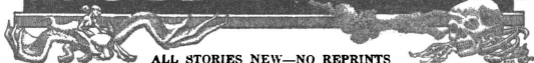


Weird Tales



ALL STORIES NEW—NO REPRINTS

SEPTEMBER, 1942

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Vol. 36, No. 7

Eyes of the Panther

By *KUKE NICHOLS*

"I have made a superb delirium
with only a lizard to start on."
— *James Branch Cabell*

THOSE last weeks in the city exhausted my endurance and tore even at my reason, but when at last I sped away from the bitterness and humiliation through the gray hills of New England, I felt my troubles slip away behind. I knew the mad whirlpool of my mind would slow toward placidity in the house my family had held for generations, the beautiful house on the high hill that looked eastward to the shining of the ocean.

I would be alone there, alone among the memories of a carefree childhood, in the home where I should have stayed, instead of allowing myself to be lured away into the strain of life and competition in the city, to which I was so ill suited. And now that I had failed, fearfully and perhaps shamefully, lost all my dizzy towering fortune save the old house and a little money that would permit me to live there unmolested for a year or two, now perhaps I could be at peace and happy once again.

I stopped in the village, to make sure my letters had been received and my instructions obeyed. Coal and firewood were needed, great stores of them, for the last withered leaves were drifting softly on the chill autumn wind; and provisions of every kind, for I did not intend to bother myself with frequent trips to the village, in which there were too many half-remembered faces, and too many friendly, curious,

pitying eyes probing gently at the raw wounds of my self-esteem. It was good to get away from them, and I remember now that I sang as the car toiled up the steep gravel road.

The house was smaller, and its setting gloomier than I recalled. Its paint, refreshed at my whim the year before, gleamed whitely from the casements and the pillared porch, the brown of the old shingles was golden in the afternoon light, and the drive curved in among the giant, friendly elms I remembered so well. But the pine forest behind towered like a wall of emerald night, and the house seemed to shrink back into its long shadow guiltily, huddling under the slopes of its own dark shingled roof.

But the darkness in my mind which retouched even this familiar scene soon left me, and my life fell into a pleasant pattern there on the high and lonely hill. For long hours I would doze or read, looking now and then with infinite comfort on the patchwork of field and orchard and woodland that dropped away past the distant village to the sparkling edge of the sea. And I would walk on pleasant meadows rimmed by the shining white of birches and the occasional bulk of some rugged, hoary tree that had somehow escaped the axe of the pioneer and the long malice of the wind.

And of course I cooked and washed, and split and carried wood, and each night I slept with a dreamless depth I had never known before. Day followed after shining day, while my mind and body healed.

So passed a week, and then came rain,

There IS a way to pass the gate—a sky-reaching gate of flame beyond which weep the legions of the damned!



dolgor

"The great oak hurled itself forward—its branches writhed and reached. . . ."

a heavy pouring rain that lashed the eastern windows, while the wind that bore it shuddered and sang around the house, and the pines roared with a deep varying thunder. At first it felt luxurious to sit before the leaping fire, but I soon grew bored and restless.

Early in the afternoon my prowling took me into the attic, where stood many old trunks, most of them filled with the commonplace rubbish of three generations. Only one interested me, a small chest of some dark wood, bound by riveted iron bands.

This, I had been told, had been sealed by my great-grandfather Ebenzer, who had solemnly read a curse upon any member of the family who should open or destroy it. And since during his lifetime his curses had seemed to be peculiarly effective, he was still feared enough after death so that the chest had lain unmolested.

I PULLED tentatively at the iron, and the wood collapsed under it, sending up a puff of acrid dust. It was completely rotten, as if it had long been wet. Perhaps there had been a drip upon it, before I had the roof reshingled.

Inside there was a box about a foot and a half square. I slid it out between the bands, and saw that it was wrapped three times each way by a tarnished silver chain, and that the chain was made of tiny crucifixes, linked end to end, and fastened at last by sealing wax. As I touched the wax it gave way, and the chain unwound from the box, sliding through my fingers to the floor.

As the last loop fell, I seemed to see from the corner of my eye that a crack between two boards of the attic floor widened into a crevasse filled with blackness, and out of its velvet depth eyes looked at me, a pair of gleaming yellow eyes. Hideously startled, I jerked my head around to look directly at the spot, and

saw nothing but the dusty boards with a faint crack between them.

It was some trick of light, I thought. But I was no longer comfortable in the attic. Its shadows seemed full of life, and I found my ears straining to hear some whisper, inaudible above the tumult of the wind. I slipped the chain into my pocket, and carried the box down to the fire, to examine it further.

It was locked in some obscure way, but it was as rotten as the chest, and I easily pried the lid from its hinges. Within was a mass of palpable darkness, out of which a spangle of stars shone remotely, I rubbed my eyes, and a second look assured me that it was only some black flimsy cloth sprinkled with tiny stars of phosphorescent or radioactive material that shone with its own light.

Reassured, I removed the stuff from the box, and found it was wrapped around some object. After unwinding yards of the cloth, that clung slightly to my fingers with an unpleasant feeling, I loosened its last fold, and in my hand was the Book.

Its covers were of thick, carved wood bound in blackened silver, and their hinge was of some heavy greasy material of greenish black. The lower cover had almost rotted away, and pieces of its carving lay on the starry cloth. But the upper lid was hideously well preserved.

In its center was a circle, broken at the top, containing an exquisite rendering of a thatched cottage under a graceful tree. By the door of the cottage stood a man, a woman and child. Above the circle was stretched at ease a great cat, a panther, perhaps, stained black in contrast with the rest of the carving, which was pale brown. The cat's face was turned outward from the book, and in its eyes were set tiny specks of gold.

On each side of the circle, and below, was an obscene nightmare of nameless, misshapen beasts and birds; a curious,

dreadful piece of diabolism from which my sense of decency recoiled. Instinctively I looked away from the loathsome images.

Perhaps it was because of this that I had a peculiar difficulty in bringing myself to open the book. I threw more wood on the fire, walked around peering out through the streaming windows at the storm, drew a glass of water in the kitchen, and finally, very much annoyed at my own prudery, returned to the chair and abruptly opened the book. As I did so I was sure I heard all around me a quick sibilance as of tense, indrawn breaths, and the attic stairs creaked once, and were silent.

There had been fifteen pages in the book, and of these three, the first, the eighth and the fifteenth were thin sheets of unmarked, clouded mica, while the rest were of thick parchment. The first six of these were in poor condition, but among the green and yellow stains of mold, I could see traces of an elaborate script. Beyond the middle page of mica, however, the very structure of the pages had rotted away, and there was little remaining except rags and dust, held together by the filaments of the fungi that had wrought its destruction. Only near the binding were these pages at all preserved, and there I counted them, and found scraps of writing.

I must have sat there for hours with the strange book in my hand, while outside the fury of the storm died away. I know I slept fitfully and dreamed, dreamed of a sky-reaching gate of flame behind which wept the legions of the damned, pleading piteously with me to let them free. And of the shape and manner of these damned I remember nothing, save that their eyes were the eyes that had looked through the crack in the floor, that I sorrowed for them, deeply, helplessly, and yet feared them, too.

When at last I fully wakened, I was sick and shaky. The storm had cleared

away and the house was silent, but as I went about preparing my evening meal, I felt that I was watched, and learned that if I looked sharply at any shadow, it would move a little and then be still. I feared the old house, and the strange book, and the long night that lay ahead, and more than these, I feared the curse of old Ebenzer. But I crushed down my fears, and when I turned out the lights for sleep, the life in the shadows seemed to die, and my sleep was deep and dreamless as the night before.

The next morning came clear and very cold. I walked briskly for an hour in the fields, split quantities of wood and brought a good supply into the living room. Everything was bright and cheerful, and I laughed at myself for the fears of the previous day.

I took up the book to examine it more carefully. I felt that it probably contained the creed or rituals of some cult of pretended magic or witchcraft, in which my great-grandfather had believed, and that it would be interesting to decipher it.

As I thought this, something impelled me to glance out of the window, and there, in my sunlit New England yard, lay a great black panther, who raised his head and looked at me with lustrous yellow eyes, the eyes of the attic and the dream. As I stared at him he vanished.

IN SPITE of the wind-swept brightness of that autumn day, a dark terror rose up and seized me by the throat, and the book felt cold and slimy in my sweating hand. With quick repugnance I flung it toward the fire. It struck against the andiron and fell back safely on the hearth, and then it seemed to me as if a fearsome screaming had been cut off in mid-note—although I had not been conscious of hearing it until it stopped.

Long minutes I sat there waiting, waiting for I knew not what, while the frantic hammering of my pulse died back to nor-

mal and my unreasoning terror ebbed away, leaving my common sense in control again.

For, I told myself, there was nothing to fear. I was modern, too modern to even disbelieve greatly in the powers of darkness. If such powers were as nonexistent as our science claimed, the book was a harmless curiosity, and I had imagined the eyes, the panther and the screaming. And if science were wrong, if there were a gate from our world into some other dimension, some other space peopled by all the dark panopoly of legendary terror, and this book controlled the gate, what then? Old Ebenzer must have used it, and his life had been long and prosperous.

Perhaps this book had powers that could regain for me my lost wealth, all of it and more. And if the phantom panther should be the familiar of the book, bound to its service as the djinns to the service of Aladdin's lamp—ah, what treacherous throats he would rend at my bidding!

Now I was trembling again and my mind was slipping, slipping into that black whirlpool of frustration and hate that I must avoid. Grimly I fought back, crushed alike the wish for vengeance on the men who had robbed me, and the hope that I had found a magic charm. Soon I was calm again, but the attraction of the book had grown to be more than curiosity, and I knew I could not be at ease until I had solved its riddle.

THROUGH the afternoon and late into the night I worked, cleaning the pages carefully and striving to interpret the beautiful but illegible writing. I succeeded in understanding only a few scattered phrases, but they served to stimulate my interest.

After a night of heavy slumber that somehow did not refresh me I put aside the temptation to work on the book, and took my customary walk. I had an odd impression that the great old trees were looking

down at me with grave approval, and that the young and shining birches turned a little to watch me as I passed, and again I fought down an unreasoning terror.

That afternoon I finished the first half of the book, guessing at a few words, and filling in others that the rot had utterly destroyed. And its words, unforgettably burned into my consciousness, were these:

"Through the chinks and crevices of man's world, peer the creatures of the Pit, longing for their own.

"They pine from the hearts of trees and the depths of caves, whence they may not stir while the door to the Pit is closed.

"This is the book of the Pit, and the powers that lurk in the Pit, powers that once possessed the world, but may not possess it again, unless some man let them in unbound.

"This is the Book that holds the key to the door that may let them through, and this is the Book of the spell that shall hold them bound.

"Cursed be he who destroys the Book, cursed by the Pit and all its Powers, and he shall die in madness and fear.

"Cursed be he who turns the Key and opens the Door, and wields not the Spell that binds, cursed be he by men and by God.

"This is the Key that opens the Door; that opens man's world to the Powers of the Pit, and the Powers of the Pit to the Man:

"Let there be three sticks the height of the Man—one of oak, one of elm and one of young pine; all the thickness of the wrist of the Man, and not quite round;

"Let there be black cloth which shines with the stars that made it; cloth that may burn forever and not be consumed;

"Let the three sticks be bound into one by the Cloth of the stars and the

night, so their wood may no longer be seen;

"Let the three sticks and the cloth be stood, erect and be buried the length of the foot of the Man in earth where grass has grown;

"Let a fire be built around the Sticks and the Cloth, and let the wood of the Fire be of pine and of elm and of oak, but let the kindling be of dry grass;

"Let the Fire burn until the Sticks are consumed, that the Key may turn in the Door;

"Then the Cloth shall fall in the flames, and the Door to the Pit shall open,

"And the Powers and the Creatures shall come up out of the Pit, and shall serve the Man who has opened the Door and who holds the Book and who knows the Spell."

BUT with the second half, the vital half that must have held the spell, I could do nothing. I found reference to a gray wolf, to twine and to a triple bar, but the rest was utterly missing, crumbled into its original dust of soot and mixed with the dust of parchment.

In its lack I had sense of irretrievable loss, for now I did believe that the book controlled a magic—a magic as antique as Man; one that the priests of most ancient Egypt had wielded with their strange, lost rituals, aided by the cats who were their familiars; a magic that had showed its head again and again through the pages of all history, and had now been fought back into a whispering darkness only by the power of the Church; and I knew that the old writings in this book were but a translation of books and scrolls yet older, harking back to when time began.

I knew I should set the book aside and forget that I had ever seen it, for did it not call down a curse upon whoever would evoke the spirits without the means to

control them? This I decided, and yet in the early November twilight I found myself trimming a small pine, and laying its trunk beside a pole of elm, and one of oak. And then I saw that I had also made three piles of brush, and three of fine split sticks, and that they were made of oak, of elm and of pine, and I knew that the book must be destroyed.

Back to the house I strode, resolved that I would take the book and the cloth and the box and bind them harmless in the holy silver chain, and take them the next day to the priest of the village, so that he might destroy them, and the curse rest on him, not on me. But when I went to the book, the great panther crouched between it and me, and though his eyes were loving, his eyes were fierce, and in their hypnotic yellow glowing my determination faded and I could not pass him, whether for pity or fear, I knew not.

Then slumber came, early and insistent, and I dreamed again of the gate of fire and the wailing of the damned, and behind the gate the panther padded, his eyes full of anguished pleading, eyes that promised me love and obedience beyond the need of any spell. And in the dream everything beyond that gate was of beauty and wonder and pain made misty by the flaming of the gate.

When morning came I only half woke and the house wavered uncertainly around me. Mechanically I performed my household tasks, kindled fires and ate and cleaned, while a desperate urgency of things to do pressed on my bemused consciousness. I left the book upon the arm of the chair before the fire, left it there unbound, and when I left the house, I did not turn my steps toward the village, but to the woodpile, and my pocket bulged with the black cloth and its shining stars.

Then my steps carried me northward, still as if in a dream, and under my arm were the three sticks, of oak, of elm, of

pine, and in my hand was my keen, fresh-sharpened axe.

In the near meadow, I went to the greatest of the ancient oaks, turned and came back thirty paces, while some fierce constriction tightened on my head. Then I took the shining axe and dug with it in the stony, frozen sod, dug with quick hard strokes. I measured my foot upon the handle, and that deep I dug the hole.

I took the three sticks and wrapped them in the star cloth, loop on filmy loop, till they were just a spangled darkness. Then I stood them in the hole and filled the hole and stamped the brittle frozen earth around them.

It was while I fetched the three piles of brush and three sticks that I noticed that the bright morning sky was dimmed, but not with clouds; and that a wind wandered without direction in the tree-tops, saying strange things I could not hear. It was somehow hard for me to look upward, and the oppression in the back of my head drove me on without my will in a world like a darkening dream.

With a skill that was not my own I made the pyre—was that wind whispering it was the funeral pyre of the whole bright world?—first the dry grass, then the brush and last the sticks, brush and sticks of pine, of elm, of oak, heaped round and round the triple stick whose blackness shone with stars. There were matches in my hands, but my hands were shaking, and I shrank back from the triple triple pile around the triple stick—shrank back against the agony of the oppression in my head, while I felt the panther watch me tensely, and I sensed shapeless things that stood and muttered to other shapeless things, and the great trees leaned down and whispered pleadingly, and the fitful breeze spoke urgently of other things. Long I stood motionless, but something tipped the scale, and I struck a match and lit the pile in one place, in another and a third.

The breeze moaned slightly and was gone, the trees lifted their branches in relief and all around there was a creeping and a rustling, but the growing fire seemed to snap and crackle in a silence.

It burnt at first as any fire would, until the flames bathed the cloth. Then they were sucked into the space between the sticks and the fire roared into a whirling cone of flame reaching to half their height, while out of their top grew a ball of yellow light, that strained and twisted like a balloon tugging at its string. And in its yellow radiance, and the weak light that fell from the still darkening sky, I saw the creatures.

Beside the great tree crouched the panther. Behind him, and to my right and left there walked and crept and rolled such things as haunt deliriums, shocking mixtures of man and beast and fish and reptile, of form and color beyond description. And their eyes were dead, like the eyes of a snake. I tried not to look at these, nor at the parodies of birds, vulturish things of horrid brilliance, that sat upon the branches of the trees, their eyes filmed balls of hate. I tried to look only at the spirits of the wood, who stood back along its edge, weird lovely things, more beautiful, more seductive than human flesh could be.

I stood awhile like a thing of stone, and watched, unfeeling and unthinking, until to my ears came a far, faint, insistent sound, the frantic tolling of a bell—the bell of the village church. And with the sound came a dim realization of this thing I had done in unleashing these horrors upon the world. My hands writhed with the torment of my mind, writhed into my pockets, and there one of them touched the silver chain!

With a vision now completely cleared, I saw the hideous scene before me truly: a giant devil-cat, eyes alight with malignant triumph that showed their former loving promise to be wicked treachery; a horde

of hideous monstrosities which God in his kindness had banished from the world of men, of fearsome, ghoulish birds and of wood spirits whose beauty was alien and deadly as the glistening scales of a poison snake; all giving tongue with a horrid, ululating sibilance as they worshiped the yellow ball of evil fire and waited for the falling of the cloth to overwhelm the world with terrors undreamed of.

IN THAT moment I knew to the full my blasphemy and wickedness, my crime against the glad world these things would destroy. But perhaps it was not yet too late! I felt the thought travel from the chain, up my arm and into my brain, there to explode into furious activity. With a single bound I reached the accursed whirling fire and wrenched at the star-wrapped sticks, shouted madly and wrenched and pulled though the flames licked my legs

and the hot cloth seared my hands as it twisted like a wounded snake. The strength of my desperation prevailed, and I tore it free and cast it aside, out of the flames.

And then a fearful, prolonged screaming rose against the sky as the creatures saw their triumph snatched away. I looked up to see a million eyes of dreadful, eternal hate upon me, looked up higher as the great oak hurled itself toward me—it stood rooted but flattened its huge trunk along the ground while its branches writhed in futile reaching for me. I screamed too, and turned, and fled, feeling all that vast delirium pounding after me. More trees fell, some behind, some ahead and some even upon me, so I fought in a tangle of choking clutching branches, while the pursuit came on. But the strength born of my insane terror and growing purpose was such that even though the old elms of my front yard

came twisting down on me in a blur of flailing, fumbling branches, I won through to the porch and to the living room to snatch the devil-book from the chair and hurl it into the still glowing fire.

It caught instantly with a green flaring, and turning, I saw that its radiance beat outward, not like light, but like rolling clouds of smoke. In the forefront of the indescribable things which had followed me crouched the panther, his tail lashing, his eyes yellow pools of burning hate, unforgiving and unquenchable. The smoke reached him and he was gone, and behind him the creatures vanished as it touched them, but in the instant of their disappearance, they looked at me, and their eyes too were yellow hatred.

I could not see the house around me, I saw only the green radiance rolling outward, stiffening the tree branches where they twitched upon the ground, dissipating alike the shapeless horrors and the wood-things with their sinister beauty, all the unclean things; rolling on and on, purifying the world again for man.

Abruptly the house took shape around me, and I saw that it was burning fiercely in every board and beam. I rushed out through the tangle of fallen elms to collapse in the road, and there they found me, burned and screaming and raving.

Long they held me in the hospital, so clean and cool and white, and they talked to me soothingly but in vain. At last there came my keeper, who took me away from them, and away from the hateful trees, on this great ship that steams southward.

THEY say it was a cloud that darkened the sky. Then why did the church bells ring?

They say the cloth in the meadow had no stars or traces of stars. But why are the

palms of my hands burned with tiny stars, burned deep so they do not heal?

They say the trees fell in a sudden wind. But why do they burn the wood in great piles in the meadow, while the hearths of the village are cold?

They say my madness invented it all. But why, *why* do they exorcise the cloth and the ashes, again and again and again?

YES, they say I am mad, and I know with all the conviction of the madman that I am not—not yet.

Not mad, but accursed, for I have blasphemed against God and this beautiful world that lies like a lid to keep down the horrors of the Pit, and in this world I may not be forgiven.

And I raised the creatures of that Pit by my blasphemy, and I incurred their hatred forever and ever when I destroyed the instrument of that blasphemy.

And even here on the wide sea I cannot escape their vengeance, for in the night the creatures of the sea comes near the boat, and look at me with unwinking yellow eyes that are the eyes of the panther.

Every night these shadows are more bold, and creep further into the room and out onto the decks; but no one else can see them, or hear their obscene whisperings, for they seek only me.

And I know that southern islands climb nearer over the curve of the earth, the islands of the voodoo and the zombie, where the powers and the creatures of the Pit have found another door through which they have come bound, but not bound so tightly that they cannot haunt me now and attack me soon, when I am nearer.

So I know that soon I will die—in madness and in fear, as the curse has said.

Afterward—perhaps God will forgive.