

# TERROR TALES



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Number Two

**THIS SEAL PROTECTS YOU  AGAINST REPRINT FICTION!**

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# CAT-WOMAN by Ray Cummings

*The mad Gods laughed at my helpless plight, and my poor brain rocked at the sound—as I watched that sex-crazed monster turn the girl of my dreams to a murderous, ravening beast before my eyes!*



THE setting sun gleamed a yellow-red on the frozen snow-fields. I was awkward with snow-shoes, and the little road over which I trudged was almost obliterated by the snow. The distant mountains, here in the northern reaches of Quebec, were purpling, with night settling like a shroud upon their white mantles.

I had come some two miles from the sprawling mountain town which was the northern railway terminus of the line up from Trois Rivieres, and already I was beginning to wonder if I had been too adventurous trudging out here alone. The purpling night seemed suddenly sinister. The houses and fences had long since peetered out, and a turned ankle would leave

me helpless and alone in this waste.

Then ahead, nestled against a naked frozen crag, I saw a little cabin, with light winking in its windows. As I came to its almost buried fence, the figure of a man showed suddenly standing there—a young fellow, tall, straight, bare-headed with longish black hair and swarthy face, his graceful figure clad in high leather boots, woolen trousers tucked into them, and a short, vivid plaid mackinaw of traditional *habitant* fashion.

He gazed at me curiously as I ploughed toward him.

"I'm looking for Jeanne La Rue," I said. "She lives up this way with her guardian—a Mr. Franklin—Arthur Franklin?"

He gestured. "Down in Frozen Canyon—it is not far." He suddenly gripped my arm. "Why you come up to see Miss La Rue?"

I stared. But there seemed no reason for offense. "My name is Bob Blake," I said. "What's yours?"

"Paul Beaumont. Why you come to see Jeanne?"

Suspicion suddenly was in his voice. In the gloom of the gathering night, I saw that he was about my own age.

"Well," I said smilingly, "I mean her no harm, if that's what's worrying you." Certainly there was nothing particularly secret about my mission. "I'm a lawyer," I added. "Maybe I have good news for her."

"What?" he demanded.

My smile was supposed to be quizzical, but suddenly I was aware of his tenseness. His hand slowly shifted toward his pocket.

"The news," I said, "is her business. She and Mr. Franklin—they may want to go to New York. I'm going back on the midnight train."

He sucked in his breath. "You take Jeanne away from here?"

"Maybe," I said. "But don't worry, she'll doubtless come back."

His face, with the smouldering look of his undoubted Indian ancestry, was a somber mask. Again he gestured. "The entrance to Frozen Canyon is there—you be careful—the night comes—"

"Thanks. You said it isn't far?"

"There is a—thing that roams this snow by night—the moon, she will come up almost soon—"

I could feel my smile fading as I stared at him and he added somberly into the silence.

"This snow by moonlight—it is no place for a stranger like you—"

He suddenly turned, waded through the snow of his little yard and banged his cabin door upon me.

Things roaming in snowy moonlight. . . I own that there was a shiver within me not caused by the frosty air as again I trudged forward. The entrance to Frozen Canyon was obvious—a wild, broken defile that led in a sweeping curve downward.

Frozen Canyon! The origin of its name too, was obvious, for it seemed as though here at the bottom of this narrow cleft all the frozen air of the uplands had settled. I could feel the temperature lowering with my descent. And suddenly down here it was night. Somberly purple, its shadows closing about me, filling me with quick unreasoning terror.

Presently in the gloom I saw the lights of a house—a big, two-story log-cabin affair, set into a hollow of the frozen canyon-wall. At the front door I knocked.

There was silence; then a murmur of voices; then footsteps. The big front door was piled with snow at its threshold. It swung inward; lamplight flooded me, and I crossed the threshold . . .

**I**F ONLY I had known then what a flood of horror was pent up here within these walls!

My unheralded visit startled Arthur J. Franklin, and his young ward Jeanne La

Rue. But my mission to them was interesting—possibly good news; and they made me welcome. The girl, after I had introduced myself, went into the adjacent kitchen to prepare supper. In the big, central living room, with all the atmosphere of a wealthy sportsman's hunting lodge, I sat before a huge hearth where a log fire was burning, and told my errand to Franklin.

"I'm connected with Barrett, Barrett and James, a law firm in New York," I said. "We had a cable from London—a commission to locate Miss La Rue and her guardian."

"We are the ones you seek," he smiled. He was a tall, thin, grave-faced man of perhaps forty, with longish grey-black hair. He was dressed roughly, but there was about him the aspect of a man of culture, wealth perhaps, who in his northern retreat did not care how he looked. He ran a lean hand over his unshaven face. "A London law firm," he echoed. "Have we done something wrong, that they are after us?"

"Quite the contrary," I assured him. "An Aunt of Miss La Rue's has died—"

I had no details myself—merely brief cabled information from the London firm. The girl herself appeared in the doorway.

"An Aunt of mine died?" She looked puzzled. And so did Franklin. Then he said,

"Why, you did tell me once you had an Aunt Agatha somewhere over there, Jean. I hope she died wealthy," he added to me.

I had no information as to that. I knew only that Jeanne La Rue, of half French heritage, had been born up here in this region; educated in Montreal; and, left an orphan and penniless. Two years ago, when she was sixteen, this dilettante Arthur Franklin, an English-Canadian friend of her father's, had undertaken to care for her. The London law-firm wanted to locate her now. Her signature was needed to settle an estate. The papers were on

their way by steamship from London.

"You will be paid," I assured them. "Will you come to New York? You will need proof of identity which my employers will help you secure. My firm cannot send the papers up here—they want to interview Miss La Rue."

"We will come," he said.

"And I am instructed to ask—Miss La Rue is still unmarried?"

He nodded. "Of course."

At the kitchen doorway the girl appeared again, standing in the yellow light gazing at me with beautiful, heavy-lidded eyes. And she echoed,

"Unmarried? Oh yes—unmarried—"

It came upon an expiration of her breath—an intonation, her whole look oddly weird, as though here were some strange frustration—

And she added cynically, "There is no man good enough for me—who knows?"

Under my gaze she turned away. I saw Franklin staring at us.

"She never tries to make herself charming," he said. "That comes from being the only woman in a desolation like this. But if another woman were here—" He grinned. "Then you would see her claws come out like a cat—"

"Like a cat!" From the kitchen doorway the girl echoed it—murmured it involuntarily as though a dam of horror within her had burst.

Franklin was staring, suddenly tensed. And upon me fear rushed with vague flooding thoughts, with the half-breed's words echoing in my mind . . . "A thing that roams this snow by night." What Thing did he mean, that roamed the snow?

"Oh I say now," Franklin was protesting. But the girl, with a queer quivering look upon her, had turned back into the kitchen. And Franklin added, "She's angry, Blake." Was he trying to cover up the girl's strange reaction to his chance words? Was he trying to hide from me

his own horror? He laughed. "Every woman is a feline at heart, eh Blake?"

"Why—why maybe so," I stammered.

I HAVE not pictured this Jeanne La Rue, but all the while that I had been sitting chatting with Franklin, certainly all my interest went to the girl. She was clad in laced high boots, a longish woolen skirt, a woolen blouse, high at the throat with a colorful neck-scarf. But it seemed as though the clothes belied her. Undeniably she was the most strangely beautiful girl I had ever seen. Her face was oval, with classic Latin features; luscious red lips, with a natural color—a fullness and moistness amazingly sensuous. Her eyes were a somber midnight blue. Her hair was a great braided pile upon her head—black hair already shot through with a premature grey.

But beyond all that it was her body that was amazing. She was small, slim, yet rounded with a full maturity. And it seemed as though the rough, picturesque clothes were a mere mask—as though under them, this girl's body were bursting to be free. The curves of her hips—the heavy coarse skirt could not mask them. The swelling of her youthful breasts seemed incongruous to the rough, tight blouse. Breasts palpitating to be freed, as though here were a young woman's body—like an animal chained—straining at a leash—a giant feline . . .

The thing stirred me against all reason, so that even thinking of her made my heart pound . . .

"Supper is about ready, Jeanne?"

Her somber contralto voice floated in from the kitchen. "Yes—it is ready."

The tall, thin, long-haired Franklin stood at a mirror tying his necktie. He smiled at me. "We get careless up here. . . You must change from those clothes, Jeanne—we have a visitor—"

He went to the kitchen, spoke to her; and came back. "I'll set the table," he

said. "Won't you help me, Mr. Blake?"

He drew a table before the huge hearth; tossed a cloth over it, and began setting it with silver and napery. Then Jeanne came from the kitchen, starting toward a rustic inner stairway up the side of the living room, to where overhead there was a balcony, with bedrooms opening from it. And as she passed close to where I was standing, again horror struck me. She was so close that her blouse brushed me; an exotic, redolence of perfume from her—so incongruous to those rough outdoor garments—drifted to my nostrils.

"Don't go—tonight," she murmured. "I want you—need you—tonight."

It would have struck at me with a wholly normal, answering rush of youthful passion, save for that second as she lingered and our gazes crossed. In her eyes there was something horrible. Passion? Lust? Terror? All of those perhaps, blended into something so unnamably weird that it set me shuddering.

And then she murmured, "He—he called me a cat. That is a lie. I am—just a normal woman. And I—want you to a normal woman. And I—want you to

I did not answer; and she glided past me, up the stairs, soundlessly with a lithe and youthful tread . . . lithe as an animal . . . soundless as a cat . . .

Franklin seemed to have noticed nothing. I helped him set the table. And presently Jeanne came down from her bedroom upstairs.

"Ah, that's better, Jeanne," he said. "We shall at least feel that we are civilized up here."

One may become accustomed to anything. I wondered if it was that the older Franklin, friend of this girl's dead father, had long since ceased to be amazed at the singular beauty of his ward. She was clad now in a long, filmy pale-grey evening dress. It swept the floor. It clung to the voluptuous lines of her thighs; it billowed over the high fullness of her bosom. In

the back it was low, exposing an expanse of flesh, smooth as pink-white marble, under which little muscles at her shoulders rippled as she raised her arms.

**A** WHOLLY conventional dinner dress. Any debutante could have worn it—and some would not have drawn a man's second glance. But upon this girl—devoid of cosmetics, with her black-grey hair piled high on her head, the dress still seemed something that had no right to be there. Less confining than her woolen blouse and skirt—more revealing, so that under it one might discern more of that quivering body—like an animal straining at its leash—trying to burst into freedom . . .

"Oh—" I murmured. For that second I must have stood staring like a country lout. Franklin had gone into the kitchen, informally to serve the food. The girl's slumbrous eyes were upon me. Her moist, lusciously red lips were parted in a half-smile.

"We are—still civilized, Mr. Blake," she murmured. "You will—stay tonight and go to New York with us tomorrow?"

"Yes," I said impulsively. "Why not?"

Was it only woman's passion in her eyes as she scanned my six foot, youthful figure? A girl, penned up here in the wilds, with a thin, almost delicate-looking older man, friend of her father? . . . And suddenly I thought of that Pierre Beaumont—handsome, youthful, half-breed Indian who lived so close here. Resentment of me had come upon him the moment he saw me. His fear, that I would take Jeanne La Rue away from here . . . And then his warning of something that roamed the snow in the moonlight . . .

What greswome mystery was here? The horror of it was mingling now with the lust in the girl's dark eyes; it trembled upon her moist red lips, where suddenly her pink tongue licked out like a cat's . . . And it mingled with my own stirrings of

passion so that I could not tell whether this girl attracted me—or was a thing that I should loathe and fear . . .

There may have been an atmosphere of joviality at the supper. Certainly Franklin strove to create it. But for me, there was only the consciousness of the silent Jeanne—her silence seeming, like her body, to palpitate—

What trivial subjects Franklin and I talked of I cannot remember. Then I mentioned having met Beaumont, their young neighbor.

"Oh," Franklin said. "He's all right—he thinks he's in love with Jeanne. That's a joke."

Fatuous guardian indeed. Jeanne's eyes lifted, with her gaze upon my face.

"He is a very nice boy," she said.

It had been arranged with Franklin now that I was to stay the night—my bedroom—between his and Jeanne's, at the top of the staircase. My suitcase was in the village—but he would lend me things of his own.

We were presently finished the meal, and with an apron over her dress, Jeanne had gone to the kitchen. Franklin had produced wine and he and I were drinking it as we sat by the hearth.

"That fellow Beaumont said something queer," I remarked casually. "Something—roams this snow by moonlight. Now what the devil—"

Vaguely I had thought that Franklin would smile; but his thin face, with its four day growth of iron-grey whiskers went suddenly grim.

"A wildcat," he said. "As it happens I saw the damn thing night before last. Couldn't get near enough to shoot at it. A thing like a big dog. Maybe it's a freak animal—grey fur, shot with black—a cat, or a dog—or giant silver fox—could you cross them and get something new?"

Fur black and grey. A giant animal, prowling in the moonlight. Several people

had seen it . . . No one had been able to shoot it. . . .

"Last night," Franklin was saying, "we're at the full of the moon now—the damned thing prowled nearer here—a neighbor a quarter of a mile north beyond the canyon—and it killed his infant daughter. Little girl two years old—"

I sucked in my breath. "Somebody saw it do that?"

"Yes, the father. That is, he thinks what he saw was an animal. God knows, it must have been the same wildcat that I saw. The time was just after sundown. The little girl had wandered near the woods back of the house. The man saw something pounce—all in a second it had killed the child, ripped and tore it—and dashed away with the body. It was snowing then. The trail filled up, you couldn't follow it."

I heard myself murmuring, "And today there's been no trail?"

"No. But if it comes out tonight there are plenty of men from the village ready to track it. A clear moonlight night—"

A full moon had risen now above the little canyon walls and was shining down through the windows of the cabin. They were drenched with frosted silver. . . .

And suddenly as I was staring, a dark blob showed out there. A man, outside, peering in at us.

I gripped Franklin. "Look—" I muttered.

"Well, by God—" He jumped to his feet, stood gazing. The blob vanished. Together we rushed to the window, flung it up . . . The pallid, congealed canyon disclosed a darting figure, vanishing down a curve of the trail. Pierre Beaumont, the Indian.

"Well, I'm damned," Franklin ejaculated. "What's the idea? He never did anything like that before."

We said nothing to Jeanne. For the rest of that brief evening Franklin and I sat by the fire smoking and sipping his

light Canadian wine. Jeanne, for the most part, seemed busy in other parts of the house. To me it was an effort, conversing with this middle-aged, matter of fact Franklin. The silences, when we sat smoking, pausing in our talk, screamed with things unnamable. Every shadow masked unmentionable things. The frozen moonlight outside our windows was frightening.

And I found too, that a tense expectancy was upon me. The girl's murmured words that I stay the night—her throaty, purring contralto dinning in my head as though still I were hearing her words: "I want you—need you tonight—"

ON THE broad mantle over the fire-side, with a stuffed moosehead above it, there stood a small bronze statue. It was wholly familiar; all my life, in common little casts of bronze or clay, I had seen it. And seen photographs of its original. It was the replica of a huge, wolf-like animal, suckling two little infants—the lost Roman babes, who were nurtured by the female wolf.

I chanced to be staring at it; and Franklin followed my gaze. And abruptly he murmured,

"You're no fool, Blake. Are you thinking anything about that bauble?"

I gazed at him in startled surprise. "What do you mean?"

He took the little statue down and toyed with it in his lap. "Romulus and Remus," he said. "Suckled by an animal. You know I've often wondered—nobody ever told us what sort of children Romulus and Remus grew up to be."

His laugh had a queer nervous quiver in it; he uncoiled his lean length from his easy chair and replaced the statue.

Blankly I stared at him. "You mean—" "Not a damned thing," he said. "You can't imbibe the qualities of an animal from its milk." Again he laughed. "That wouldn't be very scientific, would it?"

We'd all end up by being like cows."

I tried to smile.

Why had he introduced so weird a topic? He stared at me with a queer grimace. "But there is something else, Blake—" His voice lowered; he flashed a look toward the kitchen. "God knows," he said. "I can't imagine why I should talk to you like this—except that one gets pent-up, being here alone . . . I found, about a week ago, a supposedly scientific article in an old magazine—up in Jeanne's room—"

I could only nod with a silent expectancy to prompt him when he paused. His laugh again had a queer quaver in it.

"Supposed to be a new discovery of science," he said. "Some Austrian physician—a theory—"

"A theory?"

"Of course—God knows it must be only a theory. A claim that by some simple distillation of the glands of animals—a medicine can be made to carry into the human system qualities of the animal from which the glands were taken. A permanent change. A human—with an animal's emotional freedom. An animal's unrestrained lust."

Still I could only stare. "And—and then?" I murmured.

"Then—but it's all rot, Blake. I guess I want you to tell me it's all rot. But there were formulae—instances of experimentation. I am no scientist. The damned thing spoke of *hormones* of the blood—little things that in our brain direct what we call *personality*. Little things that make us what we inherently are—that influence our instincts, impulses and thus direct our human behavior. It said that the *hormone* is a physical particle—nourished by our blood—capable of being nourished by the *gland—hormones* of an animal."

His soft voice trailed with a monotone as though submerged by his own horror.

"It was in a French magazine, Blake,"

he repeated. "God knows how it got into this house. I—I burned the damned thing. It said the distillation—the making of the medicine would not be difficult, even for a layman. It gave the process—detailed by that accursed Austrian physician—"

His voice died into silence. He was staring, not at me, but into the fire . . . And suddenly my horror burst loose. "You mean," I murmured, "Jeanne—"

God knows I had not meant to say it; and as though I had struck him, Franklin whirled in his chair.

"Jeanne? Good God, no! Why, how dare—" Then he suddenly relaxed. "I'm sorry," he said. His puff of anger was gone. "I was—thinking of that damned roaming thing that mangled the body last night." He smiled weakly. "And this fellow Beaumont—there is a queerness about him when you get to know him—"

Through the opening doorway of the kitchen came the sound of a crash—a gong-like clatter, with tinkling of breaking glass. We sprang to our feet. Jeanne was standing across the kitchen; at her feet was a brass tray and two broken glasses.

"Oh," she said. "How clumsy of me—did I startle you?"

Franklin drew me back to the living room hearth. "We've been talking rot," he said. "Forget it."

"Of course—of course," I murmured.

Then presently the evening was finished. The wine, the fire, and my long trip up from New York, seemed suddenly to make me drowsy. But in my bedroom, at the head of the stairs, abruptly it seemed that momentarily all my senses were alert. Franklin and Jeanne had accompanied me.

"You'll be comfortable," Franklin said.

"Oh—quite," I agreed.

He turned, passed Jeanne's room along the little balcony and went into his own room. And left her standing with me.



Her gaze crossed with mine lingeringly.

"Goodnight," she murmured, and abruptly swung away.

I CLOSED my door. It was a big, heavy panelled affair. At its top, level with my face, there was a foot-square grating to admit heat from the room below. I drew the curtain over the grating, but I did not undress. The room had a single window, ten or fifteen feet above ground . . . The moonlight drenched the little empty frozen canyon; everything out there was motionless and silent—congealed and pallid, like death.

I blew out my small oil lamp. From the canyon, it seemed that the death-like palor sprang into my silent bedroom. On the bed I lay down, pulled the blankets over me. With what expectancy was I lying here? I recall that within me was a slow seething passion. But the sudden, unnatural drowsiness came again, so that I closed my eyes and almost in that instant, I must have been wafted into insensibility. . . .

I awakened with the knowledge that I was struggling—fighting with myself to awaken. It was a long fight, but I was frightened and desperately I fought to force myself into consciousness.

Then at last I found myself sitting up in bed, bathed in cold sweat, with my head roaring. What had happened to me? Had I been normally asleep? Or was this a drug from which now I had forced myself into consciousness?

The house was silent. In my bedroom, the pattern of moonlight on the floor had shifted. I looked at my watch. Quarter past twelve . . .

My room was warm; and now, with my full senses returned I heard, in the silence, the brisk crackle of the log fire in the living room. The little curtain at the grillwork of my bedroom door quivered with the rising heat.

Then it seemed that I heard a footstep

downstairs. I went to my door, turned the knob. The door was locked on the outside. I was locked in!

I drew the curtain; and through the grill I could see a portion of the room downstairs—the huge fireplace, the broad hearth and a segment beyond it to the opposite wall, and the outer door to the right. But the nearer half of the scene was cut off by the balcony which was close before me.

No one seemed to be down there, but there had been a change. The fire had been built up; its flames leaped merrily—the only light in the room, so that the scene danced and swayed with shadows and yellow-red glow. Before the hearth now a huge fur rug of grey-white animal skin lay stretched. Beside it there was a little pile of silver fox furs—neck-pieces of the type one might buy in any fashionable shop. They were long-tailed, and with the little fox-heads realistically mounted. The fire-light gleamed on the artificial animal eyes.

And in the pile there were other skins—a huge cat—its round face had an open mouth, with needle teeth showing—

For that instant, breathlessly I stared. And I saw that back from the hearth, diagonally facing the fire, a full-length mirror had been set upright . . . The footstep abruptly sounded again. There seemed a rustle under the balcony beyond my vision—a whispering chattering voice . . . Then from beneath me, Jeanne appeared, moving toward the hearth, where in the center of the rug she stopped and faced the mirror.

She was fully dressed, in the filmy evening gown which she had worn at supper. And in the dimness of the room now, with the firelight partly behind her, abruptly she was almost in silhouette. Her dress, those hampering garments so incongruous to her vibrant young body, suddenly now were shadowy, with her undergarments outlined, and like a wraith

beneath. There were the curving lines of the woman herself—the body that seemed so fettered—so unnaturally leashed—

For a moment she stood gazing at herself in the mirror, with uplifted arms that raised the mounds of her youthful breasts to make them press against the hampering dress . . . And I caught a glimpse of her red-lipped face, painted by the firelight. Upon it there was a contortion indescribable—parted lips as her breath panted between them—and eyes that regarded her palpitating body almost with terror. . . .

Then as though mechanically, with her gaze in the mirror watching her every movement, her raised hands were twitching at the shoulder straps of her dress. It fell to her waist, with her young breasts at last set free and the glory of her slim arms and shoulders and back like shimmering satin with the firelight dancing upon it.

**F**OR just an instant she postured, swaying, so that across the background of my tumultuous mind I had the sudden thought that she would crumple and fall. But she steadied herself. Her hips swayed as though to a soundless rhythm. The dress fell into a little heap at her feet. Her fingers, trembling with haste now, stripped off the satin lingerie—her satin mules—the long silk stockings. . . .

And wholly nude, with the great masses of her strangely grey-black hair tumbling down over her glorious young body, she fell to the fur rug—fell twitching, with the pile of fox-furs and the cat-skin pulled in a tangled mass upon her.

Dimly I was aware that I was pulling frantically at the door-knob. But it was futile. And then again I stood transfixed, for I saw that she had not fallen, but had thrown herself down—rolling, palpitating in the furs . . . Staring at herself in the mirror as she postured with raised limbs. . . .

A sudden sweep of grisly horror was

upon me. What ghastly thing was this, that now suddenly, all in these few seconds it had passed all bounds even of human lust and was a thing gruesomely animal. No longer like a woman, she rolled and grovelled in the furs; stretched and twisted, and rubbed the catskin upon her limbs and thighs; hugged it to her quivering breasts . . . God—I saw then where she had drawn the teeth of the cat across her side and a little red line of welling blood showed crimson. . . .

Madness . . . A thing of horror unnamable . . . And the horror was upon her beautiful face—her eyes bursting with it, even while she gloried in the heat of the fire and the softness of the skins against her flesh . . . Her red mouth, with her breath panting, seemed almost bursting with a scream. . . .

Did I hear a jibbering murmur and a rustle under the balcony? In all the chaos that was upon me, I hardly noticed it. But the girl twisted and turned her face toward the balcony with a weird agonized gaze. Then, prone, face down she hitched herself to the mirror—raised her head, stared at her contorted face that was mirrored so close to her eyes—

Perhaps I pounded on the oaken panels of my door. I may have cried out. Then I had turned, rushed to the window, raised its sash. There was a frozen trellis. I was down it in a moment, tumbling the last eight feet into the deep drifted snow. Then I ran to the front door. Would it be locked? It yielded to my frantic shove and swung inward . . .

To this day I cannot gauge with what sweep of emotion I burst into that gruesome, firelit room. With horror? With a wild desire to rescue this girl from whatever grisly spell was upon her? Or was I dominated only by my own overpowering desire?

Her palpitating nude body, enveloped by the masses of her grey-black hair, still lay in the pile of furs. Frantically I rushed

to her, threw myself down beside her. . .  
 "Jeanne—Good God, what's the matter with you?"

Fiercely her arms went around me. "You! You—came!" With all her strength she clung, pressing herself against me. "I love you. I—want you—No! Good God—what did I say? Be careful—you—you—"

In that chaotic second she seemed hysterical—shoving at me—stammering with panting breath and with words of warning that choked in her throat.

Just one priceless second. Then I was aware of a shadow over us—a scream bursting from Jeanne. There was a roaring crash in my head as something struck it; the world burst into a catalysmic flash of light as I fell unconscious. . . .

Blankness. . . . Then slowly, with my senses one by one recovering, I became aware that I was lashed with ropes—my ankles and wrists bound. I was lying on the living room floor, over by the door, which I had left open as I burst in and which now was still open behind me.

Upon the hearth, in the pile of furs, the nude form of Jeanne still lay. And there was another figure there now. Franklin—crouching before her—his hands pawing her with obscene caresses. And his gloating, lustful voice sounded:

"Why—you were marvellous, Jeanne—I had no need to send a bullet into you, did I? Not that I would actually have done it. Oh no! I would have come and prompted you—"

SO IT was he who had been under the balcony, crouching in a corner of the room, with a gun upon Jeanne so that in terror, she had stripped herself and postured for his lustful gaze! But was that all that had urged her? Surely I had seen upon her far more than mere terror of death, that had made her grovel nude in those furs! Surely more than terror had made her glorious young body struggle

with the freedom of a lusting animal.

But she was only terrorized now—a dominating sweep of terror so that under his lascivious touch she shrank away with a hand pressed against her mouth.

"You—must rest for a minute, Jeanne—then we will let it sweep us gain. Oh I have waited so long for this! You never suspected it of me, did you, little Jeanne? Well, I had to wait. But tonight, everything got just right and set me loose. Money that I've waited for—"

He dashed back his longish black hair with a gesture. "We won't talk of that. We'll talk of us. This thrill—this thing for which anyone would give his life. You felt it, Jeanne. I could see it in your eyes—on all your wonderful little body I could see it. All the human bonds of restraint—all gone. The animal in us, Jeanne—set free. Rest now—you'll feel it again in a moment. Both of us—"

His caressing hand touched her, so that her scream came: "Bob—Bob Blake—help me—"

I was bathed in the cold sweat of weakness, straining with futile strength at the rope that tied my ankles and lashed my wrists behind me. Then despite my dry thickened tongue, a cry burst from me.

"You—damned fiend—let her alone—"

He hitched back from her, jumped to his feet and stood over me. His hair fell partly over his thin, pointed face as he bent down. His thin bloodless lips parted in a grinning snarl as he regarded me.

"So? You can talk? You can see what Jeanne and I are doing? Well, that's all right—that might even give us a greater thrill—"

God, that I was so helpless!

"And I fooled you too, didn't I, Blake?" he was saying. "You thought I was so fatuous—a fellow who knew nothing of the glory of this girl. Why, for two years I've been waiting. That rich maiden aunt of hers in England I've known all about her. I've had an agent over there. Half

of her million dollar fortune is left to Jeanne. Provided Jeanne was unmarried! Well, she is still unmarried. That's why I have kept her up here isolated—while I waited for that old woman to die. And Jeanne didn't know the real meaning of the papers she signed for me, three months ago when she came of age! All her fortune to come to me. She doesn't have to sign your papers in New York. That's a technicality. I can prove her identity, and mine, at my leisure. My agent made that clear to me—Jeanne's death—after the death of her aunt—and all the money is mine."

Gloating, loathsome fiend. But he was a clever scheming criminal for all that—playing for half a million dollars.

"I did see a giant wildcat around here," he was saying. "And others have seen it. It did kill and mangle that baby. What luck for me! Don't you see how easy it will be to explain Jeanne's death? When she and I—have our thrill—I will leave her down the canyon where they will think the wildcat mangled her. I drugged you tonight, Blake. You seemed like a nice fellow. I made you think there was something queer about Jeanne—so you wouldn't think there was anything queer about me. I would have let you escape—but I didn't give you enough of the sleeping drug. So now you will lie mangled with Jeanne. Like that fellow Beaumont who came snooping around here to spy upon me. He lies out there now—crimsoned—dead—"

"You—you" But I could only mumble with thickened tongue, and twist my body as pantingly I strained at the ropes. And he snarled,

"Lie and watch. You have so little time to live you might as well let yourself be thrilled."

Jeanne had come toward us, hitching her white body on the floor with a vague terrorized desire to help me. She screamed as Franklin pounced upon her, and flung

her brutally back to the soft fur rugs.

"Now—you are rested, little Jeanne. Don't be frightened. I feel it now—the wild freedom—"

Had his hand gone to his mouth as he talked to me? Vaguely I seemed to remember it. And now suddenly he was groveling on the rug, reaching for the cowering numbed girl . . . What ghastly transformation was this? The firelight gleamed upon his head and face—his pointed, long-nosed face with its grey stubble of hair—his thin bluish lips snarling, baring his teeth—his grey-black hair long to the ears was flung back as he tossed his head—

And suddenly he seemed no longer human—the head and face of an animal—

And his voice had changed, with a throaty snarl in it, mingling with his triumphant lust. "I have studied the animals, Jeanne. Like this—the wildcat mating—"

His gibbering eerie catcall rang gruesome . . . "Doesn't that thrill you, Jeanne? Don't draw away from me—hold me—you—your fingernails could scratch me, Jeanne—like a wildcat scratching—"

In terror, as he pawed at her, I could see her hand gouging at his face.

Then suddenly behind me there was a sound. A snarling purr. I rolled to face the open doorway . . .

AT THE threshold, the pallid moonlight gleamed on a huge grey-white shape. The giant wildcat. It stood in the snow with humped back, lashing its furry sides with its tail. And in its mouth was a grisly frozen, crimson thing—the mangled body of a little girl, the ragged torn flesh hanging in stiffened ribbons of bloody plup . . .

I must have gasped some horrified cry. For a second or two the huge grey cat stood peering, with its tail lashing. Then it dropped the horrible frozen infant, and with a bound leaped over me and into the room.

My cry mingled with Jeanne's scream. Then Franklin turned and saw the giant cat, which his gibbering call doubtless had attracted.

"Why—" he gasped, "why—good God—"

He tried to scramble to his feet. With fatal error, in a panic he seized a chair, flung it. Nimbly the huge snarling cat avoided the missile. And then it pounced, its teeth and great claws with lightning speed ripping and tearing at Franklin as its weight bore him backward.

The firelit room for those brief moments was a chaos of horror. The snarling, spitting, hissing cries of the giant cat—Franklin's oaths—then his screams of terror and pain . . . The thuds of the two bodies as they threshed about the room . . . Now they were near the door. I had rolled and gotten past them. On the rug, Jeanne was gripping me. And she moaned,

"Oh—dear God—"

"Jeanne! Untie me, quickly!"

Franklin's screams were agonized now, choked with the blood in his throat. His clothes were ribbons; his flesh was crimsoned—the room was a shambles.

And as at last the ropes under Jeanne's shaking fingers fell from me, I sprang to my feet. The cat, with lashing tail, was struggling to drag Franklin's body over the threshold. He was only twitching now—but his spasms rolled him out to the snow, with the cat still upon him.

I leaped and closed and barred the door. And back on the rug I crouched, holding Jeanne's nude shuddering body against me.

"You're all right now, Jeanne dear—"

"Yes—all right now—"

Outside the door there was only the retreating sound of the spitting, snarling cat as it dragged at the crimsoned, mangled thing that had been Franklin—dragging it away through the snow of Frozen Canyon.

Then here in the sudden silence of the

lamplit living room as I crouched, holding Jeanne against me, suddenly she gave a cry.

"Bob! He—that fiend—he forced me to take some medicine tonight! Forced it on me two or three times. Oh Bob, is that what I'm feeling now as you hold me? It—it won't leave that horrible taint in me, will it, Bob?"

THAT night of horror in Frozen Canyon was nearly a year ago. Jeanne and I are married now. My wife has that glorious, vibrant young body that nature gave her. But certainly she is normal. We never talk of Franklin and those ghastly things of Frozen Canyon. I try to tell myself that Franklin was a scheming criminal, and a vicious fiend half mad with his lust. We found no strange drugs in the house that night. Jeanne had never seen the French magazine he mentioned. God knows I have never tried to verify if such an article was ever published.

I tell myself that there was no such magazine. That all Franklin's talk was the product of his deranged mind. He did nothing to my glorious vibrant young wife, I try to tell myself, that could leave a taint in her. And yet—sometimes when at night in our bedroom she disrobes, gazing at her beauty in our bedroom mirror, the look on her face fills me with a vague unreasoning dread. My very reason is caught and gripped in the grinding maw of an awful fear. For you see, sometimes a strange lethargy comes over her, and she takes little naps during the day—*cat-naps*, she calls them. And at night, when I awake, I see her *eyes*—gleaming green and yellow in the dark—unwinking, steady—*luminous!* Or is it that my mind is tottering under its staggering burden . . . . I think that I shall know the answer soon—for I *feel* her watchful eyes upon me—following me—waiting, like . . . Merciful God! Like a cat watches a mouse!