

Weird Tales



ALL STORIES NEW—NO REPRINTS

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Corey's Cat

By *HARRY RAYMOND*

THE ending of my affair with Mrs. Corey was messy enough, but what happened to John Brown, my Scottie, ugly as that was, saved me from a worse conclusion. John Brown, throughout all the deplorable business, showed himself subtler and wiser than his master. Beasts are more aware of some kinds of reality than humans.

John Brown and I both approved highly of the little cottage on the pond's edge; John because the surrounding pines were full of red squirrels that chattered defiantly at him, and I because this quiet place high in the hills seemed to be just the spot I wanted for my six weeks of convalescent loafing. Overwork, breakdown, and a touch of stomach ulcers.

It was dusk when I finished unpacking, and found that the shed containing the generating set was locked and there were no lights. It was a long half mile around the pond to the central lodge where the occupants of the cottages ate their meals, and I didn't feel up to walking that far. A few hundred yards away my nearest neighbor's lights winked softly on, and through the pines John Brown and I walked in search of a phone.

A small man in a dull red lounging jacket answered my tap on the door. I couldn't see his face clearly because he wore a long green eye shade which cast an emerald lambency over his features. I had an impression that under this odd light, his facial muscles were moving nervously like little fish seen far down in water.

"My name is Martin," I said. "I'm your next door neighbor for a few weeks. I'd like to use your phone if you have one."

"Of course," he answered, opening the door. His hands were long for such a small man. He shut the door before John Brown could get in. "Right there. My name's Corey."

I made my call to the central lodge.

"Sit down," said Mr. Corey. "Smoke?"

We chatted as strangers might. Soon, with the directness of one possessed by his subject, he told me of his work. He had written a history of necromancy in America, and he was expecting a batch of proofs in a day or so.

"An odd field," he said with a little self-conscious snigger. "But I come by it honestly. My ancestors came from Salem village." He paused.

I could see I was expected to say something, and I did come up with the right thing. "You're descended from that Giles Corey?" I asked. "The one they pressed under a door during the witchcraft trials?"

He giggled. "Yes. It must have been a definitely messy business."

"It certainly was a useless one," I said, lighting up again.

He looked at me quickly under his long green shade. "Oh, I don't know," he said in swift protest. "Ever read Montagu Somers? Do you know his thesis that witches still like cellar hollows where houses were once and still work mischief? As a matter of fact, I have made an experiment myself." He stopped as if he had said more than he meant to say.

From the door, John Brown growled as I have never heard him growl. He was staring into the room, his hackles stiff. I followed his look.

An enormous tortoise shell cat, splendid



*There are only two kinds of danger—
one is physical, and the other spiritual. This
man faced both. . . .*

in yellow and black, slid into the room. She looked at me, and John's rumbling was even deeper. Her eyes flickered briefly at John and back to me. I had a swift, eerie sensation of being appraised and approved.

"A beauty," I said to Corey.

"She is," said Corey. He seemed to be moved with an inward mirth. "And she likes you."

The cat leaped purring to the arm of my chair. She peered into my face, and then

laid a paw on my forearm. As she spread her toes, I could see that her claws were painted scarlet.

Corey caught my look. "A whim of my wife's," he said. "But not unbecoming, what?"

"No," I said, as the cat started to settle down in my lap. At this John Brown set up such a dolorous noise that I stood up, putting the cat gently aside. "I'm afraid John Brown's behaving badly. He doesn't like cats, and I've already trespassed on your time. Thank you."

THE cat undulated to the door and John Brown shrank as far as his pride would let him. Something of deep enmity, so palpable that even dull humans could get it, went between the two. John trembled all the way home.

The sun was high and hot next morning and I lay on the strip of beach soaking in the heat. John was back in the shade.

"Hello," said a woman's voice. "I'm Mrs. Corey, your neighbor. Do you mind company?"

I opened my eyes, said "Hello," mechanically and blinked, and not only from the bright sunlight. Mrs. Corey tossed aside her beach wrap and lay down on the sand beside me. Her face was warm amber, and her hair was black and silky, faintly curled. I got up on one elbow. "Not at all," I said.

Mrs. Corey had a gorgeous body and she was utterly candid about it. She lay face downward, her head on her forearms, her eyes on me. Her swim suit was black satin, and the contrast of it with her golden skin was a color symphony that vaguely made me think of something. An inasmuch as the upper section of it was a mere dark thread across the subtle curvings of her back, the result was that no man, not even a bloodless convalescent like myself, could look on it and have any more interest in the vivid scenery of the mountain lake.

John Brown elected to spoil the meeting. He came slow and bristling across the sand, his voice dark with hate.

I got up. "My dog's a nuisance," I said. "Will you excuse me for a moment?" I dragged poor John to the shed, locked him in, and came back. "Sorry," I apologized, and lay down on the hot sand.

In a week, I was far gone in infatuation. It wasn't love, I'm sure, for I never respected her because of the cold-blooded way she went after a tired lonely shell of a man like myself. And I grew to have, swelling side by side with my desire for her, a growing formless fear. Even in my foolishness, I knew that Mrs. Corey was very dangerous.

I WAS thoroughly ashamed of myself, of course, not only because I was such a pushover, but because my wife was working hard in town to keep me up in the hills. But shame and decency were helpless before the thing that was burning in me. I must have been pretty obvious about it all, for when I had been there about two weeks, I went over to ask the Corey's to be my guest at a stock company's show down in the valley, and I found that Corey knew.

"Mrs. Corey isn't available evenings," he said, his face inscrutable under the long green visor. He paused, then said, "Sit down, Martin." He waited a while, playing with his fingertips, and spoke like a lecturer. "There are two kinds of danger," he said, looking at the ceiling, "the one is physical, the other spiritual. There are situations where both exist."

I was in a mood to be blunt. "Irate husband oils up his gun?" I asked.

He shook his head. A deep pitying sadness was strong on his weirdly-lighted face. "I won't explain," he said, "and you wouldn't believe me if I did. Suppose we let it go that you are in danger. Why don't you go somewhere else?"

I stood up. Shame and confusion make

a man foolishly stubborn. "I'm staying," I said, "Till I get ready to go."

He made a gesture as though he were washing his long white hands. "I did what I could," he said. He seemed to be reminiscing rather than talking to me. He got up. "Sorry we can't accept your offer."

"Good night," I said stiffly, and went back to my cabin.

NEXT morning Mrs. Corey and I walked along the narrow strip of beach until we came to the little outlet of the pond. Lying motionless in six inches of crystal water was a trout, red speckles vivid against the snowy sand.

Mrs. Corey seemed to breathe swiftly. "Could you scoop him out?" she whispered.

I shook my head. "Doctor told me once I had the fastest reflexes he ever saw," I said, "but I can't move the way a trout does."

"Look," she breathed. She knelt swiftly, and the concave arching line of her back was superb. Slowly she lowered her hand toward the water's surface, her slim fingers claw-curved, the scarlet pointed nails gleaming. A curious slow writhing rippled along her spine. I watched her with tolerant amusement, knowing the speed of a startled trout.

Mrs. Corey struck with a scooping motion. With bewildering speed she swung on her knees and pounced with both hands on the trout that flopped madly on the sloping shore.

"You got him!" I gasped unbelievably. Then I stopped, for my back crawled with gooseflesh.

Still on her hands and knees, Mrs. Corey was smiling at me. Between her sharp white teeth the trout was a green and white spasm of motion. I looked away just in time, but I couldn't help hearing the crunching noise.

I got hold of myself in a moment and turned to Mrs. Corey again. In that in-

stant I realized what it was about her face that had been troubling me. When I looked straight at her face, her mouth was sober, serious, but when I saw her profile she always seemed to be faintly amused.

"I'll have to be going," I stammered, "I must get the noon train." I had a feeling that I wanted to be sick.

She moved close to me. "You're going home?"

"For a check-up," I said, pulling away a little.

"You'll see your wife?" Her eyes had a slit-like cast, but this may have been due to the fact that she was looking into the bright sun as she peered up at me.

"Yes, of course," I answered. Then, not wisely, but because I could think of nothing else, "Will you look after John Brown for me? I'll have to leave him locked up."

She smiled. "I'll look after him tonight. Hurry back."

I thought that I had myself well in hand when I came up to my cabin two days later. I opened the door and stepped into the room where bluebottles buzzed resonantly.

John Brown was lying in the center of the floor, dead.

I moved to kneel beside him, and to my sick rage I saw that he had no eyes. Whatever had killed him had literally clawed his eyes out. Poor John had died like a wolf, with his teeth fast locked, and between his fangs were tufts of hair, black and tawny.

I FOUND myself knocking savagely on Corey's door. Corey answered, his green shade incongruous in the bright daylight.

"What's the matter, Martin?" he asked, for my anger and horror must have been plain on my face. "What's happened?"

"Where's your cat?" I demanded. My voice was a harsh croak.

Corey sighed before answering. "Oh," he said in a sad, tired voice. "So that's it."

He exhaled. "I don't know. That cat is never around in daytime."

"She's killed my dog," I said. My hands were trembling.

Mrs. Corey answered, sliding from her bedroom. She had on a black silk house coat, and her hair was tied with yellow ribbons of an odd hue.

"Oh, that's too bad," she said. Her face was toward me and her mouth grave and serious. "He was all right when I left him out for his run last night."

"Where's your cat?" I repeated, stupidly. "You've got no right to let a creature like that loose."

"We can't do much about it now," said Corey, the same sadness still in his voice. He shuffled some sheets of paper together. "Or perhaps we can." He seemed to be talking to himself.

"She always seems to do this sort of thing when the moon is nearing full," said Mrs. Corey. "We can't control her." She was not looking at me, and seen from the side, her mouth was curved in that fixed enigmatic smile.

"I'll have to do something, I'm afraid," said Corey. "We can't let her keep this up." He drew a deep breath of resolve. "Would you mind doing something for me, Martin? Even though it seems an imposition on top of all this, will you correct these proofs? This afternoon?" He held out the bundle of papers.

Despite my anger I could see that the little man was moved. Behind his eyes I could sense something pleading with me to take the proof sheets. He kept his tone casual, but his face, turned away from his wife, was desperate.

I took the sheets. "I shall be glad to look them over," I said coldly. "Good afternoon."

An hour later I had returned from giving John Brown decent burial under a blasted pine on a hill crest. Sorrow and wrath were strong tides in me as I sat in my room with my hands balled into fists. The door opened and light steps pattered across the room. I didn't need to look up.

Mrs. Corey put her arm about my shoulders.

"He's gone to town. He'll be gone all the afternoon. I came over to tell you how sorry I was." She pressed against my shoulder and the warmth of her body came through her single covering of black silk.

I turned to look at her. Her house coat was open and in the V of the neckline, I could see an ugly red scratch scored on the blond tintings of her skin. I did not know that I had the capacity to loathe anybody or anything as I loathed her at that moment. I had been thinking hard the last hour.

I stared full at her. I said, "Go away!"

Our eyes were glittering swords, crossed. Her face was full of fresh fury, and her red lips were drawn tightly back over her white teeth. I was so full of a cold pure hate that I couldn't be afraid, though a sensible man would have shuddered at the things that moved deep down in her opalescent eyes.

Silently she moved to the door. She stood there a moment, lovely as a coral snake, full of beauty and death. Then she was gone and never a word had she spoken.

I felt, with my dismissal, as though some dreadful menace had gone from me. But now, after my visit home, and after the death of John Brown, I felt that any association with her was infinitely perverse and deadly, a peril to the soul. Dimly I began to understand what Corey had been talking about.

I tried to work, after I had collected my thoughts, on Corey's proofs, but with little success. They were full of necromantic nonsense: Why the cold iron of a horse-shoe over the door keeps witches away; how werewolves and werecats can only be killed with silver implements, and a vast deal of similar run-of-the-mill rubbish. But I promised that I would read it, and I did. Toward the end of the pages there was more pertinent material.

I dined at the lodge that evening. Across the dining-room I could see Corey, his shade off for once, and weariness and despair were clear on his face for anyone to see. Mrs. Corey was busy with her rare steak and never once did she look my way.

THE moon was an immense flattened orange over the hills as I went back to my room to wait. I suppose I should have been frightened, but there is room in a man's heart for only one strong emotion at a time, and I was too full of vengeance for fear to get in. The moon came higher, and the lodge orchestra began to play.

It is strange how even civilization and years of soft living cannot strip from a man those things nature has put in him for his preservation. Even with the orchestra going I heard the padding, and I was ready when Corey's cat appeared on my window-sill, sinister against the pale moon, glowing eyes yellow holes in her black silhouette.

I walked around the edge of the pond a little later. From the kitchen door of the lodge I saw a light shining. The steward emerged for a drag on a cigarette.

"Good evening," I said. "You're working late."

He swore gently. "Checking the silver," he said. "I think somebody swiped a steak knife."

"Too bad," I sympathized. "By the way, would you mind if I washed my hands in your sink?"

"Not at all," he said. "There's soap and a towel."

He came in as I finished washing. He gave an exclamation of delight and stooped. "There's that everlasting toad-sticker now," he said. "How'd I miss it?"

"We all of us miss a lot of things sometimes," I said. "Thanks for letting me wash my hands."

"That's all right, sir," he said.

I went back to town next morning. Corey really needn't have sent me a marked copy of the local paper telling of the murder of his wife, whose body was found, a few days after I left, under a blasted pine on a hilltop, her throat cut. All the metropolitan papers were full of it, and the details of the rather hopeless search for the killer.

It was very decent of Corey to let that time elapse. I hope he isn't a talker.