

# Weird Tales



JULY, 1952

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Published bi-monthly by WEIRD TALES, 9 Rockefeller Plaza, New York 20, N. Y. Reentered as second-class matter January 26, 1940, at the Post Office at New York, N. Y., under the Act of March 3, 1879. Single copies, 25 cents. Subscription rates: One year in the United States and possessions, \$1.50. Foreign and Canadian postage extra. The publishers are not responsible for the loss of unsolicited manuscripts although every care will be taken of such material while in their possession.

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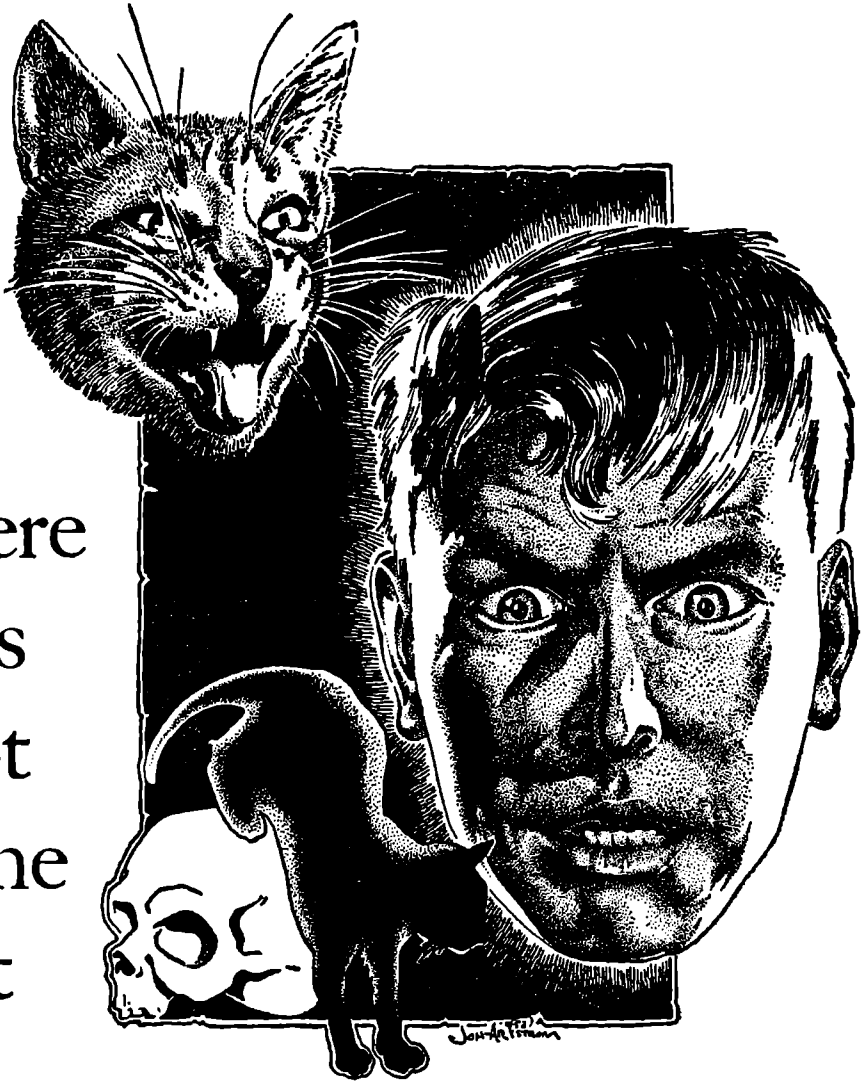
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Vol. 44, No. 5

PRINTED IN THE U. S. A.

D. McILWRAITH, Editor

*It might seem that Jude was mad. But the others saw it too.  
There's no getting around the fact that there was soot on the cat.*

There  
Was  
Soot  
on the  
Cat



**BY SUZANNE PICKETT**

**A** CHILL wind bristled through the trees and tugged at my hat as I walked through the cold, brooding air. Good to get out after four weeks of feverish cutting, revising and polishing on what I hoped would be "The great American novel."

Back to the office tomorrow. I smiled at the thought. But I would have smiled at anything. A cold wind always exhilarated

me. Something in me seemed kin to the fierceness of the wind.

Coming to an old, deserted-looking road I turned into it, walked a few feet then slackened my pace and looked up in surprise. Queer that the air should feel so strange all at once. The road seemed lost between old, gnarled oaks, tall pines and thick underbrush. The actual thick, murky feel of horror seemed to emanate from it.

"This is what comes of too hard concentration," I muttered. But a minute ago I had been happy, exhilarated—I shivered in the gloom and listened to the ceaseless murmur of the pines and the dismal creaking of the oaks. Impelled onward by some strange force in spite of my frantic desire to go back I stepped over rocks and gullies in the road, hesitated, shivered and walked on again until I came to an old house set back from the road. The horror jumped at me as I looked at the house; yet it was pleasant to the eyes, situated on a small hill, picturesque with its gables and high windows.

Unable to move, I stood still a minute. Then I heard a car behind me, looked back and saw a jeep bounding over the ditches and rocks.

Caught by a movement on the roof my eyes returned to the house. Scrabbling and clawing, a huge, tiger-striped cat clambered down the roof and bounded to the road at my feet. Crouching before me, he looked at me with almost human eyes; large, yellow-green, with a dark rim around the iris.

His yellow coat was covered with soot!

There was knowledge in those eyes and a look—but don't let me speak of that look. Then he, too, noticed the jeep. With a cry that ended in a squeal, he tried to escape it. I shuddered as his life was crunched out beneath the wheels.

The jeep swerved, roared and stopped. I knew the driver, a nearby farmer, Mase Oliver. He climbed to the ground. In spite of the chill in the air, drops of sweat stood on his face. His hand trembled as he mopped his upper lip. "I don't like cats," he said to me, his eyes almost the color of the iron gray of his hair. "I am glad when I kill one, but that cat—" He looked at the animal and his lips tightened. "Did you see his eyes?"

We stood silent, both looking at the cat, just a dead beast now, then he turned to me. "By the way," he remarked. "Seen Henson lately?"

"Who?" I asked.

"Jude Henson."

"Never heard of him."

"He lives here. Thought you might be going there." His eyes had a worried look. "Want to go with me?"

"Well—" I hesitated. I wasn't in the mood to meet a strange man.

"I wish you would," Oliver said. He looked at me as if I might be some sort of new species. "You a writer, ain't you?"

"Well—yes." I wondered what that had to do with it.

"Him too," Oliver pointed to the house. "Raised here. Paw used to own this place. Always was a queer kid. He come to me about a month back, asked to rent the old place, said he wanted to write." There was the contempt of the man who works in the good honest soil for anyone who would waste his time on words. Then the worry was back in Oliver's voice again. "Henson got milk and butter at my house, we ain't seen him for a week, so I come down to ask was anything wrong."

"Gone somewhere," I suggested. I didn't want to enter that house. "There's no smoke."

"Heats with oil."

"Well—I'll go with you," I said quickly. At least I'd meet the man.

OLIVER rapped on the door and waited a minute. The house seemed to wait too. He knocked again, this time louder. Still no sound within. Suddenly he shook the knob. It turned and the door moved slightly. It wasn't locked, but something, a bar or latch, held it.

"He must be there," Oliver said. "Door's barred on the inside." He was a big man with thick, ruddy skin, I noticed that he had paled. We looked at each other. "Let's try the back," I said. I felt pale too. There was something about that house. We must get inside.

The back door was barred too.

We tried the windows. They were locked, the shades drawn. "Something wrong inside." Oliver mopped his face.

"Yes," I answered.

"I'm going." I held the screen wide and he hurled himself at the door. It creaked and gave. He stumbled inside and I followed.

The living room and large kitchen were empty. Dirty dishes littered the table, a greasy skillet, egg shells and empty milk bottles.

"Not very neat," I remarked.

We crossed the hall into the front bedroom. It was empty. Oliver looked at me as I glanced his way. "Well," his voice shook, "there's one more room."

"Yes," I muttered and looked at the door. I knew, and he knew. Something was in that room.

Finally, he opened the door. He jerked to a stop, then stumbled back, his soundless lips moving.

"What is it?" I asked holding his arm. He tried to control his lips and speak, but still no sound came. Finally he pointed to the door.

As a "Sob Sister," I have covered fire, theft, murder, disaster, but nothing could prepare me for the "thing" I beheld. The sunken eyes, the pitifully clawing outstretched hands, the horror in the eyes of the grinning corpse on the floor.

I was worse than Oliver. I couldn't even move. I could only stand and stare. The room was a wreck. The curtains torn, a chair overturned, some crockery broken. But, gentlemen, there was not a sign of violence on the face of the man. Not a scratch, not a bruise. Later, when the body was examined, there was not found anywhere any evidence of injury. That he had died of terror was evident. What had caused the terror was unknown. "He must have gone mad," was the verdict of the doctors.

Perhaps I did wrong. Well, I'll let you decide. But I alone saw the diary lying open. I read the last page, picked it up and put it in my pocketbook.

That night I read it.

IT HAS been a month now.

Perhaps I am going mad. The boys at the office can't understand my sudden fear of cats. Before my vacation it was I who brought milk to the office cat, I who gave him cheese, rubbed his back in the way he loved. Now if he comes near me—But I'm getting away from the diary. This is what I read:

### THE DIARY

Well, it began, the perfect crime at last. Nice looking man too from his pictures Fey (what a name for a man) Fey Brandon. Dead by person or persons un-

known, shot once through the heart on a lonely, country road. Yes, the gun was found and identified. It was stolen a few days before from a pawnshop in Birmingham. The theft had been reported, but neither the owner of the shop, nor the customer who looked at the gun could describe the man who came in as they crossed the aisle to look at a watch. When they came back, the man was gone, so was the gun.

I don't know what there was about Brandon. Irene Sharp was—well almost the prettiest girl I ever saw. I was crazy about her and thought she loved me. But one day I ran across her in the park with a strange man. From behind an azalia bush I watched them. If I had been a dog my bristles would have risen. There was something about the fellow's eyes—they were large, yellow-green with a dark rim around the iris. His hair was a tawny yellow, streaked by the sun. I noticed the ripple of smooth muscles under his thin, sport shirt, and his walk was beautiful, graceful, catlike.

As they moved away he looked down at her and laughed. I could have killed them both—and I never spoke to Irene again. She called me a few times, wondered what was wrong, but I wouldn't give her the satisfaction of knowing that I cared.

And then I didn't want Brandon, yes, it was Brandon with her, I didn't want him to gloat over me. I hated his eyes, I could have cut them out. When I saw him—and I was always running into him, I shuddered as I looked at him.

He pretended that I was a stranger, never seemed to notice me. But I knew, all the time I knew he was laughing inside.

I hadn't gone with Ruth Clearwell a month until she mentioned the new man in town, Fey Brandon. We never had so much fun before. I spent every penny I had, and Ruth was gay, bright. "You know," her voice was husky as I kissed her good night. "I didn't know that you could be so—so sweet and so nice."

I never spoke to her again.

And then I met Margot and learned why God made us male and female. Little she was, gay and golden. Like sunshine, and as pure, with the clear blue eyes of an angel.

Margot loved me too, then suddenly she

changed. She wouldn't see me, wouldn't talk over the telephone. I didn't know what was wrong. One day I cornered her in the library, and for some reason I glanced at the book she was reading. "Fey," she had written. "Fey Brandon."

"Margot!" I said, trying to whisper above the rage in my heart. "Margot, do you know this man?"

"Yes," she said dreamily. "You know, Jude, there's something about him. He has the strangest eyes—"

I tried to reason with her. She laughed at me, then grew angry. When she left me I was exhausted. Somehow, I managed to get home. I was sick for a month, couldn't eat and couldn't sleep.

Then one afternoon Margot's picture stared at me from the paper. Oh God! it couldn't be! But she was—Margot was dead! She and Fey Brandon had been riding down the Montgomery Highway. Margot was driving, the paper said, and Brandon was thrown from the car. Except for a bruise or two he was unhurt, but Margot—I closed my eyes. This is what Brandon had done for her.

I can't remember anything for three days. I must have acted all right as no one said anything later. I was able to go to work the day after Margot's funeral. No one knew that I had loved her or that I had ever seen Brandon. I didn't dare ask about him, but that is when I stole the gun.

**F**ATE has been kind to me. I was driving a few miles from town one day when I saw and recognized that tawny head, that feline walk. I pulled into the side road he had just taken and followed slowly until out of sight of the main road, then I eased up behind him and stopped the car. "I'd like to speak to you a minute," I addressed Brandon. I knew enough to avoid his eyes.

"Of course," he answered. I drew the gun and pointed it at him.

"My God!" he said harshly. "What do you mean?"

"This is for Irene and Ruth and Margot," I said calmly feeling neither tremor nor excitement.

"But you can't do it." His voice was calm now, purring, and my hand began to shake.

"I'm going to do it." I tried to keep my voice as calm as his.

"But you can't kill me," he insisted. "I've done nothing to you, I don't even know you. Look at me, man!"

I kept my eyes over the spot that covered his treacherous heart.

"You know," he said, his voice growling in his throat. "Surely you know what will happen to you if you do this thing."

As I pulled the trigger I looked at his eyes. They blazed at me and glowed. Green fire darted from them. It was too late to stop my hand, I saw his eyes as the bullet hit. Two demons from the darkest hell looked at me from them, then they grew blank as he sank to the ground.

I had not seen it before, but as he fell a large, tawny, tiger-striped cat came down the road. Suddenly the cat screamed, arched his back and enlarged his tail. For one paralyzing minute he looked at me with large, blazing, yellow-green eyes. Eyes whose irises wore a dark ring. Two demons looked at me from those eyes as I jumped into my car and roared away.

The cat sprang and missed me by less than an inch.

I traveled a mile, took a road that turned back to the highway and came home.

**A** MONTH has passed. There's only occasional mention of the murder (they call it murder) but my nerves are growing bad. Oh no, it's not him! Every day I grow more glad that I killed him. The gun was found the day that Brandon was found. Fortunately, I had presence of mind to wipe it carefully before I hurled it into the woods. Also it rained that day and there were no car tracks on the gravel road.

Now, every time I see a beautiful girl I think, perhaps you owe me a lot. Perhaps you would have been his next victim. So I'm not sorry I killed him. I'd be almost glad if they found me, but fate who delivered him to me seems to will otherwise. It's only these devil-begotten cats. These green-eyed demons from hell that pursue me. I never knew before there were so many large, tawny, tiger-striped cats. Everywhere I go I see one.

I am afraid to be alone.

I have decided to leave the city. There is

a farm where I lived as a boy. Perhaps I can rent it and get away from these damned cats.

**T**HREE weeks of warm, pure beauty, spring almost here. Three weeks of rest. The hills are beautiful, and the trees are beginning to show tiny signs of spring. My walk to farmer Oliver's twice a week is pleasant. I think I'll go home tomorrow. My nerves are calm, everything is wonderful. I haven't seen a cat here.

Later . . . Let me see again if the windows are all barred.

Yes, they are fastened! Nothing can get in! Nothing. I tell you! What was that? It's that—that cat. Yes, he has found me. This morning when I started out for Oliver's he sprang at me. His green eyes blazed and he just missed me. I managed to slam the screen as he hit the floor, but I dropped my key outside. One of his paws was inside the screen before I could latch it. Oh God, he is strong! He almost tore open the door, yelling and spitting at me horribly, then his eyes caught mine.

Yes, I'll admit it at last. They are Fey's exactly. And I—I still shudder to think of it—I almost opened the door to him. Somehow I managed to close and bar it and then I barred all of the windows.

But he has stalked me all day. Whichever room I am in he is outside the window, mewing and scrabbling to enter.

Next day . . . What a horrible night! I'm weak and tired I ate nothing all day yesterday. My shade will not stay down and every

time it raises to the top there are those demon-possessed eyes gleaming at me.

Two days later. I thought I almost escaped today. I saw him enter the woods across the road, and cautiously opened the door only to spring back. A coiled rattlesnake darted his fangs at me. (It had been warm, he must have left his den. It is raining and turning cold now.) I had heard Fey . . . the cat . . . dragging the rattler onto the porch. There had been a peculiar whipping and slithering noise mixed with low growls. Were they conversing? Are all the demons in league with him? As I slammed the door the monster came bounding across the road to renew his efforts to get in.

Next night . . . I'm going mad. I know he can't get in. He can't! Yet he continues to scrabble and howl at my window. Why can't I eat? He can't get in. . . . Why don't I go out and face him?

But I have no gun. I threw it away.

If he should touch me! I can't face him.

Oh my God! Oh Margot!

He is outside my window. But he can't get in I tell you. He can't!

He is quiet now. Am I to get some sleep? He has been prowling the yard but he is quiet now. And I am writing. . . . But tired. . . . So tired.

What was that?

Soot! Falling down the chimney!

He can't get in I tell you!

But he is! He's coming down the chimney!

Oh my God! He's coming down the chimney!