

Weird Tales



JANUARY, 1952

Cover by Jon Arfstrom

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*... if it got food enough in the swamp it could
 grow as big as the Masonic Temple.*
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 they'd find me and call it "murder."*
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 (Copyright 1923 by Rural Publishing Company)
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D. McILWRAITH, Editor

Cat's Cradle



by E. W. Tomlinson

... the glassy eyes of the stuffed crocodile seemed to gleam with mockery.

IT has been a long time since I have seen children playing at cat's-cradle. It was popular pastime when I was a boy and I can remember how children were set to playing the game as an engagement for long

Sabbath afternoons when custom and parents required quiet and repose. On such occasions my sister and I faced each other from hassocks placed in the large parlor bow-window and for several hours were occupied with a

long loop of cord and a printed chart which showed us how to begin and how to progress, alternately lifting a continuously more intricate complex of cord from each others hands.

I have often wondered how the game ever came to this country—what strange group of immigrants brought the cat's-cradle with them from over the sea. But more I wonder how it ever came to assume the rank of a game for children, whose nearest approach to evil was an occasional raid on cookie-jar or jam-pot. Even in the mild form it assumed there remained a taint of an old evil, especially since some of the figures were called by such names as "Hang the Witch", "Flying Goblin" and the like. I can now see more clearly this truth because of what happened to a friend of mine. I trust his veracity completely for reasons which need no explanation here. And I know that his powers of observation are remarkable.

My friend is a man only a little older than myself and we were brought up together. The houses of our parents were so placed that their alley-entrances were exactly opposite and the children of both establishments were constantly back and forth. My sister and I were as much at home in my friend's house as we were in our own and I am happy to remember that the reverse was also true. Our father was the minister of a local church while my friend's father was the director of a bank. So it was that my friend inherited a sizeable and well-invested fortune which has left him free to do as he liked. He has always used his money well, never squandering it as so many wealthy sons of wealthy parents have done. His tastes were always serious and his money only enabled him to indulge his predilection for travel and education. Late in life he married and became himself a father, but the incident which I am about to relate occurred to him when he was a young man. He had been pursuing his studies at the Sorbonne toward a graduate degree. It was near the turn of the century. Science was in the air and superstition had been (it was supposed) thrown upon time's scrap-heap of outmoded things—along with revealed religion, public morality and the divine right of kings. My friend was a child

of those times, deeply infected with an aversion to immaterial things which cannot be examined under a microscope or contained in a test-tube.

The summer had been fine and my friend had long looked forward to a holiday in the Pyrenees after a protracted season of seminars. He had gone by train to Lourdes, examined the records and watched the pilgrims with a preconceived disbelief which no amount of visual proof could touch. Beyond Lourdes he had traveled by voiture up the lower slopes of the chain of rough mountains which separates France from Spain. He had spent some time in the tiny mountain state of Andorra, looking into its strange dualistic government. But when the life in Andorra began to pall he hired a donkey and set out to travel on foot into the Spanish country beyond.

THE road soon became little more than a track across barren stones and earth and my friend had begun to feel a little shut in by the towering peaks and looming sun-baked cliffs. Night was approaching and my friend had seen no sight of human habitation since early afternoon. He was beginning to wonder if he would not be forced to sleep cold upon the ground when he saw with distinct relief a well-constructed house facing him as he rounded a turn among the boulders. For a moment he wondered how anyone could scratch a living from the bare earth and rock about the house but quickly put aside a problem which concerned him less immediately than a warm supper and a comfortable bed.

The lower story of the house was of roughly dressed stone and the upper half-story was of planed timber surmounted by a tiled roof. A few thin chickens scratched dispiritedly in the dooryard and a sleek black cat sat warming itself in the dying rays of the sun. Astout girl was cooking something on an outdoor brazier behind the building, but it required more than one hail to bring her to the roadside. My friend had some difficulty in making her understand his wants, for he spoke the best of French and Spanish while the girl spoke only the bastard Pyrenean patois—so it was more by gesture than word of mouth that my friend finally con-

veyed the idea of his wishing a meal and a night's rest. It was the pesetas which he displayed which appeared to illumine his meaning best of all.

The dull-eyed girl surveyed my friend and his money, then turned and called raucously toward the house. The door was opened and another woman appeared, a stout woman who from resemblance appeared to be the girl's mother. But while the girl was roughly clothed, wearing a cloth about her head and rope sandals on her feet, the mother was well dressed in heavy black silk. Her graying hair was pulled tautly back with combs and she wore black patent-leather buttoned shoes, over the high tops of which bulged her fat ankles. Her fingers were so loaded with broad gold rings set with bright stones, and such a large gold brooch was set in the black silk at her throat that my friend thought suddenly of the border smugglers of whose activities he had lately heard. Somehow he wished he had not so definitely requested his night's lodging. Perhaps the stones of the roadside would have been preferable. However, the deed was done. After an unintelligible conversation with her daughter the old woman took my friend's money, dropped it into a capacious bosom and ushered him into the house.

My friend hardly recalls the supper which was served him because during the meal his attention was so riveted upon a large stuffed crocodile which hung from the ceiling of a recess in a wall. He does recall that the meal was plentiful and good and that the girl ate greedily, leaning over her plate, while the mother ate daintily as a duchess, pausing at intervals to survey her visitor and to direct unanswered remarks to the girl. The sun had set by now and a lamp had been lighted. Its rays were oddly reflected from the teeth and shiny glass eyes of the crocodile, as well as from the highly polished surfaces of a few tall old chairs and a heavily carved armoire which were the room's only furnishings. The ceiling overhead was composed of wooden beams, overlaid by the flooring of the upper attic story. The floor was of stones cut in such a way that a design of a six-pointed star enclosed in a hexagon stood out against regular horizontal lines.

SO much my friend observed of the main room of the house. Then, the meal being finished, he was led down a short hall. At its end was a ladder leading upward through a hole in the ceiling to the attic. It was indicated that his room was above, and when he had climbed the ladder a lighted candle was passed up to him. By its light he saw that a low bed was situated at the end of the attic under a window and that at the other end were several very old chests, carved and bound with brass. He was very tired after his long day of walking and climbing and without delay pulled off his shoes and outer garments, blew out the candle and was soon asleep.

He relates that he could not have been asleep long when he was awakened by a high, thin sound which reminded him of the distant howling of a dog, but infinitely higher in pitch and more prolonged. Sitting up in bed he placed the sound as coming from the room below and suddenly the short hair on the back of his neck stood erect as a cold chill swept over him.

Quietly getting out of bed he peered down the trap-door of the garret but could see only a flickering light on the floor beneath it, a reddish light reflected from the parlor. His curiosity infinitely aroused and his inexplicable fear overcome he peered about him in the darkness, his eye finally encountering a red gleam among the chests at the far end of the attic. It came from a small knothole in the floor boards, upon which he lay down at full length in order to peer through into the parlor. He saw something which to this day his mind will not accept—and about which he has spoken to no one other than myself.

The view which his vantage-point disclosed was broad enough to include the parlor below nearly from wall to wall. Directly beneath him was the six-pointed star. He could see that at each point of the star had been set a low dish containing some material which was burning redly with a great deal of pungent smoke. The two women were seated cross-legged upon the floor within the star and between them lay a square of carpeting. Upon this carpeting rested the black cat which my friend had observed in the dooryard. It crouched, and

its tail twitched as if it were thinking of pleasant things. Over its back and in the air between the women stretched a long loop of cord upon which were strung many bright beads. The women appeared to be playing cat's cradle and my friend was intensely puzzled as to what might be their purpose in playing such a game at such an hour under such strange circumstances.

THE high, thin noise he had heard appeared to come from the women, but by now it had been completely sustained, without break or pause. The red light had become more intense and the room below was becoming partially obscured by smoke. The loop of cord whipped and flashed, evolving patterns more and more complex, the affixed beads seeming to slip into strange planes and angles, from one design into another like the bright patterns in a kaleidoscope. Its effects were hypnotic and my friend now believes that he slipped into a semi-comatose state as he watched the changing shapes through the obscuring smoke in which all outlines were growing dimmed, so that the whole scene below him took on the aspect of a scene under water—objects moving into focus and slipping out of focus in a celeritous rhythm of strange value.

The square of carpeting appeared to roll and twist upon itself in a slow and doubtful fashion while the cat appeared to have rolled on its back with its legs stretched as if being pulled asunder. The loop of cord moved at dizzying speed, the women's hands dipping and twisting like evening birds as they passed the cord back and forth to each other. The old woman's tightly confined hair fell from its combs and over her shoulders in a great cascade and she bent backward and forward to the rising and falling of the thin wail which now seemed to come out of the very walls. The girl appeared to grow larger, to impose herself on the scene as it were, and her hands moved with lightning rapidity in opposition to those of the older woman.

Suddenly the noise ceased. The intense activity stopped. The red light flared once more and quickly died away, the smoke

seeming to dissipate itself. And my friend saw—but what he saw was impossible for him to accept and oppose. So his senses left him; but not before he saw the girl pick up the cat—if cat it still was—and, opening the bosom of her dress, appear to nurse it as a woman would nurse an infant. The old woman slumped forward like a half-empty meal sack.

This much my friend saw before he fainted. When he came to himself it was dawn and the pale light in the garret enabled him to see well enough to get into his clothing. He slipped down the ladder and crossed the empty parlor. As he opened the door the glassy eyes of the crocodile seemed to gleam with mockery. But the sharp, cool air of the mountain morning heartened him as he untied his burro and hastened away from the house and up the valley.

A FEW hours later he made his breakfast at a small settlement which clung to a hillside like barnacles to a ship's hull. At the inn a few guarded queries elicited responses which showed that the villagers detested the old house down the valley—because, Señor, those women are witches. Oh surley, Señor, we go there sometimes to obtain a love-potion or a medicine against the murrain, but no, Señor, we hold no frequent business at that house. It is better, Señor, not to tempt the Devil!

This then is the story told me by my friend when we were both young men and he just returned from Europe. He did not know what to think of his experience, since it fell into no category with which he was familiar—for his mind does not allow for the possibility of witchcraft. But I, being somewhat better versed in these matters, believe that what he saw was nothing less than a sacrament of sorcery, a feeding of the familiar.

Of course, I do not *know*, but that is what I believe. At any rate, my friend *says* that the simulacrum which the girl lifted from the square of carpeting was alive, for he saw it move. He says guardedly, however, that the object was obviously neither animal nor human.