

The Wolf-man of Alcatraz

by Howard Waldrop

"Madame, I regret to say that we of the Bureau are unable to act in cases of lycanthropy, unless they have in some way interfered with interstate commerce."

—J. Edgar Hoover, 1933

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When something loped across the moonlit bridge, the truckdriver slammed on his brakes and swung to the left, taking out three Tri-State Authority tollbooths.

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Early one afternoon, they came to take him from his cell in D Block, down to the solitary vault built for him.

"Oh," said Smitty from the next cell, "that time of the month, huh?"

"Yeah, well," said the prisoner. He picked up a couple of the astronomy books from his bunkside shelf.

"Uh, warden says we'll have to get everything out of the place before dark this time, Howlin." said Sawyer, sergeant of the guards. "Losing too much prison issue. And books."

"Sorry," said Howlin. "I just have to check a few things. Be through before evening."

"That's okay, then," said Sawyer.

As he passed Smitty's cell, he looked at the big calendar on Smitty's wall, the one marked over with a big X each day, with the lunar phases in the empty squares along the bottom.

"See you—Tuesday, Smitty."

"Sure thing, Bob. Try to get some shut-eye."

"Always *try*," said Howlin, from down the block.

They took him down from the cells, and up the enclosed spiral staircase turrets of the gun gallery with their ports that gave clear fields of fire to every part of the cell blocks and corridors. They crossed down under the maximum-security floor, then went down the freight elevator, out of it, and down another

corridor. There was another stairwell at the end that led to the part of the prison under the old military fort.

The hall was like that of the solitary block, but the walls were of smooth finished concrete, forty feet long. Only two doors interrupted it. A guard opened his cell with a key and a combination lock. The cell had a Diebold vault door, twelve inches thick, with a total rim lock of interleaved 1-inch chrome-steel wafers. It could have held King Kong.

"Doc'll be here to see you around four o'clock, see if there's anything you want," said Sawyer. "I'll pick up everything but the blanket then."

"Sure thing, Sergeant." said Howlin.

Sawyer turned and went out. The door swung to behind him; he heard the rim-wafers slam down like teeth.

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"You want your shot now?" asked the old doc.

"I guess so," said Howlin. "Could you make it a little stronger than last time? I think I remembered *something*."

"I can't give you anything much stronger, Bob," said the doc. "We don't want you becoming an addict." He smiled a quick smile.

He readied the hypodermic. "All I can promise you is, I give you this now, it should keep you out for at least four hours. Depending. Sunset—"

"Sunset's at 5:43 PST; moonrise at 5:45," said Howlin. "*That* I know."

"So you should be out a couple of hours afterwards. By the way, a couple of medical types would like to examine you . . ."

"When's my next physical?"

"Next month, I think. I'll check."

"If they do it then, I don't mind. They meat docs or head docs?"

"One each."

"Long as I don't have to do a lot of foolishness, like when I first got here."

"You ready?"

He rolled up his prison uniform sleeve. "Shoot," he said.

The doctor put the needle in. With a sigh, Howlin leaned back on the single blanket on the concrete bunk and put his hands behind his head.

Sergeant Sawyer picked the books up from the floor, stepping around the water bucket and the slop jar.

"Thanks, Doc, Sergeant," said Howlin. Then his eyes closed and his chest rose and fell slowly.

Sawyer and the doctor went out into the corridor. The guard closed the vault door like it was the end of a business day at a bank.

The sergeant went back up into the guardroom in the gallery overlooking the hallway and put the books in a small shelf there. The doc followed, and a guard let him out into the stairwell that led back to the elevator.

A little past five, two guards reported to the night sergeant. He went to an armory cabinet, took out two Thompson submachine guns, handed one to each guard. Then he unlocked another cabinet, took out two thirty-round circular magazines marked LYC in silver paint on each drum and handed them to the guards. They slid the bolts back, slipped the drums in the receivers, and let the bolts go forward: one, two.

One of the guards was let out into the hallway and stood near a chair they put there, ten feet from the vault door.

The other one opened the gun port directly across from the door in the gallery, and put the barrel of the Thompson through it.

They were attentive till the night-sergeant left, then relaxed. The one in the hallway sat down.

"Pretty much like watching paint dry, isn't it?" asked the one in the gallery, a newer guard.

"In many ways," said the one in the chair.

"Does anything ever *happen*?" asked the new man.

"Plenty *happens*, I understand," said the guy in the hall. "Nothing so far that affects anybody out *here*."

A couple of hours later the two guards thought they began hearing noises through the twelve inches of steel door. The hair on the new guard in the gallery stood straight up under his cap. He knew he would have to listen to eight more hours of this.

No wonder there was a 30 percent turnover in the guard staff on The Rock, he thought.

"Poor bastard," said the guy down in the corridor. Then he lit a cigarette.

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March 4, 1937 Box 1476
Alcatraz, California

Prof. M. H. Nicolson
Smith College

Dear Professor Nicolson:

I have just finished your article on early Moon voyages in the new *Smith College Studies in English*. I would like to suggest a line of research for you (since you seem to be ideally suited for it)—for what

reason were there so many plays dealing with the Moon (and other planets) in the late 1600s and early 1700s in England—Aphra Behn's *Emperor of the Moon*—which I think had its base in an Italian or French farce—of 1687; Thomas D'Urfey's *Wonders in the Sun* (1706), Elkanah Settle's *The World in the Moon* of 1697? Was it just, as you imply, a reaction to the new worlds revealed in the telescope and microscope, to a world also undergoing violent changes in religion? Or just exuberance at the reopening of the theaters, the Restoration and the Glorious Revolution?

And why should the figure of Domingo Gonsales, The Speedy Messenger, figure in *so* many of them, with his framework raft pulled by swans to the Moon, where they overwinter? Surely it can't be because Bishop Godwin was an Englishman—the first edition was published anonymously, and most people—because of Domingo's name and the fictitious biography—took it to be a translation from the Spanish or French?

And why "Speedy Messenger"? Was this Godwin's sly reference to Galileo's *Starry Messenger*?

I'm sure you, too, have thought about some of these things, but that they weren't in the scope of your article. Perhaps you're planning more work of this nature, or know of where I can find other articles of this kind? I would appreciate knowing of any forthcoming works on the same subject.

I have to admit I came across your article quite by chance—the *Smith College Studies* was meant for someone else here and was delivered to me by mistake. But it has been a revelation to me, and I want to thank you.

Sincerely,

Robert Howlin
#1579

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"I don't know, Doc," he said to the visiting psychiatrist. "I don't remember *anything*. I wake up weak as a kitten. The first morning's the worst, because I know it's going to happen two more times before I'm through with it for the month."

Dr. Fibidjian looked down at the thick bundle of papers in the file.

"And you still don't know how it happened?"

"Like it probably says somewhere there. I was in a clip joint. A fight broke out. Somebody used a chair on the lights; somebody else took out the bartender, who I had been talking to, with a bottle. I was pretty busy there in the dark for a few minutes—I think I gave as good as I got. When it was over, there was a couple of big bites out of my left arm. A friend put some caustic balsam on it, and it was fine. Then, come the next full moon, I *was* like I *am*."

"Do you think you belong in a mental institution, rather than here? That your condition is medical, rather than criminal?"

"I don't think there's a mental institution that could hold me—look what it says about Atlanta there," he said. "Besides, they tell me I killed four people—aside from the turnpike thing, I mean."

"Do you remember the circumstances of—"

"I told you, I don't remember *anything*, ever, Doc." He took a drink of water from the glass by the pitcher on the table of the conference room.

"Would you like a smoke?" asked Fibidjian.

"I don't smoke, Doc," he said. "I trade mine for books. I've got the book privileges for half the cons in this joint for the next five years. I chew gum, though. Beeman's Black Jack."

"Sorry," said the psychiatrist. "I'm fresh out."

"I've got the supply of *that* tied up, too," said Howlin.

The doctor looked over his notes.

"You say you have no memory of the murders of the three—"

"Postmen," Howlin said. "I seem to have a thing for postmen. What the two postmen were doing out, after dark, in the truck, in the summer, I don't know. But evidently they were. The wrong guys in the wrong place at the wrong time, I guess. Like the one the next night ..."

"And the other?"

"They tell me it was a child." He shrugged. "As far as I know, it could have been Mussolini or Neville Chamberlain."

He looked at the psychiatrist. "The part that bothers me is there could be others they haven't found, people who just disappeared one moonlit night. I was bitten in May. I didn't cause that wreck til November. That's seven months. That seems a long time for only four people, doesn't it?"

"Uh, I agree," said the psychiatrist. "But the convictions were for the three postmen, and the turnpike accident. Those are the reasons you're *here*."

Howlin got up and whacked his hand against the thick concrete walls of the room. "The reason I'm *here*," he said, "is that this is the only place on Earth that can *hold* me."

He rubbed the inside of his right elbow.

"Sore?"

"Your other doc friend has jabbed me somewhere every two hours since last night. He's running out of places to put the needle to draw blood."

"Maybe we should knock off awhile, then. I want to give you some simple tests this afternoon."

"All this is fine by me, Doc. You guys are earning me a dozen extra books this year."

"And that's what you want?"

"Look, Doc," he said. "I'm going to be here the rest of my life. Books are the only way I'll ever get to experience the outside, or see the world, or meet a woman or fish for bluegills in a pond. I can do all that in books. They're all I have except these walls, those bars, my cell and the exercise yard."

"What if we can find *some* way to cure you?"

Howlin laughed.

"Doc, there is no cure for this but *death*. There's nothing you or I or anyone on this planet can do about that. Don't go dreaming there is."

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Before the next full moon, they had installed, high up in the isolation vault, an 8 mm camera, the lens of which was behind a small opening eleven feet up one wall, pointed toward the concrete bunk area.

The two doctors had turned it on at ten-minute intervals throughout the night from within the gun gallery where the second guard with the tommy gun stood.

Before they turned on the camera they turned on the single light bulb in its reinforced metal cage, which was on the ceiling fifteen feet up.

When they went in with the prison doc the next morning, they found Howlin naked, his clothes and the bedding destroyed, his toes and fingernails bleeding. The prison doc gave him vitamin and painkiller shots, and he was in a deep sleep. They saw that some of the torn bedding had been stuffed into the hole hiding the camera lens, eleven feet up.

They retrieved the camera from its drilled-out space in the wall above the vault door. They took the prison boat over to San Francisco and had the film developed. They returned in six hours. From the boat they watched the ritual of the docking. The lieutenant in charge of the boat took the ignition key out and sent it—via a clothesline pulley—three hundred feet up the hill to the guard tower. It would not be sent down til the boat was ready for the return run and the lieutenant gave an "all okay" signal—which changed every day. They went from the boat directly to the warden's office, where the warden, prison doc, and captain and sergeant of the guards waited with a projector rigged to run on the island's DC electrical system.

They pulled the blinds, turned off the lights, and started it up.

Fibidjian read off his notes by the light as the leader went through. "First one should be 7:14 PM, a couple of hours after sunset when the sedatives were wearing off."

The first scene leapt up. The cell was lit. Howlin wasn't on the bedding. There was a flash of movement, the move of a shadow at the lower edge of the frame.

Then something came up to cover the lens—the bedding strip. Then the screen went dark.

And stayed that way through the rest of the reel.

"That's *it*?" asked the captain of the guards. "Could we see it again, slower maybe?"

Fibidjian rewound the film, showed the scene over, frame by frame.

"Hold it," said the warden. "Right *there*."

It was the bedding coming up. For three frames. At the edge of the cloth in the second frame was the outline of—was it a hand? Was it something else?

The next morning, while Howlin slept, they brought the workmen in. The camera had been destroyed, and the hole around the lens had been chipped away for two inches.

They reconcreted it with a piece of three inch in diameter rebar inside, repoured, and never tried anything like the filming again.

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November 29, 1939 Box 1476
Alcatraz, California

Professor E. C. Slipher
Lowell Observatory
Flagstaff, Arizona

Dear Professor Slipher:

I understand there are at present *no* plans to use the new 200-inch telescope at Mount Palomar for observations of the Moon. I understand that would be like using an elephant gun on a gnat.

I read in *Sky and Telescope* the field of view would be something like 2 1/2 miles across viewed from 17 miles away, at least twice as good as any telescope used on the face of Luna before.

I believe this is a rare opportunity to look for the anomalies reported on the Moon in the last century—the signs of light in various areas, possible volcanic activity in the Sinuous Rille from 1879; the blue glow coming from differing areas, and the changes in craters Alphonsus, Hercules, and Eratosthenes.

It would be wonderful—and scientifically useful—if some small fraction of time—a night each month or two, perhaps just a few hours of that time—could be used for direct or photographic observation of these areas of the Moon.

Perhaps we can settle the question once and for all, of whether the Moon is a dead world, or is in some way *still* active, perhaps even with small traces of an atmosphere or the tenuous presence of water vapor deep within the craters—which, until man attempts to go there, can only be answered—*perhaps*—by using the best equipment available.

I'm sure time on the wonderful new telescope is heavily booked. But if you, like me, believe we should do this, I would hope you could broach the possibility at the next meeting of the American Planetary Society, and at the International Astronomical Union Satellite Section in March.

Thank you very much.

Sincerely,

Robert Howlin
#1579

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The great WWII outside was a rumor. The guards got older for a while, or had small disabilities that could keep them out of the Army or Navy, but not out of the staff of Alcatraz.

The wind blew off the Bay as hard as ever; Angel Island still sat out there, the closest piece of land; San Francisco across the exercise yard looked the same, bright and white in good weather, grey and wet in bad; disappearing completely in the solid-wall fogs so thick you couldn't see the Industries Building from the boat dock.

The magazines and books came, the letters went. The days were the same as the years. They were marked only by his monthly trips outside the cell block and down to the old fortress area and the vault for three days of amnesia, weakness, and vertigo.

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On the second of May, 1946, prisoners AZ 415 Coy and AZ 548 Kretzer, using a screw jack they'd built in Industries and smuggled in through the Laundry, got into the gun gallery and overpowered the only armed guard in the cell block. They got M-1 carbines and .45 automatics, and then surprised nine unarmed guards in the block one at a time, including the captain, who'd been wounded back in the big breakout attempt in 1938—and put them all in two cells at the end of D Block.

They opened cells and let others out.

The place was chaos a few minutes until the others realized they didn't have the keys that would get them out of the cell-block building.

One of the two instigators went berserk and started firing with a .45 auto into the cells full of guards, killing two of them and wounding all the others.

The youngest prisoner on The Rock went into the cells and told Coy and Kretzer, "They're *all* dead."

Five or six prisoners, including one named Hubbard, joined the two with the guns. Most of the rest returned to their cells. This had been just a short break in the routine.

Coy began firing out the windows, indiscriminately, at the rest of the Island.

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The second day of the siege—with another guard dead on the hill outside, and marines from the Presidio, just back after 3 ½ years of kicking Tojo butt, were on the roof of the cell block, throwing tear gas and hand grenades down into the utility corridors that ran between each row of cells.

The warden had been on the horn for two days, urging the prisoners to give up.

Most inmates were hunkered in their cells, their heads down inside their bailed-out toilets, breathing fresh air from there, away from the tear gas that floated like ground fog through the building.

Word came up to Coy, Kretzer, and Hubbard, who were still firing at anything that moved outside.

"Howlin wants to talk with you."

"I'm *busy*," said Coy, shooting toward the exercise yard.

"I think you better go talk to him."

"I *better*, huh?" said Coy, bringing the carbine around. He coughed, his eyes closed to slits. Snot hung down his chin in a rope.

"I'm just the messenger," said the inmate.

Machine gun bullets ricocheted off the walls above them, fired from the lower hill. What glass was left came down in an avalanche.

Coy went down to the other end of Broadway where all the cell blocks junctioned.

Howlin sat calmly on his bunk, surrounded by his books, tears running down his swollen face. He wiped his face with a sock. He coughed quietly.

"Yeah?" said Coy.

"Have you been listening to the warden?" asked Howlin.

"It's the usual wind," said Coy.

"Those are marines on the roof. They're sending Federal Marshals from as far away as Colorado."

"You ain't telling me nothing I don't know. I ain't afraid of marines."

"I know you're not," said Howlin. "That's your choice. And I don't like being in here any more than you do. But it's not the marines I'm worried about, either."

Hubbard and Kretzer joined them. "It's quiet," said Kretzer. "They'll yell if the soldiers try anything. What's up?"

"I don't know yet," said Coy. "Get to the point, Howlin."

"You don't have the keys to get out of the cell-block building. There's no other way out of here. They'll jackhammer their way in through the roof soon. There's three, maybe five of you with guns. There's hundreds of them. It's pretty much over."

"You *scared*?" asked Hubbard.

"Yes. But not—"

The sound of two prisoners having sex in a cell down the way came to them.

Coy jumped up and fired down Broadway. "You *animals* disgust me!" he yelled. He wiped his eyes and nose, coughed hard and couldn't stop.

"Coy," said Howlin. "Tonight is the full moon. If this isn't over before it comes up, and they haven't got

me down to the isolation vault, you, and every prisoner here, will be locked in with *me*."

Hubbard and Kretzer looked at Coy, then back at Howlin, sitting among his books.

"He's crazy!" said Hubbard.

"Maybe. Probably," said Howlin.

"Why don't we kill him *now*?" asked Kretzer.

"What's he done to us?" asked Hubbard. "He's stuck in here like us, crazy or not. He didn't break out."

Coy rubbed his eyes.

Howlin lifted his leg off the floor, cupped both hands around his knee. "I thought I would tell you what's *going* to happen tonight, since in your excitement you might have forgotten me. You can listen to me, or you can listen to the warden: I don't care. They've got their timetable for dealing with you—I have no idea what that is. I only know mine, and that I can't help myself, once it starts.

"If that happens, you might as well eat those guns now. They won't do you any good. The only ones that'll work on me are down there in the vault level, and you can't get *there*, either. Bars won't help; I'll come through them like they were butter. Not only that, I'll get everyone in the cell-block building, one at a time. Then I'll start in on the marines when they get in, and the rest of the Island. Then I'll take the boat and do in San Francisco.

"You've got eleven hours and fourteen minutes. That's all I wanted to say."

There was more noise from up on the roof, and the three left.

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Six hours later, they threw out the guns and surrendered. The marines came in and secured the cell blocks. The guards took out the dead and wounded and set up fans to blow away the tear gas.

It was a few minutes til sundown when they got Howlin down to the isolation vault, and the doc in.

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One day in 1953, the new prison doctor, who'd only been there six months, came into the cell vault on the morning after the first night of the full moon.

He found Howlin sitting up on the bedding of the concrete bunk.

The doc was taken aback.

"Are you okay?" he asked.

"*You* tell me, Doc. I'm jumpy as hell. But I *think* I stayed awake the whole night. I don't think anything

happened. I could be wrong about that as about anything else—I could have only *imagined* I stayed awake. But I *think* I did."

The doc moved a flashlight beam across Howlin's eyes, then used the stethoscope.

"Let's assume you've been awake the whole night. I'll give you your vitamin shot, and a sedative. I'll be back this afternoon and give you another. Maybe you can sleep through the whole night for the first time in—what?—nineteen years?"

"What's happening to me, Doc?"

"I'm not a guessing man," said the doctor. "Until I know better, I would say you're getting *old*. There's some tests we can run next week."

Howlin looked down at the concrete floor. "Other than the great relief about it, I don't think I *like* the idea of getting old, Doc."

"Happens to the best of us," said the doctor, loading up the needle.

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His book—*The Moon and Me*—came out October 6, 1957, two days after the Sputnik went up. He had gotten copies two weeks before but couldn't have any kind of celebration. He, and half the prison population, were down with the Asian Flu, brought back by one of the schoolkids on the boat.

Already they were talking of closing down The Rock. But then, they'd been talking about *that* since about two days after it opened in 1934.

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"It doesn't look good," said the doctor. "If we'd caught it earlier, we could have operated. It's slow growing. It started in the gonads—I think now that must be why your condition went away. But now it's spread everywhere. You may have one or two years, or less. It's a tough break, Bob. I'm sorry as I can be."

"To think, Doc—the thing that's cured me's going to kill me. There's your irony."

"We're trying to get you transferred to the prison farm in Missouri," he said. "The medical board meets next week in Walla Walla."

"That would be great, Doc. You know what? If I do get there, I'm going to try to get permission to go out in the night and just *look* at the full moon. I haven't seen the Moon all these thirty years. I may see the Moon on the train, but it probably won't be full. Yeah, that would be *great*, Doc. I can last *that* long."

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They made a movie about his life—*The Wolf-Man of Alcatraz*—which starred Kirk Douglas, who looked nothing like him, and which was highly fictionalized. Howlin never saw it.

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They came up to the top of the hill, Howlin using one of those new prison farm-issue three-toed canes made of aluminum.

The hill looked like all of the other ones that stretched away toward Jefferson City over to the east.

The Moon sailed on the rim of the world like a big, bright ocean liner, or a giant pumpkin. It seemed so close you could touch it.

"Kids'll be trick-or-treating next week, won't they, Captain?" asked Howlin.

"Suppose so."

"Man, you shoulda seen the Moon in the old days. It was *really* somethin'!"

The captain shrugged.

"People are going there someday. I can feel it."

"Not anybody from this prison farm."

"Just so," said Howlin.

They continued to watch until the Moon stood completely up off the jumbled horizon.

Tomorrow they were letting him fish for bluegills in one of the prison ponds.

"Thanks, Captain," said Howlin. He handed the guard a stick of Black Jack gum.

"Mind your step," said the guard.

They went back down the hill toward the barracks, their full-moon lengthened shadows going before them.

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When he passed away in his sleep, in the prison-farm hospital, he didn't get much press: he died the same day as Aldous Huxley and John F. Kennedy.

The End