

# The Cat

A STORY WHICH SHOWS THAT WHILE NATURE MAY BE  
CRUEL, SHE CAN ALSO BE JUST

By Robert Terry Shannon

ELIJAH HOOK had felt, since the murky dawn, some feverish tension in the air that stretched his nerves, unsettled him, and lent a vicious swish to the ax which he swung with prodigious strength. The sun had been obscured all day by dense pewter-colored clouds piling sullenly over the heavily wooded hill country. Hook's brooding, on days like this, always gave him the muscular energy of a giant.

A final glance at his silver-plated watch showed that at last it was four o'clock. He drove the keen blade into the half severed trunk of the tree and left it there. Making his way across the ragged clearing to the rough, grayish road, he scanned its mile of downward slope to the point where it curved away into the dull green of the timber.

Nelda Haskell was not yet in sight. With his bulking frame sprawled under a pine, Hook opened a long Barlow knife and began to hack at a broken branch, as he gave himself up to the racking thoughts that were forever milling in his mind.

It was beyond his comprehension why Nelda devoted herself to a wraith like David Witherspoon, with those persistent attacks of lung fever. Hook had dared to ask her something of the sort once, but she had immediately silenced him with a chilling aloofness that would have been final to another man. He bit a thick, pendulous lower lip as he thought of her. His dark eyes glowed like oil-polished ebony as some internal tumult of desire stole upon him.

There was much he yearned to know about her—much fuel for his fires. The Haskell's had moved in three years before from the East, shortly before Hook himself had come up from Georgia. Even in the backwoods, the Haskell's had maintained a semblance of refinement that set them apart

from their neighbors, while Hook was alienated by a surly defiance of all that was common to human relationship in Hatterburn County.

So far as any one knew, he had never kept a dog, had never lent a hand in sickness or death, or in the building of any man's barn. Worse—in the beginning, he had spurned the midnight hunt for coon and possum, and had refused to slake his throat with the clear, molten fire of native corn liquor. Obscure prejudices that did not lend themselves easily to words germinated in the breasts of the Hatterburn men, and Hook, before long, had been left almost entirely to himself.

Once, when a deadly feud had crackled across the hills of the county and into Burrwitch, to the north, he seemed to be the only man for miles whose sympathies and weapons remained untouched. Late riders passed his cabin and saw the saffron glow of a kerosene lamp through his dirty windows at strange hours, but no one had ever asked him questions. In all this he experienced a sardonic satisfaction.

At the sight of Nelda Haskell's tired figure far down the road, he jerked himself to his feet, an impulse to meet her and walk back in her company assailing him; but he decided against it. Standing with his back against the tree, he kept his eyes steadily upon her, until at length he was able to discern that she bore some indistinct burden. As she came nearer, he thought, oddly, that it was a cat. When she was nearly upon him, he was sure of it.

## II

"Howdy?" called Hook, with an upward gesture toward his wide straw hat.

Her face, as she lifted it, gave him a surge of pleasure at its delicacy. A bonnet

pendent from her arm made it possible for his avid gaze to luxuriate upon her weight of coiled copper hair, flecked through with glints of dark gold. It annoyed him to find that he was trembling slightly.

"Where'd you pick up the cat?"

She stopped in the middle of the road, uncertainly.

"The dogs were fighting something in a thicket, and this little thing straggled out. Can you tell me what kind of an animal it is?"

Hook came closer to her, and grew acutely conscious of her fragility. He could have held her slender form in the crook of one arm. He took the creature from her and rested it, a ball of faintly striped fur, in one of his capacious hands. With a long forefinger he examined the hairy growths at the tip of its ears.

"It's a lynx—a young one. It's a tasseleared lynx." He smiled at her, showing his strong yellow teeth. "Want me to kill it for you?"

The girl's hand darted out and her gray eyes suddenly lost all fatigue.

"No—I don't want you to kill it for me," she said frigidly. "I'll take it, please!"

Hook drew the animal back from her reach, his unabashed gaze estimating her graceful lines. Some ivorylike quality of smoothness and coloring formed a sensation rather than a picture in his brain—something illumined and warmed by a soft, golden light. Once more he moved the cub from her attempt to retrieve it.

"Will you please, Mr. Hook?"

Her voice was perfectly level, but he noticed that she was looking at the animal instead of meeting his own penetrating eyes.

A vivid sprangle of lightning streaked in the somber northwest, and a premonitory growl of thunder shook the heavy air. Scattered drops of rain spat at their feet, raising little puffs of dust.

"I'll carry the critter for you. Better step over to the cabin and wait a bit till the storm passes."

He looked up at the darkening sky.

"I think I can get home before it comes," she said, without conviction.

Across the valley, now dim with a vaporous haze, they could see the sheeted torrent slanting down on massed tree tops. A wet chill, like a warning, crept into the air, and Hook saw her shiver.

"You'll get soaked to the skin!"

His lips quivered. He studied her face, and tried to imagine what was in her mind. The girl's natural poise, her accustomed demeanor of austerity, seemed to be dissolving into uneasiness.

She glanced up at the clouds, and his eye followed the white curve of her throat. It was not the thought of her bodily attractiveness alone, he repeated mentally, that sent his pulse jerking. More than half of it was a rabid urge to penetrate her veil of intellectual remoteness.

The force of his covetousness pumped through his veins in a hot current, staining his cheeks darkly and twisting the suggestion of a sneer into the corners of his mouth. A cunning fear that she might detect the tide of feeling that possessed him caused him to turn his face aside.

"The rain 'll come down like blazes in a minute," he remarked.

As he spoke, it came furiously, with a driving rattle in the leaves, drenching the air, the ground, the trees, with an irresistible deluge stung through with coldness. A gasp sounded from Nelda Haskell's lips as the water penetrated her clothing, and she threw up an arm to ward it off.

The futility of her action, so characteristic of a delicate physical adjustment, brought a flash of gratification to Hook, intensifying his own indifference to mountain downpours, and to all inconsequential sensations. For a moment the girl bent in the flood, and then, with an uncontrollable cry in her throat, she fled toward the cabin.

Scarcely sensible to the beating pressure that plastered his cotton shirt against his body, Hook followed on without haste. Within the dusky, fetid interior she had sunk, dripping, into a sagging chair of hickory wythes, her hands to her ears, as if to stop out the pounding roar of the rain on the shingles.

"I am sorry to trouble you," she murmured weakly. "These storms always terrify me."

"You're wet," he said shortly.

Closing the door, he dropped the wooden bar into its socket. The lynx, which Hook had tossed carelessly to the floor, took a few experimental steps on its feeble, shaken legs, and calmly squatted on its haunches in the center of the room. Methodically the man gathered wood and twigs from the litter beside the smudged fireplace.

"Might as well get dry and be comfortable," he said.

The blaze from his match leaped through the tinder and immediately began licking around the dry pieces.

Two yellow eyes with cat pupils that ran up and down regarded the figure kneeling before the fire with malignant intensity. Hook, turning, caught the glare and frowned.

"Come here!" he growled, and seized the thing around its thin neck. With a snarl it tried to claw him, but his fingers tightened, and he dangled it before him. "No, you don't!" The words came with a grit. "I'm too smart for you, you whelp! If I wanted to, I could throw you into the fire!"

His eyes caught Nelda's face, and at her pain he smiled reassuringly.

"I wouldn't hurt the critter," he told her.

Scraping a chair across the floor, he sat down beside her, with the cat on his knees. The eyes of the girl avoided him and moved about the disorderly room, from the unmade bed to a confusion of dishes on an uncovered pine table. For a moment a sudden surprise lit her countenance, at sight of a shelf of heavy books bound in yellow.

"Yes—I can, and do, read," he remarked in an unpleasant voice. "Surprising, ain't it, for a clodhopper?"

"Not at all," she replied levelly.

Her tone, more than her words, antagonized him. Despite the pull he felt toward her, a quick resentment stirred him. Trying to appear at ease, he thrust his damp brogans toward the fire. Poise had not yet come to him, and his innermost thoughts belched out in husky abruptness:

"I been watching you for a long time. There's something I want to tell you that's been on my mind—about us."

She half rose from her chair.

"Sit down," he said. "There ain't nothing to be afraid of."

"I am not afraid."

Somewhere there was a break in her voice, at which his eyes gleamed. One of his broad palms smothered the head of the cat into immobility.

"Sit down!"

The command came deeply from his throat, and Nelda sank back as if a weight had been placed on her shoulders.

"That's better! It's no good pretending you don't want to hear what I got to say. You do, because you're a woman, and they're all alike—all alike!"

She looked at him steadily, but had not strength to combat his aggressive stare.

"Don't eye me like I was a worm in the dirt," he ordered. "I ain't. I'm twice as much of a man as this Witherspoon you figure on marrying, and you know it!"

She whitened a shade. He noticed that hers was the kind of skin that never browns with the sun, that its texture remained like the petals of a pale pink rose.

"You're drunk," she told him.

Hook flushed.

"Sure! It's always when a man's drunk that he begins to look farther than the end of his nose. Lemme tell you something, though—I'm a big man, a brainy man." He removed a hand from the cat to wave it in the direction of the bookshelf. "All that stuff is law. I dug it out myself, right here in this cabin." He rose to his feet and gesticulated with his arms, unconsciously waving the cat through the air with a grip so firm that the animal was unable to struggle effectively.

"You and your education—I suppose you think you could rip into Blackstone and tear the meat out of it alone! Yes, you could! I didn't have any chance in my life. There wasn't anybody else to pull an oar on my boat."

A feeling grew upon him that he was arousing her interest. He was behind her chair, and, looking down over her head, he noticed a film of steam rising from her wet shoes where the firelight played upon them. Restlessly he began tramping the room.

"Latin—Cæsar's Gallic Wars," he went on raspingly. "I masticated that stuff! Read, write, and translate. All goes to show what kind of a strong mind I got; like a bear trap, deep teeth and a God-awful clamp when I get set on anything. I ain't never tried to do anything with this farm. I'm out for bigger stuff. I'm going high—clear to the top. You'll never see my brain buried back here in the timber!"

He broke off shortly, stung by Nelda's self-contained silence. An accumulation of temper welled up in him, and he flamed out:

"Him—Witherspoon—what 'll he ever be able to do for you? What is he, anyway? A decaying gimcrack!"

A quick shadow gathered on her face, softly illumined in the flickering light.

"He is something entirely beyond your comprehension—a gentleman."

"A sort of fancy luxury, too!" Hook's teeth showed in a fleeting smile. A contemptuous sweep of the cat described his

disgust. "Too rickety to support a woman. He'd make you spend the rest of your life teaching school for a kittle of mountain brats!"

The pain on her face, now that he could see her, was too evident to escape him.

"You wait," he continued in a softer key. "Better days are coming. You don't want a gentleman—you want a full-grown man. I can provide you with the best, too. Listen—silks, diamonds, money, hired help. You wait! I'm coming after you one of these days, and we'll go to Europe on our honeymoon!"

She raised a fluttering hand, blue-veined on almost pallid white. The room was a grayish welter of drear and musty odors, and stretching shadows from the rain-sputtered fire. The incessant fury of the rain was like a thousand flails beating on the roof. Through the splashed window panes she could see, indistinctly, the gushing wetness of trees weaving in the downpour.

Hook kept his eyes on her, looking craftily for a hint of approval. Not finding it, he was encouraged, nevertheless, to note that she did not flare with anger in defense of Witherspoon.

"Women!" he went on, choking out his speech. "They're all afraid of me, but they like my style, just the same. I could take away 'most any man's woman if I wanted to, but I don't. I'm a one-woman man—you, Nelda Haskell, that's all! You don't catch me beating around the bush. Right out strong, straight from the shoulder—you!"

Nelda sank deeper into the chair.

"I don't know why I don't leave your house at once," she said, in a monotone scarcely audible above the din outside.

Exultation rioted in the man, and he thrilled to the thought that he was battering her resistance away. It was easier than he had expected.

"You'll never know happiness like you'll have with me!" he urged wildly.

"When I think of you," she said, "you always remind me of a vulture flying over the woods. Why, just being near you is unclean!"

She turned her head away from his direction, the burnished mass of her hair reflecting a dozen alluring lights. His self-confidence, at the moment, steeled him against anything she could have said. The cat moved in his grasp, and he clutched it again into helplessness.

"I understand what makes you feel that way against me," he asserted. "I'm breaking down all your old ways of looking at things, and you're trying to fight me off. Go ahead and hate me, if you want to—it's only a hair line between that and loving me, anyhow. I'm clearing out of this part of the country, and you won't see me for two or three years. When I come back, I'm coming back to get you. Don't worry—I'll be sticking in your mind all the time I'm gone. Witherspoon, he ain't going to live long." Nelda winced, and there was the sound of her sharp breath. "You don't want to marry him, anyhow—not down in your heart you don't. You want me!"

Against his will, Hook's voice rose to a strange pitch. He felt that he was addressing himself to the world, that he was bending fate and circumstances to his will.

"Let Witherspoon die, damn him!" he cried. "You and me, we're going to live on and on forever, feasting on the sweetest and fullest—"

A gasping sound came from her throat. "You're a devil!" she cried faintly. "You're insane!"

"Every great man is a little insane," Hook answered, one arm moving up and down in a nervous beat that carried the cat with it. "I'll make my start in some city. There's money in the law, and power, too. I'll make the State Legislature. When I speak, I carry people with me. Take the Governor's chair, for instance—I don't want that in particular. The thing I aim at is national. You'll see me in Washington some day—in Congress; and I'll take you right along with me. Think of it—the carriages, the silks—"

He passed a tongue over dry lips.

"I can work eighteen hours a day and never feel it. My constitution is made out of oak bolted together with iron."

Nelda slowly got herself up to her feet, her face colorless and trancelike. Her fragility, her weakness, awoke in him an unrealized sense of beauty that was strangely unrelated to any phase of life he had ever known.

In her damp gingham dress, high-necked and with sleeves to the wrist, there was no suggestion to lead his mind on to a reveling intoxication; but somehow he was made dizzy by the swirling excitation of silken stuff in undulating motion, with white, polished curves underneath. The illusion expanded into a fantasy of stringed music



and golden light, an elusive perfume that went to his head and almost staggered him.

Nelda moved toward the door, swaying slightly, gracefully. Hook, with one hand outstretched toward her and the other holding the cat at his side, interposed himself in her path.

"I'm letting you get away now because I want to save you up to look forward to," he said unsteadily. "I'm always going to have you in front of me, to make me travel faster." His eyes rested on her crown of hair; a gloating lighted them to a new brightness. "I could cut off a love lock of it to take along."

An abhorrence contorted her face, and she raised a protective hand to her head. For the first time there was a blaze in her expression. In the space of an instant, Hook caught something in her eyes that he had seen in the eyes of the cat.

"Don't touch me!"

Her voice was low, almost a purr. Startled, Hook felt the necessity of speech.

"Look at Lincoln!" he cried. "I been doing the things he did—studying, building myself up. My brain's like a steel trap."

Nelda looked at him without wavering.

"It was something besides Lincoln's brain that made him great," she said. "It was his heart, and you haven't any heart."

Strangely, it seemed to his heated vision that her pupils were running up and down. His fingers unconsciously loosened, and the cat dropped to the floor.

"You're all alike!" he rasped. "*Cats!*"

The girl lifted the bar, swung the door, and plunged out through an insweeping burst of rain. Hook, moving mechanically, closed and fastened the door after her. From a window he watched her splashing heedlessly through the pools of water that lay between the cabin and the road.

One cheek twitching, he kept her in sight as long as possible. When she had disappeared, he stood at the window with his head bent forward, trying to coördinate his thoughts, to substitute the details of his imminent departure in place of the sensuous introspection that still lingered in his mind.

### III

A FAINT noise on the floor roused him from himself, and, turning, he was pierced by two shafts of glazed fire. Something that was part fear and part superstition gripped him momentarily. His hot forehead grew damp. With an effort he sup-

pressed the feeling of terror, and took a step toward the cat, half determined to kick it across the room.

It made no effort to retreat from him. His mood changed, and he picked it up, returning to his seat by the fire.

His mind was at once diverted from its reflections by the twisting of his captive. The action nettled him, and with the fingers of one hand he slapped the young lynx sharply in the face, on one side and then on the other. There was a small, vicious snarl, and Hook struck a third blow, with more force.

Instantly one ridiculously small paw shot out so rapidly that his eyes could scarcely follow the movement. Four stinging red lines furrowed the back of his hand, bringing an oath. The pain of the scratches suffused the man with a spreading anger. His lips drew back in an egregious grin, and he cupped one hand over the small head.

One twist, and he could snap the animal's neck; but, with an inspiration, he thought of something better. Holding the writhing form between his knees, he produced a Barlow knife. With easy deliberation he pinched the tip of an ear between thumb and forefinger. There was a keen, swishing stroke; then another; a rasping snarl in the animal's throat.

The victor smiled at his cleverness. The furred tassels, the distinguishing mark of the species, the sole ornament of the craftiest of cats, had been removed forever. Satisfied, he went to the door, opened it wide, and flung the silent, mutilated thing far out into the rain.

Hours later, with his Blackstone in a cheap tin trunk and one volume of the revised statutes of Missouri under his arm, Elijah Hook stood in a drizzle on the platform of a lonely station, awaiting the night train that was to take him to the city and to his career.

Long before he could distinguish the outlines of the locomotive approaching in the distance, he could see its headlight gleaming yellow like a single terrible eye launched straight in his direction. This fancy brought to his mind the recollection that a cat has not one eye, but two.

### IV

THE lynx, thrown bleeding and smarting into the rain, curved through the air and

splashed without any great shock into a soft skim of mud and water. Bedraggled and shivering, it pulled itself out of the tenacious ooze and crept away slowly until it was lost in an uncleared area where sumac bushes grew at the edge of the timber land. There, by good fortune, it found a dry spot of powdery earth beneath the lift of a great stone.

With immediate industry it began cleaning its fur of the plastered mud on legs and belly, licking with a tongue that ran out to amazing length, and biting at the thickening yellow paste with scarcely visible teeth. The stinging along its raw ears gave the only sensation of heat in a body that shivered constantly. From time to time the reddened stumps would jerk involuntarily, and the cat would pass its damp paws tremblingly over the back of its head, bringing them down warm and salty, offensive with the odor of human hands.

The sun came out in the late afternoon. It dappled the watery thickets with patches of light and warmth, into which the tremulous thing crawled. For the most part, however, it kept to the shadows as it retreated into the depths of the woods. Before night all its remaining energies had been gathered into one swift leap of clawing fur tearing at the feathered stupidity of a robin intent upon angle worms. After that there was no doubt of the young cat's survival.

As it gained in strength of tooth and claw and in size of frame, there developed a vague hunger that could not be appeased by mere glutting of the stomach. Half grown, it prowled the timber alone, always restless by day and far into the cool, black nights; sniffing, searching with his eyes, and pursuing the tantalizing magnetism of strange yet somehow familiar sounds that were constantly elusive.

The meeting, when it came, was unexpected. As daylight shaded toward night, the cat encountered its own kind—a mother and three of her young, on a bare shelf of rock overhung by low-branched trees that receded into a depth so green and dark that no eye, beast or human, could penetrate it.

From the shelter of the underbrush the cat watched the family picture in motionless silence. The mother lynx, at her ease, lay luxuriously on her side, licking a wide-padded paw, while the smaller ones rolled and spat at one another, arching their backs in the mock combativeness of kittens.

Presently, as if some barely distinguishable scent were growing in the air, the mother and her offspring began gradually to gather closely together, and to freeze by degrees into fixed, alert postures. Without further hesitation, the young cat glided into the opening.

From the first instant he was subjected to a burning scrutiny of suspicion that slowed his step and brought him to a stop, as the small lynxes, with unshifted gaze, shrank back to the sleek sides of their mother. The old she, with fringe-knotted ears flattened back, sank into a nervous crouch, baring her teeth in a snarl that rose wiry and vibrant in a crescendo of distrust and aversion.

The intruder, self-conscious at once, dropped to his haunches. Ingenuously he began to lick a paw and hook it, after the manner of a domesticated cousin, over his head—over one of the ill-shaped tufts of hair and gristle. Four malignant pairs of eyes followed the motion, and, so directed, focused their unblinking glare upon the damning handiwork of Elijah Hook.

After a puzzled moment the feline brains, dull of reason and dead to sympathy, reverted to the instinct which inevitably revolts from all abnormality in the natural order. Beating through the air, as if communicated by animal telepathy, some bitter antipathy, inexplicable in its violence, impinged deeply and forever upon the highly sensitized perception of the cat that had known the cruelty of man.

Quite suddenly he was alone, with only the slightest movement in the underbrush to show the way his blood kin had disappeared. Slowly his jaws opened, and there rose in the woodland a cry in which was mingled desolation and defiance.

The mutilated lynx was a pariah!

## V

ELIJAH HOOK, from the beginning, affected broadcloth and white linen. He cultivated a homely, ironic method of pleading such cases as he managed to get, and tried to throw out an impression of deep intelligence. He had seen a picture of Henry Clay, and imagined that there was a resemblance. He took to stocks, and combed his thick black hair straight back from his wide forehead.

For the first year his practice was almost entirely in the police court, where he took anything and everything that came his way,

for whatever fee he could squeeze out of a client. A two-dollar bill, if it was all the prisoner had, was sufficient to insure legal representation. For five dollars Hook would go through the form of cross-questioning the arresting officer—never severely. For ten he would enter a perfunctory appeal from the usual conviction.

None of this, however, tended to thwart the administration of justice, nor was it so intended. To set up a vigorous defense would have aroused the opposition of the men whose toleration made possible his scavenging—policemen, the assistant city attorney, the police judge, and the raft of political small fry who, like himself, gained a parasitic livelihood from the dregs of the city's violence and intrigue. Toward all of these Hook maintained consistent courtesy and, in time, it was through one of them—a night lieutenant of police—that he received secret information of prisoners who, when arrested for drunken and disorderly conduct, had in their possession ten dollars or more.

A sly hint from the jailer at police headquarters was enough to convince the befuddled victim that Elijah Hook was necessary to the most favorable presentation of the case in court. Upon a written order from the prisoner, the desk sergeant released to Hook, in advance of the morning hearing, whatever money had been held for safe keeping.

The arrangement worked well. The prisoner was discharged with an admonition, Elijah kept one-third of the money, and the rest was distributed among the proper persons. The percentage that he had to pay was high, but, even so, his profits brought him a greater prosperity than he had ever known, introduced him definitely into the ring, and enabled him to set up a respectable office and maintain a clerk.

To make money, however, was not the whole of Hook's ambition, and his income did not entirely compensate him for the disrepute that inevitably attached to his name. His vanity, rather than his scruples, demanded that he should rise above such mire, and that he should achieve more rapid progress in the direction of his boasts to Nelda Haskell.

Aside from his business affairs, his thoughts were still upon the girl as constantly as when he had been on the farm. Frequently there fell upon him fevers of eagerness to subjugate her and make her

his property. Of the few women he had known in the city, none was the equal of Nelda.

When he thought of her, it was always as he had last seen her, with the catlike flame in her eyes, the soft, dangerous purr in her voice. She had never, he told himself, been more alluring than in her final moments.

Curiously, she had become associated in his mind with the animal from which she seemed to have borrowed the feline character of their parting, and he never pictured her without also seeing the untamed fires in the eyes of the lynx. He recalled with endless satisfaction how cunningly he had triumphed over the animal. In the end, victory would be as easy, as masterfully complete, over the woman.

In times of stress, when he had call to summon his full energies, such fancies invariably came to his mind. Later, when he had contrived to make himself leading counsel for the defense in a widely notorious murder trial, in the poignant moment before he began his closing address to the jury, his inner vision turned back automatically to his green hills and misty valleys.

The crawling August heat of a packed, humid court room, the tense expectancy of his auditors, and the infinitely anxious face of the defendant, faded into the image of Nelda—into the excitation of malevolent eyes that fixed and held him, while a pleasurable chill moved along his spine. Throughout the speech—which gave him his first taste of the ephemeral importance that the sensational press bestows so lavishly—he was conscious of some mental throw-back to the greatest scene in his past. He was stimulated to new power, he believed. There was a sweep of genius in his logic, and the heat of oratory in his mounting speech.

After the verdict was in, and he had passed the rubber-band roll of currency—short by a hundred dollars—to the silent, dominant man who had agreed to swing the jury, even then Elijah Hook was still under the spell of Nelda Haskell and the pariah lynx.

## VI

THE cat was in his third year, and a magnificent specimen, were it not for the odious disfigurement of his ears. All recollection of the circumstances of his despoliation had vanished from his mind. There

remained only in his nostrils a dormant effluvium, the like of which he had encountered but once.

From the time when he was first denied by the lynx tribe, a strange devilry had settled upon his life. Recklessly he haunted the vicinity of roads and clearings. Innumerable fowls and sheep had been his victims. He had killed a goat and a calf, and had ripped a man-scented hound into whining flight.

To his own breed he carried terror and battle without truce, assailing by stealth and in the open, maiming and destroying, relentless and implacable. In size, in strength, in ferocity, he had a rushing advantage over any lynx he met. At dusk he drank his fill in solitary preëminence at some woodland spring, while luminous eyes in hiding peered out cautiously upon his savage splendor.

His stripes had faded into a shadowy gray sheen, of which every hair stood singly when in combat. So often did he fight that he bore constantly fresh scars, strips denuded of hair, and skin that was torn and clawed to the bone. Alone he licked his wounds, scarcely feeling their pain, and alone he lived his life.

Then appeared the female who finally settled his destiny—gorgeous of line and grace, lustrous, enravishingly redolent. Straightway he knew but one task, and that was to woo. All interests and activities joined and converged toward this sole mission in life.

His advances, zoologically candid, were met with an aversion in which there was no coquetry. If he sought to approach, he was spurned by her sinuous flight, so rapid that it required all his speed to keep apace. Cornered, she met him with infuriated paws, teeth naked to the gums, and claws to the sockets. An inborn gallantry prevented him from punishing her, as he might easily have done. He would merely sit before her, his ghastly, mucronated ears bristling forward in puzzled eagerness.

When, after his utmost display of ardor, it was established that she would not accept him as a mate, he became the jealous lover, and devoted his time to stalking other males who cautiously sought her favor. Three of them she saw lacerated to death in furious, snarling whorls of fur dyed with blood. It was beyond her strategy to shake him from her trail, and they became companions, despite her contemptuous aloofness.

Then, one day, she stepped into the serrated jaws of a trap, which clamped with bone-snapping power through the joint of her left hind foot. As she screamed, he was at her side with a bound. When he saw what had happened, he lay down with his paws outstretched in front of his breast, to watch her leaps and thrashings, to listen to her cries.

Exhausted, she fell with her head toward him, and he saw in her brightening eyes the reflected greenery that was about them. Pain, applied to himself, he could comprehend; the convulsions of the female were something peculiar to observe.

At night she twisted back, and he beheld her, in the filtering moonlight, gnaw off the mangled foot and so gain a limping, bleeding liberation. As she crept away, he followed. When she found a place to rest, he lay down beside her, until morning light disclosed the stump darkly clotted, but no longer bleeding.

She got on her three feet, attempted to walk, and halted miserably.

At the sight of her—true to the instinct that disdains the mutilated, the abnormal—desire went out of the male cat, and with it the charm of sex departed from the crippled female.

For the first time he saw in her eyes a softened, humbled light. Moved by curiosity, he drew closer to her. She was licking her wound, and there was no longer the necessity of repulsing him. Mystified one with the other, but free now of cause for quarrel, they fell into the comradeship of the deformed and roamed the hills and woods together.

It was not jealousy, the next time, that hurtled the fighting lynx at the largest male of his species that he had ever seen. The old rancor of the outcast, the powerful retaliation of the ostracized, raged in his blood and muscle until his antagonist, dripping red, slunk away.

Weaving on his feet, half dead from the desperate battle, the victorious cat saw his female partner follow off after the vanquished, the un mutilated, with never a backward glance toward his own blighted elegance. He watched them, and, at a distance, he saw the male turn against her with an angry snarl—saw her fall back and then follow sneakingly, her ill-balanced body tilting along.

Some quality of the spirit, rather than the flesh, went out of the cat. His eyes



dulled, and he lay prone for hours, until the vultures noticed him and began to circle high over the tree tops.

## VII

WITH the most courtly gentleness, Elijah Hook seated a trembling little woman beside his great desk, and dimmed the room with lowered shades until the ravages of grief were scarcely visible upon her middle-aged face. Finally she was able to command her voice, and to talk with a show of self-possession.

The lids of the lawyer half closed as he listened to her story, and at times he nodded his head sympathetically. There was nothing in what she said that he had not known before in all its unclean details. The woman's husband, among his political intimates, had made no secret of the liaison. It was surprising only that he had been aroused to such animosity against the wife of his youth and his poverty.

"You've always been so friendly, like home folks, when you've been to our house, Mr. Hook, that I feel free in coming to you with all this. There isn't any one else that I feel I could depend on. You know what kind of a wife I've been—what black, heartless lies he is going to try to prove against my character. He's not the same man—not since he got to making so much money, and got so mixed up with all these politicians. This—this other woman—"

Elijah observed that when a woman weeps with her face in her palms, her shoulders jerk with every gust of tears. Presently she lifted her wet face.

"If they ever try to prove those lies about me, I'll kill myself! You know the truth, Mr. Hook. Isn't there some way we can bring him to his senses?"

The man's lips pressed together in a straight line before he answered.

"I think there is a way," he said judicially. "Your husband wants his freedom. If you could bring yourself to agree to it, there would be no scandal. Otherwise he will make as strong a case against you as possible."

A love inexplicable by any human logic illumined her face until it shone like a saint's.

"If it would help him, I'd take myself out of his life forever; but it won't. A woman like that will drag him down to the gutter. I want you to take my case, Mr. Hook, and help me bring him to his senses.

I have some jewelry—some rings that he gave me twenty years ago—"

"Diamonds?" Hook asked sharply.

"No, but they are worth something. I can sell them."

He swung away from her in his swivel chair, reflecting rapidly, his face hardening until it was set as a stone mask. There was, he knew, a sort of quixotic glory to be gained by taking up the woman's defense. In such a rôle he would be at his best—a consideration not to be ignored. Almost without effort he could blast away every scrap of prearranged evidence against her, could stand out as a great exponent of a mighty chivalry.

On the other hand, her character could be polluted so brazenly, so convincingly, that there would remain to her not a fragment of public sympathy. Then, with her husband definitely in his power, Hook could climb with sensational rapidity in the party organization.

Again his thoughts returned to Nelda. He had not heard from her since he left Hatterburn County. It would be sweetly satisfying to return there, bearing the prestige of some public office, some tangible mark of greatness.

The woman beside him fumbled in her purse and produced a few pieces of inexpensive jewelry. Elijah turned back to her and waved a hand in dismissal.

"I am sorry, madam," he said bloodlessly, "but your husband has already engaged me as counsel. We are going through with the case to the end!"

## VIII

DURING the next political campaign, Elijah Hook visited Hatterburn County and made two speeches there. He rhapsodized of wooded hills and shady dells, of nature's noblemen, of wives and sweethearts who were fairest of the fair, of the finest country the sun ever smiled upon. In Ash Grove, where he rested for a day, he learned by cautious inquiry that Nelda Haskell had married the sickly David Witherspoon.

The next morning he hired a team and buckboard to spend, as he said, a day alone amid his native hills. A whiskered old man, who had overheard, slapped Elijah on the back approvingly.

"That's the talk!" he cackled. "Some of these days we'll all be votin' to send 'Lije Hook to the Legislatur', you bet your bottom dollar!"

Out on the steep roads Hook drove for hours before he came abreast of his old place. Reining in his horses, he sat in the vehicle for a while, contemplating the changes of the years. Tall saplings of a new growth stood amid the stumps of the clearing, and the path to the cabin was already obliterated by brambles.

He still held title to the property, and the thought came to him that some day he might build a lodge on the slope of the hill and spend his vacations there. It would be inexpensive. He smiled cunningly at still another thought—he would be near Nelda and her weakling husband.

Driving on toward the Witherspoon place, he found that the country had changed but little. He, Elijah Hook, was the only person touched by the breath of progress. The men in the lonely fields, the calico-clad women around the rude cabins, were exactly as he had left them. A gloating satisfaction showed itself upon his face, and his lips puckered in a tuneless whistle.

Witherspoon's house, when he came to it, showed the deft hands of a woman. There were curtains, a flash of white paint, a rose bush under a window. As Hook was hitching his team at the gate, Nelda appeared on the porch and came down the path toward him. She looked more ethereal, if anything, than he remembered her; yet he was immediately conscious of her power to excite his predatory instincts to the highest pitch.

He had no way of accounting for the ideas that came to him spontaneously—the queer thought of a spark from flint and steel darting into a pan of powder. A pulsation of pleasure rushed to his brain, and for all his strength he rocked on his feet for a moment, as he stood with his wide felt hat in his hand. It might have been yesterday that he had last seen the girl. The clarity of her eyes, which were fixed upon his flushed face, brought a scowl that he could not restrain.

"I heard you were here, and I thought you might come out this way," she was saying in a voice that had the hum of a wire in the wind. "If you don't mind, I won't ask you to come in. My husband is dangerously ill, and there must not be the slightest disturbance."

She was breathing rapidly. It was obvious that much of her energy had been used up under the strain. Elijah looked past her toward the house.

"Is there anybody else up there?" he asked.

Nelda moved not an inch.

"You can't go up," she said firmly.

"I can't?" Hook was positive, at once, that she was alone with the invalid. "I can't go up?" he demanded in a rising frenzy. "Who's going to stop me, if I want to go?"

"You shan't go!" she cried, nervously desperate.

A sadistic desire to inflict mental agony upon her attacked him with overwhelming force.

"I can't go up and see your highfalutin' dude, can't I? Well! Well!"

With one powerful sweep of his arm, he brushed her out of his way and strode toward the house.

## IX

WHILE Elijah was in the bedroom, Nelda quaked in the parlor. As he came out, his eyes dancing, she followed him out to the porch.

"David will shoot you dead when he gets well," she said, almost in a drone.

A heavy chuckle, infinitely ironical, that sounded in Elijah's throat, blanched her face in an instant.

"Get well!" His lids dropped over his turbid eyes, he shook his head negatively, and the corners of his mouth pulled back. "He'll never get well. He's in a stupor now. There's not twenty-four hours more in him!"

Hook's hot hand closed over her cool, slender wrist. She was drawn close against him. His fingers insinuated themselves into the soft sheen of her hair, and he bent her face up to within an inch of his own.

"You won't tell of this, honey," he said. "You dassen't, on account of him in there!" Lips as scarlet as blood pressed down on her livid mouth. "I've waited years for this—and I'm going to make you warm up, too. To-night I'll be back—to help you sit up with him. You needn't be afraid of me, Nelda!"

Out of the myriad sounds in the air—of fowls, of birds, of wind in the trees, of distant jangling cow bells—only one reached Elijah's ears. From close by he heard some lapping noise, as of an animal drinking. It grew until he could hear nothing else, until it took possession of all his senses. It came from the end of the porch.

His embrace loosened, and Nelda was out of his arms. A trancelike blankness came into his face, and he tramped with mechanical steps toward the sound. Over a crotch of milk crouched what was, at a glance, a grotesquely overgrown cat; yet there was about it some intangible mark of degeneracy. Elijah Hook was aware, psychically, that this was a denaturalized animal, something broken and spiritless—a flinching abnormality of nature living upon the bounty of domesticity.

The man's eyes roved to an ax that leaned against a pile of chopped wood. The cat lifted its head, and their eyes met. The shorn ears quickened, and instantly identification flashed in the human mind. Everything came back clearly—the cabin, the rain, the Barlow knife, and the helpless creature that writhed between his knees as he mutilated it.

A contemptuous animosity grew upon Hook. He wondered how far he could boot the skulker.

"Kitty! Kitty!" he called softly, holding out his right hand and snapping his fingers coaxingly.

The nostrils of the cat widened with quick, sharp intakes of some long-forgotten scent that was in the air, that emanated from the hand, the body, of the man. Its head lowered. There was a gathering of muscles under fur. Silently and motionlessly it watched—waited.

Elijah Hook felt his heart freeze suddenly. A shuddering sickness took him at the pit of the stomach. The animal's eyes fascinated him—narrow, up-and-down pupils—slits of running fire.

"I can stare it out of countenance," he told himself firmly. "I can stare down anything!"

His eyes burned straight into the two contracting strips of tigerish flame. His damp hands closed nervously. The tingle of Nelda's flesh and hair was still in the palms. He wondered if it would be possible to reach the ax. For the finest part of a second his eyes wavered toward it.

In the next instant there was an illusion of time prolonging itself—a great stretching length, in which all motion in the universe slowed down to some absurdly impossible retardation. A monstrous glowering form floated lazily toward him. He saw white beads of milk trembling in its whiskers. He sought to move, to spring aside, but he was thick in some scarcely yielding substance that imprisoned him to the spot where he stood.

The fore claws, white, hot, seared first upon his face. An animal odor filled the air. There was a cosmic snarling that excluded all other sounds from Hook's hearing. He sank, with strangling fangs crushing at his throat, with pitiless steel hooks tearing madly through his clothes and into the soft flesh beneath.

"Me—goin' like this—with everything—her—in my mitt! A stinkin' cat—"

The cat backed away from the carcass. Then, with a long scream of ecstasy, it leaped in great bounds toward the forest.

David Witherspoon roused to consciousness, to find his wife flung frantically across his head and chest, stopping his ears with her hands, pressing her body, her loose hair, over him, shielding him in terror from he knew not what.

He managed to free himself.

"I'm better," he said thinly. "It seems like there has been something moved out of my path. I'm going to get well, Nelda!"

## IN THE SILENCES INNUMERABLE OF THE NIGHT

In the silences innumerable of the night—

I have mused more in darkness than in light,

When life can be relived with wonder most—

I have looked at one that noon has made a ghost.

How is it that you only bring unrest?

How is it that of all I love you best?

Has God among the multitudes touched two

And said: "You are for her, and she for you?"

Charles Divine