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Strange STORIES

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TIGER! TIGER!

By O. M. CABRAL

Author of "Food of the Ghoul," "The Dead and the Damned," etc.



Jason was at the mercy of the demon-thing

JASON WEST glanced at the yellowed face of the clock ticking on the kitchen shelf. When he heard the sound of the postman's car he ran out on the sagging porch and down the steps.

Beside the rural mail box perched at the dusty roadside there was a decrepit old flivver. A little round man thrust out his head and handed Jason a folded newspaper. Jason smiled back at shrewd, friendly blue eyes. The postman's face was as

Hate Haunts the Ancient House—and Jason West Fears the Loathsome Cat His Dead Aunt Left as Her Legacy!

brown and wrinkled as a frost-bitten pippin. His clasp was warm and hard,

"How be ye, boy?" he asked. "Reckon ye wouldn't remember Caleb Healey, used to be notary over to Morton's Mill?"

"I sure do." The intense loneliness that Jason had felt overnight suddenly seemed weak and foolish. "Haven't changed a hair. What's the secret?"

The old postman chuckled, opened the car door and stepped out beside Jason.

"Fact is," he considered, "folks nor things don't change so danged fast around here. Still, they do some. Folks come and go. Old folks keep a-dying off. Young'uns leave. You'll find this farm run down some from what you remember. Le's see, how long?"

"I was fifteen when I—left. Say, fourteen years ago."

Without glancing back over his shoulder Jason was painfully aware of the rambling farmhouse, with its ghastly yellow paint sloughing from warped clapboards. The rich river-side meadow was now thickly clumped with thistle, crab-grass and willow brush. No plow had furrowed the weed-grown fields for at least ten years.

"We was all curious," the old man gossiped, "about whether she druv ye out or whether ye run." He scratched his head vigorously.

"Both," Jason West dryly admitted. "I left as soon as I was old enough to shift for myself."

"She never did let on." The postman sucked contentedly on his bubbling pipe. "Your Aunt Han was an almighty close-mouthed woman."

Too vividly, Jason remembered the bleak, harsh woman who had dominated that house. Old fear stirred darkly in his brain, the terror of a helpless boy who had wanted to kill in order to escape Hannah West's cruel tyranny. Instead, he had run away.

"I still don't know," he told Caleb Healey, "why she left me her damned farm. If I wasn't up against it, I don't think I'd want to stay. The whole place gives me the willies. Maybe I can clean up the farm a bit and then sell out."

"Ye might," the postman agreed. "But not to nobody around here."

BOTH men, their eyes attracted by a flicker of movement, looked suddenly toward the ugly house. A huge yellow cat leaped from the porch railing, glared balefully, and slunk swiftly around the corner.

"There's one danged thing," Caleb Healey exclaimed with strange violence, "I reckon I'd get rid of, and soon! I'll never look at that sneakin' yellow critter but what I'll be reminded of—"

He paused. Jason West looked at the postman oddly.

"You must be one of those people who can't abide cats? Some folks, you know, have a feeling about them."

"Tain't that," Caleb Healey denied, frowning. "It's—well, ye may as well know. It was me found your Aunt Han dead. Papers had piled in the mailbox three-four days. Kitchen door was unlocked. I don't mind saying, boy, it give me a turn when I see her a-layin' lean and cold on her bed upstairs. Her eyes was wide open. The undertaker never did get 'em to shut right. And danged if that blasted yellow critter wasn't a-cuddled up close to the corpse, purring and blinking. There's claw-marks yet on my hand."

The vicious scars were barely healed. The picture conjured up in Jason's mind was sickeningly vivid.

"Kept follerin' her around," Caleb Healey went on. "Allus nigh to her skirts. Billy, she called it. After the buryin' it hung around the empty house. I tried to feed it some. Hell, it wouldn't eat anything, not even good raw meat. A spoiled critter, I say, if ever there was one!"

Jason knew about that. The dead woman's pet had strangely fastidious tastes. It drank milk, but wouldn't touch the raw scraps he put before it. An unfriendly beast! So far he had not been able to touch the big tawny cat that was faintly striped like a tiger.

As he walked back toward the house, Jason's lips were pursed and he was whistling tunelessly. Even before he crossed the porch he heard

the teetering squeak-squeak of the rocker. The sound stopped abruptly at his first footfall on the kitchen floor and he stopped his whistling automatically. For one frozen instant Jason stood still, his heart thundering. At that moment he was once again a timid small boy, barefoot, shaking with habitual terror of the gaunt woman who rocked in that chair. Nothing had maddened her so much as his boyish tuneless whistling. She would shriek at him to stop, glare wildly, half-insanely at him and then run madly into the house or upstairs, her hands over her ears.

When he thrust through the doorway into the kitchen the cat jumped to the floor leaving the empty chair shaking.

Jason laughed shortly. Everything in the house reminded him too keenly of the woman he had hated. Even the worn linoleum on the kitchen floor was the same crude, beflowered pattern he remembered as a boy. The hideous brown wall paper would have to come off. He would burn all her baggy black clothes—tear everything of Hannah West out of the place. Then he could remain.

The cat crouched, yellow-eyed, unblinking, beside the old-fashioned range. Jason reached out a tentative, caressing hand.

"We're going to forget her!" he muttered. "She's dead. Nothing can bring her back. So we might as well be friends, see?"

His hand hovered inches away from staring amber eyes. The cat never moved. Slitted pupils widened slightly. Rubbery black lips grinned, baring white teeth curved sharp as a serpent's fangs. The cat hissed softly.

"To hell with you, then!" Jason felt an abrupt stirring of puzzled anger. "See if I spoil you, you yellow hellion! And if you don't like what I feed you, go catch a rat!"

He turned back into the dining room to tear down a framed chromo hanging over a cabinet crammed with dusty knick-knacks. The vacant space made a lighter rectangle on the time-fouled wall.

The portrait was crudely realistic.

Every time he had passed up the steep, narrow stairs to the second floor Hannah West's dead gaze had followed him mockingly. With a frenzy of hatred Jason tore the bone-dry paper to crackling shreds, then flung it on the hot coals of the kitchen range. The flame roared up the chimney in a wild gust, and his lips felt dry.

THEN Jason went upstairs and methodically emptied the closet and old bureau of the dead woman's clothes. Threadbare, old-fashioned dresses vividly suggested his aunt's tall, gaunt shape. He held the garments gingerly away from him as he took them outside and flung them all on one heap. They had a faint, musky odor that stirred prickles on his scalp—a queer, animal odor, not unpleasant, yet vaguely troubling.

After he had soaked the pile with coal oil, the huge flaring bonfire gave him a deep satisfaction. Already, Jason morbidly imagined, the air was purer, the house less redolent of Hannah West's grim personality. In a few days, he promised himself, all trace of the dark past would be erased from the place.

There was the cat, Jason, eating a frugal dinner, furtively eyed it through the window as it sat on the sill. Its paws were crossed. Yellow eyes, wide-open, stared out across the field, over the river.

Something about the odd attitude of the tawny beast struck Jason West with an instinctive suggestion of repugnance. Hannah West, she used to sit just like that! Staring out across the river, statue-still, her yellow hands crossed upon her bony knees.

When she sat that way she was deaf and blind. Anyone passing by the road might shout at her without getting a sign of an answer.

It would be as if only the empty shell of the gaunt woman sat there in her old rocking-chair.

Later, he went to bed and wrestled with sleep—tried to claw his way through the horror of nightmare into wakeful sanity. A pungent darkness lay on his breast, smothered his lips

and his nostrils. He screamed with the inarticulate terror of dream paralysis. It was as though warm, fetid breath fanned his sweating face.

The thing that was crushing all life from his body was soft, yet clinging, something frail, something that grew heavier and stronger. Soft, electric fur brushed Jason's rigid lips. He choked with anguished fear and disgust.

Then a hoarse scream tore through his tense throat. Jason sat up, abruptly breaking through the nightmare web. Shaking hands plucked at the familiar patchwork coverlet.

PALE moonlight bathed the confines of the vacant bedroom. Jason reached for a cigarette, although his heart was still pumping unevenly. His body was damp with reeking sweat. The match flame shuddered in his hand.

When he was a child—when he had lived in this house—Jason had often been haunted by terrible nightmares. After he ran away, all that had ended. Now, he was discovering how deeply the roots of the present were sunk in the past.

"If I stay here," Jason thought moodily, "I'll probably just go nuts. She was crazy. Sly about it, but actually mad as a loon! And the house is soaked full of it. Maybe if I don't get away from here I'm due to go that way, too."

That thought brought an icy chill of fear, only a little less dreadful than smothering nightmare. Out there, Jason West had found the world to be wide and cold and cruel. But Hannah West couldn't follow him if he ran away again, if he fled from his own morbid terror of a woman now harmless and dead.

His night fears seemed childish by daylight. Jason, grimly shaving before a cracked mirror over the iron sink, twisted his lips in a thin smile. He would not leave. He would stay and fight it out with himself, else this dark obsession would slowly undermine sanity, like a creeping poison.

Caleb Healey, the aged postman, had been Jason's only contact

with rural neighbors. Eagerly, Jason dashed outside to meet the old man's flivver.

Shrewd blue eyes regarding him from a network of fine wrinkles were clear and sane as the swept sky. The sunlight felt good. Only solitude could be haunted by dread fear out of the past.

"Look," Jason said, "I wonder if you'll do me a small favor?" He glanced involuntarily over his shoulder before he turned blood-shot eyes toward the old man. "Bring me out some rat-poison, the kind you put out for rats when they get to running all over an old barn."

"Ain't nothing in that barn for a rat to eat," Caleb told him dryly. "Not so much as a wisp of straw. Ye got somethin' else on your mind, I reckon."

"It's the cat!" Jason laughed quaveringly. "I'm taking your advice, getting rid of it!"

"Don't blame you none," the old man approved. "Ain't any use keepin' a vicious critter like that. It's no comp'ny fer ye noway. I'll bring some rough-on-rats in the morning."

Suddenly Jason found himself spilling out all of his aching loneliness. He had to tell someone! This sane and friendly old man—

"Listen!" Jason cried hoarsely, plucking at Caleb Healey's ragged sleeve. "You've got to understand how it is! I don't like to hurt anything that lives, but this is different. It's not just an ordinary cat! It—it's something hellish! Good God, it even looks like her! I can't stand it! It keeps hanging around on purpose, sneaking behind me, watching, just so I won't ever forget!"

Caleb Healey looked suddenly pale and startled. His eyes narrowed, shrewdly studying Jason's distraught face.

"I reckon, boy," he said mildly, "ye been sick maybe, afore ye come here? Nerves all on edge, seems like."

Jason nodded dully.

"I recall" the old man continued, "ye was never a husky shaver. Some said Hannah West starved ye. We all know she was uncommon cruel to her orphan neevy. Seemed like when

her young sister run off and married the man Hannah'd set her own cap for, your Aunt Han lived for nothin' but hate. Turned her mind, I reckon. Cursed 'em both. Sure enough, in not more'n a year, she could spit on both their graves."

"Maybe she poisoned my parents," Jason growled. "Damn funny—they died so sudden!"

"Never went near them," Caleb denied, shaking his head. "But there's some claim she didn't need to. There's some claim she just *willed* 'em to die—and they died." Then, abruptly, seeing Jason's staring eyes, old Caleb Healey chuckled dryly.

"But shucks!" he went on. "Anybody that gets themselves powerful disliked like your Aunt Han is bound to get talked about. And she's six feet under now, but folks've still got the habit of givin' this farm a wide miss. They know ye need comp'ny. But nobody won't never come nigh Hannah West's house. That's why, boy, ye've got to take to callin' on them."

"I haven't a friend in the world," Jason said bitterly. He shook his head sadly.

"Well now," Caleb Healey twinkled. "That's putting it strong. There's me an' Carrie. Might be Carrie's young cousin, Kate. School teacher, and pretty as any ye ever did see. I reckon that ought to do ye for a start, boy."

"I'll come soon," Jason promised gratefully. "Yes. I must get out more. You know," he added earnestly, "she never would let me go anywhere when I was a kid. An I keep thinking she's still here, alive some way, and able to punish me!"

JASON kneaded the poison into hamburger. The meat should have been his own breakfast, but he had prepared it carefully for Billy, the striped yellow cat. The poison was so mixed with the raw meat that even a mouthful would be enough to jerk the beast's gaunt body with violent death-spasms.

Jason felt his own mouth watering. God, he was hungry! Almost reluctantly he put the chopped beef into a

clean saucer and slid it toward the crouching cat.

"Let's see you take that, you damned yellow devil!" he muttered.

The cat crouched in its accustomed place by the glowing stove. Baleful eyes watched Jason mix the poison into the food. The beast must be ravenous. Jason had starved it on purpose. It would eat the meat this time, he felt sure.

"Well," Jason snarled, "come on and get it!"

He kicked at the stove. The cat's slitted eyes widened, narrowed, widened, like a shutter opening, closing. When the shutter opened, blinding hate poured out hate that seared Jason's brain with electric force. When the shutter closed, amber eyes revealed only the impassive, owl-like stare of a feline thing.

The cat rose and stretched daintily. Then, with a disdainful hiss at Jason it pushed through the screen door and slunk outside. It looked backward once, head cocked over one shoulder, gloating at the man's helpless horror.

"You—"

The strangled cry wrenched from Jason's tight throat. No wonder the cat hadn't eaten the meat. It wasn't simply because it had suspected poison in the meat. It hadn't touched raw meat previously, either. No wonder!

She stood there, in the body of that gaunt yellow cat, looking back at him with an evil grin! She'd dropped all pretense, wasn't even trying to act at home in her borrowed feline body. Now that Jason *knew*, she didn't care. Jason groaned as he realized the error he had made. Hannah West had been fastidious about food. She'd lived on milk and herbs, and eaten meat now and then, but it had to be cooked just so and well-seasoned. And he had prepared the meat instead for the cat. . . .

Hannah West's own eyes glared at him with bleak, undying hatred—her eyes daring him, taunting him! Fiery anger seared the man's frame. His glazed eyes fixed on a rusted shotgun hanging from a hook. Maybe there were shells— Twin yellow moons

stabbed at his back as he took the gun, tremblingly, from its place on the wall.

She used to keep shells in a box behind the clock. Sure enough, when Jason groped there, his hand grasped a dusty time-stained cigar box. There were just three cartridges in it. He slid a shell into the rusted breech, savagely hoping that the damned weapon would work.

Suppose she couldn't be killed? Suppose she was evil incarnate, something immortal that lead shot couldn't harm? She had appeared to die, but had merely passed from one body to another. Could he, then, wholly destroy the gaunt beast's shape inhabited by a demon?

Sweat beaded Jason's pallid forehead. His hand tightened spasmodically on the gun butt as he stepped toward the screen door leading to the porch. The demoniac cat was gone. Intently watching Jason while he loaded the shotgun, it had simply turned and vanished before he could crash the killing charge into its evil brain.

All day Jason looked for the tawny cat. It did not return. The shotgun was loaded and ready in the kitchen. But the hellish victim did not show itself again.

Maybe, Jason thought with grim satisfaction, now, at last, Hannah was afraid of him. That must be it! If lead couldn't harm the demon cat, why had it fled to hide itself from him?

Anyway, it was good not to have the thing around—whatever it was. Maybe the yellow cat was gone for good! Maybe at last he was free from a mad obsession.

Jason bolted the screen door before going upstairs to bed and closed the windows. There were some things, after all, Jason sardonically reflected, that no cat could do. Being prisoned in a cat's body must be a grave disadvantage to a vengeful demon like Hannah West.

BRIGHT moonlight awoke Jason. The globe of the moon hung low in the black square of the window. Jason blinked and rolled over on his

back, wondering why his heart was thumping so madly.

She was in the room! Jason jerked toward an alien sound—strange, hoarse breathing nearby, in the shadow.

His hand twitched toward the night table where the oil lamp stood. He couldn't find the matches. He didn't dare turn his head from that rasping sound revealing a dread presence that he could sense but not see—that *thing* crouched at the foot of his bed.

Icy sweat dripped from his temples, crawled down his cheeks, soaked into the coarse pillow. Very slowly, Jason turned his head. The dark thing moved. The man's feet jerked up in spasmodic terror as a big furry ball raised up and began delicately crawling toward his face.

"Scat! Go away!" he shrieked, choking.

He couldn't move. Nightmare again! Only, this time, he seemed to be awake. Nightmare obsessed him with his eyes wide open, every strained sense alert. He couldn't shut his eyes, couldn't tear them away from hypnotic, lucent amber globes.

"Tiger, tiger burning bright
in the forests of the night. . . ."

The yellow devil, inching slowly toward his face, was prowling terror. A thing spawned in the black heart of the jungle, or the abysmal pits of night. Tawny fur was striped with dark bands writhing like snakes in the bright moonlight. The cat crouched, arching sinuously, eyes blazing with terrible concentration.

Hypnotic coils of horror groped for Jason's brain — took hold, like clinging tendrils. A blow of his fist could hurl the thing from the bed! He could, if he could only summon his will, savagely twist the head from the furred body! All he had to do was lift his hands—but he could do nothing. He was helplessly paralyzed while *she* looked out from the slitted eyes. Hannah West, fiercely exultant, watched the helpless twitchings of her human prey.

Jason's lips opened but no sound came out. Every muscle strained in

futile agony. The thing's light weight rested on his chest. It leaned nearer, grinning. Its eyes, twin lighted hell caverns, yawned before Jason.

He felt utterly helpless. There was nothing he could do against this demon-thing. He had tried to poison it and had failed. He should have—yes, he should have realized. . . .

A thought struck his mind, tore it away from the hypnotic influence of those blazing eyes. What should he have realized. Why had he failed? Ah! He had treated the cat as a cat, not as Hannah West!

Jason's eyes rolled in his head. Thick blue cords stood out like welts on his straining throat. His lips pursed—and very thinly, from his mouth issued a dry whistling sound. He moistened his lips and then tried again, tried in that desperate moment, to whistle!

And then fantastically he was lying there, weak, perspiring and whistling! Not a strong whistle, but still a clear, shrill sound, a sound that used to drive Hannah West mad, drive her, shaking fitfully, away from the source!

The soft fur that had been rubbing against his throat was abruptly removed. Miasmatic breath purred hoarsely against his face. The fetid, pungent feline smell almost made his senses swim with vertigo, but he kept on whistling.

THE slitted yellow eyes were opening and shutting with glinting speed. Jason caught a glimpse of awful fury in those amber globes, and then he felt the body of the striped cat jumping up and down on his body as if in impotent anger. Jason could almost imagine Hannah West stamping her foot and shaking her hands as he heard that infuriating whistling.

And then, the weight was gone from his chest. Jason heard the sound of the cat's body as it landed at the foot of the bed. There was a blurred flash of yellow fur in mid-air. Then he saw it outlined on the window sill, a big furry ball threshing around, hopping up and down ludicrously as it glared at him. Jason's throat was

parched but he dared not stop that whistling just yet.

From the window sill came an uncanny wild shriek of demoniac bafflement and despair. And, with a final stab of blinding hate coming from its blazing eyes, the hell-cat bounded downward into the corner-shadows of the room, into a hole in the floor that Jason could just see dimly, that he hadn't seen before.

He lay there, panting, weak. At last he summoned strength to get out of bed. Night's stars were paling as Jason dressed. Gray light crept into the sky and across the stubbled fields. That ghastly struggle seemed now like a vivid dream, but Jason knew that it had been stark reality.

One thought, somehow, kept drumming in his mind. It was silly, but he couldn't help thinking it. Hannah West used to flee from his whistling, but he always paid the penalty later. She always punished him somehow for his innocent whistling. What would that hell-cat do now because of his deliberate whistling? What *could* she do?

He tried to laugh it off. She couldn't do anything, of course. The cat was gone, Hannah West was conquered. But—but would she come back?

Jason built a fire and set a pot of coffee on the stove in the kitchen. Sunlight was bright across the purling river. Surely the whole thing had been unreal. The whole atmosphere was different now, curiously.

The familiar creak of the mail flivver sounded. Jason went outside to greet the postman.

"Say!" Caleb Healey piped, coming toward Jason. Then he stopped. His shrewd eyes noted the drawn look on Jason's face. "Ye look kinda seedy. Not sleeping well, eh?"

Jason nodded.

"Carrie'll have something good for that. But say! 'Bout that yellow critter o' yours. Reckon ye didn't get to use that rat-poison, eh?"

Jason looked at him blankly. "Why? How'd you know?"

Caleb Healey chuckled. "'Cause the danged thing is lying down the road a

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TIGER! TIGER!

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piece, smashed to a pulp. Seems like old Brewster is driving home late in the night from Meadville and he run over the cat. He says it came tearing down the road lickety-split and he couldn't turn the wheel away in time. The damn thing seemed half crazy. Front tire mashed its head right to a pulp—and I'm someway not sorry."

"Then she's dead!" Jason sighed. "Thanks." He looked about him and laughed shortly. "Guess I won't miss her any!"

"She?" Caleb Healey repeated, puzzled. "But that there yellow critter

was a tom-cat. Billy, its name was. Say—dern if I ain't nearly fergot! How 'bout dinner tonight? Carrie an' young Kate. . . ."

"You bet!" Jason nodded. "I'll be there."

He watched the flapping, ancient Model-T disappear around a bend of the road. Then he turned and went cheerfully back toward the house.

The worn clapboards needed clean paint. And he'd plough up the weeds and seed the front lawn. Everything was going to be all right. The dead would be forever dead.