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Contents for April, 1929

- Cover Design Hugh Rankin
Illustrating a scene in "The Devil's Rosary"
- Neptune's Neighbors Cristel Hastings 436
Verse
- The Devil's Rosary Seabury Quinn 437
Tibetan devil-worshippers play a thrilling part in this eerie tale of the French occultist, Jules de Grandin
- The World-Wrecker (Part 1) Arlton Eadie 455
A stirring three-part weird-scientific serial about a scientist who pulled the world from its position in the solar system
- In a Dead Man's Shoes Harold Markham 465
A story of Tyburn gallows and vengeance from beyond the grave—disaster seized the man who betrayed his friend
- Folks Used to Believe:
The Unicorn Alvin F. Harlow 472
One of the strange beliefs of our ancestors

[CONTINUED ON NEXT PAGE]

The Hermit of Chemeketa Mountain	Thomas de V. Harper	473
<i>A strange tale of anthropomorphism, and the fate that befell the man who investigated the hermit and his dogs</i>		
A Dinner at Imola	August W. Derleth	478
<i>Abandoning poison for once, Caesar Borgia took an unusual way to rid himself of an enemy</i>		
The Dunwich Horror	H. P. Lovecraft	481
<i>A colossal story of eery happenings in a drab New England settlement—a tale of blood-chilling horror</i>		
The City of Iron Cubes (Conclusion)	H. F. Arnold	509
<i>A two-part weird-scientific story by the author of "The Night Wire"—strange invaders from space land in Peru</i>		
Up Irriwaddy Way	Lieutenant Edgar Gardiner	519
<i>A story of man-eating plants and giant fungus growths that attack human beings</i>		
The Goddess of the Painted Priests	Drury D. Sharp	532
<i>Down into the nest of venomous snakes and sparkling jewels she went, to the amazement of the Indian priests</i>		
Sonnet	Clark Ashton Smith	442
<i>Verse</i>		
The Damsel and Her Cat	David H. Keller	543
<i>The high-born maiden lay in a deathlike swoon, but outside the castle terrible things were happening</i>		
Weird Story Reprint:		
The Diamond Lens	Fitz-James O'Brien	547
<i>This was the first of the great weird-scientific stories, and it made its author famous</i>		
Moon Mockery	Robert E. Howard	562
<i>Verse</i>		
The Eyrie		563
<i>A chat with the readers</i>		

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THE DAMSEL AND HER CAT

By DAVID H. KELLER

IT ALL happened in the fall of 1270.

The Damsel Susanne had developed a sickness that frightened her parents and drove Friar Sinistrari to extra hours of devotion. She would retire as usual in the evening, and, after some hours had passed, there would come a cry from her as though she had suffered from a nightmare in her sleep. Going to her daughter's room, the mother would find her in a deep sleep and very white, with little beads of perspiration on her face. Moisture gathered on a mirror held before her mouth but she could not be seen to breathe. This way she would stay for hours, often till the first dawn of day, and then she would sigh deeply, grow roses in her cheeks and fall into a natural sleep from which she would awake by noon. These periods of deep unconsciousness, hours of stupor, came at first a week apart, then twice a week, and finally every night. During the daytime the damsel lost her buoyancy and light heart and became listless.

The duke, her father, was poor. Fortunately for him the forests were full of deer and the rivers abundant with fish. Grain was raised by the vassals, and firewood was plenty. Everyone contributed toward the welfare of the little community. There was but little gold, and few jewels, some dresses that had been worn for three generations, plenty of armor, and at least some degree of

security. The very poverty of the duke and the isolated position of his castle kept at a distance the robber bands that roamed over France during those lawless centuries.

The duke and his Lady Arabella, however, considered themselves rich in one respect, and that was in the possession of their daughter. She was not only a well-behaved young lady, but she had some degree of beauty and in addition was intelligent enough to learn to read and write, a most unusual accomplishment in those days for a woman. The old friar was proud of her, as she was the only pupil of his old age. He was almost enthusiastic over her scholastic attainments and frequently spoke of her wisdom.

In 1270 Susanne was seventeen years old. Life must have seemed very quiet to her during those years, and no doubt she took long breaths and sighed deeply when the friar told her tales of Paris and the French court. I presume that she thought nothing ever happened in Aragon—and just when the child was ready to die from the very sameness of her life, the cat had come to the castle.

There is no doubt that this was a very unusual cat in every way. She was much larger than the average cat, and striped like a tiger. The eyes were yellow and at night shone like large stars. During the entire time the cat was at the castle she was never seen to eat; while she often

sat on the table at mealtime, not even the choicest titbit was fine enough to tempt her appetite. As soon as this cat came to the castle all the other cats left, at once, and their absence was not a cause for concern, for all the rats and mice left at the same time.

The cat came and went according to no rule or reason and seemed to have no trouble in going anywhere she wished to, even though the doors were closed and the windows locked. She was never seen in the small chapel. Her favorite room was that occupied by the Damsel Susanne, and she seemed fonder of that child than of any other person in the castle. She would lie for hours at a time on the floor, watching Susanne, her eyes first narrow slits in the yellow and then deep pits of a peculiar green.

The damsel liked the cat, and for that reason the animal was tolerated. Friar Sinistrari protested from the first and said that it would end in some horrible disaster, but the damsel cried and the Lady Arabella looked concerned and the duke said that he saw nothing of harm in a cat; so it ended in the cat's staying. Yet in the fall of the year the damsel was ill more often than ever.

To add to the worries of Duke Jacobus Hubelaire, strange tales began to come to the castle. First a goose was found dead with blood coming from little punctate holes in the neck; then little lambs were somehow killed during the night and their bodies sucked dry of blood; and finally a child was taken from its crib and the torn and lifeless body left in a thicket near the grief-stricken parents' hut.

The common folk were dependent on the duke for protection, so it was natural that they send a delegation to him telling him what they feared and asking him for help. They were no cowards though they were serfs, and the tale they told to the duke,

his lady and the friar was no story to tell to little children.

To put it briefly, their tale was this—that several of them had seen a woman wandering through the woods on the nights when the lambs and the baby had been slain. It was the opinion of those who had seen her most clearly in the moonlight that the woman had the dress and general appearance of the Damsel Susanne. At this statement the duke swore, the Lady Arabella fainted, and the friar crossed himself. The nobility in the castle assured the serfs that they must be mistaken, as they were sure that on these nights the damsel had been asleep in her bed—not only asleep, but so deeply asleep that she could not be aroused.

For a wonder the simple folk believed the duke and his lady. They left the castle convinced that their eyes had betrayed them. The friar went at once to his room, where he spent long hours in study and prayer, nor did he neglect to fast, to purge, and to drink large amounts of water mingled with the juice of limes. Then the secret was revealed to him by merciful Saint Anthony.

What he realized was this:

When the cat was in the room with the damsel, she was always awake or sleeping peacefully. On occasions when the damsel was in her deep and deathlike stupor the cat was never to be seen. When she roused from this deep sleep the cat was always in the room, crouched in one corner or hidden back of a chest. In some way the cat was associated with the strange sickness of the girl. Another fact was evident. The child had been perfectly well before the cat came. Also the killing of the animals and the child had all happened since the coming of the cat.

If the cat could be killed, then the whole trouble would stop. At least Friar Sinistrari hoped so. Unfortunately, the thinking about killing the animal and the actual kill-

ing of it were two separate things. There was no doubt about its having nine lives; perhaps it had ninety. Secretly the duke offered a gold piece as a reward for the killing of the cat; everyone wanted the money and tried to earn it, but when they saw the cat they were weaponless, and when they had their weapons ready the cat was never to be seen.

Then another lamb was killed, and the very next night an attempt was made to take a baby out of the cradle. This time the mother was watching and when her baby cried she sprang forward in its defense. She saw a woman in white picking the baby up. There was a struggle, and finally the intruder fled. The mother was sure that it was another woman who had tried to rob her. She had scratched the thief's neck and, the next morning, while telling the story to the duke and the friar, showed them the blood, still under her fingernails.

The duke tried to comfort her, but all the time he and the friar were looking sidewise at each other, and as soon as they could do so they went to the room of the damsel. She had passed through another hard night, one that was worse than usual, but when they saw her she was sleeping naturally. There was a red spot on the sheet, and when they turned her head they saw several long red scratches on her neck.

The cat sat as usual up on the window-sill, leisurely washing her face.

The duke was not a coward but at the sight of the scratches he turned pale and started to gnaw upon his fingers. The friar thought harder than ever, but all he could say was to repeat the statement that they should kill the cat, at which statement the animal disappeared through the window and was seen no more that day.

But the Damsel Susanne was

whiter than her usual wont that dinner-time, and against the pallor of her face her red lips blushed. Friar Sinistrari had something on his mind, it seemed, something that he dared not speak to the damsel's father. None the less, he made two suggestions: first, that from then on the damsel be watched constantly, and second, that a lamb be tied as a decoy and a bait in the grass circle of the dark wood in back of the castle. He advised that all the people hide themselves in a great circle around this lamb and watch in the full of the moon for whatever might come to kill the lamb and suck its blood.

His advice and argument were so good that the duke promised him that no matter who came for the lamb, they would kill him in any manner the friar considered best. The friar went to the blacksmith and had a long talk with him, and all that day the smith toiled at his forge.

THAT night the lamb was tied in the middle of the bare circle. No tree or shrub grew there—only a small green grass—and all around the edge were mushrooms. The simple peasants, shivering but at the same time determined to do what they could to rid the place of this horrid pest, hid in the thick wood some distance away. They were told to come to the circle when they heard the screech of the great horned owl.

The Damsel Susanne complained of being tired and went to bed earlier than usual. In the next room, looking through holes bored in the wooden partition, watched the duke and the friar. The window was open and the night was still; there was no breeze, and the candle by the bed burned without a flicker. Just as they were growing tired, the moon came above the trees and shone into the room. There was now

light from three sources—the moon, the candle, and the fire on the hearth. They had no trouble in seeing the cat come through the open window and jump up on the bed. They had no trouble at all in seeing the great green globes of the cat's eyes as it leaned over the damsel and seemed to suck the breath of life from her. Friar Sinistrari had to hold the duke to keep him from rushing into the room. Then, with one jump, the cat disappeared through the window. When they reached the room, Susanne seemed as though touched by the hand of death. Leaving her in the care of her mother and the aged nurse, the duke ran out of the castle, followed as rapidly as possible by the old friar. A few men-at-arms joined them in their hurried walk to the bare circle. There they joined the blacksmith and the others who were waiting.

The full moon, just above the tree-tops, was like a harvest moon, yellow like an orange, round as a ball and large as a bushel basket. It seemed to rest on the top of the pines, flooding the circle with light. In the middle of the spot the white lamb baaed uneasily.

Then the woman appeared.

The duke gasped. The friar prayed. Every peasant who saw what was to be seen crossed himself, for the woman was the Damsel Susanne, but her eyes were yellow globes in the moonlight. She glided over to the lamb and struck it with her left hand. A feline cry echoed through the wood, and then, without further pause, the woman seized the lamb, bit it in the neck and started to suck the blood. Once she raised her head to listen, and her lips were red in the moonlight.

Out of the stillness came the hooting of an owl!

From every side the peasants gathered to form a complete circle, greatly afraid but determined to do

the thing they had been asked to do. They carried axes and hoes and sharpened stakes, and a few had spears and swords. The circle finally was three deep with determined men.

Too late the woman realized that she was surrounded. She glided away from the dead lamb, and her face was covered with blood and hate. Several times she jumped savagely at different portions of the encircling ring only to be met by the threatening hedge of weapons. Then the friar whispered to the smith, and he shouted an order to close upon the woman.

To the duke's credit he kept silent; he had promised to keep silent and not interfere, but his face disclosed the feeling in his heart to find that this woman, this fiend from hell, was his daughter. Closer and closer the threatening ring of peasants pressed, and finally a few of the bravest jumped and bore the woman to the ground under their weight. The blacksmith had her by the throat, but not before she had drawn blood from his arm.

The friar called for the brazier of glowing charcoal. In it, white-hot, was a brand in the shape of a cross. Shaking with excitement, the old man managed to control himself long enough to say earnestly, "In the name of the Father, Son and Holy Ghost;" then he took the handle of the brand in his hands and pressed it against the skull of the woman, just above and between the eyes—pressed it with all his strength. . . .

The woman writhed beneath the weight of those above her. All the powerful strength of the smith was barely enough to hold her head to the ground. Shriek after shriek filled the air as the hot crucifix burned its way into her brain and into her soul, searing and destroying the very centers of her life.

And to the horror of all, to the

surprize and amazement of those who held her, she changed suddenly in shape, and when she died, it was not the Damsel Susanne they held, but a twisted cat.

The duke was brave, but for all his bravery he fainted.

When he came to his senses, he found that a large fire had been built and the cat was searing amid the flames. There was nothing to do but to stumble back to the castle.

The Lady Arabella told her husband that she had sat by the side of her daughter holding a golden cross in her hands and praying. At a certain time the damsel had screamed, sat up in bed, and then

dropped backward. The mother and the old nurse thought she was dead, but her regular breathing soon showed the return of life. The rest of the night they spent in the bedroom, one on each side of their beloved daughter, holding her hands.

The morning dawned, a lovely rose.

The damsel, waking, called for food. When milk was brought to her she drank it eagerly but complained that it hurt her to swallow. Then she fell asleep.

In the daylight they saw a red cross on her forehead.

On her neck were the livid marks of fingertips.
