

# Weird Tales

ALL STORIES NEW — NO REPRINTS

MARCH, 1948

Cover by Lee Brown Coye

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# Catnip

BY ROBERT BLOCH

## I

RONNIE SHIRES stood before the mirror and slicked back his curly hair. He straightened his new sweater and stuck out his chest. Not bad! Had to watch the way he looked, with graduation only two weeks away and that election for class president coming up. If he could get to be class president, then next year, in high school, he'd swing a little weight maybe. Go out for second team or something. But he had to look sharp—

"Ronnie! Better hurry or you'll be late!"

Ma came out of the kitchen, carrying his lunch. Ronnie wiped the smile off his face. She walked up behind him and put her arms around his waist.

"Darling—I only wish your father were here to see you—"

Ronnie wriggled free. "Yeah, sure. Say, Ma."

"Yes?"

"How's about letting me have another buck, huh? I got to get some things today."



*The old woman and the cat, they were both ageless, both evil*

Heading by BORIS DOLGOV

"Well, I suppose. But try to make it last, son. This graduation costs a lot of money, seems to me."

"I'll make it up to you some day, Ma." He watched her as she fumbled in her apron pocket and produced a wadded dollar bill.

"Thanks. Be seeing you." He picked up his lunch and ran outside. He walked along, smiling and whistling, knowing Ma was watching him from the window.

Then he turned the corner, halted under a tree, and fished out a cigarette. He lit it and sauntered slowly across the street, puffing deeply. Out of the corner of his eye he watched the Ogden house just ahead.

Sure enough, the front screen door banged and Marvin Ogden came down the steps. Marvin was fifteen, one year older than Ronnie, but smaller and skinnier. He wore glasses and stuttered when he got excited, but he was valedictorian of the graduating class.

Ronnie came up behind him, walking fast. "Hello, Snot-face!"

Marvin wheeled. He avoided Ronnie's glare, but smiled weakly at the pavement.

"I said hello, Snot-face! What's the matter, don't you know your own name, jerk?"

"Hello—Ronnie."

"How's old Snot-face today?"

"Aw, gee, Ronnie. Why do you have to talk like that? I never did anything to you, did I?"

Ronnie spit in the direction of Marvin's shoes. "I'd like to see you just try doing something to me, you four-eyed little—"

Marvin began to walk away, but Ronnie kept pace.

"Slow down, jag. I wanna talk to you."

"Wh-what is it, Ronnie? I don't want to be late."

"Shut your yap."

"But—"

"Listen, you. What was the big idea in History exam yesterday when you pulled your paper-away?"

"You know, Ronnie. You aren't supposed to copy somebody else's answers."

"You trying to tell me what to do, you sucker?"

"N-no. I mean, I only want to keep you out of trouble. What if Miss Sanders found out, and you want to be elected class president? Why, if anybody knew—"

Ronnie put his hand on Marvin's shoulder. He smiled. "You wouldn't ever tell her about it, would you, Snot-face?" he murmured.

"Of course not! Cross my heart!"

Ronnie continued to smile. He dug his fingers into Marvin's shoulder. With his other hand he swept Marvin's books to the ground. As Marvin bent forward to pick them up, he kicked Marvin as hard as he could, bringing his knee up fast. Marvin sprawled on the sidewalk. He began to cry. Ronnie watched him as he attempted to rise.

"This is just a sample of what you got coming if you squeal," he said. He stepped on the fingers of Marvin's left hand. "Sucker!"

MARVIN'S snivelling faded from his ears as he turned the corner at the end of the block. Mary June was waiting for him under the trees. He came up behind her and slapped her, hard.

"Hello, you!" he said.

Mary June jumped about a foot, her curls bouncing on her shoulders. Then she turned and saw who it was.

"Oh, Ronnie! You oughtn't to—"

"Shut up. I'm in a hurry. Can't be late the day before election. You lining up the girls?"

"Sure, Ronnie. You know, I promised. I had Ellen and Vicky over at the house last night and they said they'd vote for you for sure. All the girls are gonna vote for you."

"Well, they better." Ronnie threw his cigarette butt against a rose-bush in the Elsner's yard.

"Ronnie—you be careful—want to start a fire?"

"Quit bossing me." He scowled.

"I'm not trying to boss you, Ronnie. Only—"

"Aw, you make me sick!" He quickened his pace, and the girl bit her lip as she endeavored to keep step with him. "Ronnie, wait for me!"

"Wait for me!" He mocked her. "What's the matter, you afraid you'll get lost or something?"

"No. *You* know. I don't like to pass that old Mrs. Mingle's place. She always stares at me and makes faces."

"She's nuts!"

"I'm scared of her, Ronnie. Aren't you?"

"Me scared of that old bat? She can go take a flying leap!"

"Don't talk so loud, she'll hear you."

"Who cares?"

Ronnie marched boldly past the tree-shadowed cottage behind the rusted iron fence. He stared insolently at the girl, who made herself small against his shoulder, eyes averted from the ramshackle edifice. He deliberately slackened his pace as they passed the cottage, with its boarded-up windows, screened-in porch and general air of withdrawal from the world.

Mrs. Mingle herself was not in evidence today. Usually she could be seen in the weed-infested garden at the side of the cottage; a tiny, dried-up old woman, bending over her vines and plants, mumbling incessantly to herself or to the raddled black tomcat which served as her constant companion.

"Old prune-face ain't around!" Ronnie observed, loudly. "Must be off some place on her broomstick."

"Ronnie—please!"

"Who cares?" Ronnie pulled Mary June's curls. "You dames are scared of everything, ain't you?"

"Aren't, Ronnie."

"Don't tell *me* how to talk!" Ronnie's gaze shifted again to the silent house, huddled in the shadows. A segment of shadow at the side of the cottage seemed to be moving. A black blur detached itself from the end of the porch. Ronnie recognized Mrs. Mingle's cat. It minced down the path towards the gate.

Quickly, Ronnie stooped and found a rock. He grasped it, rose, aimed, and hurled the missile in one continuous movement.

The cat hissed, then squawled in pain as the rock grazed its ribs.

"Oh, Ronnie!"

"Come on, let's run before she sees us!"

They flew down the street. The school bell drowned out the cat-yowl.

"Here we go," said Ronnie. "You do my homework for me? Good. Give it here once."

He snatched the papers from Mary June's hand and sprinted ahead. The girl stood watching him, smiling her admiration. From behind the fence the cat watched, too, and licked its jaws.

## II

IT HAPPENED that afternoon, after school. Ronnie and Joe Gordan and Seymour Higgins were futzing around with a baseball and he was talking about the outfit Ma promised to buy him this-summer if the dressmaking business picked up. Only he made it sound like he was getting the outfit for sure, and that they could all use the mask and mitt. It didn't hurt to build it up a little, with election tomorrow. He had to stand in good with the whole gang.

He knew if he hung around the school-yard much longer, Mary June would come out and want him to walk her home. He was sick of her. Oh, she was all right for homework and such stuff, but these guys would just laugh at him if he went off with a dame.

So he said how about going down the street to in front of the pool hall and maybe hang around to see if somebody would shoot a game? He'd pay. Besides, they could smoke.

Ronnie knew that these guys didn't smoke, but it sounded bigshot and that's what he wanted. They all followed him down the street, pounding their cleats on the sidewalk. It made a lot of noise, because everything was so quiet.

All Ronnie could hear was the cat. They were passing Mrs. Mingle's and there was this cat, rolling around in the garden on its back and on its stomach, playing with some kind of ball. It purred and meowed and whined.

"Look!" yelled Joe Gordan. "Dizzy cat's havin' a fit 'r something, huh?"

"Lice," said Ronnie. "Damned mangy old thing's fulla lice and fleas and stuff. I socked it a good one this morning."

"Ya did?"

"Sure. With a rock. This big, too." He made a watermelon with his hands.

"Weren't you afraid of old lady Mingle?"

"Afraid? Why, that dried-up old—"

"Catnip," said Seymour Higgins. "That's what she's got. Ball of catnip. Old Mingle buys it for her. My old man says she buys everything for that cat; special food and sardines. Treats it like a baby. Ever see them walk down the street together?"

"Catnip, huh?" Joe peered through the fence. "Wonder why they like it so much."

Gets 'em wild, doesn't it? Cats'll do anything for catnip."

The cat squealed, sniffing and clawing at the ball. Ronnie scowled at it. "I hate cats. Somebody oughta drowned that damn thing."

"Better not let Mrs. Mingle hear you talk like that," Seymour cautioned. "She'll put the evil eye on you."

"Bull!"

"Well, she grows them herbs and stuff and my old lady says—"

"Bull!"

"All right. But I wouldn't go monkeying around her or her old cat, either."

"I'll show you."

Before he knew it, Ronnie was opening the gate. He advanced toward the black tomcat as the boys gaped.

The cat crouched over the catnip, eyes flattened against a velveteen skull. Ronnie hesitated a moment, gauging the glitter of claws, the glare of agate eyes. But the gang was watching—

"Scat!" he shouted. He advanced, waving his arms. The cat sidled backwards. Ronnie feinted with his hand and scooped up the catnip ball.

"See? I got it, you guys. I got—"

*"Put that down!"*

He didn't see the door open. He didn't see her walk down the steps. But suddenly she was there. Leaning on her cane, wearing a black dress that fitted tightly over her tiny frame, she seemed hardly any bigger than the cat which crouched at her side. Her hair was gray and wrinkled and dead, her face was gray and wrinkled and dead, but her eyes—

They were agate eyes, like the cat's. They glowed. And when she talked, she spit the way the cat did.

*"Put that down, young man!"*

Ronnie began to shake. It was only a chill, everybody gets chills now and then, and could he help it if he shook so hard the catnip just fell out of his hand?

He wasn't scared. He had to show the gang he wasn't scared of this skinny little dried-up old woman. It was hard to breathe, he was shaking so, but he managed. He filled his lungs and opened his mouth.

"You—you old witch!" he yelled.

The agate eyes widened. They were big-

ger than she was. All he could see were the eyes. Witch eyes. Now that he said it, he knew it was true. Witch. She was a witch.

*"You insolent puppy. I've a good mind to cut out your lying tongue!"*

Geez, she wasn't kidding!

Now she was coming closer, and the cat was inching up on him, and then she raised the cane in the air, she was going to hit him, the witch was after him, oh Ma, no, don't, oh—

Ronnie ran.

### III

COULD he help it? Geez, the guys ran too. They'd run before he did, even. He had to run, the old bat was crazy, anybody could see that. Besides, if he'd stayed she'd of tried to hit him and maybe he'd let her have it. He was only trying to keep out of trouble. That was all.

Ronnie told it to himself over and over at supper time. But that didn't do any good, telling it to himself. It was the guys he had to tell it to, and fast. He had to explain it before election tomorrow—

"Ronnie. What's the matter? You sick?"

"No, Ma."

"Then why don't you answer a person? I declare, you haven't said ten words since you came in the house. And you aren't eating your supper."

"Not hungry."

"Something bothering you, son?"

"No. Leave me alone."

"It's that election tomorrow, isn't it?"

"Leave me alone." Ronnie rose. "I'm goin' out."

"Ronnie!"

"I got to see Joe. Important."

"Back by nine, remember."

"Yeah. Sure."

He went outside. The night was cool. Windy for this time of year. Ronnie shivered a little as he turned the corner. Maybe a cigarette—

He lit a match and a shower of sparks spiralled to the sky. Ronnie began to walk, puffing nervously. He had to see Joe and the others and explain. Yeah, right now, too. If they told anybody else—

It was dark. The light on the corner was out, and Ogdens weren't home. That made

it darker, because Mrs. Mingle never showed a light in her cottage.

Mrs. Mingle. Her cottage was up ahead. He'd better cross the street.

What was the matter with him? Was he getting chicken-guts? Afraid of that damned old woman, that old witch! He puffed, gulped, expanded his chest. Just let her try anything. Just let her be hiding under the trees, waiting to grab out at him with her big claws and hiss—what was he talking about, anyway? That was the cat. Nuts to her cat, and her too. He'd show them!

Ronnie walked past the dark shadow where Mrs. Mingle dwelt. He whistled defiance, and emphasized it by shooting his cigarette butt across the fence. Sparks flew and were swallow by the mouth of the night.

Ronnie paused and peered over the fence. Everything was black and still. There was nothing to be afraid of. Everything was black—

Everything except that flicker. It came from up the path, under the porch. He could see the porch now because there was a light. Not a steady light; a wavering light. Like a fire. A fire—where his cigarette had landed! The cottage was beginning to burn!

Ronnie gulped and clung to the fence. Yes, it was on fire, all right. Mrs. Mingle would come out and the firemen would come and they'd find the butt and see him and then—

He fled down the street. The wind cat-howled behind him, the wind that fanned the flames that burned the cottage—

Ma was in bed. He managed to slow down and walk softly as he slipped into the house, up the stairs. He undressed in the dark and sought sanctuary between the bedsheets. When he got the covers over his head he had another chill. Lying there, trembling, not daring to look out of the window and see the glare from the other side of the block, Ronnie's teeth chattered. He knew he was going to pass out in a minute.

Then he heard the screaming from far away. Fire engines. Somebody had called them. He needn't worry now. Why should the sound frighten him? It was only a siren, it wasn't Mrs. Mingle screaming, it couldn't be. She was all right. He was all right. Nobody knew . . .

Ronnie fell asleep with the wind and the siren wailing in his ears. His slumber was deep and only once was there an interruption. That was along towards morning, when he thought he heard a noise at the window. It was a scraping sound. The wind, of course. And it must have been the wind, too, that sobbed and whined and whimpered beneath the window-sill at dawn. It was only Ronnie's imagination, Ronnie's conscience, that transformed the sound into the wailing of a cat. . . .

## IV

"RONNIE!"  
It wasn't the wind, it wasn't a cat. Ma was calling him.

"Ronnie! Oh, Ronnie!"

He opened his eyes, shielding them from the sunshafts.

"I declare, you might answer a person." He heard her grumbling to herself downstairs. Then she called again.

"Ronnie!"

"I'm coming, Ma."

He got out of bed, went to the bathroom, and dressed. She was waiting for him in the kitchen.

"Land sakes, you sure slept sound last night. Didn't you hear the fire engines?"

Ronnie dropped a slice of toast. "What engines?"

Ma's voice rose. "Don't you know? Why, boy, it was just awful—Mrs. Mingle's cottage burned down."

"Yeah?" He had trouble picking up the toast again.

"The poor old lady—just think of it—trapped in there—"

He had to shut her up. He couldn't stand what was coming next. But what could he say, how could he stop her?

"Burned alive. The whole place was on fire when they got there. The Ogdens saw it when they came home and Mr. Ogden called the firemen, but it was too late. When I think of that old lady it just makes me—"

Without a word, Ronnie rose from the table and left the room. He didn't wait for his lunch. He didn't bother to examine himself in the mirror. He went outside, before he cried, or screamed, or hauled off and hit Ma in the puss.

The puss—

It was waiting for him on the front walk. The black bundle with the agate eyes. The cat. Mrs. Mingle's cat, waiting for him to come out.

Ronnie took a deep breath before he opened the gate. The cat didn't make a sound, didn't stir. It just hunched up on the sidewalk and stared at him.

He watched it for a moment, then cast about for a stick. There was a hunk of lathe near the porch. He picked it up and swung it. Then he opened the gate.

"Scat!" he said.

The cat retreated. Ronnie walked away. The cat moved after him. Ronnie wheeled, brandishing the stick.

"Scram, before I let you have it!"

The cat stood still. Ronnie stared at it. Why hadn't the damn' thing burned up in the fire? And what was it doing here?

He gripped the lathe. It felt good between his fingers, splinters and all. Just let that mangy tom start anything—

He walked along, not looking back. What was the matter with him? Suppose the cat did follow him. It couldn't hurt him any. Neither could old Mingle. She was dead. The dirty witch. Talking about cutting his tongue out. Well, she got what was coming to her, all right. Too bad her scroungy cat was still around. If it didn't watch out, he'd fix it, too. He should worry now.

Nobody was going to find out about that cigarette. Mrs. Mingle was dead. He ought to be glad, everything was all right, sure, he felt great.

The shadow followed him down the street.

"Get out of here!"

Ronnie turned and heaved the lathe at the cat. It hissed. Ronnie heard the wind hiss, heard his cigarette butt hiss, heard Mrs. Mingle hiss.

He began to run. The cat ran after him.

"Hey, Ronnie!"

Marvin Ogden was calling him. He couldn't stop now, not even to hit the punk. He ran on. The cat kept pace.

Then he was winded and he slowed down. It was just in time, too. Up ahead was a crowd of kids, standing on the sidewalk in front of a heap of charred, smoking boards.

They were looking at Mingle's cottage—

Ronnie closed his eyes and darted back up the street. The cat followed.

HE HAD to get rid of it before he went to school. What if people saw him with her cat? Maybe they'd start to talk. He had to get rid of it—

Ronnie ran clear down to Sinclair Street. The cat was right behind him. On the corner he picked up a stone and let fly. The cat dodged. Then it sat down on the sidewalk and looked at him. Just looked.

Ronnie couldn't take his eyes off the cat. It stared so. Mrs. Mingle had stared, too. But she was dead. And this was only a cat. A cat he had to get away from, fast.

The street car came down Sinclair Street. Ronnie found a dime in his pocket and boarded the car. The cat didn't move. He stood on the platform as the car pulled away and looked back at the cat. It just sat there.

Ronnie rode around the loop, then transferred to the Hollis Avenue car. It brought him over to the school, ten minutes late. He got off and started to hurry across the street.

A shadow crossed the entrance to the building.

Ronnie saw the cat. It squatted there, waiting.

He ran.

That's all Ronnie remembered of the rest of the morning. He ran. He ran, and the cat followed. He couldn't go to school, he couldn't be there for the election, he couldn't get rid of the cat. He ran.

Up and down the streets, back and forth, all over the whole neighborhood; stopping and dodging and throwing stones and swearing and panting and sweating. But always the running, and always the cat right behind him.

Once it started to chase him and before he knew it he was heading straight for the place where the burned smell filled the air, straight for the ruins of Mrs. Mingle's cottage. The cat wanted him to go there, wanted him to see—

Ronnie began to cry. He sobbed and panted all the way home. The cat didn't make a sound. It followed him. All right, let it. He'd fix it. He'd tell Ma. Ma would get rid of it for him. Ma.

"Ma!"

He yelled as he ran up the steps.

No answer. She was out. Marketing.

And the cat crept up the steps behind him.

Ronnie slammed the door, locked it. Ma had her key. He was safe now. Safe at home. Safe in bed—he wanted to go to bed and pull the covers over his head, wait for Ma to come and make everything all right.

There was a scratching at the door.

"Ma!" His scream echoed through the empty house.

He ran upstairs. The scratching died away.

And then he heard the footsteps on the porch, the slow footsteps; he heard the rattling and turning of the doorknob. It was old lady Mingle, coming from the grave. It was the witch, coming to get him. It was—

"Ma!"

"Ronnie, what's the matter? What you doing home from school?"

He heard her. It was all right. Just in time, Ronnie closed his mouth. He couldn't tell her about the cat. He mustn't ever tell her. Then everything would come out. He had to be careful what he said.

"I got sick to my stomach," he said. "Miss Sanders said I should come home and lay down."

Ronnie lay in bed and dozed as the afternoon shadows ran in long black ribbons across the bedroom floor. He smiled to himself. What a sucker he was! Afraid of a cat. Maybe there wasn't even a cat—all in his mind. Dope!

"Ronnie—you all right?" Ma called up from the foot of the stairs.

"Yes, Ma. I feel lots better."

Sure, he felt better. He could get up now and eat supper if he wanted. In just a minute he'd put his clothes on and go downstairs. He started to push the sheets off. It was dark in the room, now. Just about supper-time—

**T**HEN Ronnie heard it. A scratching. A scurrying. From the hall? No. It couldn't be in the hall. Then where?

The window. It was open. And the scratching came from the ledge outside. He had to close it, fast. Ronnie jumped out of bed, barking his shin against a chair as he

groped through the dusk. Then he was at the window, slamming it down, tight.

He heard the scratching.

And it came from *inside the room!*

Ronnie hurled himself upon the bed, clawing the covers up to his chin. His eyes bulged against the darkness.

Where was it?

He saw nothing but shadows. Which shadow moved?

Where was it?

Ronnie didn't know. All he knew was that he lay in bed, waiting, thinking of Mrs. Mingle and her cat and how she was a witch and died because he'd killed her. Or had he killed her? He was all mixed up, he couldn't remember, he didn't know what was real and what wasn't real any more. He couldn't tell which shadow would move next.

And then he could.

The round shadow was moving. The round black ball was inching across the floor from beneath the window. It was the cat, all right, because shadows don't have claws that scrape. Shadows don't leap through the air and perch on the bedpost, grinning at you with yellow eyes and yellow teeth . . . *grinning the way Mrs. Mingle grinned.*

The cat was big. Its eyes were big. Its teeth were big. It crouched there, hunching to spring.

Ronnie opened his mouth to scream.

Then the shadow was sailing through the air, coming at him, at his face, at his open mouth. The claws were fastened in his cheeks, forcing his jaws apart. And the head dipped—

Far away, under the pain, somebody was calling.

"Ronnie! Oh, Ronnie!"

Everything was fire. Ronnie lashed out, and suddenly the shadow went away.

"Ronnie! What's the matter with you?"

He sat bolt upright in the bed. His mouth worked, and he opened it to scream, but no sound came out. Nothing came out except that gushing red wetness.

"Ronnie! Why don't you answer me?"

A horrible guttural sound came from deep within Ronnie's throat. But no words. There never would be any words.

"Ronnie—what's the matter? *Has the cat got your tongue?*"