his outline and the twinkle of the badge on his shirt as the moon glanced off it.

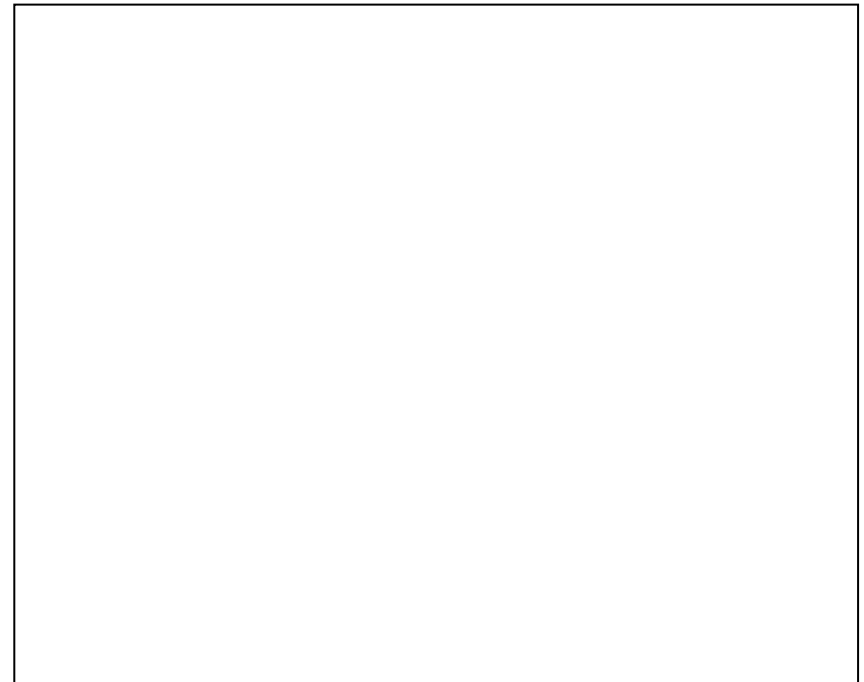
“Is the Reverend gone?” a wavery voice asked.

The sheriff grunted an assent. Everyone thought it was 'cause he didn't want to scare the children too much. A moment later they found out the truth when he turned up the lights.

There stood the sheriff with his jeans and his shirt busting at the seams and hair sticking out all over. His face was covered with it, and his eyes gleamed in wicked delight. His mouth watered at the sight in front of him: the whole town was arranged before him like a Sunday banquet and he had until morning to eat his fill.

WEREWOLF FEVER

A Ghost Story For Brave Souls



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Sunday came round at the end of the week like it always does, and the whole town was made to turn out for the picnic. They all brought their best food and their strongest ropes. And everybody ate their fill, exceptin' the sheriff. He didn't want the food to make him too sleepy to keep a good watch. The picnic ran extra late, but somehow it didn't seem as much fun as it usually was.

When the shadows started growing into late afternoon, it was time to start the job. People were led into the church one by one and tied up strong and secure by either the Reverend or the sheriff. Then either the sheriff or the Reverend double-checked it to make sure it was tight.

A few of the young uns whimpered a bit, but other than that everything went well. Everybody was as comfortable as could be in the pews and the sheriff and the Reverend were standing up by the front. The sheriff was holding his gun and watching everybody in the crowd, and the Reverend was reading from the Good Lord's Book. No one was really listening, though. They were all watching the moon peek over the mountain.

Just before it rose, the Reverend excused himself real quick and headed for the outhouse. The minutes passed slowly, and everybody started wondering if he was coming back or not.

Finally the sheriff headed out for a peek.

WEREWOLF FEVER

“There's a werewolf around. I just know it.”

“Johnson lost another lamb last night.”

“They found what was left of it torn to bits down by the railroad track.”

“And they found tracks of the monster too.”

“It was horrible.”

“They were huge.”

Sheriff Corbin listened as the talk around him started raising the pulses of the crowd. Finally he stepped in.

“All right, that's enough,” he yelled. “Frankly I don't believe all this talk, but if you folks are going to get all agitated up about it, then we're just going to have to figure out a sensible solution. Otherwise everybody is going to start killing off everybody else and before you know it the whole town will be staying up there on cemetery hill.”

“But what can we do?” someone asked.

“It's an unearthly monster,” someone else cried, and the talk started again.

“He'll kill us all.”

“We haven't got a chance.”

“There's no way to handle this.”

“Maybe the Reverend can do something. He's got to have some holy water or something like that.”

The sheriff almost laughed. He'd read enough stories about werewolves and ghosts to know that crosses only worked with vampires. Besides, all that stuff was just talk. It was funny how superstitious people could get in a small town and what funny things they'd believe.

The Reverend was quickly fetched, and just as quickly dismissed when he said he didn't know how to take care of werewolves. The sheriff could tell by the twinkle in his eye that he didn't really believe all this talk either.

“All right, folks,” the sheriff said. “Why don't we start with having us a little trial here? We can weigh the evidence and see what it points to. Frankly, I think we've got a rogue bear on the loose, or maybe a small wolf pack that's getting hungry. It has been a dry year and food is getting scarce up in the hills.”

“You can have a trial if you want, Sheriff, but my mind's made up,” said old man Stevens.

“Yeah,” several others echoed.

“And just to make it civilized like, we'll have the Reverend and the sheriff do the tying up.”

“Then the Reverend can pray the devil away after the sheriff shoots him.”

Before another two minutes had passed, the whole town had their minds made up real firm on it. Then a little boy spoke up.

“What if it is a bear?” he asked. “Won't that make us all sitting ducks for an attack?”

“We'll do it inside the church.”

“Yeah, no bear would dare enter the town, much less the church.”

“And the Almanac says the next full moon is on Sunday night.”

“We could make the picnic extra long and special for the kids.”

“We aren't going to tie up the young uns, are we? Or the babies?”

“Everybody's got to be tied up.”

“We can wrap the little ones up in blankets like the Indians do their children. They say it makes them feel safe and secure and they don't seem to mind it at all.”

“But our children aren't Indian children.”

Finally the crowd drowned out the protests of the mothers and anyone else who didn't like the idea. Before long everything was settled.

was pretty loco. It was far more likely a hungry bear was doing the marauding.

“All this here fancy talk is fine,” somebody yelled from the back of the room, but it don't get us nowhere.”

“Yeah, if it is a werewolf, it's somebody right here in town.”

“Or just outside it.”

“Either way it's got to be stopped, and I got just the way to do it.”

That stopped everybody for a moment, and they all turned to see who was speaking. It was Tom Sanderson from over the hill. Everybody egged him on, but he took his own time telling us what he had in mind. Finally he came out with it.

“We had werewolf trouble back in the old country when I was a boy,” he said, shifting his chew of tobacco from one side of his mouth to the other.

“We decided the only way we was going to find out who done it was to tie everybody up real secure like with lots of rope. Then when the full moon came out, the Sheriff just watched everybody real close, and when one boy started snarling and spitting and growing hair, the sheriff shot him cold dead on the spot. After that there weren't no more problems.”

“That's a great idea.”

“That'll work.”

“I'll bet it's that Cousins boy,” somebody yelled. “He always was a mean one.”

“Had bad blood in him from the day he was born.”

“Let's hang him.”

“Yeah, let's string him up.”

“... Stretch his neck.”

“I got a rope in my barn.”

“Well let's go get it.”

BANG! The crowd noise stopped before the echo of the gunshot did.

“I'm Sheriff of this here town,” the Sheriff said, “and I got a problem with you people stringing somebody up just because you think they're a little different. After all, what would have happened to you people if the powers that be decided that all blue-eyed people could be sold into slavery instead of just people with black skin? Every one of you would have had a family member torn away from you. Or you would have shunned them horrible cause you thought they were different and had been cursed by the devil or something for having been born with blue eyes.”

That got the people to thinking a little bit.

“All right,” Shem Clemmens finally said. “Let's have that trial. But I still say it's that Cousins boy.”

Everyone agreed while the Sheriff led them over to the courthouse.

I won't bore you with all the proceedings that ran on for several days, but they quickly decided there was definitely

something on the loose in the county. Dawson Harper testified as to how he had lost a calf a month ago and a cow the month before that. Then everybody started listing the livestock that had turned up missing. It was quite a bit when all was said and done. Then they started in on the people.

“Miz Maple was also killed by the thing,” Shem yelled again.

“Now we don't know that,” the Sheriff cautioned. “I went up there and checked everything out after the death was reported. It looked to me like she'd been mauled by a bear. There were grizzly tracks found right outside her cabin. More'n likely a bear smelled that fine cooking she was famous for and followed the scent to her door. And everybody knows the damage a hungry bear can do.”

“What about that horse and wagon we found on the road?” somebody else yelled.

“Yeah, nobody's ever found out who that belonged to yet.”

“But with the river right there, and the flash floods we'd had the night before,” the Reverend added. “It's a sure bet that they laid their blankets down too close to the river and fell asleep. A flash flood came and carried them away.”

The Sheriff was glad there was at least one other sane voice in the crowd. Although he had to admit that several other people seemed to think the whole idea of a werewolf