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WEIRD TALES ISSUED 1st OF EACH MONTH

The Watcher at the Door

By HENRY KUTTNER

A brief, shuddery story about the horror that haunted Keene's dreams

THE house was loathsomely old. I felt that from the first. I am not usually sensitive to such impressions, but the tall gambreled house in which Edward Keene was staying seemed to exhale a perceptible miasma of dusty antiquity. The house was set in a little valley in the New England hills, all alone, and Keene had leased it for the summer in order to have a headquarters in which to complete a series of paintings of the countryside and landmarks.

I was spending my vacation in New York, and drove down one Sunday to see Keene, whom I knew well. He came to the door of the house and greeted me, and I was shocked at the pallor of his face and the feverish brightness of his eyes. After greeting me with pleasure that nevertheless showed a trace of reticence, he led me along a narrow, dingy hall to his studio. We smoked and chatted for almost an hour before the lurking terror in Keene's eyes was explained.

He broke in suddenly on some unimportant retrospection of mine. Leaning forward, he put one thin hand on my knee for emphasis, and said hurriedly, "Johnny, do I look insane? I've been to a doctor, and he could find nothing wrong—but something is wrong. Do I—"

"A touch of flu?" I suggested. "You may have been working too hard, Ed. But why insanity?"

He looked at me hard. "I'll tell you, I've been wanting to tell somebody, anyway—all about it, from the first moment I noticed there weren't any rats."

I stared, and he smiled crookedly.

"This house is very old. A witch was supposed to have died here in the old days. And in houses as dilapidated as this you naturally expect rats. See?"

I nodded, and Keene's eyes went past me to the doorway. The door, I saw suddenly, was open, although I thought I had closed it on entering.

The most horrible expression appeared for a moment on Keene's face—and was gone, so swiftly I could not analyze it. I felt an unfamiliar chill creep along my spine as he continued.

"No rats. No spiders. No insects. There's no life in the house, except for me. The woodwork creaks sometimes, though—at night."

"You're a victim of a bad case of nerves," I said. "Woodwork creaking! You'll be telling me next there's a ghost in the house."

"Yes," he said. "There is."

For a moment I didn't say anything. And Keene went on swiftly, as though to forestall my comments.

"It happened the first week I stayed here. You know the long hallway that runs the length of the house? Come here." He got up, motioned me to the door, and stood waiting. I hesitated and then preceded him from the room, noticing that his eyes were fixed with curious steadiness upon the threshold.

The hallway was dark, and looking along it I got the impression of an incredibly long tunnel, stretching to infinite depths.

"What am I supposed to see, Ed?" I asked.

He shrugged and drew me back into the room.

"Nothing I suppose. I could scarcely expect——" His white face was intensely serious. "Did you see nothing at all, not even a suspicion of any movement?"

"No. You're coming back to town with me—to a doctor."

"Always practical," he said, shrugging. "I've tried that. It doesn't help. Well—I was telling you what happened. A few nights after I came here I—dreamed.

I WAS very tired and sleepy, but in the dream I moved with a curious lightness, as though not bound by gravitation. My bed's here"—he pointed to a cot under the window—"and in the dream I seemed to get up and go to the door, which opened, very slowly, as I approached. Moonlight came in through the window, but in the hall it was black as pitch. I felt my way, running my hand over the wall on the right side of the passage. Remember that.

"On my right, bare woodwork—and old, horribly old. I felt something under my fingers as I moved along—a carved panel of wood, and, involuntarily groping for the doorknob, my fingers closed over a heavy metal latch of some kind. I hesitated—and then, even in my dream, I remembered. There's no door in that wall.

"Of course," he said, checking my comment with an uplifted hand, "just a dream. But I can't hope to convey the sense of shock, the horrible disorientation of the moment. Then, too, I heard something that was quite distinctly not the disturbing creaking of the woodwork around me—a soft, rubbing sound, as though of some heavy body scraping itself against the door; and I felt the latch quiver in my hand.

"Almost involuntarily I compressed the latch, and abruptly the door was flung open—pulled violently away from me. Remember, I could see nothing. Just black-

ness—and two little points of light that sprang into existence just ahead of my face. Amber lights, like the eyes of a cat. Then I woke up."

Keene watched me closely, and I forced from my face the concern that I felt. "You need a rest," I said. "This house *is* old—but I always thought you were pretty hard-headed, Ed." I laughed, and a flash of anger crossed his face. It was gone swiftly.

"Trying to laugh me out of it? I wish it would work. No—when I asked you if you saw anything in the hall, I wanted to find out if you saw what I did."

"And that is?"

"Eyes. Amber cat's-eyes, watching me. I can see them now, in the doorway. Two disembodied eyes." He began to tremble violently, and I realized the intense nervous strain under which he labored. "Good God, can't you understand how I've fought against it, told myself the damned things can't exist? That it's hallucination, and if I don't want to lose my mind I'll have to ignore them—and they watch, they watch me, always! No expression in them. Always keeping the same distance ahead of me—but they can't cross the threshold of this room. I don't know why."

I saw that Keene was mad, or going mad.

He got up and strode about the room, his gaze continually returning to the doorway. I went to the door, intending to close it, but his voice stopped me.

"No—don't! It's worse when it's shut. I can't tell what it's doing, but I know it's behind there. And when I open the door it'll be waiting. If it would only give me some hint of its purpose—what it wants, what it intends to do! Am I mad, Johnny?"

"No," I said. "But you're on the right road, unless you come to town with me and see a doctor—a specialist maybe."

"It's no good." His haggard face was covered with perspiration. "It follows me. Even in the doctor's office I could see those two cat's-eyes, watching—*he* couldn't see

them. Gave me pills, the fool—and wanted to send me to a sanitarium." Keene laughed wildly. "Oh, no—I know what would happen there. I'd break and start raving, and then they'd put me in a strait-jacket, and I'd have to lie there and watch the eyes without being able to move. I'd go crazy then, all right."

"Listen, Ed," I commanded. "You've got to snap out of it. You've got sense enough to know that this is a hallucination, caused by overwork, perhaps. The thing to do is to get *you* in good condition, not your imaginary eyes."

KEENE was watching the doorway. "Imaginary eyes," he repeated. "*Imaginary eyes*—God, what a huge joke! The worst of it is I don't know whether I'm right or you are—whether I'm going crazy, or——" He stopped suddenly, a violent shudder shaking his slender frame. His dark eyes were haunted.

"Overwork might have caused it," I said, realizing that I had to get Keene to a doctor as soon as possible. "Or nervous strain—eh?"

"I've not been under a nervous strain," he murmured. "Not till that dream. If you want to know what caused it, come here!"

There was another door in the room and he led me to this, opening it. Twilight was falling over the valley—a somber, brooding hush had dropped upon the hills, stilling even the bird-songs. Keene stepped into a weed-covered garden and drew me along the side of the house.

"See that?" he asked, pointing. I could see nothing but the bare, rotting wood, flaked and withered by the weather. I told him as much.

"Oh, there's nothing to see. That's the worst of it. As nearly as I remember, that's the point in the hallway where, in my dream, I opened the door. And look here."

He nodded toward a crumbled wooden slab, half embedded in the weeds, a few feet away. I bent low, straining my eyes in the twilight.

"*Ori—ori* something," I said. "I can't make it out."

"*Origo mali*," Keene completed. "That's all. The origin of the evil."

He turned back to the house, and, back within the studio room, lit an old-fashioned oil lamp. His eyes were startlingly black in the sickly yellow of his face that shone, mask-like in the lamplight.

"I'm not sure, of course," he told me, pulling a chair up to a rickety table. "But remember I mentioned that a witch was once supposed to have lived in this house?"

I nodded.

"She died here, too. I wandered around the hills, and visited a few farms. One old man told me a lot. Just tales, and fragmentary; he'd had them from *his* father. About an old woman who lived here long ago, and died and was buried outside the house. I rather imagine"—he watched me closely—"that that slab you just saw is what's left of her headstone."

His eyes went to the threshold, and a muscle at the corner of his mouth twitched. Involuntarily I turned my head.

Only the dark rectangle of the doorway was there, of course.

"I haven't told you the worst," Keene said. He pillowed his head on his arms, and the table creaked under his weight. His voice came muffled. "I get sleepy, at the first hint of nightfall. Every night since that first one I've dreamed."

I looked at the top of his head, and saw, with a sudden shock, that there were gray hairs among the glossy black ones.

"Ed," I said to him sharply. "You're coming——"

"I dream," he interrupted me dully. "Each night I have the same dream. I go down the passage in the darkness till I feel that cold metal latch under my hand."

The door opens, and I don't wake up, as I did the first time. Nor do I see the amber eyes. They're in the hall, at my side. . . ."

HIS VOICE died away in a mumble, and his head rolled aside. But before I could move he went on almost inaudibly. "I've got to go in the—whatever it is. Not a room. I've got to step across the threshold, pass that doorway that doesn't exist—there's a horrible compulsion pushing me—and . . . each night I step a little further toward it. Last night I put one foot over the threshold. . . ."

For a long time there was utter silence. Woodwork creaked eerily around me. The lamp burned unevenly, casting heavy, misshapen shadows on the walls. I thought of that hideous little wooden slab outside the house, and shivered. The drive back to town would not be a pleasant one.

Minutes passed. Suddenly Keene spoke again, halting me as I was about to rise from my chair.

"The witch died. She couldn't live forever. But she had discovered a way to live again—not her body, buried and long ago rotted into dust, but her soul. She waited in her grave for someone to enter this house.

"They came at last, but only after a long time, for the witch had been feared. From the grave a spell was cast upon that man, so that he dreamed of a door. The moment the door was opened . . . he was doomed. No matter where he fled, he would dream again . . . and again . . . until finally, in his dream, he would step over the threshold.

"When he did that, his body would be vacant, and the soul of the witch would enter it."

I heard a faint noise from behind me. I turned to stare at the doorway. Black emptiness.

The low voice droned on.

"Such changes are not easily wrought. A strong vessel, a strong body, was needed to survive the metamorphosis and hold the soul of the witch. The first man died . . . and many others died . . . and still the witch had found no body strong enough to hold her soul."

"Listen!" I said peremptorily, and stared at the doorway. I had heard something that sounded like the rattling of metal.

Then, unmistakably, I heard a door slam. I got up quickly, realizing that my breath no longer came evenly. Without moving I waited, watching the doorway. But there was no further sound.

KEENE had lifted his head, and was staring at me. For a moment the horrible thing escaped me. Then I saw, and, I think, I screamed.

Keene's face had changed. Like a dark veil, impalpable and intangible, an expression was upon it that I can only describe as sheer evil. It was still Keene's face, but it was at the same time the face of a demon. But it wasn't that which sent abysmal horror lancing through me, making me shudder with frightful nausea. The eyes that stared from Keene's ghastly face were no longer dark—they were *amber cat's-eyes!*

It is difficult for me to remember what happened after that. I think the monster that was Keene rose up from the table, and smiled very terribly, piercing me with those demoniac eyes. I think I screamed again, as I remembered the sound from the hall—the sound of a door slamming—and realized that Edward Keene had dreamed again, and had stepped over the fearsome threshold he had dreaded so much. And I know that the light suddenly faded from the amber eyes, and a lean body collapsed on the floor and lay quite still . . . and when I finally forced myself to feel for a pulse there was none.

That was two nights ago. I left the

witchhouse and drove like mad to the city, seeking only to escape the tentacles of fear that had closed around me. As I drove I kept remembering words I had heard: ". . . a strong body was needed to hold the soul of the witch. The first man died . . . and many others died. . . ."

What thing had spoken to me with Edward Keene's lips? There can be but one answer, and it is an answer so fantastic that no sane man could entertain the possibility of its accuracy. But I am no longer sane.

At least, I hope I am not sane. For if what I saw in the witch-house was more than the crazy phantoms of a disordered mind, the fate that overtook Edward Keene is one on which I dare not speculate. Also, sitting here alone in this modern hotel room in Boston, I keep remembering certain phrases: "From the grave a spell was cast on that man, so that he dreamed of a door.

"The moment that the door was opened . . . he was doomed . . . he would dream again and again until finally he would step over the threshold. . . ."

I DREAMED last night. In a modern hotel, in modern Boston, I dreamed of a dark passage along which I fumbled my way, and of a latch that turned beneath my hand . . . and of a door that opened.

As I write, my eyes stray to the doorway of my bedroom, and the amber points of light I see there.

It is twilight. An irresistible drowsiness has crept up and overwhelmed me. My head nods continually, and my eyelids are very heavy. Presently I shall fall asleep and dream of a threshold beyond which waits horror unimaginable.

And that is something I cannot and dare not face.

So—I suppose—I must kill myself.