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NOMADS of the NIGHT

by David Baxter



Author of "The Brown Moccasin"

Bats have long been the symbol of all that is weird and horrible and gruesome. Virgil called them harpies; legends of blood-sucking vampires have been built about them; and they are regarded as peculiarly unclean, repulsive creatures. Whenever an author wants to add a touch of ghostly horror to his description of a ruined castle or a haunted house, he has a bat dart across the scene in the gathering gloom.

David Baxter, careful observer of animal life that he is, comes to the defense of the maligned flying mammals in this nature-study, and paints an intimate and sympathetic picture of the family life of the Kansas brown bat—a picture which is not at all in accord with the popular misconception of the "fitter mouse." Mr. Baxter's delineation, you may be sure, is accurate; and those readers of WEIRD TALES who enjoyed his interesting story of the Kansas watersnake in the February issue (The Brown Moccasin) will need no invitation to plunge into the vivid narrative of the four-cornered race of death which he presents in *Nomads of the Night*.

THE smoky-purple haze of early-summer twilight crept up out of the flat valley to flood the sandhill district with a shallow sea of glimmering solitude. The grayish-blue dome of sky, sprinkled with pale stars, hung heavily, like an inverted bowl, close above the tumult of rocky ledges and hoary dunes. And the myriad voices of day blended gradually into the incessant drone of night as the landscape grew more vague and lonely.

From her throne low in the east an immense red moon waved her wands of light over the gloomy depths of a deserted rock quarry, near the center of a wilderness of weeds and stunted trees, turning the grim stone walls into a blurring nocturne of bronze high-lights and inky shadows.

Some fifty paces away a great gray owl gripped his claw-polished limb in a box-elder and gazed intently at a black, mouthlike crevice, where it

opened near the bottom layer of rock. With his yellow eyes glowing greedily and his short neck craning eagerly, the fierce robber of the night had remained immobile for nearly an hour, fully alert and expectant, for all his rigid silence.

From the blackness of the deep horizontal fissure there had emanated strange sounds: thin, rasping, little sounds, as of a dead cottonwood leaf blown quaveringly along a stone walk, or as of some small creature scratching ineffective claws upon a granite floor. Alternating and commingling with these tiny rustlings, other odd noises had echoed: repressed, labored breathings, hissing whines of puny distress.

A trifle puzzled and a bit nervous, the feathered king of night had heard and heeded. In fact, the queer little sounds had awakened him from an all-day drowse, hungry as usual. He now proposed to pounce without warning upon the cause of his disturbed dreams, should the creature come out of the cavern.

And so he had waited instead of flying off about his night's business, among the foliage of surrounding shrubbery where it hung motionless in an attitude of spent dejection. Long shadows lying athwart each tree and bush might be hiding some morsel to tempt his palate. The heaviness of sleep seemed to weigh down every object within the vision of the wary bird as he, now and then, pivoted his head to gaze over distant huddles of mottled sand dunes.

PRESENTLY, a weird little creature with dragonlike wings flitted out into the open space 'twixt stone wall and owl perch. Swiftly and silently it circled, dipping anon erratically, but gracefully, mounting high and higher, then fluttering wildly and diving dizzily to the very tops of tall gum-weeds growing along the floor of the abandoned quarry.

Again and again this brown goblin wheeled near to the mouth of the cavern, only to turn like a flash and disappear through the trees, miraculously evading outstretched, entangling limbs, and approaching again, in a moment, from a different direction; seeming almost to take shape from the hazy void itself, so silent and ghostlike did he come.

The gray owl watched the aerial contortions of the dragon-winged animal without emotion, save for the greed which shone in his round orbs. He knew it was useless for him to try catching the elusive animal among the trees, for it could dart swiftly through a network of branches where he would have found it difficult indeed to squeeze his bulky form an inch at a time. His sole hope was that the bat would fly near enough for him to strike it with his powerful wings. One stroke of his mighty pinion, and the restless nomad of the night would flap awkwardly to the ground, an easy prey to the hooked beak of the savage killer.

But this hope was vain, as nature had equipped the brown bat with a pair of wings so sensitive they could detect the size and location of any object, no matter how small or how swiftly it was approached, animate or inanimate. Even when the beady black eyes could not see it, the bat was able to sense the proximity of an enemy in time to evade it.

In fact, the brown bat's wings, ears and nose membranes are a network of supersensitive nerve centers, which warn him of the approach of anything, and which immediately notify him when he is approaching an object, no matter how dark the night. Any change in an air current, such as where it is deflected by a tree limb or is shut off by some obstacle, is instantly communicated to the bat's brain through the delicate nerve system of the rubberlike membrane stretched over his wing frame. So delicate is

this system that the bat suffers agony when anything touches the wing covering.

This seemingly supernatural power of divination is but a sense of touch developed to an unbelievably high degree. In truth, the brown bat's wing is really a hand with greatly elongated fingers; the first digit, or thumb, terminates in a hook or claw, which is the only part of the hand that can be utilized as such. The rest of it is used solely for aerial locomotion and to cover the body when the animal is dormant. In fact, the brown bat is the least terrestrial of all animals. Even his tiny apelike feet are entirely unsuited to walking; they are used to hold him suspended, head down, from his perch, and to assist him somewhat in seizing obstreperous beetles. His travels on the earth are nothing but an ungainly shuffle.

By some grim derision or perhaps overconfidence, on the part of an inscrutable nature, this indigenous little mammal was created half bird, half beast, and by nature was given such an impish face and aspect that he has but few friends in all the animal kingdoms, including man. Even the latter, of whom he is valuable benefactor and near relative, fears him and shudders with superstitious dread at his near approach.

There are yet today many people who believe the bat to be a creature of ill-omen and unearthly powers. Many, in this enlightened age, still believe the "fitter mouse", as he is called, to be a repulsive animal of horrid habits and evil influence, when in reality the little brown flyer of the nights is an extremely affectionate, family-loving creature of clean customs and exemplary living.

In days when Virgil referred to the bats as harpies, it was to be expected that they should be feared and shunned, but today folk should know that the rubber-clad nocturnal is one

of man's best friends. He is the third nearest relative of man in the United States, which fact probably accounts for his penchant for darting close to anyone he chances to meet in the evening dusk, feeding upon the hordes of insects that naturally gravitate around man.

HOWEVER, the gray watcher was concerned merely with waiting developments, evidently fully aware of the reason for the great anxiety of the brown flitter to enter the cavern in the quarry wall. Again and again the bat materialized out of the dusk like a dragon-winged goblin, swooping with lightning speed down over the tree-tops into the quarry pit.

At last he circled the pit completely as if to make certain the coast was clear. Then on the second round he darted deftly into the blackness. Guided by his tense wing-senses safely past ragged, jutting rocks and sharp corners, he disappeared from the owl's range of vision instantly. Peer and crane as he would, the owl could not make out what was taking place in the dark recess, although he could distinctly hear the peevish squeaks and chattering snarls that greeted the flyer and echoed out into the night.

On a small sloping shelf of rock near the back of the cave, there crouched another awkward goblin-esque creature, who met the first with a long, warning snarl of thin high-pitched protestings. So angry was this voice that the owl outside must have thought the owner of it were choking.

Bobbing up and down on her partly distended wings a little mother bat met the intruder with anything but a pleasant welcome, although the wide-open mouth, with its rows of white, needle-pointed teeth and the snarling, foxy snout, looked a deal more dangerous than they were in actuality. The piggy ears of the recumbent one

also lent to her wizened countenance an exaggerated expression of fierceness that put fear into the heart of the unwelcome visitor.

Bats can start flying only from an elevation, so the mother had selected the high shelf as the first home of her four tiny babies, who were the exact replicas of herself in shape and clothing, even to the woolly eyebrows and naked wing membranes. Pigmy counterparts of their parents, goblins in miniature, they were, with wide-spread mouths and blinking pinpoint eyes. And already they were cleverly imitating their mother in paroxysms of puny, clicking snarls.

But the intruder's intentions were good, in so far as they went. He merely wanted to see how his family was progressing. How he knew they had arrived is another of nature's mysteries, since the male bat had paid no attention to their coming, nor to the welfare of the mother for many days.

The female *cheiroptera* failed to recognize him, if indeed she had any desire to do so. This wing-handed husband was virtually a stranger to her. To be accurate, she never did know to whom she had been wedded during that early spring, after a long winter of hibernating, when she and scores of her kind, male and female, had clung to each other, head downward in an inert cluster, neither knowing nor caring about the fierce blizzards raging outside of the cave where they slept a sleep nigh unto death.

Nature provides many strange ways of sustaining life for creatures whose food supply is cut off entirely by winter. Hibernating is probably the strangest of all. The sleeper passes into a stage that is virtually death. All organs cease to function, and no signs of life are apparent, save a sporadic quivering or irritation of the outer skin.

When the animals spend the dormant period in clusters, as bats usually do, there is little doubt that the purpose of the massing is the collective warmth afforded by bodily contact. However, it is still a mystery to science how the animals at the top of a cluster sustain the weight of the rest.

With the arrival of warm weather the cluster disintegrates and the individual members fly out into the twilight like a small cloud of crepuscular butterflies, fluttering and dodging for a while ere they obtain complete control of their wings. It is as if they were stiff after the long sleep. Some dance among the tree tops a while with their mates, others seek instant obscurity, when spring restores their wonted activity.

Now, when the delinquent husband darted into her retreat, the female mammal drove him out with peevish scoldings. He was glad to leave, however, and soon hurried away in fickle flight for an air waltz with some other brown dancer, leaving the mother alone to teach the ways of aerial life to her youngsters, who had as yet but feeble strength in their fragile wings, and only their milk teeth with which to crunch the tough, armored beetles that formed a goodly share of the food eaten by indigenous mammals.

So the mother knew she must care for the flock without help from her mate for a period of about three weeks before they shed their milk teeth and in this interim gained sufficient strength to fly alone. Although born with the same supersensitive wing, nose and ear membranes, the young bats were really helpless for the first few weeks.

After the male bat flashed out and circled into the gloom of outlying hills, much to the chagrined disappointment of the gray owl, who still maintained his look-out post on the box-elder limb, the female proceeded to clean and dress her babies. Each

little elfin was gone over carefully and licked, cat-fashion, with her monkeylike tongue, in spite of stuttering and impatient squeaks.

Awkward as the work was, the mother bat persevered until the last olive-brown coat and yellowish waist-coat shone like moist satin. Her sundry lickings were interspersed with clicking whispers and shrill chidings, almost human in their solicitude. Only after the entire brood was properly dressed were any of them permitted to nose around for their source of food supply.

But four babies were too many! By some mishap or slip in nature's plan, the brown mother had been given too many offspring! Usually there should be but two; sometimes, but seldom, three. This was a serious handicap from the very beginning. Quadruplets! It didn't matter so much at first; they were so small and weighed so little, even though they did depend solely upon the parent for sustenance. But, after the first few days, the entire brood must cling to the mother's breast fur for a period of approximately twenty days, at which time their first teeth would be exchanged for a permanent set consisting of four varieties similar to man's teeth.

Long before the teeth would appear, however, the quartet would be quite large and heavy—too heavy, in fact, for the unfortunate mother. For as soon as the youngsters were strong enough to cling head down to her breast fur, the mother bat must take them out of the quarry cavern for experience in air sailing. Just a few nights could she leave them on the ledge while she sought strength-building food for herself.

DURING this time, and a night or so after their birth, the mother bat disengaged herself from the squirming four and fitted out into the moonlight, where her flying was

rather weak and uncertain, much to the pleased surprize of the feathered night king, who was again seated on his throne above the quarry pit. And it was with greedy anticipation that he watched her wheel in wobbly circles before and below him. So erratic were her initial attempts that it kept him busy screwing his head around and back again.

But the gray killer's glee was short-lived, for the little *cheiroptera* had the wisdom of her nature. Experience had taught her to keep shy of trees when she was physically unfit. So she practised in the open spaces until she was mistress of her wings, and circled far and wide in search of anything edible in the shape of nocturnal moths, gnats, or flying beetles.

Presently her skill was rewarded. She neatly snared a roaring June bug in the fur-covered sac formed by the conjoining membrane of tail and hind legs. Reinforced by the pelvic girdle of fur, this pouch served both as a rudder and an air-seine for snaring the larger forms of crepuscular insects. The gnats and mosquitoes she caught by the million with her mouth alone as she darted through their teeming hordes, but the more rugged bugs required the use of her tail sac, which also served to assist her in rapidly doubling back in pursuit of a particularly agile insect.

It was needless to carry food back to the family in its original state, so the mother bat merely gorged herself to repletion on her favorite moths.

Finally, as the red moon changed to silver and the twilight deepened, the roarings of the brown bat brought her to a narrow river gliding like a brocaded silver ribbon down over the dusky plain below the rock quarry. There she balanced a moment, then nose-dived straight for the iridescent water, where she scooped up a mouthful of the cold liquid. So daintily and gracefully did she dive and

snatch up the water, that the surface of the stream was scarcely ruffled.

Several times she repeated the diving, despite the great risk of being swallowed by a leaping black bass, which broke the surface dangerously close to her as she arose for the last time. The fish was quick, but the bat sensed his nearness ere he attained the surface of the stream.

Back to the cave, through moonlight so bright that it turned her to an inky dragon against the hazy horizon. Swift as the wind she flew. Scarcely pausing in her dizzy speed, the mother bat darted into the gloomy interior of the crevice. And she was just in time to save the family from a horrid extermination. A monster gray rat crouched within springing distance of the helpless quartet. The sinister bristling of the rodent's whiskers, the cruel glint in his eyes, told the mother bat his evil intentions only too plainly. But her sudden entry and her burst of metallic snarling startled him, causing him to shrink back into the darkness, where his retreating scamper echoed loudly.

As this danger subsided, the mother bat alighted near her brood and hobbled ungracefully over to cover them. It was difficult indeed to walk on legs constructed solely for aerial locomotion.

Half famished, the young bats bounced and clawed for a turn at the nursing, as the mother gathered her pigmy counterparts to her bosom. She was a wise parent and managed to satisfy the cravings of all.

IT WAS well past midnight, with the waning moon resting far down in the west and the chorus of night hushed to solemn silence, when all of the youngsters were finally fed and sleeping. A new dawn was sweeping slowly and majestically over the countryside, bringing with it a fresh burden of daytime dangers to the nocturnal nomads.

The bat family was reasonably safe from daylight marauders, however, so the mother settled back, with her silky rubberlike wing membranes enfolding the furry four, long before the sunlight hours. In fact the odd little mammals are scarcely ever awake more than six hours out of every twenty-four—six hours of flying and eating, and eighteen for digesting.

By day their best means of defense is to hang perfectly quiet, with wings folded like a dusty black cloak, resembling a bunch of partially withered leaves so closely that it is difficult for the sharpest of eyes to detect them. Fortunately, too, the majority of the bat's enemies are also nocturnal creatures who must sleep during the day.

THE long day dragged by uneventfully for the bat family, save for an occasional sleepy squeak as a youngster adjusted himself to a more comfortable position, or the resisting snarl of a fellow sleeper who disliked to be disturbed.

Once that veriest of earth wanderers, the diamond-back rattlesnake, paused below the cavern entrance to sound a loud alarm, probably because he was in a particularly savage humor, mayhap because he was disgruntled at not being able to climb up the steep wall of rock to explore the cracks and crannies of the bat cave. Much as he liked a meal of brown bats, the reptile did not tarry long, however. Hunting was more profitable among the rag weeds and Russian thistles, for here the sun in sultry fervor cast a spell of drowsy stupor over the toads and lizards, making them easy to catch.

Then night came again on moonlit wings to bring the bats an urgent need of food and drink. But the batlets were still too weak to hang to their mother's fur for any twilight sailing in the sky; in fact it would

be several days before they could hold to her while she flew. So the mother bat was forced to leave them again unguarded while she foraged for her own stomach. Not only had she to satisfy her cravings, but she must build up surplus strength against the time when she must carry the family with her. She must be in excellent trim in order to support a weight almost equal to her own.

Thus the nights went by. For several nights she left the brood to shift for itself while she drank and was merry, except on the night of a terrific rain storm, when she remained at home and went to bed hungry.

After this, for the balance of nearly three weeks, she carried the writhing little fellows wherever she went, flying after food or resting, head down, from trees or ledges. Changing sleeping quarters frequently, the bats always hung upside down when at rest. Instinct told the mother that it was an unsafe policy to sleep more than a few days at a time in the same nest.

TOWARD the end of three weeks, the moon was again peeping into the bat cave. Only the gray owl was missing from the scene. The trees, the stone wall, the dark underbrush, the weeds and shadows, all seemed the same as on the night of the feathered king's first futile vigil. The big dulled sun had dropped below the western rim of the sky and the murky twilight was stretching across to the dim east to crown the massive humps of white sand, each with a purple halo.

It was a bit of sandhill Kansas, painted on an immense heavy-grained canvas by some giant medieval artist.

All was motionless, except for an agile bird known as a bull-bat, who soared crazily in the middle distance,

quite spoiling the effect of this living tapestry. This solitary flyer, a night-hawk, was almost identical with the brown bat in so far as actions were concerned. He wheeled and circled on oddly balancing wings, with the incredible swiftness of the little wing-handed mammal; but he was no relation to her, either blood or ancestral. He had feathers and talons and a short wide beak surmounted by noctivagant eyes, in place of fur and thumb hooks. By day he sat stupidly around on posts or trees, instead of hanging head down in the dark crevices like his namesake. The name "bull-bat" was given him because he flew and fed only at twilight, cleverly imitating the brown bat in his fluttering maneuvers.

Paradoxically enough, this enemy of the brown bat had no cannibalistic designs upon the fur-coated creature. He was not raptorial, except for the preying upon insect life. His vicious attacks upon the bat were aimed solely to drive an industrious rival out of the insect-hunting business. He sought merely to kill the bat or drive her from his game preserve.

On this particular evening the mother bat dropped out of her daytime retreat. After falling perhaps two feet, her cupped wings caught the air, steadied her, and she climbed high up into the upper strata of atmosphere before she was aware of the proximity of the feathered bat. In pure exultation she fairly looped the loop through the grid of moonbeams where they sifted through the interstices of an osage orange hedge. Turning and diving, and doubling swiftly back, she flew like a thing possessed, always sure, through it all, that the four youngsters were still clinging tenaciously to her breast fur. The batlets never so much as squeaked a protest against the perilous ride.

Meanwhile the bull-bat came on apace, soaring over the hills on swift, silent wings.

A gaudy moth sailed out of the shadows beyond a tall, trembleleaf cottonwood. The brown bat spied it, and immediately gave chase.

In and out, back and forth, through the grove and across the ridges with lightning speed, went pursuer and pursued. Grim determination drove the wings of both, one to kill and the other to escape destruction: a race typical of wild life. Nature's inscrutable law of survival: one life to preserve another.

All too soon, the bull-bat arrived to make of the race a three-cornered chase, with one pursuing and two trying to escape. Bent on colliding with the brown bat to crush the delicate framework of her wing-hands, and bring her absolutely helpless to the ground, he closed in behind the twain. Just one slender bone fractured, and the bat's pinion would be useless, so finely adjusted was its equilibrium.

But the cruel night-hawk was not to have his way unmolested. The route led past a thick-foliaged box-elder tree, wherein sat that mighty king of darkness, the gray owl. He espied the swaying bull-bat as he passed through a shaft of moonlight, and without hesitation lunged heavily out of his place of concealment to bring up the rear of what had now become a four-cornered race of death.

The brown bat overtook the panic-stricken moth and neatly scooped it into her tail sac. Turning to flit back to her favorite region by the rock quarry, she saw her feathered foes for the first time. She saw the gray owl come up with the bull-bat, heard his raucous squawk of fear, heard the owl's cry of triumph, and watched the pair go down together into a wild-plum thicket amid a terrific clash of rending bones and fluttering feathers.

The shrieking voices arising out of the bushes told of a battle unto death by two of night's fiercest nomads.

But the frightened mammal did not await the outcome. Too anxious was she to get home with her restless babies, who seemed to sense the danger and were now beginning to wriggle peevishly. So large and strong had they grown that it was quite a problem to navigate the air currents with them when they hung quietly. When they persisted in moving about, which they did at times, they would literally trip her up, causing her to stagger drunkenly and strive mightily to maintain her balance.

AS TIME passed, the feeding and carrying of the young bats became more problematic. The mother realized she could not support her own weight and the increasing weight of her family much longer. As the youngsters grew in size and strength, they required more nourishment. And, to complete the cycle, they hampered her wing functioning to such an extent that food was increasingly harder to procure. They were no longer sucklings entirely, but depended a great deal upon such insects as the mother could catch for them. She often sacrificed her own stomach to satisfy their voracious appetites, thus weakening herself and thereby reducing her ability to snare sufficient insect food.

She struggled desperately, bravely, slowly reaching the stage where it would be impossible to go on, where starvation faced the whole family. A tragic ending was in sight for the five little night-lovers if nature did not soon intervene.

Then, one night as the brown mother essayed to fly out of her hiding place, she fell clumsily to the bare rocks on the quarry floor, where she lay flat on her back for several

minutes in spite of the ever-present danger from earthly enemies. It was the end! She could not longer flit through the twilight with her living burden!

There was the bitter alternative, and this she finally accepted. In spite of angry, stuttering protests, in spite of shrill pleadings, in spite of the ties of affection, the tired mother pried loose one of her brood and pushed him away from her. In order that the other three might have a chance to live she discarded one, the backward little imp of the lot. It was nature's law: to outcast the weakling.

However, nature sometimes relents! For as the brown bat dropped from a gum weed where she had climbed to

start her flight, another bat appeared upon the scene.

It circled low over the outcast, who bounced and fluttered on the hard stones like a distraught child. Twice the strange bat darted above the crying youngster. The third time it paused long enough to permit the batlet to fasten his thumb hooks in the thick breast fur. Then out through the trees into the dim distance winged the rescuer and its adopted waif.

Who knows? Perhaps the male parent was repentant! Or perhaps this was some other mother who had lost her entire family and could not resist the maternal instinct so strong in wild life, particularly the life of night's nomads!

