

Weird Tales



ALL STORIES NEW—NO REPRINTS

MARCH, 1941

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The Cream-Colored Cat

By ANN SLOAN

*"Will explain by letter but dare not wait. If you love me
get rid of that cream-colored cat."*

PETER was only three, the first time the cream-colored Cat looked in at his nursery door. He was hot—terribly hot—and "they" kept pulling up the blankets, no matter how often he threw them off. He was too tired now, to try it again, and he cried for a drink of water. His mother came and knelt by the side of his bed, and let him suck a piece of fine linen with a bit of ice in it.

The room was vaguely dark, and there was a strange young woman in a white gown standing by the doctor. Peter had always liked Dr. Keith, but today it was too much trouble to speak to him. He turned his eyes back to his kneeling mother, and over her bowed head, he saw the cream-colored Cat creeping into the room.

Its eyes were of a deep orange color—very large and round; they were staring fixedly at Peter. He wasn't a bit afraid of the Cat—then! He was wondering in a confused way where it had come from. His eyes, which had been so lifeless for hours, kindled, and he looked inquiringly from the Cat to the strange young woman. She caught the look, and smiled back at him.

"I think Peter wants to speak to you, Sister," said Mrs. Vicars.

His throat was so queer that he could hardly get the words out, but he drew his arm from under the covers, and pointed at the cream-colored Cat. "Is—it your—pussy?" he managed to ask.

"Where, darling?" said the woman that Mummie had called "Sister."

His arm was tired—he stopped point-

ing, and let it drop. The cream-colored Cat had paused cautiously on the door-sill, and was watching the nurse. Peter thought it was a little afraid of her. It must be her cat.

"Sister's" eyes had followed his gesture, and come back to him.

"There's no cat there, Peter," she said.

Peter frowned. All grown-ups were funny. There sat the creamy, furry Cat right on the door-sill, and she said that it wasn't there! He choked in a strangling cough which brought the doctor and nurse to him at once. In spite of his paroxysms he still watched the Cat. He whimpered—"It's coming in—"

His mother gave a frightened turn toward the doorway, then took his hand protectively in both hers.

"There's no pussy there, sweetheart," she said, but she seemed troubled, and looked back over her shoulder again.

Somebody said something Peter didn't understand—but he caught a new word "delirium," and decided to remember it—it seemed to belong to the Cat. He choked again desperately, and felt a soft plop on his bed—the Cat had jumped up on it, and was staring grimly at him—and still "they" didn't see it!

He was frightened this time; he screamed and struggled. They were doing things that hurt to his throat. He didn't fight them off—as he had done before—he was watching the cream-colored Cat, and wondering how soon they would drive it away. Mimi, his mother's big Persian, had tried three times that morning to get into

the room. They had driven *her* away each time—and she had cried and scratched at the door. He pulled his hand from his mother's grasp, and held it out to the big new Cat.

"Puss! Puss!" he tried to call.

There was a shadow flashing through the open window. Mimi jumped all the way from the flowering branch of the apple

tree into the room. *She* knew that the cream-colored Cat was there! The hairs on her back bristled, and her eyes shot fire as they had done the day she drove the grocer's police dog down the lane. But in spite of her brave attack Peter knew she was dreadfully afraid of the big Cat!

That frightened Peter too. He screamed. His mother put her arms round him—



"He lifted his eyelids, and looked across the desk into the round orange eyes of the cream-colored cat!"

tight! For a moment she kept even the doctor away.

"I can't bear it!" she cried.

Then Mimi sprang at the cream-colored Cat! Peter stopped screaming, and raised his head to watch. The great beast waited for Mimi—all humped up and ready—when—suddenly—it turned! It jumped from the bed, Mimi at its heels. It leaped for the door! Mimi was driving it from his room!

Peter relaxed; he lay back in his mother's arms, and smiled.

"It was a very big Cat," he murmured, "but Mimi won't let it in again."

The doctor looked sharply at Peter, and put his hand on his forehead. "It's wet—" he said in startled relief—"what happened—what made this sudden change?"

"He said he saw a cat—" Mrs. Vicars faltered in a trembling voice. "His eyes followed *something* across the floor and onto the bed! Then—Mimi came in the window—and she saw—*it*—too! Her fur was all on end! She chased—*it*—out the door!"

"Come, come," said the doctor gently. "You *are* all in, Mrs. Vicars. Don't let Peter's delirium start you off seeing things too! Mimi came in that window after a moth, and chased it across the room. We can't let you begin raising ghosts now, after the soldierly way you've been carrying through. Let Sister give you a bromide—you haven't slept for days!"

Mrs. Vicars smiled—unconvinced.

"Peter saw something — and so did Mimi! 'See—Peter's drowsing off already—I'll try to nap over in the deckchair by the window. But—if I do go to sleep—and I think I can—now—please let Mimi stay if she comes back! I'll—I'll feel safer about Peter if she's here!"

"Surely, my dear—if you wish it. But—" he looked keenly at her. "Lie down—do! We'll let Mimi stay."

Peter and his mother were fast asleep

when Mimi came back to the nursery door. Both doctor and nurse found themselves watching the cat as she crouched on the doorsill. Eyes fixed on the turn in the hall, she settled down for a long vigil. Twenty minutes later when the doctor left, he stepped carefully past her. She never moved, but she did lift her head, and he saw how huge and dark the irises of her watchful eyes had grown.

FROM that time on Mimi's little trick of meeting the family where the meadow-path touched the highway seemed much more to Peter's mother than just an affectionate habit. Mimi was so serious about it. She was ecstatic and purry when she had safely escorted her charges through the long, wavy grasses. Mrs. Vicars was very like her Scotch-Highlander father and she couldn't forget Mimi's behavior that day when they all fought so for Peter's life. She never spoke of it again to anyone—especially not to Peter—but on the nights when Peter woke screaming of a cream-colored Cat, she would soothe him first, and then, taking her candle, go down through the house until she found Mimi and could bring the cat back to guard the nursery door.

Her husband knew that she did this, and she knew that he knew it, but they never spoke of it. Peter entirely forgot his illness and the part the cream-colored Cat had played in it, but the Cat haunted his dreams, and his fear of it grew until it included all cats but Mimi.

Peter's home was set in the curve of a Cornish tidal-river; a drive along the shore, and the short-cut through the upper meadow were its only land approaches. Peter knew that the cream-colored Cat came prowling down through the meadow whenever Mimi was not on guard. It never came up from the river end of the property.

He told that to the visitors one tea-

time, and a big red-faced man said it must be because cats hated water! Another man added slyly that then Peter's cream-colored Cat must hate *running water* still more! Everyone but Peter's mother laughed; Peter got very red and ran out of the room. He never talked of his Cat again—and only spoke of it once in the next ten years.

It loped past him without looking back the day the two carriages crashed on the highway. Peter was running up the meadow-path after his father and the two gardeners. He caught one glimpse of the over-turned carriages, the eight rearing, trampling, frightened horses, and heard the shrieks. Then his father spied him and sent him home. He woke screaming of the Cat that night, and his mother brought Mimi with her. They sat patiently beside him till he fell asleep again.

The summer after his eighth birthday held one month when every time he went through the meadow he was uneasily aware that back in the deep grass something white was stalking him. He didn't really see the cream-colored Cat these times—but it was more frightening to know that it was there, and only a matter of time till it would run across his path again. Mimi was bristly too—she took to following his mother everywhere. Twice when Mrs. Vicars started across the meadow, Mimi did her best to coax her toward the river road—failing. The cat kept ahead of her on the grassy path, watchful and belligerent.

Many afternoons when Mrs. Vicars was "taking a nap" Peter would follow Mimi into the little garden beneath her window, where the cat and the little boy kept vigil together and comforted each other in the instinctive uneasiness that possessed them both. And Mimi slept in Peter's room at night.

That unforgettable night when unaccustomed noises in the house woke Peter suddenly, he put out his hand to feel for the

cat—and Mimi wasn't there! The telephone rang—again and again, and twice carriages drove to the door. Peter sat on the edge of the bed, afraid to go out in the hall, unable to go back to sleep.

His room door, which wasn't quite shut, pushed open a few inches, and Mimi, a pale shadow in the dark, went past him and jumped up on the window-seat. He followed.

From his window he could see the front of the house, and his mother's room—all brightly lighted. He knew himself to be a very little boy, alone, in a world he didn't understand. Tonight even Mimi couldn't comfort him—she was as troubled as he was.

Then the thing they were both fearing happened!

Mimi rose from her crouching position; she growled, and Peter could feel the long hairs on her back rising. She took a menacing step over the edge of the window-sill.

The moonlight was bright on the meadow before them, and Peter could see a little ripple in the grass, as if something was passing through: something not tall enough to reach to the tops of the grass-blades. He turned to Mimi—she was trembling as her eyes followed that gentle swaying of the grasses.

The ripple reached the edge, the tall grass beyond their little lawn separated, and the cream-colored Cat came into the garden.

PETER tried to shout at it—to call for help—to throw something—but his voice wouldn't work, and his hands were as lead. The cream-colored Cat seemed much bigger than he remembered, but that might be the moonlight. It came toward the house deliberately. It didn't look up at Peter's window though it surely knew that he and Mimi were there. It crossed the little lawn till it came to the

foot of the apple tree, and shot up the trunk like a streak of silver.

Peter instinctively tensed his muscles to meet the attack—but at the fork of the tree the Cat turned. It took the other branch, the one that passed within a few inches of his mother's window.

Mimi roused from the paralysis of fear that had held them both. She gave a jangle-like shriek as she sprang into the tree and started after the cream-colored Cat. It turned and waited for her! The round orange eyes were balls of fire in the moonlight as the Cat reared back huge and threatening, to receive Mimi's attack.

She sprang at him, and the two animals swayed back and forth on the branch—grappled together—tearing at each other's throat. Mimi knew she was fighting a losing fight, and the helpless child in the window knew it too. Peter heard an ominous snap—he'd heard it once before when the gardener's terrier broke the neck of the big rat.

Mimi stopped struggling, the cream-colored Cat released its grip, and Mimi's body hurtled to the ground.

Peter's torpor snapped too; he seized a book from the window seat, and flung it at the Cat. It didn't turn—it didn't even try to dodge the missile. Down the branch it paced with a sure and delicate step, and sprang into Mrs. Vicars' window.

Peter cried hysterically for his mother to come and help him, though he somehow knew she couldn't come. He watched her windows fearfully. Someone in her room was dimming the lights. A shadow passed from one window to another pulling down the shades—evenly.

Peter rushed to the door. The strange silence in the hall was so frightening that his heart fluttered. He crept slowly down the empty corridor—and his voice came back—he screamed. His mother's door opened, his father, white and shaken, came out to him.

"Peter—! My little boy—my poor little son!"

He lifted Peter in his arms, and carried him back to bed.

"The Cat!" Peter sobbed. "The cream-colored Cat! It killed Mimi! And it went into Mother's room!"

His father shuddered, and tightened his clasp on the little body.

"Hush, Peter!" he said. "You were dreaming again! I'll stay with you till you go to sleep. I've just come from Mother's room, and there was no cat there. Nurse Watters will stay—with Mother—till morning."

For a long time Peter held his father's hand in a hot clasp—and John Vicars sat motionless in the darkness. When at last the small hand loosened its grip, the father took his flashlight, and went down through the silent house seeking Mimi. But though he searched thoroughly he could not find her. He thought again of Peter's hysterical outcry, and wiped cold drops from his forehead with a trembling hand.

Next morning when the gardener brought Mimi's body in from the grass-plot, Mr. Vicars forbade the servants telling Peter. Peter didn't ask any questions nor did he seem surprised when his father carefully explained that Mother and the baby sister for whose coming they had made so many happy plans, had decided not to stay with them, but had gone back to Heaven together—"They took Mimi, too," was all he said. But he was dumbly grateful to his father for taking him into his own bed that night.

LIFE changed completely for Peter after that. His father sold the happy little house and went up to London where Peter would be near "the Aunts." The house, the river, the meadow, Mimi, and the cream-colored Cat faded together into a dim memory for Peter. His days were filled with a new interest called school; and a

multitude of fascinating activities which his father and school together brought into his life. He was ashamed if his childish fears were mentioned but—but other people gradually forgot about them—and when he was old enough to go away to one of the big public schools, he never thought of them himself. But he could not be induced to stay in the same room with any cat. And he still turned pale when the moonlight fell on rippling fields of grass.

When he had turned sixteen he believed football was the most important thing in the world. One afternoon before the daily practice, he was detained overtime by the Latin master, and so was the last to leave the dressings rooms. Pulling his sweater over his head as he came out into the corridor, he stepped on something soft which slithered away from under his feet. The wall opposite was all that saved him from falling. A final pull on the sweater brought his head out at the top, and he caught a glimpse of a cream-colored Cat turning into the next hallway.

Peter's heart skipped a beat. Then he pulled himself together. That old memory was kid's stuff—crazy—should have been well beaten out of him! He rounded the corner in pursuit—he'd be all right when he made sure the cat was real!

The main hall with its many closed doors stretched empty before him. Hoteling Major was coming from a room at the far end. Peter waited for him.

"Nearly took a header over that bloom-in' cat," he growled, "which way did it go?"

"Cat?" said Hoteling. "No cat down this hall."

Peter turned white. He had not only caught a glimpse of the cat as it turned that very corner ten seconds ago, but he was shudderingly aware of the furry softness he had tripped over. He went onto the field with misgivings, but the excitement of the game swept them away.

Half an hour later, pale and trembling, he helped carry young Hoteling from the field. He was present when the doctors said that the boy's neck had been broken instantly—he had probably never known what had happened. Peter had been ten feet away at the time, but he was sure he'd seen a creamy white flash dart in front of Hoteling.

Peter went out and telegraphed for his father, and when he came—told him, with many hesitating pauses, what had happened. John Vicars took Peter back with him, and they went to see a famous nerve-specialist, who after asking many questions put Peter through a stiff physical examination. He found no serious trouble, and sent him to an oculist—it might be eyes. If not, come back again. It wasn't eyes—and both doctors admitted being gravely puzzled by the case-history as John Vicars told it. For the first time Peter learned that his mother had been stricken with a heart-attack as she came through the meadow from an evening at the rectory. As her husband carried her to the house she murmured something about "Peter's Cat!" She only lived a few hours after that—there had been a premature delivery, and she and the little daughter died together.

The doctor said that sometimes it did seem as if "there were more things in Heaven and Earth, etc." and recommended a long sea-trip for the boy and his badly shaken father.

Peter jumped at the idea. The long leisurely trip through southern waters did him a world of good. Mr. Vicars saw that for some reason Peter felt safe—that he did not now fear meeting the Cat again. That joke made ten years ago about the safety of running water as a protection for the hag-ridden had made a great impression upon the little boy. Mr. Vicars did not remember this, nor indeed did Peter. He only knew he was safe.

In the end that voyage with its abiding sense of well-being brought Peter and his father to an agreement on Peter's future. As soon as he could be prepared for the entrance examinations, he was to enter the Naval College at Greenwich. He found he could make it easily when he was eighteen, and Mr. Vicars planned for Peter's entrance the autumn following.

PETER'S eighteenth birthday fell in the spring of Nineteen-fourteen and the following autumn saw him in the trenches.

For awhile he went in daily dread of meeting the Cat. But it never came. Then he worked out a theory of the purely personal menace the creature held for him. The carnage around him was too general. In the back of his mind he could picture the great cream-colored beast as lying lazily in the now well-remembered meadow waiting for the moment when the bullet, shell, grenade, or bayonet specially marked for Peter should give him his cue to spring again. Peter rather morbidly felt that if the Cat were given his choice it would be the bayonet!

Since he didn't meet the Cat he grew utterly reckless. Young Vicars' daredevil courage was the astonishment of those magnificently courageous mess-mates of his. Peter was ashamed of this; he felt he was sailing under false colors—he took no chances—he must always *know!* Men fell all around him; new men came out to take their places—and Peter went steadily up in regimental rank.

Home-leave was the only thing that stood out through those four years. Peter's father always met him at Waterloo platform and together they went off to the gentle English hills for a cleanly respite of orderly life.

ON THE night of the Armistice the mess wildly celebrated their reprieve from violent death. Peter, for all his four years

of reckless living, felt that reprieve the most actively. After an absurd, side-splitting review of the months behind them, he ended up with a ribald toast. He had raised his glass, arm high, and his eyes following it widened in stricken terror. On a shelf across the room, insolently eyeing Peter as it washed a paw, was a cream-colored Cat!

Peter's glass flew from his hand, a clean throw. It crashed through the Cat and smashed against the brick wall behind it.

"The Cat!" he cried. "The Cat!"

His mess-mates laughed and jeered.

"For once—Peter, old top—you've gone the limit! You're seein' things!"

Next day a sober Peter could find no Cat among their dugouts.

Two days later he approached Waterloo with dread—and met his weeping aunts with dry and burning eyes. He had been certain, all these hours, that his father would not be there.

Peter learned that his father had been the victim of an Armistice night celebration. In order to get the latest news as it came in, John Vicars had gone to the public rooms of a big hotel on the Embankment. Someone in the drunken crowd threw his helmet at a great plate-glass mirror—the whole thing crashed down on Vicars; the broken glass severed an artery; in the confusion skilled aid reached him too late.

Peter became dangerously morbid over this. For more than a year he kept seeing, over and over again, the great Cat goading him into throwing his glass. What if—if—he—hadn't thrown it?

His colonel tried to plumb the depths of the boy's despair; but Peter kept his own counsel, and the doctors put it down to belated shell-shock.

It was Peter who finally brought himself to take up life again. He openly said that he had no ambitions left. It was too late for the Naval College—yet he longed, as never before, for the solace

of blue water. There was some money— plenty, he was sure, for his unambitious needs. A friend of his father's helped him with introductions, and two years after the war ended, Peter began his work as super-cargo on a large British liner.

HE WAS contented now. His co-officers knew his war record, and they admired and respected the taciturn lad. His calm poise was nothing new; so many young men of twenty-four had that same quietude.

They were surprised at first that young Vicars could so rarely be persuaded to spend the night away from the boat. He was happier after the dusk had dropped to laze serenely on deck with a pipe between his lips. He never slept soundly if he did not hear the lapping of the tide beneath his portholes.

The Headmaster of his old school worried over Peter's complete submersion in such an unimportant niche. He sent for Peter just to tell him that. And Peter's quiet acceptance of the implied criticism was most disconcerting to the great schoolmaster. He, in turn, found it hard to parry the "cui bono" of the younger man whose record of extraordinary valor was, ironically enough, such an incentive to the lads just starting out from Peter's old school.

Half a dozen years of this life found Peter with stanch friendships in most of the English speaking ports. This at least he had won for himself; all sorts of men and a few women. He was serene these days, and not unhappy,

He met the Cat twice during these years. Both times it happened, as he had always known it must happen, while the ship was in port. The first time they had docked in New York, and were held there overtime for engine-room repairs. Peter and Macrae, the Scotch engineer, took an evening off for a fight at the Garden. On

their way back to the ship they cut across the wide and empty expanse of Water Street. Skirting the front of one of the dimly lighted ferry-houses, Peter stopped abruptly with a muttered oath.

Scuttling directly across their path ran a huge rowdy-looking cat. Peter put his hand out to stop Macrae—and then, for the first time in his life, was violently, deathly sick. For Macrae didn't stop—and walked straight *through* the beast! Macrae heard Peter's muffled call, turned back, and caught the reeling Peter by the shoulder.

"Man!" he cried. "What's happened to ye?"

Peter steadied himself; the paroxysm was over.

"I was sure, Macrae, you were falling over that great Cat—"

"Cat?" cried Macrae, "where would a cat be comin' from on this waste of cobbles?"

It took Peter the better part of the next ten minutes to convince Macrae he had not been drinking boot-leg American whiskey.

THEY separated in the cabin, Macrae to give a glance at conditions in the engine-room, and Peter to spend the rest of the night soberly putting his books in order, and writing a long letter to his old Headmaster to be delivered "if—"

He finished at daybreak, and went on deck for a breath of air before turning in. He passed Macrae's cabin, met the captain coming out, and caught a glimpse of the ship's doctor working over a body on Macrae's bunk. A worried group of engine-room oilers waited in the narrow passage.

So that was it!

The captain joined Peter. Mechanics from the naval-engineering firm had worked through the night installing a new flywheel. In the gray dusk before the dawn they had finished. Calling Macrae

they had started up the engines. The new part had a hidden flaw, and Macrae was in the path of the flying piece of steel. He was still living when they carried him to his room, but it was hopeless. The clang of an ambulance on the dock announced the arrival of competent help, but the end came before anything could be done.

Peter tore up his letter, and added a few lines and the date to those other items in his locked diary. While he had it open he read back through the years, and tried to think out some explanation of the Cat and its influence. What it had meant in his life was fairly clear but he had no explanation of the Cat! He gave his Highlander ancestors the dubious benefit of his "possession"—and realized for the first time that nobody ever said what "second sight" was, nor how it operated.

For a long time after Macrae's death it was on deep water alone that he breathed freely; it was strange how sure he was that the Cat couldn't reach him here. But for weeks his heart sank as they neared port, and, once there, his uneasy eyes watched for his familiar on every street. He confessed to a "nervy" fear of traffic.

But when the months passed uneventfully into years, and the Cat still lay couchant "somewhere in space," his nerves steadied themselves.

IN Nineteen-twenty-six they reached Aden around Easter time. It was blisteringly hot. No one wanted to go ashore. On deck and in the cabins electric fans kept a certain amount of motion in the air. Men and officers alike were restless to get out to sea again, but the cargo would take another twenty-four hours before its transfer was completed.

At midnight a knot of officers were still sitting out with pipes and cigarettes and long cool drinks. Thank God for the ice-machine! It was much too hot to think of

turning in. The tropic night was purple blue, and there was a very red moon rising over the sands of upper Egypt. Peter wondered idly how much those mysterious old Egyptians had really known. A lot, he felt sure, that our crass materialism was ignoring. The book-shelves in his cabin had doubled and trebled during the years. He had amassed a store of volumes in many tongues, which gave him a shadowy understanding of the various interpretations of life and death that man has alternately made and discarded through the few thousand years since he became articulate.

Peter glanced from the desert to the skies. He had come to know the constellations as few super-cargoes ever do, and he had read widely what the long past had believed of their influence on human destiny. Brockly, now, in the light of Peter's ranging thoughts, sounded pretty futile.

Peter had been trying to ignore Brockly all the evening. A rampant North-of-Irlander, he was holding forth on his pet subject, the religious credulity of his southern compatriots. Indeed for over an hour the group had been arguing in a desultory fashion about religion.

Brockly ended a long harangue. Peter was dumping the ashes out of his pipe and had started on his usual neat, meticulous job of refilling it.

"Brockly," he said, pausing, match in hand. "I do envy you the certainty of your religious opinions. I'd like to be told one thing. Just what do you honestly expect to see and do—five minutes after you are dead?"

There was a long pause. Peter still held his match, unstruck, and waited. Brockly, after much hemming and hawing, finally said that the next world was so different from this that it was difficult to grasp just what it was like.

Peter struck his match and lighted his pipe. The group smoked on in thought-

ful silence. They were evidently turning Peter's question over in their minds. Peter got up and went back to the smoking-room galley. Old Ferguson was cutting beef in thin slices for sandwiches. He knew these all-night sessions when it was too hot to sleep, and everybody got hungry at three o'clock.

Peter, leaning on the rail, listened while Ferguson talked. Ferguson had been head steward on all the voyages Peter had made. They had chanced to transfer from ship to ship at the same time. So a very real and sincere affection had grown up between the two because of, rather than despite, their differences in age and rank.

"It sounded for a bit, sir, as if they were getting all-heated up back there on the quarter-deck, Mr. Vicars."

"That was Mr. Brockly," said Peter.

Ferguson nodded. "He was down here, for a while, sir, and he always gets excited when he starts on the Papists, as he calls them."

"I stopped him off, tonight," said Peter. "I've always wondered what he'd say if I sprung that question."

Ferguson waited.

"Just what do you expect to see, Ferguson, five minutes after you're dead?"

Ferguson turned, knife in hand. "I don't think anyone could answer that off-hand, sir! Yes, that's one to make a man think a bit."

Peter leaned further over the rail. Something dim and whitish was moving in the black shadows on the dock below them. It was certainly coming nearer with a slinking, feline motion.

"What made you think of that, Mr. Vicars? Five minutes after you're dead? There'll be some of us know the answer pretty soon, sir! Pretty soon!"

Peter wheeled back and caught the old man by the arm. Ferguson was gazing into the dark with a rapt, listening expression.

"Ferguson what made you say *that*?"

"Nothing, Mr. Vicars, nothing! It just seemed to say itself."

There was a scratching, scrambling sound behind Peter. He wheeled back. The cream-colored Cat was sitting on the rail. As Peter stiffened, it jumped to the deck, and passed rapidly through the galley.

"Did you see it, Ferguson? The Cat!"

Ferguson looked at him curiously.

"No cat on this ship, Mr. Vicars! The captain hates them."

"But-it just came over the side!"

The old man shook his head.

"It's been a pretty hot day, Mr. Vicars," he said. "I wouldn't stay out in the sun so long tomorrow, if I were you. It's got you a bit jumpy, and your eyes could be feeling the glare, too."

Peter walked the deck for the next hour. When he met the Cat there was always the question—who?

It stood as far as he could guess between Ferguson and himself. And the old man's response to his fantastic question had been what Peter's grandfather used to call 'fey'. "There'll be some of us know the answer pretty soon, sir! Pretty soon!"

Before he turned in Peter went to the bridge and asked the captain if Ferguson might be excused from duty on the morrow. The weather was unusually hot, and he was worried about the old steward. Peter was never known to suggest anything, unasked, and the captain sensed something unusual behind the request. He nodded, and said he'd arrange it in the morning.

IN THE morning the inexplicable disappearance of their dock laborers threatened a serious delay to the boat's sailing. A force of disreputable looking ruffians was recruited from the sweepings of the port; all of the officers, wardroom and petty, were ordered to stations in case of trouble. Ferguson spent the day mixing

cool drinks, and rushing them to the hot and exasperated men. He carried several trays to the upper deck himself, and forgot his cap each time.

Peter, coming back from escorting mail-bags to the steamer for home, was called to the ship's hospital. Ferguson had collapsed with a sun-stroke; the captain and the doctor were with him, and he had asked for Mr. Vicars. Peter was just in time. Ferguson smiled when he entered, and tried to speak. Peter knelt beside him.

"Five minutes after, you said, sir?"

Peter could only press his hand. His throat was choked up. This old warrior was going on courageously to solve for himself the mystery Peter had so idly propounded.

The captain sent for Peter afterward.

"What was it, Vicars, made you ask the day off for Ferguson?"

Peter blushed. "You'll think me an awful fool, sir—but—my Mother's people were Highland Scotch—and sometimes—I know!"

The captain shook his head thoughtfully.

"I'd never call a man a fool for such reasons. I've seen too many strange things in my day to question anything a man's serious about. We'll act on it—next time, my lad."

Peter lingered, hesitant.

"If you please, sir! I'd rather not be quoted as having presentiments. It doesn't help a man any to have his mates think there's something odd about him."

"'Tis a burden on any man's shoulder's—you're not to be envied."

Peter remembered then that the captain was a Fifeshire man. Perhaps he, too, had experiences. Most men would be wise enough to keep still about such things. His own breaking of that same habit hadn't done any good! How much respite was the sea bringing him, after all? They had been in port, to be sure, both times he

met the Cat; here in Aden, and in New York with Macrae. He did hope the captain would keep counsel; men might with reason be a bit shy of a shipmate who saw Death at their elbow. Jonah needn't be the last prophet to suffer from the aroused sailormen.

AS IF to test his theory of immunity at sea, at the end of this very trip he had an ugly mixup with a London bus, and fractured his ankle, the accident keeping him on shore for six months between voyages. The ship sailed with a substitute, and Peter was carried down to his Aunt Ellen's home in Dorset. It was his first long leave.

He found himself let in for a novel and flattering experience. His three young cousins lavished their adoration upon him. Little girls just starting school during the war, they had followed his exploits and felt vicariously heroic in their relationship. He found it impossible to convince them that his life at sea was not equally magnificent. With them it was "once a hero—always a hero."

But it was the serious-eyed young daughter of his former colonel who really opened up new vistas to Peter. Colonel Carstairs had a particularly warm corner in his heart for Peter, the one young officer who had been with him from the beginning to the end of the war; and he viewed the growing attachment between his former protégé and his adored daughter with a funny mixture of fatherly dismay and approbation.

Peter fell desperately in love with Elinor, and she with him. He discovered that she had long since built a little pedestal in her heart for his unseen image—and he was filled with proud humility by her blissful happiness when the chosen idol of her schooldays became the lover of her young womanhood.

Peter's middle-aged patina fell away.

For the first time since the Armistice he was the happy youngster he had missed out on being. He and Elinor read together and rode together. When he began to walk again his arm was in hers—and through it all they made love entrancingly. They drew plans for a perfect future. The Cat never entered Peter's mind these days; life was so full of radiance, and it offered such powerful reassurances; the uprushing flood of youth and happiness forced his enemy back into Limbo.

He would rejoin his ship for what was to be his last voyage. A long voyage to be sure; to New Zealand and around home by Java and the East Indian ports. But when he got back he would be transferred to the company's headquarters in London, and need roam the world no more. He and Elinor would marry then, and go down to Kent. The colonel was giving them the beautiful old house where Elinor and her mother before her had been born. They took Peter down to see it just before he sailed, and the place brought back crowding memories of the house in the curve of the Cornish tidal river—memories of forgotten childish happinesses that all but drowned out the memories of the Cat! Peter knew at last that ever since he left Cornwall his heart had been homesick.

Here in Elinor's birthplace it was at home again; he wandered round those Kentish orchards and gardens, and marvelled that he and Elinor should be so unbelievably fortunate. With her hand in his he could defy his obsession.

His last trip proved a happy one in spite of their separation. Now that there were always letters waiting it took the curse off making port. Delightful letters! And thanks to the radio, one could get a message answered inside twenty-four hours. Elinor's most-understanding father often treated her in turn to a round-trip radiogram.

The ship was in Rangoon when Peter got the letter that brought him sharply

back to the great terror of his life. It began charmingly. Full of excitement over the new car her father had given her that she might drive Peter to London. Full also of the girl's naive pride in her status of fiancée, and in the lovely things her family and friends were planning for her and Peter. It gave Peter a warm glow of belongingness that he had not known since his father's death. He sat beaming over the letter. Then he idly turned the last page, and found the hastily scribbled postscript.

"And oh, darling Peter! I am so flattered. A beautiful cream-colored cat has been coming into the garden lately, and it's made friends with me. It's very shy, and runs away when anyone else appears. But it isn't afraid of me a bit—it fairly haunts my footsteps."

Peter went white. His mouth was dry and stiff. He couldn't move his lips—then—

"Oh! Dear God!" he cried. "She's seen the cream-colored Cat!"

PROTEST seemed so futile—so senseless! Yet he couldn't sit there on the other side of the globe, and let the thing go on. He waited helpless in the growing dusk, head buried in his arms, motionless, wondering, planning! He finally sat up with a jerk, switched on the cabin lights with a quick frightened gesture, and then looked about with dread.

There was nothing untoward. No white shape lurked in the shadowy corners. Nothing rustled among his papers. There was no soft furry bunch curled beneath his feet. Taut and on guard, he drew a radio blank to him, and scrawled a terse note. He staggered to the companionway, and his head was reeling as he climbed to "Sparks" receiving station.

Sparks looked surprised at the message, and whistled as he finished reading it. One glance at Peter's face shut off any re-

marks. He dropped his hand to the key, and sent Peter's warning out into space.

"Will explain by letter but dare not wait. If you love me get rid of that cream-colored Cat!"

Allowing for differences in time of day, latitude and longitude, Peter expected an answer in the morning. He spent a tiresome forenoon on shore. There were many papers to be signed and witnessed by a too casual and easygoing lot of tropical business men.

He was still rounding them up at lunch time, and finally came back to the ship, hot, worried, and exasperated, too late even for tea. He ordered some sent to his cabin, and dashed down there to wash up and change.

As he had hoped a radio envelope lay on his desk. It had come just after he left the ship. If that lazy gang on shore had kept appointments on time he'd have had it long hours ago!

He slit open the envelope and read the enclosure with a puzzled frown. "I LOVE YOU OF COURSE. DON'T UNDERSTAND MESSAGE. WHAT CAT?" Elinor.

The captain's Malay "boy" tapped on Peter's half-open door.

"If you please, Mr. Vicars, the captain wants to see you at once. In his cabin, sir."

To be sure—he hadn't turned in those damned papers! What did Elinor's message mean?

He went up to the captain's cabin two steps at a time, and stood at attention to make his report. The captain and the ship's doctor were standing together. There was deep gravity and distress in both faces.

Peter's eyes grew wary. He spied, and watched—fascinated—a yellow radio slip in the captain's hand.

"My dear boy," the captain's voice faltered. "It is impossible to break some kinds of news gently. This message came

through twenty minutes ago, with the request that I deliver it to you."

Peter was faintly aware of the pitying hand on his shoulder. His mind was racing furiously. He knew that when he had read that message he would understand both the postscript in Elinor's letter, and her denial of that postscript in the message he had just found on his desk.

"I think I understand, sir," he said. "May I take it away? I'd rather—read it—alone!"

His step was mechanically even as he went back to his cabin.

He went straight to his desk and sat down, the slip still unread. He opened a drawer and took out his old service revolver. He examined the catch and the load, and with set lips extracted a cartridge. Feeling in his pocket he brought out another cartridge carrying a silver bullet. He had made time that morning to have this molded for him at a native silver-smith's. He reloaded the empty chamber with the new cartridge, and set the revolver within easy reach of his hand.

His preparations complete he unfolded the yellow slip and spread it out—flat—before him.

TO THE COMMANDER OF THE
S.S. BAY OF BALLERICA

PLEASE INFORM PETER VICARS
THAT MY DAUGHTER ELINOR WAS
KILLED IN A MOTOR ACCIDENT
LATE LAST EVENING.

G. T. CARSTAIRS.

Last night? Just after she answered his message? THE CAT! But the Cat hadn't forced his hand—this time—had it? Hadn't it?

He jerked open the small drawer where Elinor's letters fitted so perfectly, and then thought back as he did so to the day when she measured it to see exactly what size paper she must use in writing to him.

There was a strange little smile on his lips as he drew out that last letter—the one whose postscript had so alarmed him the night before that he had been driven to sending his fatal message!

The Cat—the Cat!

His eyes lingered fondly over the happy sentences of the letter itself.

But when he had read the last words—the signature—over and over, he held the letter for fully five minutes before he could summon courage to look at the postscript. At last he slowly turned the page.

It was quite bare!

He stared at the blank whiteness and his heart began to pound. He lifted his eyelids, and looked across the desk into the round orange eyes of the cream-colored Cat!

His hand groped for the revolver. For a moment his fingers refused to close on it—was it the weight of the silver bullet that made it seem so heavy?

"Too slow—" he thought despairingly, for the Cat had sprung!

It was smothering him—great waves of agony spread and stabbed from his heart to his left shoulder. A searing pain from the stroke of a huge taloned claw scorched the right side of his face. Then the pressure on his heart abated, though the pain above his heart still stabbed unendurably. His hand slowly brought the revolver up—wavered for a moment under a second onslaught from the Cat—then—as the Cat retreated—he fired at it.

PETER lay back in his chair. His tortured eyes were fixed on a tiny mirror across the room whose glass was shattered in splinters round a circular hole.

"Angina!" said the doctor kneeling beside him.

"Not—?"

"Suicide? No!"

The captain drew a sigh of relief, but

he came nearer, and laid his finger on the long red mark stretching from temple to jaw.

"What made this—scratch?"

The doctor examined it and looked about him. Then he lifted the revolver from the floor, and studied it carefully.

The captain waited in growing anxiety. His glance fell again and again on Peter's pain-wracked face, and moved back each time to the worried face of the doctor.

"What are you looking for?" His words seemed forced out against his will.

The doctor handed him the revolver and pointed significantly to the roughened notch by the bore.

"See that—" he spoke with great reluctance. "I'm afraid he did mean to end it all! He must have had the revolver at his temple when the heart attack started! And this roughened edge ploughed its way down his cheek as his arm dropped."

"Not Vicars!" the captain spoke positively. "He shot at the mirror over there! Why did he—man—why?"

"Spasms from angina are pretty dreadful—" said the doctor soberly. "If he was still clutching the gun, they could account for anything!"

In the morning the captain's "boy" brought him a silver bullet he had dug out of the wall behind the mirror.

"I—looked for this!" he said. "On shore among my people—it is whispered that yesterday—*he*—had this bullet made! You know the meaning of the silver bullet?"

"I have heard." The captain set his mouth sternly.

The boy nodded reassuringly.

"You feared he meant to shoot himself—this proves he did not! He was a very brave man. He died in a losing fight. And now—" the slim young Oriental shrugged his shoulders eloquently—"and now, God alone knows just which of the Dark Powers he was fighting!"