

The Wolf¹
Marcel Aymé
Translated from French by Patricia Worth

Hiding behind the hedge, the wolf was patiently watching the house. At last he had the satisfaction of seeing the parents come out of the kitchen. As they stepped out the door, they offered one last word of advice to their daughters.

“Remember,” they said, “not to open the door to anyone, even if they beg or threaten you. We’ll be back at nightfall.”

When he saw the parents far away at the last bend in the path, the wolf made his rounds of the house, limping with a gammy leg, but the doors were all closed. There was no point in looking over at the pig pen and cow shed; those species don’t have enough brains to let you convince them they should be eaten. So the wolf stopped outside the kitchen, placed his front paws on the window ledge and looked inside.

Delphine and Marinette were playing jacks by the stove. Marinette, the smaller girl, who was also blonder, was saying to her sister Delphine:

“When there are only two of us, it’s not much fun. We can’t play ring-a-ring-o’rosie.”

“It’s true, we can’t play ring-a-ring-o’rosie or hide and seek.”

“Or follow the leader, or Simon says.”

“Or statues, or piggy-in-the-middle.”

“And yet, what’s more fun than playing ring-a-ring-o’rosie or hide and seek?”

“Oh, if only there were three of us. . . .”

As the little girls had their backs to the wolf, he tapped on the window pane with his nose to let them know he was there. They left their game and came to the window hand in hand.

“Hello,” said the wolf. “It’s not warm outside. It’s nippy, you know.”

The blonder one started to laugh because she found him funny with his pointy ears and his tuft of prickly fur on top of his head. But Delphine was not deceived. She squeezed the smaller girl’s hand and said quietly:

“It’s the wolf.”

1 “Le Loup” from *Les Contes du chat perché* by Marcel Aymé © Editions Gallimard, Paris, 1939. With permission of the publishers.



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“The wolf?” said Marinette. “So, are we afraid?”

“Of course we’re afraid.”

The girls trembled and held each other tightly, their blonde hair and whispers mingling. The wolf had to admit he had not seen anything so pretty since the days he used to run through woods and over plains. He was quite touched by it.

“What’s wrong with me?” he thought, “I’ve gone weak at the knees.”

Thinking it over, he realized he had suddenly become good. So good and so gentle that he could never again eat children.

The wolf leant his head to the left, as one does when one is good, and put on his softest voice:

“I’m cold,” said he, “and my leg hurts. But what’s most important is that I’m good. If you’d like to open the door for me, I could come in and warm myself by the stove and we could spend the afternoon together.”

The girls looked at each other, a little surprised. They would never have suspected that the wolf could speak so sweetly. Already feeling reassured, the blonder one gave him a friendly wave, but Delphine, who did not lose her head so easily, soon regained her composure.

“Go away,” she said, “you’re the wolf.”

“You understand,” added Marinette with a smile, “it’s not that we want to send you away, but our parents have forbidden us to open the door, even if someone begs or threatens us.”

Then the wolf sighed deeply and his pointy ears lay down on each side of his head. They could see he was sad.

“You know,” he said, “people tell many stories about the wolf, but you mustn’t believe everything they say. The truth is, I’m not wicked at all.”

He sighed deeply again, which brought tears to Marinette’s eyes.

The girls were troubled to know that the wolf was cold and his leg was hurting. The blonder one whispered something in her sister’s ear while winking at the wolf to let him know she was on his side. Delphine remained pensive, for she did not make decisions lightly.

“He looks nice enough,” she said, “but I don’t trust him. Remember the story *The Wolf and the Lamb*? . . . And yet the lamb had done nothing to him.”

As the wolf was protesting that his intentions were good, she shot back:

“What about the lamb? . . . Yes, the lamb you ate?”

The wolf was not disconcerted by this.

“The lamb I ate?” said he. “Which one?”

He said this quite calmly, like something simple, something that goes without saying, and with an expression and a hint of innocence that sent chills down their spines.

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“What? So you’ve eaten lots of them!” cried Delphine. “Well, you’re a fine one.”

“But naturally I’ve eaten lots of them. I don’t see what’s wrong with that. . . . You eat plenty of lamb yourselves!”

There was no way they could deny it. They had just had a leg of lamb for lunch.

“Come now,” continued the wolf, “you can see I’m not wicked. Open the door for me, we’ll sit in a circle by the stove and I’ll tell you some stories. I’ve heard a few, which is not surprising when you consider how long I’ve been prowling through woods and running over plains. Even if I just tell you what happened the other day to the three rabbits at the edge of the wood, I’ll have you laughing.”

The girls argued in hushed voices. The blonder one was of the opinion that they should open the door to the wolf at once. They could not let him shiver in the wind with a sore leg. But Delphine still did not trust him.

“Oh, come on!” said Marinette. “You’re not going to scold him again for the lambs he’s eaten. Anyway, he can’t let himself starve to death!”

“He just has to eat potatoes,” retorted Delphine.

Marinette became so insistent, she pleaded the wolf’s case with so much emotion in her voice and so many tears in her eyes, that in the end her older sister was moved. Delphine began heading for the door, but in a burst of laughter she changed her mind and shrugged, and dashing Marinette’s hopes, she said:

“No, really, it would be too silly!”

Delphine looked the wolf in the eye.

“Hey, Wolf, I’d forgotten Little Red Riding Hood. Tell us a bit about Little Red Riding Hood, would you?”

The wolf lowered his head humbly. He was not expecting this. They heard him sniffle on the other side of the glass.

“It’s true,” he confessed, “I ate Little Red Riding Hood. But I can assure you that since then I’ve felt very sorry for it. If I could do it all over again. . . .”

“Yes, yes, people always say that.”

The wolf struck his chest at the place of his heart. He had a beautiful, deep voice.

“Good heavens, if I could do it over again I would rather starve to death.”

“All the same,” sighed the blonder girl, “you ate Little Red Riding Hood.”

“I’m not saying I didn’t,” the wolf agreed. “I ate her, that’s a fact. But it was a sin of my youth. It was such a long time ago, wasn’t it? There is mercy for every sin. . . . And then, if you knew what bother I’ve had because of that

girl! Look, they went as far as saying that I began by eating the grandmother; well, that isn't true, not at all."

Here, the wolf could not help but snigger, and probably without realizing he was sniggering.

"I ask you! Eat the grandmother, when I had waiting for me a nice fresh little girl for my lunch? I'm not so stupid. . . ."

At the memory of this meal of fresh meat, the wolf could not help licking his chops with his big tongue several times, revealing long pointy teeth which were anything but reassuring for the two little girls.

"Wolf," cried Delphine, "you're a liar! If you were as sorry as you say you are, you wouldn't be licking your chops like that!"

The wolf was quite ashamed that he had licked his lips at the memory of a plump little girl melting in his mouth. But he felt so good, so correct, that he did not want to doubt himself.

"Forgive me," he said, "it's a bad habit I picked up from my family, but it doesn't mean anything. . . ."

"Tough luck if you were badly brought up," declared Delphine.

"Don't say that," sighed the wolf, "I have so many regrets."

"Is it also a family habit to eat little girls? You should understand that when you promise never again to eat children, it's almost like Marinette promising never again to eat dessert."

Marinette blushed, and the wolf tried to protest:

"But since I swear that. . . ."

"Let's not talk about it anymore, and you be on your way. You'll warm up when you run."

Then the wolf got angry because they did not want to believe he was good.

"Still, it's a bit rich," he shouted, "one never wants to hear the voice of truth! It's enough to put one off being honest. I would suggest that nobody has the right to discourage those with good intentions as you are doing. And you can say that if ever again I eat a child, it will be your fault."

Listening to him, the girls could not think of the burden of this responsibility without worrying greatly, nor of the regrets they might end up having. But the wolf's ears were twitching and pointing straight up, his eyes were shining with a sharp gleam like the fangs between his snarling lips, and the girls stood frozen with fear.

The wolf realized he would gain nothing through words of intimidation. He asked forgiveness for his outburst and tried pleading humbly. As he spoke, a veil of tenderness fell over his face and his ears lay down, and when he

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pressed his nose against the window pane, his mouth flattened, sweet as a cow's muzzle.

"You can see he's not wicked," said the little blonde girl.

"Perhaps," replied Delphine, "perhaps."

As the wolf was starting to beg, Marinette could stand it no longer and headed for the door. Delphine, afraid, held her back by grabbing her curls. Slaps were given, slaps returned. On the other side of the glass the wolf jumped about in despair, saying he would prefer to go away than be the subject of a quarrel between the two prettiest blondes he had ever seen. And indeed he left the window and went off, racked with great sobs.

"What a pity," he mused, "I'm so good, so loving. . . . They don't want my friendship. I would have become even better, indeed I would not have eaten any more lambs."

Meanwhile, Delphine was watching the wolf as he hobbled away on three legs, numbed by the cold, and by sadness. Overcome with guilt and pity, she called through the window:

"Wolf! We're not afraid anymore. . . . Come quickly and warm yourself up!"

But the blonder girl had already opened the door and was running to meet the wolf.

"My goodness!" sighed the wolf. "How nice it is to be sitting by the fire. There really is nothing better than family life. I always thought that."

His eyes moist with tenderness, he looked at the little girls who were keeping shyly away. After he had licked his aching leg and exposed his belly and back to the warmth of the fire, he began to tell some stories. The girls came closer to listen to the adventures of the fox, the squirrel, the mole or the three rabbits at the edge of the wood. Some were so funny that the wolf had to tell them two or three times.

Marinette had already put her arm round her friend's neck and was enjoying pulling his pointy ears, smoothing his fur and rubbing it back the wrong way. Delphine took a while to become familiar with him, and the first time she stuck her little hand into the wolf's mouth, just for fun, she could not help remarking:

"Oh! What big teeth you have. . . ."

The wolf looked so embarrassed that Marinette hid his head in her arms.

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Delicacy kept the wolf from saying anything about the great hunger he felt in his belly.

“How good I am,” he mused with pleasure, “it’s hard to believe.”

After he had told many stories, the girls suggested he play with them.

“Play?” said the wolf. “But I don’t know any games.”

In no time at all he had learnt how to play hot hands, ring-a-ring-o’rosie, hide and seek and Simon says. With a rather beautiful bass voice, he sang couplets from *Cunning Guilleri* or *Tower, watch out!* In the kitchen there was a rumpus of jostling, shouting, great laughter and falling chairs. There was not the least awkwardness between the three friends who spoke affectionately as if they had known one another forever.

“Wolf, you’re it!”

“No, it’s you! You moved, she moved. . . .”

“The wolf has to pay a forfeit!”

The wolf had never laughed so much in his life, he laughed until he almost dislocated his jaw.

“I wouldn’t have believed it was such fun to play,” he said. “What a shame we can’t play like this every day!”

“But, Wolf,” the girls responded, “you can come back. Our parents go out every Thursday afternoon. You can watch for them to leave, and then come and tap on the window like you did today.”

To end the afternoon they played horsey. It was a lovely game. The wolf played the horse, the blonder girl was sitting astride his back while Delphine held onto his tail and drove the team as fast as she could, in and out and round about the chairs. His tongue lolling, his mouth open wide all the way back to his ears, breathless from running and from laughter that made his sides ache, the wolf sometimes asked for permission to catch his breath.

“Time out!” he would say, his voice catching. “Let me laugh. . . . I can’t go on. . . . No! No, let me laugh!”

Then Marinette would get off the horse, Delphine would let go of the wolf’s tail, and sitting on the floor, they would laugh until they were gasping for air.

The fun came to an end toward evening when they needed to think about the wolf’s departure. The little girls felt like crying and the blonder one begged:

“Wolf, stay with us, we’ll play again. Our parents won’t say anything, you’ll see. . . .”

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“Ah, no!” said the wolf. “Parents are too reasonable. They would never understand that the wolf has become good. I know what parents are like.”

“Yes,” Delphine agreed, “it’s better not to stay any longer. I’d be afraid that something would happen to you.”

The three friends arranged to see each other again the following Thursday. There were more promises and heartfelt declarations. Finally, when the blonder one had tied a blue ribbon round his neck, the wolf ran off into the countryside and deep into the wood.

He was still suffering with his sore leg, but thinking about the next Thursday when he would go back to the two little girls, he warbled a tune, not bothered by the indignant crows dozing on the highest branches:

Cunning Guilleri
Will you let yourself die. . .

When the parents came home, they stopped at the kitchen door and sniffed.

“We can smell something like wolf,” they said.

And the girls believed they had a duty to lie and to look surprised, which never fails to happen when one is secretly visited by the wolf without telling one’s parents.

“How could you smell something like wolf?” protested Delphine. “If the wolf had come into the kitchen, the two of us would have been eaten.”

“That’s true,” her father agreed, “I didn’t think of that. The wolf would have eaten you.”

But the blonder girl, who did not know how to tell two lies in a row, was outraged that they dared speak of the wolf with so little faith.

“It’s not true,” said she, stamping her foot, “the wolf doesn’t eat children, and it’s not true either that he’s wicked. The proof. . .”

Fortunately Delphine gave her a kick, for if not Marinette would have told all.

With that, the parents embarked on a long lecture, the especial topic of which was the wolf’s voracity. The mother wanted to take advantage of this moment to tell the story once again of the adventures of Little Red Riding Hood, but at her first words Marinette stopped her.

“You know, Mama, things didn’t happen as you think they did. The wolf never ate the grandmother. Do you really think he was going to fill his tummy just before dining on a nice fresh little girl?”

“And anyway,” added Delphine, “we can’t be angry with the wolf forever. . .”

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“It’s an old story. . . .”

“A sin of his youth. . . .”

“And there is mercy for every sin.”

“The wolf is not what he used to be.”

“We don’t have the right to discourage those with good intentions.”

The parents could not believe their ears.

The father cut short this scandalous defense, calling his daughters scatter-brains. Then he tried his hardest to demonstrate with well-chosen examples that the wolf would always be the wolf, that it was not sensible to hope to ever see him improve, and that if one day he appeared to be tame, he would be even more dangerous.

While he was speaking, the girls were thinking about the lovely games of horsey and hide and seek they played that afternoon, and the wolf’s enjoyment as he laughed, mouth wide open, until he was out of breath.

“I can see,” concluded the father, “that you’ve never had anything to do with the wolf. . . .”

Then, as the little blonde one was elbowing her sister, the girls burst out laughing in his face. They were put to bed without any supper as punishment for their insolence, but for a long time after they had been tucked in, they were still laughing at their parents’ naivety.

On the following days, as a distraction from their impatience to see their friend the wolf again, and with a tongue-in-cheek intention that irritated their mother, the girls had the idea of playing the game of wolf. The blonder one sang, with just two notes, the time-honored lyrics:

“Let’s go walking by the wood, while the wolf isn’t there. Wolf are you there? Can you hear me? What are you doing?”

And Delphine, hiding under the kitchen table, replied, “I’m putting on my shirt.” Marinette asked the question as many times as needed for the wolf to put on all the items of his get-up, from his socks to his big saber. Then Delphine lunged at Marinette and devoured her.

The whole pleasure of the game was in the unexpected, for the wolf did not always wait until he was ready before coming out of the wood. He could just as easily jump on his victim while only in his shirt sleeves, or even wearing nothing but a hat on his head.

The parents did not appreciate how very satisfying the game was. Having had enough of this refrain, they forbade it on the third day, giving the excuse that they were sick of hearing it. Naturally the girls did not want to play any other game, and the house remained silent until the day the wolf came to visit.

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The wolf had spent the whole morning washing his face, making his coat shine and fluffing up the fur round his neck. He was so handsome that the dwellers in the wood passed him by without at first recognizing him.

When he reached the plain, two crows who stood gaping in the noonday light, as almost all of them do after lunch, asked him why he was so handsome.

“I’m going to see my friends,” said the wolf proudly. “They’ve asked me to come in the early afternoon.”

“They must be very pretty for you to have groomed yourself so.”

“I think they are! You won’t find any girls on the whole plain as blonde as they are.”

The crows were now gaping in admiration, but a prattling old magpie who had listened to the conversation could not help sniggering.

“Wolf, I don’t know your friends, but I’m sure you will have chosen girls who are nice and plump, and nice and tender . . . unless I’m very much mistaken.”

“Be quiet, you garrulous old bird!” exclaimed the angry wolf. “This is how a bad reputation is built, on the gossip of a silly magpie. Fortunately my conscience is clear!”

When he arrived at the house, the wolf had no need to knock on the window pane; the two girls were waiting for him at the door. They hugged for a long time, and even more tenderly than the last time, for a week’s absence had made their hearts grow fonder.

“Oh Wolf!” said the blonder girl. “The house was sad this week. We talked about you all the time.”

“And you know, Wolf, you were right; our parents don’t want to believe that you can be good.”

“That doesn’t surprise me. What if I told you that earlier today an old magpie. . . .”

“But, Wolf, we really stuck up for you, until our parents ended up sending us to bed without any supper.”

“And on Sunday they wouldn’t let us play wolf.”

The three friends had so much to say that before thinking of playing games they sat down by the stove. The wolf did not know which of their questions to answer first. The girls wanted to know everything he had done during the week, whether he had been cold, if his leg was much better, if he had run into the fox, the woodcock and the wild boar.

“Wolf,” said Marinette, “when spring comes, you can take us into the wood, far away where there are all sorts of animals. With you, we won’t be frightened.”

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“In spring, my little lovelies, you’ll have nothing to fear in the wood. By then, I will have preached so well to the forest friends that even the most vicious of them will have become as gentle as girls. Listen, just two days ago I ran into the fox who had just killed all the chickens in a henhouse. I told him this couldn’t continue, he had to change his life. Oh, I tell you, I gave him a lecture! And the fox, who is usually so clever, do you know what he replied? ‘Wolf,’ he said, ‘I want nothing more than to follow your example. We shall talk more about this a bit later, and when I’ve had time to appreciate all your good works, I shall not put off mending my ways.’ That was his reply, though he’s just a fox.”

“You are so good,” said Delphine softly.

“Oh, yes! I’m good, there’s no denying it. And yet, you see how it is, your parents will never believe it. It grieves me when I think about it.”

To dispel the gloom of this thought, Marinette proposed a game of horsey. The wolf got into the game with more enthusiasm than the previous Thursday. When the horsey game was over, Delphine asked:

“Wolf, what if we play wolf?”

The game was new to him. They explained its rules and quite naturally he was made for the part of the wolf. While he was hiding under the table, the girls passed before his eyes over and over while singing the refrain:

“Let’s go walking by the wood, while the wolf isn’t there. Wolf are you there? Can you hear me? What are you doing?”

The wolf replied, holding his sides, his voice croaky with laughter:

“I’m putting on my underwear.”

Still laughing, he said he was putting on his breeches, then his braces, his cravat, his waistcoat. When he came to slipping on his boots, he grew serious.

“I’m buckling my belt,” said the wolf, and he burst into a short laugh. He felt uneasy, choked with anxiety. His claws scratched at the kitchen tiles.

Before his gleaming eyes, the legs of the two girls were passing again and again. A shiver ran down his spine, his jowls contracted.

“. . . Wolf are you there? Can you hear me? What are you doing?”

“I’m picking up my big saber!” he said in a husky voice, and already ideas were muddling in his head. He was no longer looking at the little girls’ legs, he was smelling them.

“. . . Wolf are you there? Can you hear me? What are you doing?”

“I’m mounting my horse and coming out of the wood!”

Then the wolf, with a great howl, leapt from his hiding place, jaws wide open, claws out. The girls did not even have time to be afraid before they were eaten.

Fortunately, the wolf did not know how to open the doors; he remained a prisoner in the kitchen. When the parents came home, they had only to cut open his belly to free the two girls. But, really, this was against the rules of the game.

Delphine and Marinette were a little cross that he had eaten them without more consideration, but they had played so well with him that they begged the parents to let him go. They sewed up his belly securely with two metres of a good string greased with a piece of tallow, and a big mattress needle. The girls cried because he was in pain, but the wolf said, holding back tears:

“Go on, I deserved it, and you are much too good to be pitying me. I swear to you that in future I won’t get caught again being such a glutton. And the moment I see children, the first thing I’ll do is run away.”

It is believed that the wolf kept his word. In any case, we have not heard that he has eaten any little girl since his adventure with Delphine and Marinette.



Marcel Aymé (1902–1967) was a French novelist, dramatist, and writer of stories for adults and children. His profuse literary output included 87 short stories, many of them imaginative fantasies or fables. Aymé often created an ordinary character for whom the laws of nature are twisted. The reader is asked to accept an unexplained phenomenon and to follow the fusion of fantasy and reality and see that Nature’s laws cannot be disobeyed. Many of Aymé’s works have inspired French films, plays and comic strips.

Marcel Aymé’s short story, “Le Loup,” was first published in the journal *Candide* on April 14, 1932, and again in 1934 in a collection, *Les Contes du chat perché* (*Tales of Tag*), which has since been published in many editions. It is one of the best-selling children’s books in France where it is still in print and in demand. Some of the stories were translated into English by Norman Denny and published in 1951 in a collection, *The Wonderful Farm*, followed in 1954 by more stories in *Return to the Wonderful Farm*, including “The Wolf Who Turned Good,” his translation of “Le Loup.”

Denny’s retelling of “Le Loup” departs from the original in a number of ways. He omits details or, conversely, expands Aymé’s clear prose, and at times the dry humour is watered down. Most disappointing is the radically tamed and lengthened ending (the very thing that prompted me to re-translate the story). What Aymé described succinctly in 32 words, Denny has reworked into about 250. Readers of this new English version will appreciate the surprising dramatic turns as two little girls, at home alone, cross-examine a wolf who

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believes he is good. In spite of his disturbing self-righteousness, his instinctive animal behaviour dominates. Aymé's wolf represents every villain who has ever won a victim's trust. The original ending delivers the nasty consequence of girls playing with a hungry wolf. Yet Aymé considers his young readers and ends the story on a happy note. No one dies.

Marcel Aymé's language is simple and unambiguous, a pleasure to translate. One particular challenge, however, was finding English equivalents for the 1930s children's games played by the girls and the wolf. Some were obvious, but others, for example *la paume placée*, were a mystery even to the older French readers of my drafts. In these cases I translated the term with another game familiar to English-speaking children of that era.