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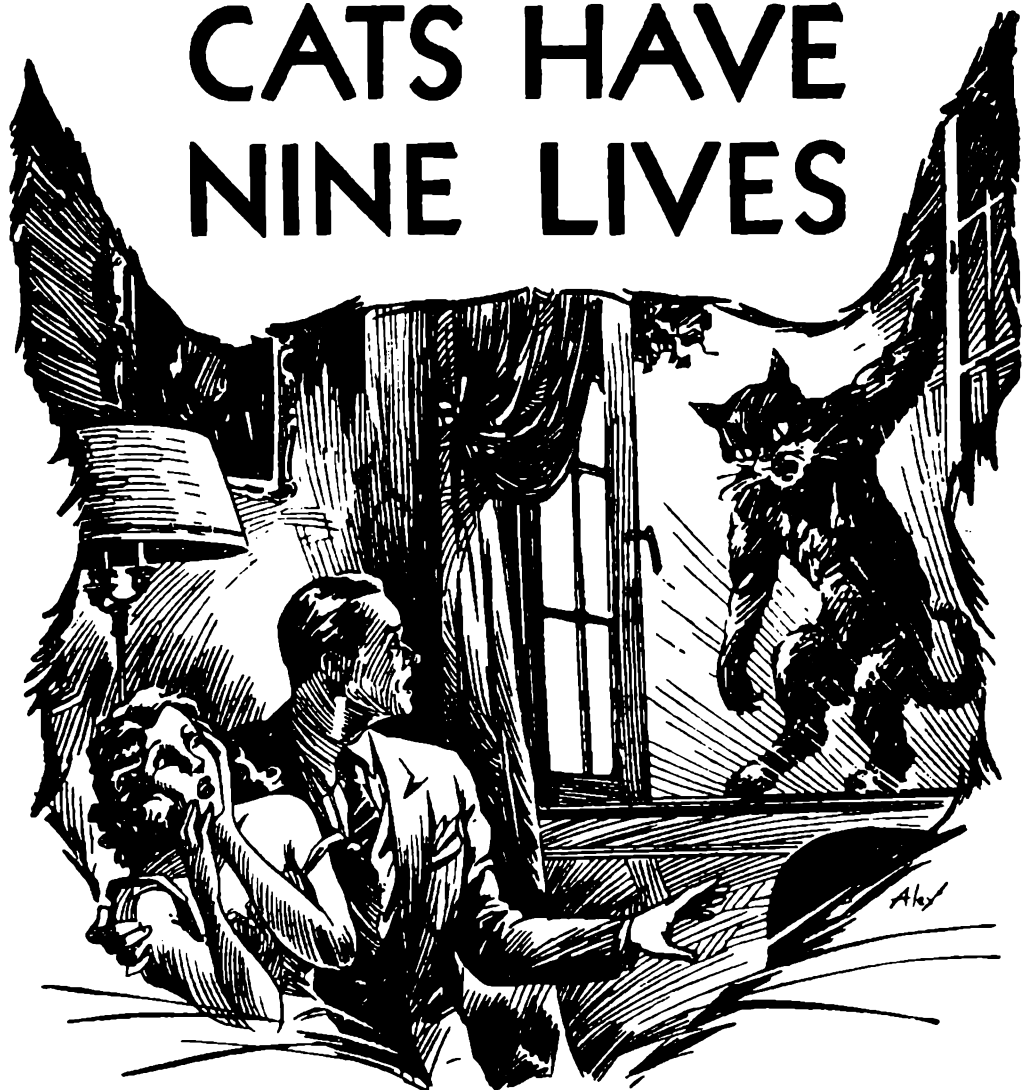
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CATS HAVE NINE LIVES



*Silhouetted against the grey of the window it loomed up—
the shape of a huge cat*

**A Strange and Horrid Being Lurks in that House—and
then Four-Footed Murder Strides, and Strikes
With Saber Talons!**

By HEYDORN SCHLEH

Author of "Keep Off the Grass," "Death at the Crossroads," etc.

I TOOK over Dr. Shaham's practice during his short holiday abroad. Rudolph Birch was one of his patients—an important one because of his wealth. Certainly had it not been for Shaham's particular solicitude for this case I should not

have responded to his call that night.

For it was a ghastly trip—five miles of it along the Shore Road to his lonely place on Gravestone Cove. Cold drizzling rain trickled through the pea-soup fog, splattering in my face and running down my neck.

The monotonous grumble of the restless sea, the blinding glare of my own headlights in the fog, the maddening creeping pace, hanging half out of the window of my automobile, feeling for the edge of the concrete road. And for what? There is really nothing a doctor can do for these chronic cardiacs, except to insist upon rest and quiet. When failure comes, we are as helpless as the rankest layman.

But they were waiting for me, even though the hour was past midnight. A big, sullen-looking fellow whom I took to be the butler met me with an open umbrella as I stepped from the car—as though I could get any wetter!—and led me, I think without uttering a word, through the large living room to the smaller study beyond.

There, behind a huge walnut desk, sat Rudolph Birch.

He was a smallish man, but puffed out, from overliving. He had tiny black beads of eyes—I couldn't tell in that light whether they were cruel, or mad, or frightened. And I could understand at a glance Dr. Shaham's concern for him. Just the type that will go quickly—his very life hanging on a slender thread at which his own nervous energy is constantly tugging perilously.

BUT the thing that fascinated me more than the man, lay on the desk, stretched across the clean, brown desk blotter. It was—the body of a dead, black cat!

"Took you long enough to get here!" he growled, drawing my attention from the dead animal.

Dripping pools of water to the floor, I was in no mood to argue that point. "It's a bad night—"

"Never mind that!" He cut me off, sharply. "Get to work!" Reaching over, he lifted the dead cat by one of its ears and handed it toward me. "I want to know if it's—dead."

I felt my blood boiling. Good God! I came five miles through this—risking my life—to tell him whether a cat was dead!

"I'm a physician—" I began hotly.

"I'm paying you!" he retorted. "I want to know—"

Maybe Shaham takes that sort of thing from his rich patients. I don't ordinarily. But choking back even my anger there was fear—fear for the man. The flushed face, the throbbing temples, the pounding of his heart—I could almost hear the wheezing of the valves. Each beat I thought would be the last, ending in a sickening gurgle of congestion and the rattle of death. I had to calm him, at all costs. I took the cat in my hands.

"It is dead," I said, simply. "Neck broken."

"I know that!" He was off like a madman. "I killed it myself! Wrung its filthy neck with my bare hands! I killed it twice before—and I'll kill it again, by God! Nine times—"

"Stop it!" I shouted. "Shut up! . . . You've got to be quiet! Your heart—"

My sharp command did sober him a little. I went around the desk, opening my bag for my stethoscope; but the instrument brought the flush to his face again.

"I don't want that! I'm all right! Get out! I want to be alone! I want to wait, until it moves again! I—"

Stark mad, of course. Nothing to do but humor him. I succeeded in giving him three grains of phenobarbital, a mild sedative, then left him alone to avoid further agitation. The butler followed me out—I had forgotten he was with me all the while—and closed the door.

The living room had been deserted and dimly lighted when we passed through. Now the household, aroused from slumber by our raised voices, was converging upon it in varied array of pajamas and negligées. I catalogued them from Dr. Shaham's description:

Mrs. Birch, whose imaginary ills had contributed so handsomely toward Shaham's holiday, was much as I had expected.

"I know! You're the new doctor!" she gushed at me. "You *do*—look young—but Dr. Shaham seems to think you are capable. You *must* give me some medicine before you leave!"

I brushed her aside, rather rudely, I'm afraid, only to face the gaunt, bespectacled, slightly neurotic son, Gerald. He had been reading in bed; he still carried the book in his hand, a finger marking his place.

"I know what it is," he said in a tinny, sing-song voice. "It's the cats. The pater never did like them. I don't know why. I like them; don't you?"

BEYOND, peering through the portières, a clean-cut youth who must have been Peter, the chauffeur; and clinging to him, a frightened maid with her hair in curlers. Opposite, apart from the rest, stood a girl.

She, I knew instantly, was Leone, the adopted daughter. Shahan had described her as pretty, the way an elderly man says "pretty," without much emphasis. I found his description inadequate. She was beautiful, in striking contrast to the rest of the clan, even in negligée and with her hair combed back and with the frightened look in her eyes.

"Is he—will he be all right, Doctor?" she asked tremulously.

I was drawn to her instinctively. She was the only sane person in the whole crazy room, not excluding myself. After that agonizing drive through the fog and the events of the past few minutes I was far from sure of my own sanity.

"I think he will be all right. I have given him a sedative. He must be kept from exciting himself like that."

I had not yet removed my wet, dripping slicker. With that as a pretext, I drew her to the hall, apart from the others, where I could talk to her.

"Tell me," I asked, "what is it all about? Has he been—like that—before?"

She was frightened; I could tell that. Her voice was almost pleading.

"Oh, I don't know what it is! It is all so—uncanny! He always has hated cats. Perhaps abnormally. We never had any in the house. But this one—"

She stopped, looking about, as though expecting something to pounce upon her.

"What about this one?" I urged, gently.

"It was Monday evening," she went on, hesitantly. "He found it in his study, nestled in a pile of papers. In a rage, he killed it, and made Gerald take the body and bury it. But last night it was there in the study again—or another black cat was. . . . Do you think I'm mad? Are we all mad?"

"Go on," I urged.

"Well, it—a cat—was there. And he killed it again. Or so he insisted. And then tonight it was back again! Do cats have nine lives?"

I started to answer, but my words were drowned out by a cry—the most horrible cry, I think, I have ever heard. Chilling, galvanizing, drawn-out, like the wail of a soul in torment, ending at last in a dull thud that all of us knew instinctively was that of a body falling.

It seemed minutes before the spell was broken; before I could make my paralyzed legs carry me across the floor to the study door. But I was the first to reach it. The others crowded behind me.

Rudolph Birch lay slumped on the floor behind the desk—dead. But there was blood—blood gushing from livid gashes across his face and about his neck. I bent over him, as much to shield the horrible sight from the women as to make a futile examination. Regaining control of myself, I faced them.

"He is dead," I told them. "Congestive failure—just the thing we have been afraid excitement would bring on. These wounds, while deep, are only flesh wounds. They are not the cause of death. But something has happened in this room—something for which I cannot account. Under the circumstances, I shall have to notify the police. I hope you will not object?"

I TURNED, lifted the French-type phone from its base, and waited for a response. There was none. Leone moved to my side, took my arm. Her big brown eyes searched mine, steadily, as though she were putting her trust in me. And I couldn't keep

my eyes off her. I jiggled the hook again. The phone was dead.

"Is there another phone in the house?" I asked her.

She shook her head. "No."

I tried to conceal my alarm—my sense of helplessness. There was not another house within a mile. I had not even a gun. Rudolph Birch had called me on that phone little more than an hour ago. Since then, someone had cut the wires. Someone had slashed his face and neck, and frightened him to death. With what intent? We had to get help at once.

I didn't want to leave them. I had no way of telling what might happen next. I was more than a little suspicious of the butler; he seemed to be glowering at me menacingly, following my every movement with those shifty little eyes. Peter seemed on the level. I asked him to go.

"You can take my car," I told him. "It is already in the driveway. Go to the nearest phone. Tell the police there has been a death, and they will notify the coroner. Return here as soon as you can."

"Yes, sir." Without knowing it, he offered a salute and went up to put on some clothes.

Leone was still holding to my arm, but it was only after Peter had gone that I noticed she was tugging at my coatsleeve, trying to attract my attention. I followed her eyes.

The body of the cat that had been on the desk was gone. But in the shadow, beyond the direct light of the desk lamp, only its eyes glistening, crouched—a live black cat!

I think the rest of them saw it at the same moment. Mrs. Birch uttered a little cry and collapsed. She would have fallen had not Leone caught her and helped her to the other room. The butler's face was a study in emotion—some emotion I could not analyze in the excitement of the moment. But Gerald came quickly forward.

"I'm not afraid of cats. I like them. . . . Here, Kitty—"

He crossed to where the cat crouched, stooped and caught it in his arms. But the cat squirmed, snarled viciously and lashed out with

its claws. Blood spurted from livid streaks across the boy's face.

For just a moment he was startled. Then there was a light in those dull eyes—the same light I had seen in Rudolph Birch's eyes—and there was a snarl on his lips. With one quick motion he had twisted the cat's neck—killed it instantly.

Just as quickly, the mad urge passed. He dropped the body to the floor and stood watching it, almost tearful, oblivious to his bleeding wounds. I started toward him, intending to dress them, but he motioned me away.

"I'll be all right. I'll take care of it myself."

He started out. After all, his wounds were not serious.

"Use a little iodine," I called after him. Mrs. Birch, now hysterical, needed my care more than the boy.

The butler found a cover to throw over the body in the study, then closed the door. I heard Peter come down the stairs and go out the back way. It wouldn't be long now until we would have help.

It was fully ten minutes before I could leave the woman. As soon as possible I returned to the study alone, and lifted the cover from the body. There was something I wanted to see.

I moved the desk lamp over, so it shone directly on the lifeless form. Then I dropped to my knees, bending closer, wiping away the sticky, clotting blood with a piece of cotton, so I could see the wounds.

There were four of them, parallel lines across the face, fully an inch apart, and as much as three-quarters of an inch deep in the fleshy part of the cheek. I opened the man's shirt. There were other marks there that I hadn't seen in my cursory examination before—pierce marks, in sets of five. Claw marks! But the marks of some huge paw. The cat that lay on the floor—still dead, thank God!—couldn't have done that. Nor could any cat, short of a tiger!

I started to replace the covering over the body. Suddenly I was conscious of something bending over me.

I turned quickly. It was the sullen butler. I hadn't heard him follow me into the study. I had moved the desk lamp, so he had made no shadow. He had been standing there, his hand resting on the desk—on one of the metal book-ends. He was still clutching it when he started back as I turned. Recovering himself, he replaced it on the desk and turned away without a word. I had the uncomfortable feeling of having had a very close call.

I returned to the living room. Mrs. Birch seemed to be quiet. The maid was sitting with her. Leone, I noticed, wasn't there. Nor was the butler. The latter fact concerned me more at the moment, for I had resolved to keep a sharp eye on him, at least until the police came.

I began to wonder what I would do if I were a detective—or what the police would do. What did it all mean? What crime, if any, had been committed? Who could have done it? And for what reason? There seemed to be no answer to those questions. I almost had myself believing that the cat had come back to life. But those deep scratches—

I parted the portières and peered out into the hall. The butler wasn't there. Gerald was coming down the broad stairs. He had dressed, in dark trousers and a polo shirt, and had strapped adhesive rather clumsily over the scratches on his face. I went to meet him.

"Are you all right, boy?" I asked.

"Yes, sir. It wasn't bad. I'm rather sorry I—er—killed it. I'm not cruel, really. It's just my temper. I can't always control it."

I smiled a little. He seemed mild; harmless, at least. That was something to be thankful for in that madhouse. But he shouldn't have used adhesive over iodine on the cuts. I started to tell him that, but I was interrupted by a scream.

It was Leone who screamed. The cry came from upstairs.

I took the steps three at a time. Leone was in the hall when I reached the top landing. Out of the open

I darted to her side. She swayed a little. I put my arms about her to steady her.

"I'm sorry," she whispered. "I was frightened!"

SHE let herself relax in my arms. The hand that had been covering her neck slipped away—and there was blood on it! There was a scratch on her neck!

The sight of that maddened me inexplicably. I could regard the others impersonally, but the sight of so much as a harmless little scratch on her neck tore at something inside me I couldn't understand. The butler started past, down the hall, but I stopped him.

"You stay here!" I commanded, sharply. "We'll have this out—now! By God, if you've hurt her—"

"Oh, no! No, please! . . . It's all a mistake! . . . Let me get my breath!" the girl pleaded.

I patted her gently. "You're all right now," I soothed. "Take your time."

She looked up into my eyes. "It was really my fault. I went into mother's room without turning on the light. I was feeling in the closet . . . I wanted to get a heavier wrap. Gustav heard me. He thought it was—someone else. I guess we frightened each other terribly. . . . Don't you see? It was an—accident!"

I didn't see it at all. "It would have been an accident, too, if a metal book-end had dropped on my head, wouldn't it?" I remarked, caustically.

Gustav gave me a malignant look, a look that would have meant fight to the death of one of us, had it not been lost in sudden total darkness. For at that moment, the lights went out.

I stood still, clutching the girl close to me, expecting momentarily to feel the weight of that big brute lunging toward me. On that soft carpet one couldn't hear footsteps. I had no idea where he was.

It seemed an eternity that we stood there. Nothing happened. The maid downstairs screamed once. Mrs. Birch was sobbing. Leone was breathing

rising and falling against my chest. Little by little, the tension wore off.

"Fuse blew out."

It was Gustav, the butler, whose voice came from the darkness. I breathed a sigh of relief at the sound of it. He hadn't tried to kill me. His voice gave no sign that he intended to.

"We've got to get a light! Mother is frightened!" The girl drew away from me a little.

"I have a flashlight in my car," I remembered. "I'll get it." I had not as yet heard Peter leave with the car.

"I'll lead you down the stairs," Leone suggested. "I can find my way in the dark."

She slipped out from my arms, a little reluctantly I thought—or perhaps the reluctance was mine—and took my hand. Slowly we made our way down in the pitch dark. At the bottom landing she stopped short.

"You go straight ahead to the door," she said, abruptly; and before I could move she had slipped away. I wondered why.

I found the door, opened it, and went out. It was still raining, but the fog had lifted a bit. I could see the parking lights of my car. I started toward them.

TWO long steps from the entry I stumbled over something—something soft. Sprawled face forward to the soft ground.

Even as I was flying through the air it came to me. Peter hadn't gone for help! If he had, my car wouldn't be here! I knew in the instant—the thing I stumbled over was a body—Peter's body!

I scrambled to my feet and raced toward the car. No need to go back. I knew as surely as though I had stopped to examine him that Peter lay there in the drizzling rain, and that he was dead. I found the flashlight and confirmed that a moment later. He had been struck over the head, his skull crushed. His uniform cap, sticky with blood, lay beside him.

Someone opened the door of the house. I turned the light in that direction. It was Gustav, the butler.

"What is it? . . . Oh, Lord!"

He shrank back from the body. I wondered if he were really as surprised as he pretended to be.

And yet, much as I distrusted the man, I had no other choice than to trust him now. The police wouldn't be here, now; they hadn't been notified. I had to have help. Hesitantly, I handed him the flashlight.

"Take this. See if you can fix the lights. I'll get him inside."

He took the light from my hand and was gone. I wondered if he would fix the lights.

I dropped to my knees in the soft mud, and swung the body across my shoulder. I struggled to the door. I had just got inside the hall, when the lights came on.

They came on suddenly, without warning. It was like a picture suddenly flashed on a screen, indelibly printed on my mind. Leone, her face livid, stood at the foot of the stairs, some papers in her hands. Someone had just gone upstairs. I saw only a man's foot and a single dark trouser-leg.

I dropped the body to the floor—the man was dead, anyway—and leaped to the stairway. But the girl blocked the way, stretching her arms from the wall to the newel-post.

"No, No, No! Please don't!" she cried. I started back, incredulous.

"Who was that?" I demanded, more sharply than I had intended. She was sobbing, almost hysterically.

"I can't tell you! I don't know! I won't tell you!" She was screaming it, madly. "Oh, you've got to go! You've got to leave us alone—get away from here! Please! Won't you go away?"

It was a plea, a frantic plea, why, God only knew. She swayed a little; I was afraid she would faint. I couldn't stand it, that look in her eyes. I caught her in my arms, held her tight. She tried to break away.

"Listen to me!" I commanded. "You've got to listen to me! I can't leave you! This is murder! Do you understand that? Peter is dead! Murdered!"

She uttered a sharp little cry—a hurt cry—and was limp in my arms.

"Can't you do—anything? Can't you—save him? Isn't there any way?"

I FELT her agony tearing at my heart.

"Listen to me!" I whispered. "You've got to believe in me! You've got to believe that I'll help you, that I'll do anything! But you must tell me the truth. You must tell me everything. Will you?"

She recovered herself a little. Pushed away from me. "I—I can't tell you. You can help—by going away—now—please!"

I hesitated. I would have done almost anything for her. Almost even that. But I couldn't leave her.

"I—I have to take care of—him—first!"

It was a clumsy thing to say. I wanted time; time to collect my thoughts. I returned to the body I had dropped on the floor, lifted it.

I didn't want to take it into the living-room. Mrs. Birch was in there. I didn't want her to know—yet. There was another door, further down the hall. I started to open it with my free hand.

Leone stopped me. "Don't!"—she cried. "Please don't go in there!"

I hesitated only a moment. Some mad impulse seized me. I thrust her aside.

The door led, I found, to the study. I put the body down on the floor and looked around the room. I saw why she wanted to keep me out.

The door of the safe was open!

I remembered then that she had left me at the bottom of the stairs, near that very door. What impulse had siezed her to open the safe? What had she found there? Who was the man who had run up the stairs?

She had followed me into the room. I gave her an accusing look. She faltered, then came close to me.

"You said you would help me," she said. "Now I'm—afraid! Terribly afraid! I—I don't know what to say! What would you think—what would you do, if I were to tell you I did—all this? I frightened father to death! I opened the safe! I—killed Peter!"

"I'd say it's a damn lie!" I retorted hotly. "I know you didn't! You're lying to cover someone else! You're—"

I stopped. Why would a woman lie to cover anyone? For only one reason. Love! Someone in her life, in the life of this creature who had been adopted into the family! The man on the stairs! What a fool I had made of myself!

And what an abysmal fool I was going to make of myself! For I knew instinctively that I would help her, that I couldn't help helping her, even if it meant a rope around my own neck!

But how? What was the answer to all of it? It was like a crazy nightmare. There must be some awakening from it; something, something we could do.

I was near desperation when the door opened suddenly. Gerald stood there, but it wasn't the mild, meek Gerald I had seen before. There was that light of madness in his eyes, the light that had flashed for just a moment when he killed the cat. Leone shrank away from him.

"Gerald! Don't!"

"Don't what?" he hissed, venomously. "I know now! You did it! I thought he'd cut you off—I always thought that! You're only an orphan—but you get everything! But you won't get it! I'll kill you—"

HE LUNGED toward her. I sprang between them. He was light, frail. I sent him sprawling on his back.

"Gerald! Don't! Be quiet!" Leone screamed hysterically. He started to get up, crouched, as though to leap at her again. I moved toward him.

"I'll kill you!" he screamed again. But instead he scrambled to his feet and ran away.

I hesitated; hesitated between springing after him, and staying with Leone. It was only a moment, but that moment was nearly fatal to both of us. I ran upstairs, but he was out of sight by that time. I looked in room after room, but there was no sign of him. I went back again to the

rooms, searching the closets and peering under beds in frenzied haste. He must be there. He had come up the stairs. Then, suddenly, the lights went off again.

I was on my knees when it happened. I had no idea what room I was in; no idea which way to go to the stairs; no idea where Leone might be. Inky blackness, and a madman loose in a madhouse, determined to kill Leone!

I staggered toward where I thought I had left the door. Struck it head-on, and bounded back. I tried it again. Made the hall. My eyes were becoming adjusted to the darkness, and there was a little light, the deep gray of early dawn. I could at least see windows. I called to Leone. She answered from downstairs somewhere. I made my way down.

It was maddening, that search for her in the darkness. I found her at last, in the study. Folded her in my arms.

Then an eternity of waiting, waiting in the dark for death to strike, not knowing what form it might take. Straining for a sound, for a bit of light, but there was no sound save the sobbing of the woman in the next room; no light but the blanket of deep blue-gray across the window. Yet it would come.

It did come. Silhouetted against the gray of the window, it loomed up—the shape of a cat, a huge cat, as big as a tiger—standing on its hind paws. Leone trembled convulsively and buried her head. The thing snarled—an ungodly snarl, neither of beast nor man. It was coming closer . . . closer. . . .

We shrank back from that—back to the wall—until we could go no further, until we were face to face with death. I pressed her head close to me. Kissed her, just once; then thrust her behind me.

I lunged, struck out at the head of the thing with my bare fist. I might as well have hit a pillow. The thing snarled. It caught me, buried its sharp claws in my flesh, tore—

I fought, with blood gushing from raw wounds, struck feeble blows that

slid off the thing's soft, furry sides. I still tried to fight when there wasn't the strength left to move, with those claws still tearing at me. Then—

Perhaps death is like that; something like an explosion. It seemed I heard breaking glass, a sickening thud, shots—a lot of them—all at once. Then oblivion.

THE sun was shining when I awoke. My first thought was that I had made the grade, because they don't have sunshine in Hades. Someone was picking on my back, without hurting me much because it was sort of numb back there. I was lying face down, but I could see the sunshine on the blue-carpeted floor. Maybe they were tacking on my wings. I must have laughed at that thought. And then, before I knew it, Leone was down there on her knees, on the very spot where the sun had been. And she was holding my head.

"It's all right now," she was whispering. "It's all over, and you'll be all right. Gustav went for help. If he hadn't—" She shuddered a little, then smiled, and kissed me on the forehead.

Gustav?

Slowly it all came back to me. Then, a little later, when they had finished the sutures and bandaging, they let me sit up and showed me the thing.

And a horrible thing it was! A suit made out of skins of cats, even to the paws and grotesquely shaped head. But for paws there were hooked knives, ground down to the sharpness of razor blades, set in leather gloves! An instrument of death which only the mind of a fiend could conceive!

And it was that, the mind of a perverted fiend, that the frail body of Gerald Birch harbored. Dr. Knowlton, a psychiatrist, determined that.

Even as a child, it was discovered, Gerald had wanted cats. Always they had been forbidden him because of his father's unreasoning aversion to them. Preying on a feeble mind, they became a maniac obsession to him. He read about them, brooded over feline cunning and ferocity, so foreign to his own frail, timid self.

Later he found a way to keep cats, unobserved, in the unused attic. There he had fashioned his weird cat-suit. While he had it on he could imagine himself to be a cat. He could be fierce, ferocious, cunning. Without it, he was only his frail self.

Probably he hadn't intended to kill anyone in the beginning. It was just a weird, perverted trick, perhaps provoked by the escape of one of his pets, which was killed by his father, and which he was made to bury.

The rest came step by step—the death of Rudolph Birch, frightened to death by the sight of the horrible avenging feline monster; Peter killed to keep the alarm from being spread; the opening of the safe to get his father's will; and at last, the chagrin, on reading it, at learning that instead of being sole heir, he was substantially at the mercy of an adopted sister!

Gerald was dead—mercifully. Mrs. Birch was sent to the hospital. She will be there a long time, recovering from that shock. I was bandaged, it seemed, from head to foot. Leone volunteered to drive me home.

IT was wonderful, even being a mass of gauze, driving in the morning sunlight again. Leone drove slowly, and I was glad she did. At

that, we drew up before my apartment and stopped all too soon. She cut the ignition, then turned to me and smiled.

"End of the line!" she said, cheerily. Then, turning away from me, she looked down the long shaded street ahead, wistfully, as though lost in thought. And she repeated it, softly, more to herself than to me: "End of the line!"

I studied her face. "You came out of it all pretty well," I suggested. "It's a large estate. You're pretty well fixed."

She nodded. "Yes. Pretty well fixed. I should be thankful for that, shouldn't I? But—"

"But what?" I asked her.

"I never had anyone when I was little," she went on, absently. "Never anyone of my own. I was always alone.

"Then the Birches took me in, and that was wonderful—just having someone, and loving them, and pretending they were really mine. Even poor, weak Gerald! But now they're gone, and I'm just back where I started. No one—"

I slipped my arm about her, drew her close to me, ever so gently, as though she were a fragile thing. For I wanted to keep her, always, looking just as she did then.

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