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Harry
by Harrison
Kroll—

BLOODY MOON



Author of "Fairy Gossamer"

AT RARE intervals, usually in the spring of the year, a singular phenomenon known as the "bloody moon" occurs in the cavernous region of Kentucky. The Indians whom Daniel Boone knew in this section had a tradition in connection with the peculiar occurrence to the effect that "the bloody moon brings swift wo to him that sees it."

Henry Pearson sat on the steps of his dwelling just after the fall of night. Through the timber along the top of the ridge he caught the first glow of the rising moon. Suddenly the orb shot above the line of timber top. Then for the first time in his life he had a clear view of the old Indian bloody moon. It fascinated him, while it horrified him. Seemingly there was nothing about the sight to occasion fright; yet something about it, some magnetic uncanniness, seemed to freeze the very blood in his veins.

For a full minute it glowed at him, then the planetary face brightened to its normal tint, and the bloody moon vanished as suddenly and with as little apparent reason as it had appeared.

Pearson did not regard himself as a superstitious person. Still, he re-

flected, he had ample basis for his present unnerved condition. The timbers of the house of Pearson knew to quake at the recurrence of the bloody moon.

The thing went far back into pioneer days. A century and a half before, the land of which his home was a part had been secured to old Alligator Pearson, a first settler, by patent from the territorial government of Kentucky. The aboriginal title was held by an Indian chief named Eagle Fire. In spite of his terror-inspiring name, the Indian was a peaceful old man; and Pearson, brutal and fearless, with a handful of pioneers, dispossessed the harmless old man and his tribe by the simple expedient of killing them. Only one was permitted to live—the old chief's daughter.

She was a pretty, fawn-skinned girl of sixteen; and Alligator Pearson took her to wife by clubbing her into submission. When the child was born the princess died. But she never gave in to her white husband in the spirit, for she died with a curse on her lips for the father of her babe. Her last words, reported by the lean women who waited on her in her sickness, were: "Live on, my son, and

avenge the blood of your people with the bloody moon."

When the boy was eighteen, Alligator Pearson died. It was, said tradition, the time of the year when bloody moon occurred. The neighbors found the stark form of the old pioneer in the trail leading to his cabin. He lay face downward in the path, without mark of violence on his person. Yet he had died in terror, with twisted face and staring eyes. Twenty years later, the second Pearson, by a white wife who followed the princess, was in like manner, at about the same time of year, assassinated. A kindred mystery shrouded his death. The bloody moon had been seen an hour previously by his wife, as she had gone down the road to the tobacco field to look for him, supper being delayed and growing cold, and she uneasy and fearful. She found him among the tobacco plants, face to the ground, eyes and mouth full of dust.

In his own lifetime young Pearson had twice known the shock of this swift, inexplicable visitation. The first occasion came about the time he was ten years old. Grandfather Pearson, third in line from the original pioneer, hale and hearty, had eaten his supper and retired, his bedroom being the roofroom under the gable. The rest of the family were in the living room below, his granny knitting, his mother enjoying her after-supper dip of snuff, and his father smoking. Suddenly the very oaken rafters of the old house quivered from the frightful scream. He dashed with his father up to the roof-room.

They found the old man alone, sitting starkly up in bed, his eyes wide and staring, the breath only a moment since left his body. They found no sign on the old man's person more than a tiny abrasion on his gray, hairy chest. But the time was spring of the year, at the full of the

moon; and the flood of light through the window upon the puncheon floor was as red as blood.

When he looked again, the glow had mellowed to its normal milk-white. Was it the bloody moon that had killed his grandsire? The doctor pronounced the cause heart failure. Who could deny that the practitioner was correct in his diagnosis? For often enough the human heart does fail when the sins of the father begin their grim visitation down the generations.

The details of his own father's taking-off he did not often reflect upon. That tragedy was still too poignant, too recent. The time was a year before, at the first full moon in May. His father had visited Bowling Green that day, making the trip on mule-back. He was expected home before sundown, but something must have delayed him, for night fell and he had not returned. The moon had risen when mule and rider appeared at the front gate.

It was his father's custom to dismount there and halloo for some of the boys to come out and put up and feed the mule. This time no such familiar call came. Going to the door to see why his father did not dismount and come in, young Pearson saw beast and rider, statuesque in the red flood of moonlight, in a vivid vision of tragic death. The mark of the curse of the Indian bloody moon was written indelibly on the sagging lifeless body of his parent. He carried the old man in and placed him upon the bed in the living room. But no one ever knew how he had come by his death.

Now he had just seen, in all of its terrible portent, the bloody moon. And the time was spring of the year, in the month of May!

PEARSON rose shakily, going into the house and closing and bolting the door. Perhaps it would be a useless

precaution, but he felt better. He would have to be cautious now, he told himself. What to guard against he had not the remotest idea; still, he would have to take care. It was the very vagueness of the enemy which troubled him most. If it were a man, he would have known easily enough some of the things to do. But this enemy was unnamable, supernatural.

It was about 9 o'clock in the evening when Pearson heard one of the mules down at the barn kicking its stall door. He was a farmer, and knew well enough that this might mean a valuable farm animal would break its leg if permitted to continue its foolish ways. He went out to the rear gate. The mule had escaped from its stall, dashed out of the lot by leaping the low fence into the tobacco, and was now snorting and cavorting about among the plants in great show of brutish agitation. He called to the beast, but with only indifferent results. Meanwhile he looked about, among the plants, and in the weeds and shadows back of the stable, for some signs of what had caused this unwonted disturbance. The mules were not in the habit of breaking out of their stalls and galloping about in this manner.

He clambered the fence, still speaking gently to the mule. The beast made a lateral swing down into a hollow at the spring course below the house. A short distance down the drain was one of the sinkholes characteristic of this cavernous limestone country. The frightened mule disappeared around the clump of bushes which fringed this opening.

Pearson could not have explained with any certainty afterward just what actually did occur. He had a vague impression of a dim figure that darted from out of the undergrowth and caught him from the rear: but neither his sight nor feeling could be relied upon. He suffered no sensation of physical contact, much less of

pain. All he knew was that he suddenly found his steps arrested, his body sliding through the dust and dry leaves and brush which clung about the edge of the hole. Nothing he did served to stay his fall. He went tumbling head first into the hole.

It seemed that he fell into the very depths of the earth. In his frantic struggles to break his descent, he had scant idea of distance, but he dimly sensed the depth of the hole to be a hundred feet. He landed at the bottom finally with plenty of bruises but no broken bones, friction with the narrow walls aiding him to slack his speed.

He stood in absolute darkness. He stretched forth his hand cautiously, finding a continuation of the passage in a horizontal direction. The walls were smooth, and the passageway of a size comfortably to admit his body.

He had spent many an hour in exploring the caves of the vicinity; Mammoth Cave, a few miles away, he had known all of his life. When his first weakness had passed, he began crawling on hands and knees along the tube. It seemed to follow the general direction of the river bluff, a half mile away. He had never heard of a cave opening out on the face of the bluff; still, there could be something of the sort. Clearly he could expect to get out no other way, since escape back up through the sinkhole was impossible.

At times he paused and listened, thinking that something, perhaps the thing that had tripped him up, was following. But no sound reached his ears. It was a premonition, that was all—much more a spirit than anything resembling an actuality.

After a hundred yards he entered a cavernous chamber. The place was cool but the air was dry. Away off somewhere he could hear the dull roar of water. He surmised that the stream was Lost River, whose course lay for the most part in the bowels of

the earth, with its mouth at the foot of the bluff on Green River. If he could push through and not get drowned in its treacherous waters, he might eventually expect to live. Otherwise—but he did not think of that now.

From his pocket he drew a packet of cigarettes and matches. A man might as well die with a good smoke in his mouth as any other way. The light of the match would aid him in getting his bearings. But neither cigarettes nor matches were to be wasted! He put the roll of tobacco in his mouth and struck the match with his thumb nail.

The cigarette was never lighted. In the glow of the faint flame something stared at him—the thing that had been following him! Whether flesh or spirit he could not have said. It had the form of a woman; and it stood with folded arms and dead, emotionless eyes, peering at him. It looked through him, beyond him, rather than at him. In his nervousness he neglected to extinguish the match quickly enough, and in the interval the thing measured him—his strength and prowess—and the next instant it was upon him!

THE first encounter was swift and illuminating. It was human, and it was merciless. He broke the first clinch with army tactics, sidestepped, then waited, drawing his breath as silently as possible so as not to betray his position—an expedient his assailant did not observe, for he could hear her labored breathing a dozen steps away.

He considered with some rapid mental calculation the disadvantages against which he worked. The other had the advantage of being on familiar ground and accustomed to the blackness of the place. She knew the exits of the place, if any existed, and how to cut off any chance retreat. But he reasoned that there must be an

opening, if nothing more than the mouth of Lost River; and he must play for that one fact alone.

He doubted not that this was the inevitable math of the bloody moon. Whether a ghost of the Indian princess whom his ancestor had abused, or a descendant of that child born to transmit the curse, mattered little in the long run. The one thing which he accepted was that the curse was by way of being visited upon him; and in the law of probabilities he had scant chance of escaping the fate that had taken off, in turn, every male head of the house since the days of old Alligator Pearson. He did not know what the others had seen; what his grandfather had seen that night in the roofroom; or his father had encountered on his way home from Bowling Green. Nothing was vouchsafed him that he might defend himself intelligently. All he knew was that he was in for a fight to the bitter finish.

His wind came back to him presently. He reached forth a cautious hand. The floor was smooth. The walls were at the tips of his fingers. He strained his ear for some sound from the enemy. Her breathing, too, had become normal. He was, in fact, uncertain whether or not she was still there. Then with silent deftness he drew himself to his feet. He had hoped to sidestep swiftly upon gaining his equilibrium, duck again, and by a second lateral leap evade the attack his movement would inevitably bring about—unless he miscalculated the venom of his enemy. The plan was perfect, except that he had not taken account of his creaking joints. The snapping of his ankles betrayed his stratagem. The thing was upon him again.

HE FOUGHT now with deadly earnestness. Nor was he a weakling. The labor in the tobacco fields had tutored his muscles in flex-

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Bloody Moon

(Continued from page 16)

ibility and endurance; his overseas service had taught him some tricks of this fighting game. He beat out with his fists; he took the clenches and played for blood. Always the hands worked for his throat.

And what curious hands they were—long and murderous, with nails like razors! Once they caught in his face, and he felt the warm blood drip upon his defending arms. For a moment he fancied he had gained the ascendancy when, by a terrific blow with no better aim than blind instinct, he smashed the unscen face. The thing staggered back. But he had hardly regained his own scattered faculties before the battle was resumed, with bloody determination. He sidestepped whenever possible, retreating as opportunity offered. He had to feel his way carefully, however, for the jump-off is always a menace in cave exploration, and he was satisfied that there was a subterranean cliff leaping down to the waters of Lost River.

As he retreated, he became aware that the roar of the stream was increasing in intensity. He slogged into some water once, by which token he knew the passage was going farther down into the earth. A sudden fear, such as takes possession of one in the darkness when he imagines that he is in the act of stepping off, compelled him to hands and knees.

He put his foot back. Less than a yard back his toe went suddenly over an edge! His instinct and knowledge of caverns had not played him false. Had he stayed on his feet and continued his retreat, he would have crashed to his doom far down into the hole through which the waters of Lost River now roared.

Had the woman paused, expecting him to go over the ledge? He remembered now. Several yards back

he had sensed a branching of the passages. Cool air came from one direction; warm air from another. The cool air, it was evident, blew from the water whose roar filled his ears. The warm air doubtless came from an inlet somewhere at the surface.

The thought that had he gone the other way he might beat up to freedom sickened him. There was nothing to do now but renew the attack and gain the other passage, the mouth of which she was probably guarding. Every instant when he was fighting the creature he expected to feel a sharp thrust, and a death reaction to some poison such as had probably taken off his father and grandfather.

But he could not wait long here in inaction. Already his muscles were stiffening, and the bruises and abrasions about his body growing painful.

He swore under his breath. Old Alligator Pearson had been slain, back there in those distant days, and he had deserved his punishment. Why couldn't the curse have stopped with the real offender? That was the trouble with one of those crimes—they somehow were never expiated until about the tenth generation.

There remained nothing but to return to the battle. He got his blood going by waving his arms and flexing his muscles, and then he started cautiously forward.

He was making his way steadily along when suddenly he all but stumbled over the woman! The sound of his footfalls had been muffled by the roar of Lost River, and she had not heard his approach until he was upon her.

The battle recommenced with a fury that brooked no quarter. The rest that had chilled and stiffened him more than it had refreshed him, appeared to have been as wine to the

savage Amazon. He pushed her away from him, striking blindly again and again, but without avail. Her claws slashed his face and arms; once she caught one of his fingers between her teeth and nearly bit it off. The terrible pain blinded him into semi-consciousness. With this as an advantage she pushed him back toward the chasm. Nearer and nearer he felt himself forced to the brink of the precipice.

In a sudden reaction of angry energy, he determined that his foe should die with him. If she lived in the flesh, she should now die in its mortality. His foot felt the brink of the jump-off.

The time had come. He had been falling back, trying to keep at arms' length from the woman; but now he changed his tactics and made a desperate clinch. He gave a frantic pull, and together they went over the brink!

In the protracted fall through the Stygian blackness he had some curiously clear impressions. The roar of the water seemed to rise to meet them. The draft of the flue was sharp and filled with chill particles of moisture. The woman who fell with him accepted their common fate with a strange, dull passivity. Her body was warm and not without a certain charm of touch which instinct told him was that of youth. It was a curious paradox that, after many minutes of furious battling, in which nothing but death could close the issue, his hand should be upon her breast, and he could feel the flutter of her heart. Then came the impact.

THE chill waters of Lost River seemed to gather them up in a roaring, breathless embrace. He had always been a good swimmer—the waters of Green River could bear testimony as to that. Instinctively he held his breath. The swirl carried him and the woman swiftly away

from the churning froth where the hurtling waters reached the earth again. It came to him that he was not gone, after all. He had not considered the "saucer" which is always to be found at the foot of a fall, hollowed out by ages of falling water to a depth of many feet.

His courage revived by the turn of fortune, he began to figure his way out. From his knowledge of the locality, he judged that he was less than a hundred yards from safety, where the subterranean stream came finally to the light in the waters of Green River. If he could last for five minutes, life would be his. The woman seemed lifeless in his arms, now; but she did not hinder his movements—the sweeping waters carried them both like corks. He found, too, that in spite of the low roof of the stream's bed, his head more often than not emerged in a pocket of air that permitted him a long breath.

The passageway widened, narrowed again: then the waters, half joyfully, half vengefully, suddenly evicted him out of the bowels of the earth into the rocky bed of Green River. The woman was still with him, her hair floating on the cottony waters, the brilliant light of the high-riding moon tracing her features into a picture far from unlovely.

He dragged both her and himself to the sandy bank. Her features were Indian, but with a pleasant variant due to her unmistakable white blood. Her berry-brown skin and gipsy hair came from her aboriginal ancestry; the rotundity of chin and mold of cheek from her Nordic stock. Her clothing was a nondescript garment of skins and rags. And even the bruises about her body, and the clotted blood in cuts about her neck, arms and shoulders, did not mar the beauty of her maidenhood. Her body rested limply on the sand, the last of the curse of the Indian bloody moon.

He dropped to his knees by

her and began chafing her hands. Between times he built a fire by flaking two flint rocks together, Indian fashion, and catching the sparks in rotten wood. Thereafter he worked with her to better purpose, and presently she was sufficiently revived for him to remove her to the house, where he turned her over to the tender ministrations of his mother.

THE rest of the story came by degrees over a long period of time, while the girl learned the language of her white ancestry. Much of what she recounted was merely her own tradition, but it pieced in well with the facts in young Pearson's possession, and was entirely plausible. The son of the Indian princess and old Alligator Pearson had taken to the caves after he became grown, wiving an Indian girl from a remnant of an allied tribe. In course of time he had killed his father. Passing the curse of his mother on to sons and daughters of his own, in course of time he had died. The charge had been carried faithfully out by each succeeding generation, usually with a poison made from the venom of a moccasin snake and certain plants whose identity had become lost to the girl. And so, because of the pressure of getting food, and the life under the earth, her people had all passed away, leaving her to complete the curse. She had lost the formula for the poison. In desperation she had worked out the present plan, hoping to get the last of the Pearsons into the cave and starve him to death, or drown him over the falls of Lost River.

The rest of this tale is another story. But so far as the house of Pearson was concerned, the bloody moon superstition became merely an old wives' tale. The next Pearson in line was a fawn-skinned boy who would never know a sense of dread when the month of May brought a blood-red moon in the evening sky.