

STRANGE TALES

OF MYSTERY AND TERROR

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"Some cat must have got in through the window."

The Feline Phantom

By Gilbert Draper

AN old house made over into a modern apartment building is scarcely the place where one would expect to meet with a shocking experience; yet it was in the hundred-dollar-a-month home of my friend Horace Banks that the incident occurred.

Banks and I had been brought up together, for our respective families had purchased adjoining houses before we had reached our 'teens, and it was from these premises that we used to set off for school together every morning. In later life, as often happens with childhood chums, we drifted apart, Banks going abroad

"Humbug" and "rubbish," Banks called the strange tale of soul-tampering. And yet. . . . And yet. . . .

to study foreign languages and I entering upon a journalistic career at home, which, incidentally, is my present means of livelihood. When he returned after an absence of nearly a decade, I found him so changed intellectually that the old relationship was impossible, though

we still remained the best of friends.

Always of a studious nature, Banks had drifted

from philology to psychology, and his knowledge of these and countless other 'ologies impressed me not a little.

He had been made an orphan by the sudden death of his father, a prominent surgeon, who, being a

widower and having no other children, had left him with sufficient means to pursue his hobby of research. We dined together about once a fortnight, sometimes in his apartment and sometimes at the home of my aunt, with whom I boarded. Otherwise we seldom met, for his ways were not mine.

ON the night of which I write, we had finished dinner and were enjoying his highly palatable port before a log fire in the living room, when, after a long silence, he said, apropos of nothing in particular: "Harvey, how about letting me put you up for the night?"

The invitation was so unusual that I stared at him. I had not slept under Banks' roof since our school days.

"What in the world for?" I asked.

"When I tell you," he answered, smiling, "you may not want to. The truth is, I'm afraid to sleep here alone to-night."

Not having known my friend, you will not be able to appreciate the absurdity of his remark; but the idea of Banks being afraid to sleep alone so appealed to my sense of the ridiculous that I loudly guffawed. Banks, I should explain, was a most powerful man, with muscles like iron and a constitution envied by all who knew him. If he had any nerves, they were always under perfect control.

"Sorry, old man," I apologized. "I didn't mean to be rude, but you rather surprised me."

"And I'm going to surprise you still more," he returned, his face as solemn as ever.

Forthwith, he embarked upon an account of one of his experiences abroad that revealed to me a new Banks—a romantic Banks and an exceedingly credulous one. It was the story of an aristocratic Persian cat and its untimely end.

"This damn cat," Banks said,

"attracted me the moment I set eyes on her. She was a beauty, I can tell you, with a magnificent tail and eyes like glittering nuggets. I bought her in the slums of Cairo from a ragged street merchant whose only wares were a number of good, bad and indifferent cats. When I had paid him for Cina—that was the beast's name—he insisted upon dragging me into his filthy stall to warn me to protect her with my very life. For, he solemnly swore, were she to meet an unnatural death, whoever owned her at the time would be visited by her spirit on the first anniversary of her death. On the second anniversary, he avowed, the said owner would himself perish miserably.

"Although my common sense told me the old humbug was talking rubbish, I listened to him, at first with amused tolerance, but later with real interest.

MANY years before, so the story went, Cina had come into the possession of one of Persia's greatest physicians, a man who combined modern scientific methods with some of the secrets of ancient sorcery—a rather sinister old gentleman, I gathered. At any rate, shortly after the advent of this cat into his household, he began to devote more and more time to practices that should never have attracted a reputable medical man. The number of his patients began to dwindle, not because his skill had diminished, but because they took exception to the way he treated them. In other words, they objected to being hypnotized instead of anesthetized."

"You mean he could render people insensible to pain by hypnotizing them?" I broke in.

"That's what my informant said. He told me that the doctor, after dabbling for a time in hypnotism,

began delving into the forbidden mysteries of metempsychosis, which, for the benefit of your uninformed mind, I will explain, has to do with the transmigration of the soul after death into the body of another man or lower animal."

"Thanks very much," I remarked dryly.

"Well," continued Horace, knocking his pipe against the grate, "things went from bad to worse, and the once eminent physician degenerated into a student of witchcraft. Now Cina, whose beautiful body was admired by her inhuman master, was made to play an important part in his experiments, and, while he didn't harm her physically, she must have endured the most unheard of tortures mentally, as a later happening proved."

"This sounds like the prologue to a first-class horror story," I put in flippantly, for I had a suspicion that the learned Horace was pulling my leg.

"That's precisely what it is," he replied, ignoring my levity. "And I want to assure you, Harvey, that I'm not telling you this for your entertainment. I'm really serious, and I'm in a worse predicament than I ever imagined a human being could find himself in."

I TRIED to look sympathetic. Banks' lugubrious tone was getting tiresome.

"One day," he went on, "a celebrated Indian fakir, who happened to be traveling through Persia, heard of these infamous exploits and, most likely jealous of his own reputation as a master of magic, decided to investigate. Accordingly he disguised himself as a wealthy victim of some obscure disease and called on the doctor for advice, fearing that if he revealed his identity he would not be admitted. At first the ruse succeeded, but when he attempted to go into the

details of his pretended sickness, the wily wizard exposed him as an impostor. Heated words were exchanged, in the course of which the fakir accused the doctor of being a charlatan. At this unpardonable insult, the latter volunteered to give a demonstration of his proficiency in metempsychosis.

"Just at this moment Cina emerged from a corner where she had been sleeping and walked with dignified tread across the room. As she passed her master, she recoiled, spitting viciously. I have already said she had ample reason to fear and hate him.

"The contemptuous fakir pointed triumphantly at the cat. 'The very thing,' he cried mockingly. 'I have no objection to temporarily possessing the body of that comely animal, and I am sure its soul, if it has one, would welcome the novelty of a brief sojourn in mine.' 'As you will,' replied the doctor craftily, seizing Cina by the scruff of the neck and avoiding, as the result of much practice, the waving talons that sought to tear his flesh. After chloroforming the unfortunate animal he placed the inert body on the floor and ordered his visitor to lie down beside it.

"HARVEY, I do not expect you to believe the outcome of that grotesque séance, and were it not for what has followed, I, too, would scoff. How he accomplished it, no one will ever know, but a veritable miracle was performed by that Persian doctor. Following God knows what horrible rites, the soul of the fakir entered the body of the cat and for a time lay dormant; but, as soon as Cina's soul, or spirit, had taken possession of the man's body, it realized its new strength, and, with the realization, came a desire for vengeance against the one who had subjected her feline form to such torment.

"A bitter struggle ensued, during which the doctor, stunned by the ferocity of one of his victims, was badly bitten and scratched. To save himself, he seized a heavy scalpel with a razor-like edge which happened to be lying on a nearby table and felled his antagonist with a single, desperate blow. In his terror he struck hard, and the fakir, or Cina, if you will, fell dead with an almost severed head.

"As the eyes of the cat slowly opened, the arch-magician became aware that behind them was an imprisoned soul, doomed to inhabit an animal's body. Aye, he had punished the fakir nicely for his insult! Now to rid himself of the creature, which might prove dangerous.

"Darting from the room, he ran out into the street, determined to rid himself of the cat. And here is where Fate took a hand, for who should be passing the house but my cat merchant with two of his pets in a cage on his back! Imagine his astonishment when the wild-eyed physician offered to give him a beautiful Persian for nothing!

"Of course the man gladly accepted. But as he was turning away, the doctor, doubtless because he knew that the animal's death would release his victim's soul, warned him that if any harm came to Cina, whoever possessed her at the time would be haunted by her spirit on the first anniversary of her death and again the following year, when the phantom would cause him to die in agony. Being superstitious and anxious to make his escape, and convinced he was dealing with a madman, the cat merchant readily promised to repeat the warning to all prospective buyers.

"IT was not until years afterwards that a dismissed servant of the doctor, who had overheard his fantastic conversation with the

fakir, told the story out of malice. Like ripples on a pond the tale spread until eventually it reached the ears of Cina's new master, who for some reason or other had refrained from selling her. I fancy, being superstitious, he had decided to keep the incomparable cat he had obtained for nothing in the hope that she would bring him further good fortune. Unluckily for me, I came upon him at a time when he was hard pressed for money."

Horace paused to re-light his pipe. My own had lain unheeded on the table beside me since shortly after he had started his idiotic reminiscences. To tell the truth, I was getting uneasy. Either he was trying to be facetious at my expense or something had happened to upset his reason.

"Harvey," he said suddenly, "I know that you are thinking this is rot, and I don't blame you. But please hear me out.

"With Cina in a basket under my arm I returned to my hotel. By a strange coincidence, I had been perusing an excellent book on metapsychics by a learned German scholar, who had devoted several chapters to phenomena similar to that recounted by the cat merchant. Under the circumstances, it is hardly to be wondered at that I spent the remainder of the day engrossed in the volume.

"Indeed, so interested did I become that I neglected to go downstairs for dinner, and it was nearly midnight when I finally laid the thing down.

"As I sat there musing over what I had read, my eye chanced to fall upon Cina, who was curled up on the foot of the bed fast asleep. Was it possible, I asked myself, that that sleek body harbored the soul of the fakir?

"At last, thoroughly weary, I went to bed. Cina looked so com-

fortable that I was loath to disturb her, though afterwards I wished I had, God knows.

HOURS later I became conscious of an inexplicable weight on my chest. With a great effort I opened my sleepy eyes, but when I beheld the ferocity in the glaring yellow orbs of the animal that crouched over my prostrate body, I became stiff with fright.

"Well, I didn't hesitate. I flung the bed clothes over that poor bewitched cat before she could spring. I had to do it: there was not time for a less brutal counter-attack. Yet even now I shudder when I think of her death struggles.

"However, it was not until the squirming form beneath me had lain still for several minutes that I ventured to slide off the bed. I stood soaked in sweat, my body trembling in every limb as I stared with horror at that heap of bedding. Then, as God is my judge, the air was rent by a terrifying *human* groan. That was the last straw. I collapsed senseless on the floor, where I was found the next morning by a maid.

"For several days I tossed delirious on a hospital cot, mumbling God knows what rubbish. When eventually I recovered, I sought forgetfulness in other lands, and for months I wandered disconsolately through Europe. In time the adventure became only a dim memory, though at intervals my sleep was disturbed by nightmarish dreams of huge cats that prowled around my bed or sat back on their haunches regarding me with fearful saucer-like eyes. Naturally I had never taken the Persian doctor's warning seriously, and by the end of the first year I had ceased to even think of it. But the monstrous business was by no means finished, as I was soon to learn.

ONE night, while staying at a quaint hostelry in Copenhagen, I retired, as was my wont, about midnight. Nothing unusual had happened since the Cairo incident, and I was in a particularly peaceful frame of mind. Certainly I did not expect to be awakened before morning, so you can imagine my sensations when I was aroused after a few hours' sleep by an uncomfortable weight on my chest. As on the previous occasion, I did not immediately open my eyes, but lay, wondering drowsily what was the matter. The first thought to cross my mind was that I had too many bed clothes on, and I was about to toss some of them off when a paralyzing premonition of danger gripped my heart. I lay there in the pitch blackness like a contemptible coward, afraid to open my eyes.

"Gradually a peculiar noise began to beat an insistent tattoo on my eardrums. At first it sounded like the faint hissing a radiator sometimes makes when a little steam is escaping; but, as I listened, with painfully thumping heart, it began to sound horribly like the breathing of a maddened animal—like that of a cat, for example!"

"Horace," I broke in, now thoroughly alarmed, "if this is a joke it has gone far enough. I enjoy a good yarn as much as anybody, but I draw the line when it is told as you are telling this one. Why, you look like a ghost! For Heaven's sake, man, snap out of it!"

"Damn your infernal stupidity, Harvey!" he cried angrily. "I'm not a fool and I don't take you for one. Will you let me finish?"

I subsided uneasily, convinced my friend was on the verge of a nervous breakdown, and permitted him to bring his preposterous story to a conclusion without again interrupting him.

"No man ever opened his eyes

with greater reluctance than I did. I had to look, though, even when I knew I should see something ghastly."

HORACE paused dramatically. "Harvey," he continued, in a slow, impressive voice, "I saw a pair of familiar yellow eyes. They were about a foot from my face. That was all. Apparently the thing didn't have a body. Yet I could feel the weight of something just over my heart—a dead weight, if you understand me, without movement.

"My hands were involuntarily clutching the bed clothes in such a manner that I could easily fling them over the thing on top of me, just as I had over the live Cina the year before. But what was the use? You can't smother a ghost; you can't suffocate something that isn't real. Even in my terrified state, that much was clear.

"Presently came an idea, and no sooner did it occur to me than I acted. Picture me huddled up with my head under the bed clothes, waiting tremulously for that feline phantom to go away! Undignified and absurd, granted, but at least I had escaped temporarily. I could still feel the weight, though it seemed to have shifted. The next minute something was walking over me, back and forth across the bed as if in search of a hole in the covers. Soon my breath became labored, my supply of oxygen being limited; but I would have suffered death rather than move my head from beneath the comparative safety of the bed clothes.

"Harvey, that experience was awful, and I am sure that if I had not heard it jump to the floor and the sound of padded footsteps retreating towards the window, I should have died from suffocation. That would have been retribution with a vengeance, wouldn't it?

"Well, you won't be surprised

to hear that I waited for the dawn in what a rotten writer like you would call 'a cold sweat of terror.' I was afraid to get out of bed for fear of being attacked.

"That's all, Harvey, except that to-night's the night I'm to have a second visit from the departed Cina, who not unnaturally has a grudge against me. It was exactly a year ago that I slept in that Danish hotel, and I am sure the ghost of that cursed cat will come again to-night as I am that you're sitting there. That's why I want you here with me."

FOR several minutes after Horace had ceased speaking there was silence between us. My heart was full of pity mingled with contempt for the big man opposite me who had so let his nerves get the better of him that he had become convinced of the reality of some ordinary nightmare. Horace's hallucinations I put down to an unwise supper. Not for a moment did I believe his incredible story about that night in Copenhagen. Either he had had a bad dream or some stray cat had entered his room in search of a sleeping place. In the latter event, he was hardly to be blamed for fancying that Cina's ghost was paying the first of her two promised visits, especially as it happened to be the exact anniversary of her death. That, however, was simply coincidence.

Well, I certainly was not going to become a party to any such foolishness as sitting up to wait for the ghost of a dead cat. Horace, I felt, should be ashamed of himself for making so ridiculous a request. Probably he would apologize in the morning.

When I bade him good night a little later, he helped me into my overcoat without a word. I perceived he was offended that I would not humor him.

I WAS awakened about six o'clock the following morning by the telephone, which is on a table beside my bed. Fumbling for the receiver, I mumbled a sleepy "hello."

"Is that you, Harvey?" I heard my editorial chief inquire briskly. "Say, you'd better hurry over to your friend Horace Banks' place.

He's dead: died during the night. Looks like he'd had a fit in bed. Write us a good story, will you? Oh, and by the way, play up this part of it. Some stray cat must have got in through the window, probably looking for a place to sleep. They say you can see its footmarks on the sill. Too bad, eh!"