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Cover Design	M. Brundage	
<i>"The Witch's Mark"—"He saw behind the loveliness that was hers, and knew her for a witch"</i>		
"Her Demon-Lover"	Virgil Finlay	1
<i>Illustration of a passage in Coleridge's "Kubla Khan"</i>		
The Witch's Mark	Dorothy Quick	3
<i>Shamus O'Brien risked his very soul for the red lips of Cecily Maltby—a strange and curious tale</i>		
The Canal	H. P. Lovecraft	20
<i>Verse</i>		
The House of Living Music	Edmond Hamilton	21
<i>A tragic weird-scientific tale about a composer who could re-create all visible things in sound</i>		
Roads	Seabury Quinn	30
<i>A reverent weird tale of Yuletide and the Crucifixion, and a gladiator from the Northland</i>		
The Hairy Ones Shall Dance	Gans T. Field	53
<i>A tale of terror and sudden death, and the frightful thing that laired in the Devil's Croft</i>		
Toean Matjan	Vennette Herron	70
<i>A story of Java, and the incredible thing that the natives implicitly believe</i>		
The Voyage of the Neutralia (end)	B. Wallis	77
<i>An epic of weird adventure and a strange cruise to other planets</i>		
Lost Dream	Emil Petaja	96
<i>Verse, in memory of the late H. P. Lovecraft</i>		
The Light Was Green	John R. Speer	97
<i>A brief weird railroad story by the author of "Symphony of the Damned"</i>		
Valley of Bones	David H. Keller	102
<i>What weird tragedy took place in that African graveyard of a murdered people?</i>		
The Third Interne	Idwal Jones	106
<i>A brief tale of a surgical horror in the Asiatic wastes of northern Russia</i>		
Weird Story Reprint:		
Ethan Brand	Nathaniel Hawthorne	110
<i>A chapter from an abortive romance</i>		
The Eyrie		122
<i>Our readers discuss the magazine</i>		

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WEIRD TALES ISSUED 1st OF EACH MONTH

Joan Matjan

By VENNETTE HERRON

*It happened in Java, that strange, weird, incredible thing that the natives
fully believe but the white man refuses to credit—
the story of a tiger and a woman*

AT A DINNER given by the British consul in Batavia I first met the Lady Violette Adair; but one way or another we met rather often after that and became friends, until finally she asked me to visit her. The house which she had had built out there—one in which to hide herself away for months on end alone with her writing and painting—was a quaint affair of mixed *billiek* and stucco; an enormous round studio, with its upper wall a ring of skylight windows under the eaves, hung with thick mustard-gold and mauve curtains, which could be drawn to shut out either sun or moon when desired, and no windows below; with a half-circle of small rooms, like monks' cells, at the back—and entered by a door stolen from a temple in Bali. The door was of intricately carved teak, covered with an in-

credible detail of tiny symbolic figures, at which many Europeans would probably have sniggered or blushed, but which made a perfect frame for the strangely blond and mask-like, more Scandinavian than British beauty of the Lady Violette. And the threshold of the door was a solid block of hand-hewn wood nearly a foot square, forming the central and topmost step of a little bridge of stairs, which led up to and then down into the studio, the floor of which was sunken a couple of feet below the level of the ground outside. A fascinating house, with a personality as exotic as that of its mistress, which is saying a great deal. And in it also there was the white cat.

"What a gorgeous animal, Violette!" For we had become fast friends **before** ever she invited me there.

"Two creatures of another world they seemed, one no more royal than the other."



"Yes, isn't it?"

But still she did not tell me its story—not until several weeks later indeed, only a few evenings before I was to leave. Then, however, she did. Not that I asked it of her even then, much as I would have liked to, but it was one of those portentous happenings which one simply has to relate to someone, sometime. And the hour was ripe, and I was there; wherefore, thanks be to Allah, I heard it. We were sitting side by side upon the threshold of the temple door, just at twilight, smoking lazily and watching the sunset behind the distant

Tangomann Prahoe, sensing the exquisite melancholy of the rose-gray dusk, of the long lines of black-winged flying-foxes flapping westward into infinity; out of one cave, then into another, with a flash across space between—symbol of sad yet seaching little egos born to die, while life itself goes on for ever.

"What would you think," propounded Lady Violette suddenly, "if you saw a tiger pass across the lawn right now? I did, one night—a little later than this, just after the moon had risen. I was sitting here alone just as we are now when all at once I heard a piteous bleat from

the goat-pens, and a great clamor of frightened fowls. And then I saw the tiger, with a kid in its mouth. He was padding along rather slowly, not even looking at the house, as though knowing that nothing would harm him, and content with his kill, enjoying the night."

"Weren't you frightened? What did you do, Violette?"

"I dashed inside, and came back with the short, double-barreled shotgun which I always keep loaded for jungle emergencies; and he was still in sight—right over there by those trees." She pointed. "But just as I raised the gun to my shoulder, suddenly he stopped stock-still and looked at me. And—I never saw anything quite so magnificent! Tawny-striped, enormous, royal—'fearful symmetry' indeed! With great golden-green moon-eyes, wise, flaming, wild and sad. With blood dripping from his jowls—with in every line of him that marvelous feline pride which makes a few creatures appear above all pettiness, above all little common things, no matter what they may do. And without trying to escape, it just stood there staring. I don't know what it saw in *me*, but *I* saw beauty incarnate, and some awful unnamable cosmic tragedy. It was speaking with its soul—in words, just as you and I speak; and suffering as no human being can suffer because in words it could not speak. The natives believe, you know, that the souls of their great hero ancestors and likewise those of some of the lesser gods are locked up in tiger bodies. They will never kill one of the beasts themselves, if they can help it; and if they meet one in the jungle, instead they kneel and pray to it. And they'll all swear that, if one does that, the tiger will pass on without harming anyone."

"But what did *you* do?" I asked my hostess, intensely curious to know, and

thinking to myself that the tiger might well have seen in her—in her mystic golden egg-shell fairness, in the fey blue eyes beneath the thread-thin dark arcs which were her brows, in the mask-like oval of her face—very much what she'd seen in it. Both were greater even than their super-finished shells. And both were part of a pitiful personal transiency, terribly and rebelliously aware of all around and just outside of themselves a mocking, jibing, ruthlessly ruminating, living eternity—Garoeda or the Sphinx—knowing it there; yet never quite able to break into and become a part of it.

"I?" replied the Lady Violette Adair. "What *could* I do after that? I lowered my gun and salaamed to him. '*Toean matjan besar*—great Lord Tiger,' I said, 'go home in peace. You are too beautiful to kill. But don't steal any more of my live-stock, please'."

"And then?"

"Then he did a strange thing. He opened his mouth and let the dead kid fall onto the grass; his lips curled in a tiger-smile, showing off his great white fangs, and he gave a little low rumbling roar. Then he was gone, like a streak of bright light—not daylight, but light of enchantment—burning its way beneath the trees, leaving behind him a ripple and swish of dew-drenched foliage, like a phosphorescent wake, for a second; then nothingness—a kind of soundless blank, which had not been there before he passed."

"And did you ever see him again?"

HER face was dreaming, inscrutable, with its lips slightly parted and queerly quirked at the corners, like the mask of a *serimpe*—one of the Javanese dancers of the Socsochoenan's court. "That very same night once again I heard him. After I'd gone to bed, suddenly,

upon the roof above my room there came a soft heavy thud and the grate of a slithering tile. Then a long soft, savagely tender purring, which went on and on."

"And still you weren't afraid?"

The Lady Violette smiled. "I fell asleep listening to it," she said, "and knew that I was protected."

"And is that the end of the story?"

She shook her head. "Oh no—only the beginning. The next morning Ati—my head-boy, as you know—brought me the kid, with his face gone almost white with excitement. 'Look, *nonja!*' he said. 'It was killed by a tiger—there are marks of its teeth on the body, and also its foot-prints, gigantic ones, in the dust of the compound. Something out of the ordinary indeed must have happened to cause it to drop its prey; but probably it will return. What does the *nonja* want us to do? Shall we set a trap for it? For if it has once killed——'

"But I hastened to reassure him. 'Don't worry, Ati. I talked to the tiger myself, even as your old men and *doekoens* talk, knowing the truth, even I, in so much of their knowledge and ways. And the tiger answered me. It said that it would attack nothing here again, that no one belonging to me need be afraid; and of its own accord it left the kid to show that it would keep its word.'"

"And the boy believed you?"

"Of course." My hostess shrugged, a trifle impatiently.

"And did it ever come back after that?"

The Lady Violette hesitated, then went on: "The natives believe also, you know, that the tiger can change its shape at will—like the werewolf—like all of the animals which are half-gods. Be that as it may, several days after that first appearance, as I was sitting at breakfast one morning in the studio, I looked up and beheld in the doorway, backed by a sheet

of gold sun, an enormous white cat."

I started. "*Matjan Ketjil?*"

She nodded. "The same. Thoroughbred and dainty, with a great plume of a tail—like something out of fairyland. And its eyes—have you noticed them? In miniature they are twin replicas of those of the tiger. Without scruple, yet so fastidious, so aloof. And flooding in all around him was the scent of sun-bruised marigolds."

"I know." As indeed I did—that peculiar pungence which seemed to contain in it the very essence of Java mornings. "And then?"

"I held out my hand and called to it—in high Malay, suited to its rank. 'Enter, cat; dost want to be friends? Welcome to my house.' Then I told Ati to fetch a saucer of cream and offer it to him; but when the boy approached, the animal arched its back and spat. Then I ordered Ati to set the cream upon the table opposite me and to draw up a chair as though for a guest; and I myself salaamed to the cat and again held out my hand. 'Wilt do me the honor of sharing my meal, *Matjan Ketjil*—little tiger?' I invited. And at that my visitor walked over, with the tip of its coral tongue and the grace of a courtier kissed my fingers, then sprang onto the chair and with a comically polite little mew commenced to lap up the cream.

"And after breakfast," continued my friend, "it followed me all about the studio, until finally I placed a big velvet pillow for it beside my work-chair and sat down at my writing-table. Then *Matjan Ketjil*—for of course already that was his name—arranged himself upon the cushion and remained there, unblinking, unstirring, sometimes purring, sometimes seeming to sleep, occasionally looking up at me. And then——"

"Well?"

"My dear, I scarcely know how to tell you—it was the queerest thing! Of course everything in the East speaks to me; but between us two there was pure communication. I was not conscious of hearing sentences—of an audible voice at all; but simply all kinds of fantastic ideas beyond any that I had ever known flowed in and out of me—and I understood the East and the cosmos as never before, and wrote as I had never thought to write. And I felt strangely young and well, too. It was fascinating and exhilarating, a kind of enchantment. I wrote on and on. Some day very likely you will read some of it; but much of it will never be published until after I am dead. And since then the cat comes every day, as you yourself have seen. And toward dusk, as you will have noted too, he leaves and goes into the jungle."

I looked at my friend. Her eyes were shining stars, her lashes were infinitesimal glittering bronze-gold wires curving up to meet her brows; her mouth was a scarlet hibiscus blooming against a pale bamboo wall. Many men had paused to look at her; but it was often said that, except for the impersonal courtesy and consideration which was a part of her breeding, she never looked back at them; but confined her gaze instead to statues and shrines, to masks and animals, to occult lore, to the things which gave to the innermost core of her a thrill and to nothing else. Very ancient was the ego of the Lady Violette, although her so strangely perfect body was still so young. "Your cat is a magic creature—even without knowing what you've just recounted, and even though he will never let me stroke him," I said.

"He'll never let anyone touch him but me," Violette answered. "But likewise he will never harm you." Then she added slowly: "And neither would the tiger. Should you ever chance to see him, al-

though I doubt if you will—but should you, you need not be afraid."

"You mean that the tiger too still sometimes returns?" I was not precisely afraid; but I peered across at the compound, from out of which seeped every now and again the comforting night sounds of sleepy goats and fowls, the stamp of Violette's riding-horse, or the whining wail of a Malay love-song—peered with the sort of horrified unable-not-to feeling with which one regards a mangling accident in a street.

"Sometimes he purrs on my roof at night—he's not apt to while you're here; but should you ever hear him, be calm—you have nothing to fear."

"You are a strange woman, Violette! But thank you for telling me."

"That's not quite all, either," she said. "And the rest may sound to you pretty terrible. But stark beauty is that, isn't it? Do you want to hear it?"

"Of course," I responded, wondering what could be more, if there were any inner truth in it at all, than what she'd already told me.

"Did you ever know Haviland Nesbit? He was rather the rage in London at one time. Just after—yes, that one. Then you know how handsome he was. But perhaps you don't know that he came out here last year—just wandering, as he so often did—and hunted me up, with a letter from my aunt, Lady Leila Caruthers. Yes, I thought you must have. Well——" She paused, then went on musingly: "Men as a rule do not attract me—I suppose you know that too; but more than any other Haviland Nesbit did. There *was* something about him which made me feel more—more as I suppose most other women feel; and I've never cared a damn for conventions, of course—so I asked him to stop awhile up here. And he did. But still we were

only friends—although he would have liked, of course——”

“And was that *after* the episode of the tiger—and the white cat?” I interrupted, too interested to consider whether or not I was being rude.

My hostess laughed. “Of course! I forgot that *you* couldn’t just know,” she said—kindly, but as though there were a way in which I might have known without asking. “But after the first day of his visit, *Matjan Ketjil* walked out, and did not return until after Haviland was—was gone.” For an instant her face was inhuman in its cold, clear, dreaming beauty.

“Yes?” I ventured, to egg her on.

“I MISSED my — my companion, of course; yet the days were complete and full. Until—until after some weeks like that, there finally arrived a night when I too thought that there might, after all, be something in—in that something which usually is between a man and a woman shut up alone together. A night when I called myself a fool for at least not trying and learning. A night when at last—standing down there in the moonlight, just outside the temple door, Haviland Nesbit put his arms about me—and I let him. And we kissed. And just at that moment, although neither of us had heard even a rustle before, there came a spring from the roof, and somehow I was knocked to one side; while Haviland—not even much mauled, but dead of a broken neck before he could so much as cry out—lay in a crumpled heap at my feet. And then I saw the tiger, without a backward look, like a fierce yellow river, flowing off through the jungle.”

“Violette!” I shuddered, and glanced involuntarily up toward the eaves beneath which we were sitting.

At which my hostess laughed again—

a little, low, pearly gurgle, soulless and bell-like—fairy laughter. “And still you need not be afraid,” she repeated gently. “For he knows now that I will not experiment again.”

“But what did you do—about Haviland? For no one at home has ever heard what became of him—have they?”

“You see how I trust you, having made you my friend,” she answered. “No, no one knows—nor will, till I too am dead. But then, if you should happen to be still alive, you may tell, if you like. But no, I didn’t tell then. My aunt would have hated it so—all the talk; and there seemed no reason to. I called *Ati*, and we buried him over there, under that lovely tree, half purple flowers on one side and orange berries on the other. I don’t know where he would rather lie for that last long rest—do you? But I was furious then too—furious! If *Matjan* had come back then in any shape—especially in his big tiger body——”

“Violette, you don’t mean that you actually believe——”

“It’s no matter. You may think what you like, but if the tiger had returned. . . . However, he didn’t—not then; and neither did the white cat. Not for several days. But then one morning I looked up and there he was, standing in the door again, with the sun a bright blob behind him. And I took down a kris from the wall, the one which hangs always above my desk, and I walked toward him—meaning to put an end to it all, of course—remembering poor Haviland, who had hardly earned the fate which befell him. But then—but then—*Matjan Ketjil* didn’t run away, you see; instead just stood and looked at me. And I knew myself better by then—so what would you? I am not as other women. This *is* my life. And although I am fond of you, my dear, very—and one or two

others—still I am always a little lonely, except when I am alone. And he *was* too beautiful to kill. So—so after a moment I hung the kris back on the wall again. And that's all."

For a breath we both sat silent. Then over our shoulders came the voice of Ati. "*Nonja, makan* is served." And we rose and went in.

AFTER dinner, over our coffee and liqueurs, there was a little more talk—fragmentary, but satisfying—mostly about the East. But I felt unusually tired and so excused myself early and withdrew to my cubicle—so perfect in its appointments, but so austere and cell-like. Then hastily I prepared for bed, but weary as I was, found that I could not sleep. And presently I heard a soft thud and a slithering tile, not quite above my room, but somewhere not far away upon the roof of the house. And I sprang from bed and stood on tiptoe to look out through my single window—a very high one, protected by stout steel bars. From there I could catch a glimpse of the lawn, backed by a black wall of jungle. The clearing was a bowl of moonlight, white and clean and lonely, with no movement in it at first. Then I saw my hostess walk across the open space in her trailing white dinner-gown, with a cigarette, glowing like a fire-fly, in her hand. Like some rare white tropical bird, stately and cold and lovely, she paced back and forth, slowly, superbly. And then—then I saw melt out of the shadows, like a thicker shadow forming, a sinuous, splendid shape, tawny-striped and fearful. And suddenly there was a tiger walking beside the woman. Two creatures of another world they seemed, one no more royal than the other, both lofty, lord-like, stately, pacing up and down in the witchlight, in a weird con-

temptment of untellable communion. And God, how beautiful they were! I stared until my teeth chattered, then crept back to bed, feeling myself very small and child-like and earthy.

And the next morning the white cat came as always, and lapped its cream, sitting solemnly upon a chair placed for it between my hostess and me. And I saw that its eyes were two slit-gashed moons, solemn and wise, sad and inscrutable—and big—bigger than it. And later it lay upon its cushion, while Violette as usual, even when I was there, sat at her desk for a little, writing—with the sun-scent of marigolds all about them—concentrated in them. And I knew that in all that she wrote there would be the swirling, spiraling, leering, heart-scorching, twisted, other-world thoughts which had once gotten themselves engraved upon all of the temple doors out there—thoughts like the carvings upon the door which guarded the house I was in. The sun on the fur of the cat was blinding—the hair of my friend was virgin gold. They were sun and snow on a mountain—they were all that most of us are not. . . .

Two days later I came away. And now Violette Adair is dead of a fever, and lies buried—not beside Haviland Nesbit, but by her own request, just beneath the ground, very shallowly, in the center of the lawn before her own house, where her bones may be blessed and bleached for ever by the sun and the moon and the rains of Java. And no one goes near or disturbs her; for it is said by the natives that night and day a tiger, or its ghost, patrols her grave.

Whether that last is true or not, I do not know; but I do know what I saw. . . . And now that she is gone, as she said I might, I give you her story.

large tree. The three friends were seated in the shadow at the rear of the globe.

They were all laughing and conversing happily, when Burgoyne, whose ears were the quickest, leapt to his feet.

"Did you hear that! He's back in the *Neutralia*!" and he rushed round the globe to the doorway.

True enough he was in the *Neutralia*, had climbed noiselessly up the rope ladder, pulled it inside, and shut the door. This last action was the cause of the sound that had caught Burgoyne's hearing.

As they stood helplessly under the shut door, the great cover began to turn, coming over noiselessly and resistlessly.

As the huge globe rose from the ground, which it did before the cover had entirely gone round the lower half, and the earth's pull was not quite cut off, the door, some twelve feet above them, was opened, and Kobloth appeared in the

opening. At that second the *Neutralia* suddenly leapt upward and, as it went, they could see he was speaking, shouting to them, but his words came in a torrent of meaningless sounds, the unintelligible ravings of a madman, muffled by the distance. The globe gathered way; evidently the turning-gear left unlocked was permitting the cover to slide gradually over, and his voice rose to a scream of insane passion. Then there came a shrill hissing that rapidly subsided, and the *Neutralia* had vanished.

"The door was open!" exclaimed Burgoyne.

"Yes. By now he will be a block of ice out in the silence and blackness of space!" said Carscadden gravely. "The *Neutralia* has commenced her last awful journey; and it is quite possible that ten thousand years from this hour, Armand Kobloth will still be standing in that doorway on his eternal voyage through space."

[THE END]