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Tony the Faithful

By W. K. MASHBURN, Jr.

A HUGE Persian cat descended the finest Colonial staircase in all Louisiana, with the complacent self-assurance of his kind. The bottom steps of the flight were variously wider than those above, so that the balustrade curved outward in a graceful flare at the lower end. At this stage of his descent, the cat hugged the wall, and peered through the slender balusters at a worn spot on the floor-covering immediately behind the newel post, with somewhat less complacency than he had previously exhibited.

As the animal reached the floor, he hesitated a moment, then circled toward the farther wall of the dimly lighted hall. The door of Colonel Desmare's library was set in this wall, and, as the cat stalked past it, the door abruptly opened, and the colonel himself stepped into the hall. Startled, the already nervous cat leaped sideways, landing in a spot close to the stairway, a few feet behind the newel post.

No sooner had its feet touched the floor, than the cat's back arched convulsively. For an instant it stood rigid; fur stiffly erect, eyes gleaming yellowly. Then, emitting one ear-splitting screech, it streaked incontinently down the long, dim hall.

"H'm," vouchsafed Colonel Desmare, from where he had paused in the library door. "That's the third time Felix has shown a marked antipathy toward that particular spot. It's interesting—very! Psychic phenomenon, in fact. I must mention it when next I write Dr. Moreau: that's quite in his line."

The colonel reached one hand inside the door, to the wall switch controlling the lights in the library. Having pressed the button, he closed the door and crossed the hall. Resting a thin, aristocratic hand upon the balustrade when he reached the stairs, the colonel stood for a moment regarding the spot behind the newel post, where a better light would have shown the carpet to be thin and worn. The fine head of the old planter was bowed as he stood thus, and, had there been anyone to see, it might have been that his eyes—the gray eyes that could be so bleak and steely on occasion—were strangely misty.

"Poor old Tony," sighed the colonel.

The long hall was dimly lighted at present, by a single, inadequate electric bulb, so that its recesses were deeply shrouded in shadow. The door that Colonel Desmare had just closed, stealthily reopened, and another shadow, darker and more sinister, spread itself upon the wall as the hulking, ominous figure of a squat, brutish negro crept across the threshold from within the darkened library. Softly the intruder crept toward the musing, unsuspecting man at the foot of the stairs.

The feeble light glinted dully upon the steel that lurked in one huge black fist. The very shadows in the hall cried aloud, "*Assassin!*" Would the colonel never hear? The air itself seemed fraught with warning. There was a mutter of distant thunder, and the old planter shook his shoulders, as if to throw off the reverry that had bowed his proud head.

"I had better go back and shut the windows in the library."

Colonel Desmare turned to carry out this intention, just as the upswung knife in the negro's great paw began its descent. With a startled cry, the colonel seized the black's thick wrist.

"Bo-Jo! You murderous devil!" Although he lacked strength to check the actual downward swoop of the blade, the planter succeeded in diverting its point to one side. "Armand!" he shouted, hoping to arouse the negro butler who had quarters in the rear of the house.

AT THIS outcry, Bo-Jo's left hand gripped the colonel's throat, and he frantically sought to drive home the knife. The colonel, for his part, clung as frantically to the hand that held the blade, at the same time trying desperately to wrench himself free of the hand that was set like a vise upon his throat. With his fingers still biting cruelly into the planter's windpipe, the negro jerked backward in an effort to loosen the colonel's tenacious grip upon his other wrist. The action threw Bo-Jo back upon the newel post of the stairway, which caught him in one side of his back, upsetting his balance. The negro loosed his hold upon the colonel's throat, clutching sideways at the balustrade in an attempt to keep his footing. The planter's weight, pulling backward, had really aided Bo-Jo; relieved of it, the negro pivoted sideways on the newel post, toppling to the floor behind it. The colonel slumped in a limp heap at the foot of the stairs.

On the instant, it seemed that bedlam had been set loose from a dozen different quarters. There was a noise from the rear of the house, as if someone blundered toward the hall in such haste as to upset all the furniture along his path. From the front came the sound of imperative voices, the stamp of impatient feet, and a dull,

insistent pounding on the heavy door. In the hall itself, there was a sudden furious disturbance in the shadows beneath the stairway—a scuffling and thrashing accompanied with shrieks that alternated with whimpers of agonized terror, and a vicious, snarling, animal growl.

A sudden scream, choked in the middle, sounded in the hall. For a moment, the pounding on the door was suspended, and there was breathless quiet in the house. Then the long-drawn, wailing howl of a dog, mournful yet savagely triumphant, rent the silence.

The hammering on the front door was resumed with more determination than ever; the voices became more loudly insistent. Tumbling into the hall from the rear came the grotesque, night-shirted figure of old Armand, an antiquated revolver thrust forward in one aged but resolute hand.

The butler cried out at the sight that met his eyes, under the dim gleam of the hall light. The still, contorted figure of Bo-Jo claimed his attention only long enough to emit one stupendous gasp of amazement and horror; then Armand ran to the foot of the stairs and dropped to his knees beside his master.

Another figure rushed into the hall from the direction whence the butler had come. It was Le Bleu, the plantation overseer. He stopped short for one surprised second, but that was all. Le Bleu was practical, as always.

"Why yo' don't open de do', Armand? It's Sheriff Picot, come fo' dat Bo-Jo."

The overseer suited his action to the word, and himself, with methodical haste, unbarred the door to Sheriff Picot and a deputy.

"COLONEL hurt?" demanded the sheriff, perceiving Armand bending over Colonel Desmare, whom the butler partly supported with one knee. "Where's the nigger?"

Observing, at this juncture, Bo-Jo's figure sprawled in the shadow of the stair, half concealed behind the flaring end of the balustrade, the grizzled sheriff stopped short. "What in thunder!" he ejaculated.

Le Bleu, the practical, had found the switchboard and turned on more lights. The sheriff bent closer over the negro. "Ah! We heard the dog howl," he remarked. "He sho' did a good job on Bo-Jo."

A gasp from the colonel focused attention in his direction. After coughing ineffectually, the old planter managed to get down a few painful swallows of the water that Le Bleu had just brought. He rubbed his throat gingerly.

"Hurt, Colonel?" asked the sheriff. "Take it easy," he added, as the colonel essayed to rise.

"Not greatly, Sheriff," said Colonel Desmare, answering Picot's question. "Where is that black devil?"

The sheriff jerked a thumb over one shoulder. "As soon as we found he'd broken jail, we figured he might try some deviltry over here, so we made a bee-line in this direction. We'd have been too late, though—you can thank the dog, Colonel, not us."

"The dog?" queried the colonel. The sheriff nodded.

Assisted by Armand, Colonel Desmare got to his feet. Leaning heavily on the butler, he walked over and regarded what was left of Bo-Jo, a puzzled frown on his face.

"This is where Tony used to sleep," he murmured. The sheriff observed that the colonel spoke quaveringly, but set it down to the still present effects of near-strangulation.

"Good thing for you he did,"

sagely observed Picot. "Made a good job of it too, that dog. Ripped the nigger's throat clean out." He looked around, as if just remembering something. "Where is the dog, by the way?"

Old Armand gulped, audibly, and Le Bleu looked sideways at the sheriff. For once, the Cajun overseer's stolid face registered puzzlement — and something else. Furtively he crossed himself.

"Yes," answered the colonel, looking hard at Picot, "where is the dog?"

"Eh?"

"Do you remember why I preferred charges against Bo-Jo, Sheriff?"

"Sho'!" nodded the sheriff. "He tried to knife Le Bleu, and swore he'd knife you, after you had Le Bleu lash him with a bullwhip for— for—" His eyes were suddenly wide, and he finished with a startled ejaculation. "Eh——?"

"Just so," said the colonel, succinctly. "I had Le Bleu lash him— well. It was rather feudal, I admit; but a dog like *that* one——"

"You mean to tell me——?"

"——That there hasn't been another dog in this house," evenly interposed the colonel, finishing Picot's question.

"But, good heavens, Colonel," expostulated the sheriff, "you had the nigger whipped *because he killed your dog!*"

"Precisely," agreed the colonel, a trifle wearily. "He was a *good* dog, Sheriff."

"A good dog," weakly agreed Sheriff Picot. "Yeah. A *dam'* good dog!"

