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Author of "Fairy Gossamer" and "Bloody Moon"

**O**UT in the hills of Mississippi a superstition exists among the negroes that a certain species of skunk is a cross between a spirit and a polecat. The skunk inhabits graveyards, old deserted barn lots, and sometimes may be found denned up in the dilapidated buildings of abandoned sawmill sites; but for the most part it clings to the gruesome companionship of moss-grown tombs and sunken graves. The blacks call it the graveyard skunk, and some maintain that it feeds upon the dead, although no negro ever fooled around one long enough to discover exactly the sort of food it does eat. It's a bad sign, the blacks say, even to look at one, or be caught meeting it in the road. Unless the hoodoo is broken by some superstitious ritual, the formula of which they never divulge to a white man, the one meeting the graveyard skunk is doomed to die within the year.

But the average catalog of fur houses has a different tale to tell about the graveyard skunk. It is listed under the name of "Mississippi skunk," and the quotation attached to the description and habits and methods of trapping says "\$125 up." The description adds that in color the little animal runs from a dark brown

to black, sometimes, but not often, with two inches of white tip at its tail. It is the white tipped pelts which command the premium contained in the word "up" in the quotation. Of the half dozen pelts sold in the open market last season, one brought more than \$1,000.

Had any one asked Pete Springer about the graveyard skunk, he would have told still another story about it, and one interesting enough. He would have said that the Mississippi skunk is a beautiful animal, exceedingly rare, wonderfully gentle, and of no little economic importance, could it be raised in any numbers. Its food is mostly snakes and rats, although at times it eats eggs and young chickens, and even quails and whippoorwills, these birds being ground nesters. But usually it eats snakes and rats. He would have said that it lives in graveyards no more than any wild animal does that has found out the tendency of humans to stay away from these localities of nights, and the consequent security.

But he wouldn't have told any more, nor would he have shown his skunks. How many he had, what he did with the pelts, whether he raised many or few, how he took care of them—these were details that the

queer little man never mentioned. People used to badger him, and try to tease him into telling something about his fad, but he never opened his mouth. The niggers might have been right, after all, about the graveyard skunk, for only one who had associated with something uncanny like them could have been like Pete Springer. He was small and insignificant, like a skunk; he had a funny way of twisting his mouth instead of answering back in words, and he never stayed around people any longer than he had to.

When he was found dead in his little cabin off the dusty road in the fall of the year, just at cotton-picking time, it was the buzzards sitting on the roof that announced his passing. The neighbors—the hardiest of them—took him to Mt. Zion Baptist Church, out in the piney woods, and buried him. There was little found in his room. A pine bed, with a lumpy, musty mattress; two old hide-covered hickory chairs; a few clothes; a stove and some cracked dishes—that was all. The whole perhaps was worth less than ten dollars.

They found no skunks, although it was reputed about the countryside that Pete had raised a lot of them and kept them hidden in strange places about his cabin. They found no money, although he was supposed to have been somewhat of a miser. Nor did they find any evidence of how he came by his death. Murder, with robbery as a motive, was suggested, and this explanation appeared reasonable; but the body showed no marks. A horse doctor living down the road advanced the theory that the cause was heart failure, and this became the accepted explanation.

**S**PRINGER and his curious ways might eventually have become a local tradition, practically forgotten except by old settlers who like to spin queer yarns, but for the fact that Mose

Sloss, a plantation negro, returning from church one night by the short cut along the edge of Mt. Zion burying ground, found himself fearfully wool-gathered by a little animal that crossed his path at the corner of the graveyard. At first he fancied it was a possum, and licking his chops in anticipation, he broke down the rusty barbed wire supposed to protect the burying ground and started in pursuit. Probably nothing but a possum, or maybe a tender young frying-size chicken, would lead a nigger into a graveyard at night when the moon is low and dim. Anyway, Mose was not dangerously close to any graves, for the yard contained several acres, and most of the dead slept over on the other side.

Just as he came out into a little opening in the broom sedge, where he was certain he could knock the possum in the head with a pine knot, he saw his horrible error. It was not a possum at all, but a white-tipped graveyard skunk! And it was headed right toward the new red mound where Pete Springer was laid away.

Mose removed his hat and released the brakes. He overtook (so it was reputed) a flivver going in his direction, and ran over two calves, and fell, his tongue lolling out like an ox's, at the front step of his white man yelling like a madman. His story was pried out of him, and after that the plantation blacks caught a screech owl and made a poultice of its meat and feathers, and applied it to the lower end of Mose's backbone, and managed to break the hoodoo. Two of the white boys belonging to the family for which Mose worked, went to the graveyard that very night, and while they found tracks and a small burrow into the grave, they could find no white-tipped Mississippi skunk.

The black's story had its effect, however. People began to talk. They recalled a great many things which otherwise would never have been

thought of again. Springer did have money. He had a great deal of it. For one thing, he often did odd jobs, picked cotton, piddled about, traded and trafficked, and so on. With no one but himself to take care of, he must have saved this money, for certainly he never spent any of it except for a very few clothes and the barest of food. For years he had been doing this, and he must have hoarded up a thousand dollars. And certainly he must have sold the pelts of his skunks, for he trapped a good deal up and down the creeks in the winter, and shipped these, and when he got the returns from the post office, in form of checks, he went off thirty miles to Clarkesdale to cash them. Somebody went to the trouble, while this talk was going the rounds, of visiting Clarkesdale, and there at one of the banks they found that Pete did have an account, and that he had taken out all his money—more than five thousand dollars—a week before he was found dead.

When this information came to light, the breath of talk became a cyclone. There could be no doubt now. The poor cracked fellow had been killed and robbed.

But here the folks interested in the matter stood baffled. Suppose Springer had been murdered and robbed? What difference, so far as catching the murderer, did this make over his having died a natural death? For nobody had the remotest idea how to go about running the guilty person down. Not a soul could devise a single scheme, or point the finger of suspicion at a single person. Everyone in the community was known to everyone else; every man had lived in it from his babyhood up; mostly they were good, honest, hard-working poor folks; those who were not honest and hard-working were too lazy to be mean. No one, so far as anybody could think, ever spent any time with Springer; had any grudge against the

poor crank. Nor did a soul in the community give evidence of possessing five thousand dollars—or five hundred, for that matter. Certainly, on the face of things, a man who had that much money in his possession would forget presently and spend a few dollars of it. That was human nature. And nobody in the Mt. Zion settlement had the indiscretion to draw suspicion to himself by spending any unusual amount of money, either at the cross-roads stores, or with the catalog houses.

WHEN the matter was about to be dropped again, for sheer lack of clues, Uncle Benny Whittle, a sometime trapper of renown, but now retired from active service, had an idea.

"I used to know something about these yer graveyard skunks," he said meditatively. "Lemme see, now. In my day they didn't fotch no hunnerd to a thousand dollars a hide. I thought I war doing a hellish business when I sold one fur five. But now lemme see. The old folks used to tell me that this yer skunk could be tamed, and hit would foller hit's moster jist like a dog—would take up with a body, and stick through thick and thin, jist like a dog. And folks used to say the skunk would sometimes take up with strangers—sorter stray off, like a pup will at times. Now, I dunno whether thar's any truth to this or not. But if there is, then the skunk that nigger Mose seen like as not was going back to Springer. And the man that killed Springer must have visited thar often enough to find out a good deal about him—whut he done with his money, how much he had, and things like that."

The group that was listening to the old man around the store stove wagged their heads in approval of this reasoning.

"Follow that skunk," concluded the old man. "That thar skunk

knoved Springer, and that thar skunk knows the man that killed him!"

A murmur of approbation went round the group. A man rose—Dave Vickers—and withdrew himself, but nobody paid any attention to the fact. He had wagged his head along with the rest, and murmured as loudly as any other; besides, he had a shrewish wife, and never clung about the stove late of nights.

Three of the men, Miles Wilkes, Sam Cobb, and Martin Spinks, who had trapped a little themselves in their younger days, borrowed a lantern from the storekeeper and set off down the road to Mt. Zion burying ground.

"Old Uncle Benny ain't as crazy as some folks says he is," observed Spinks. "If the old man had started out sooner in life, he mout have become a grand detective. We'll go look at Springer's grave, and see whut's gone of that skunk. Then we'll trail that bird, we will."

They emerged presently from the pine timber into the drab expanse of graveyard. They put out the lantern now. Craftily—for they knew the timid way of wild things—they pushed along the sodded ground to within eye-shot of the mound. Their eyes were keen, and they could see the small round spot of black against the lighter tone of soil that marked the mouth of the burrow. In spite of themselves they had made considerable noise, and in a moment were able to see the faintest movement at the opening. A dim form presently emerged into the open.

"I' grannies, thar she is!" whispered Wilkes.

"S-s-s-h!" cautioned Spinks. "The durned thing's going to take a stroll. Fellers, we'll foller it!"

"We'll shore have to do some keerful trailing, then. I never in *my* life tried to trail a skunk with the expectation of hit keeping in the direction it started off on. But we can

try. Nothing like making an attempt."

THE little animal moved off through the tall grass, and the men followed as stealthily as they could. The evening was cloudy, but a full moon drifted out occasionally, and in this wise they were able to keep within sight of the skunk. Whether it knew that it was being followed the men could not determine. Anyway, as they well knew, it was a pet, and likely it did not object seriously to the surveillance.

After leaving the broom sedge in the graveyard, it got into the big road, keeping mostly along the side, in the dusty grass. Whenever there was a rail fence to follow, its natural instinct must have told it to utilize this protection, for it went in and out of the lower rails, gracefully, leisurely. The general direction was that of the cabin where Springer had lived, and the men were quick to see this. Now they were not so disturbed about losing momentary sight of the varment, for clearly it was on its way home. After passing through a section of mixed hardwood and pine timber, the skunk, still followed craftily by the three men, emerged in the open stretch of road by which Springer's cabin stood. And, truly enough, the tiny beast went in at the gate, across the yard, and disappeared in the rear, where were located the smoke house, hen roost, and stables and crib.

In goose file the three crept silently across the yard in the animal's wake. They were able to discern where it went in and out of the rear by way of the paling fence, for certain wide spaces between the individual pickets were worn smooth, besides having a faint odor of musk; but the polecat itself they had lost sight of. They could not decide which building it had gone under, although, as well as they could make out, it was in the

habit of occupying none in particular, but just any one that happened to suit its fancy.

"Reckon we'd better not try to skeer it out," reasoned Wilkes. "But I tell you whut we kin do: we kin git down here in the shadow of the crib and wait a while, and see whut happens. Skunks prow around a lot, and apt as not it'll be out purty soon, and then mebbe we kin trail it a little farther. I ain't well read up on polecats, but I think they is apt to be in several places the same night."

They acted upon this suggestion, and entered the little-used crib, where a load of hay gave them a comfortable rest, while they could at the same time command a general view of the skunk's stamping grounds. They had not been settled very long before a sound smote upon their ears—the footfall of a human. The moon was hidden completely at the moment, and the outside was almost black; they could hear the oncoming steps, but could make out no form in the gloom. Then, with the characteristic suddenness of the moon on speckled nights, the world brightened, and the men inside the crib saw Dave Vickers.

"Whut the—" began Cobb.

"Shut up!" whispered Spinks.

VICKERS stood for a minute or two at the palings, peering over toward the cribs and outbuildings. Then he came into the lot by way of the rickety gate. Here he stopped again, scanning the ground, especially at the base of the building. He, too, was looking for the skunk.

He did not wait long. Presently the animal came out from under the crib where the three men lay in the hay, and ambled in a friendly manner over to Vickers, while the man was looking in another direction; and, not unlike a spoiled cat, it gently rubbed its bowed back against Vickers' overalls legs. The fellow gave a grunt, which turned immediately into a curse. In an instant the polecat had

leaped back under cover. Some sure instinct told it that Vickers, who evidently had been a friend until this moment, was such no longer.

At the same instant it appeared that Vickers realized his mistake and set about rectifying it by an assumption of gentleness.

"Come yer, Cutie, Cutie!" he called. "Come on out, Cutie. I ain't goin' to hurt you." He added an enticing whistle.

But the skunk remained under cover. For some minutes Vickers called and wheedled patiently, occasionally making a round of the crib, but Cutie was not to be taken in by these wiles. Presently Vickers lost his temper and changed his tactics from mild to violent. He gathered old cobs and clods from the petrified bottom of an old pig pen and began a bombardment under the crib calculated to dislodge the hardiest varment that ever found a refuge. He cursed loudly and eloquently; the men within could see that he was perspiring freely, although the late October night was frosty.

At the end of a half hour Vickers gave up in disgust. With a farewell heave of a pine knot under the floor, he went off toward the yard gate, but with occasional backward looks over his shoulder to see if perchance the polecat might not emerge.

The animal did just this. While Vickers was still lingering at the gate, the little beast sidled out from under the crib and maneuvered slantwise in the general direction of the man. Its manner was that of a fawning kitten, although it was observing the utmost discretion by hoisting its white-tipped tail high in the air and keeping within leaping distance of some of the lot buildings. When Vickers saw it, and fell back upon his gentle methods, it continued cautiously to go forward; but immediately the man showed the faintest intention of approaching it, the skunk shot back under the floor.

The curious drama began all over. Vickers raged and swore, and getting a fence rail, prodded vehemently under the building.

"I'll git you, by God, if it takes me till sundown Monday-a-week!" he cursed. "You think you're going to foller me and tell off on me! I'll show you. I wisht to the devil I had thought to fetch my gun! I'd mess you up in short order then."

He went round and round the crib, prodding and pulling and hauling. The men inside were hard put to keep from being found, for the cracks were large, and once Vickers peered through one of them to see if by any possibility the skunk had crawled inside. But being intent upon the polecat, he could not see so large a thing as three men in a pile.

After a long interval, exhausted by his efforts, Vickers rested, then started away again. He waited at the gate for a minute, then went around the corner of the house, the shadows of the pecan trees and china-berry brush swallowing him up.

"I reckon now's a good time fer us to clear out of here," suggested Spinks. The others agreed.

They crawled out of the hay, stretched their cramped legs, and one after another drew themselves through the battened window to the ground. As they did so, they saw a tiny form disappearing through the paling fence in the wake of Vickers.

"It's follering him, shore as sin!" whispered Spinks.

None of them gave voice to the thought which entered their minds simultaneously. With one accord they became immediately silent and crafty, and set swiftly but silently in pursuit. When they emerged out of the front gate, still clinging within the denser gloom of the tree-shadows, they could see, far down the road, the belligerent form of Vickers. The fellow had seen the skunk, and was swearing vividly again, and beating

the adjacent clumps of bushes with sticks and chunks and pine knots.

When he was satisfied that he had routed the pestiferous animal, Vickers started off again. Spinks and Cobb and Wilkes drew in the slack distance between themselves and him. The pursuit continued without event for a half mile. Here, in a strip of timber that crossed the road, they heard Vickers begin swearing again; then a clatter in the brush and tall weeds. By dodging from one tree to another, the three observers were able to get close enough to the scene to be obliged at times to dodge Vickers' shell-fire. But still blinded by the mote, he could not see the beam; so they watched with intense interest. Vickers was beside himself now. In his frantic efforts, he once or twice got almost near enough to the skunk to dash out its brains, but each time the agile animal sidestepped, ducked behind a log or into some brush, and saved itself.

"I'll git you, I'll git you, if it's the last thing I do!" Vickers kept saying over and over. He was almost weeping now. "I'll kill you, I will! I'll git my gun, and then you'll foller me, I reckon!"

He set off at a dead run, and when he was safe out of sight, the three started after him. They had lost sight of the skunk, but they were certain it would appear again. So they trailed Vickers until they reached his house, over on the ridge; and here they concealed themselves in the cotton beside the road and waited. In a few minutes a serene shadow flitted along the gray thread of sandy road. The skunk was still on the job.

VICKERS reappeared on his doorstep after a short time, shotgun in hand, and scanned the yard and road. Presently he went to the gate, bending an eager eye in the direction he had just come. The three men in the cotton could see that he was agi-



tated, trembling, still beside himself, and muttering under his breath.

Diagonally across the road from them stood a skinned-pole cotton house. An arm of timber from a swamp growth stuck up the slope to its rear, and they began watching this spot, certain that the skunk had taken to its cover. Vickers was also watching the same place; he now came out of the gate and went tip-toeing in a lumbering fashion along the road sand in that direction. He carried his gun in readiness, and when the moon suddenly shone forth, the watchers had a vivid impression of his distorted, determined face, with a strange fleck of slobbers at the sagging lower lip. Besides being worried about the possible consequences of this trailing, for he knew that old Uncle Benny Whittle's suggestion was going to be acted upon, he must have been troubled by the saying of the negroes that the graveyard skunk is a cross between a spirit and a polecat. The three men in the cotton had heard the odd superstition all their lives; they would not have denied a certain amount of credence in it. Under the stress of his fear and guilt, Vickers, they knew, believed that he was being pursued by Pete Springer's ghost, which had crept into this infernal pest to trail him to justice.

Suddenly the frosty night was shattered with an explosion of the shotgun. They saw, while yet the echoes went up and down the timber runs and water course, Vickers stagger back with the rebound of the buckshot load. In an instant the polecat showed itself, unhurt and apparently not sorely frightened, around a clump of brush on the side of the cotton pen opposite Vickers.

The chase began again, Vickers loading as he made the round. He shot a second time. His aim being wide, he commenced to curse in frantic oaths, and lunged desperately to and fro in the futile way of a mad-

man. At last the polecat leaped from under cover and started off across the road into the yard. It was in the act of passing through the palings when Vickers discovered it. He came from behind the cotton house with staggering determination, and the gun belched forth its contents. The three men rose as high as they dared to see what had happened; they saw the skunk make a leap forward, then drop into its almost placid amble. It was unscathed.

The moon came out now in a long patch of clear sky. The yard and cabin and surroundings were white and brilliant. Vickers had dashed around the house, with the evident intention of heading off the skunk when it came out from under the floor on the rear side. The gun rang out again. Then all was silent. The three men waited. A minute went by; two, three, finally ten. The night was as soft and silent and peaceful as a dream.

They stretched their legs, making tentative plans to come out of the cotton and see what had happened. After assuring themselves that it would be safe to creep out of the cotton patch, they crouched low, got into the road, kept within the shadow of the pickets—scant protection though it was—and finding nothing to hinder, worked eventually to the rear of the house.

A dark hulk lay upon the ground half way beneath the back steps and door of the smokehouse. There could be no doubt of what had happened. While they stood at the fence looking upon the conclusion of the tragedy, they saw the polecat creep out from under one of the lower rotten logs of the smokehouse, go over and sniff at the silent form, circle about it two or three times, then trot quietly out of the yard into the road, and off back in the direction of Mt. Zion burying ground.