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BEAST OF THE TARN

By

John Russell Fearn

Writing under the pseudonym Vargo Statten.

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Revil Draycott had never really liked the cat, anyhow. It was too clever, too intelligent, and seemed to hurl constant reminders at him of the time when he had slain his wife and thrown her body into the bottomless depths of Gilpin's Tarn. She had died with the vow that her cat would avenge her when it, too, died. Strange sort of statement—probably the empty vapourings of the dying.

Just the same, Draycott did not like the cat. It followed him everywhere, in the fields or sheds as he went about his farming work; sat by him as he milked the cows, took up a position directly opposite him whenever he had a meal.

There was something uncanny about its devotion to him, and a strange fire was always kindling in its big great eyes as though it knew his secret and waited only for a chance to rake him with vicious claws.

In appearance it was not a particularly unusual animal—merely one of the tabby varieties with a bushy tail and solid bullet head. Only its eyes were different—big, hypnotic, accusing.

Draycott tolerated its presence for nearly two years after the carefully planned 'disappearance' of his wife, only hesitating to kill it because of the vow she had made. But there came a time when he was goaded into action—when the creature, in snatching a trifling morsel of food from him, dug its sharp claws into his brown hand.

Instantly he leaped up from the table, scowling down on the blood oozing from the scratches. His cruel grey eyes shot to the cat as it scuttled away from him.

'You blasted little green-eyed devil!' he burst out furiously. 'What the devil did you do that for? By heaven, I'll show you what I do with brutes like you!'

The cat slunk further away, tail down and eyes gleaming. But it did not slink far. Stooping, Draycott seized it by the scruff of the neck and, holding it at arm's length, walked across the farmyard to the neighbouring barn. Once there he dropped the animal inside a sack and closed the neck, oblivious to the creature's wail of fright.

His tea forgotten in his smouldering anger, Draycott slung the bag over his shoulder and marched outside, through the farmyard and to the meadows beyond. He continued steadily onward toward the winter sunset, ignoring the threshing burden he clutched so immovably. His mind was focused on one spot, which he had not visited for two years: Gilpin's Tarn, about a mile and a half from his farm, just outside the village of Little Benton. Once in those bottomless waters the cat would worry him no more—would disappear as completely as his wife had done.

He gained the place at length and dropped the sack. The mewling from within fell unheeded upon his ears as he stood looking over the quietness to the lights of the village, and beyond them to the horizon bulk of Michigan. All was quiet save for the faint medley of

sounds from the distant circus sideshows, at Little Benton on one of its periodic visits. Yes, everything was quite deserted.

His gaze dropped presently to the black waters of the tarn itself, lying at the bottom of the craggy hundred-foot drop. Some said that the tarn had once been a mine; still others averred that it went straight down into the maw of hell. Idle village gossip, of course, but nonetheless here was an excellent place in which to throw bodies that must leave no trace.

Draycott hesitated for the briefest instant, suddenly recalling the vow of his wife. If he killed the cat—

With an impatient shrug he stooped, and picked up a small boulder, fastened it securely to the bag neck. Then seizing the entire bulk in his hands, he flung it far out into space, watched the stone jerk downward and plunge into the midst of those scummy, evil depths. The bag vanished in an eddy of frothing bubbles.

He stood grinning and looking down, squatting on his heels and waiting until the bubbling ceased and the tarn became placid again. It was nearly dark when he stood up. Everything was still quiet, and a threat of impending rain hung in the heavy air. An evil miasma was rising from the somber waters below. With the slightest of shudders, stricken suddenly by a peculiar fear of the calmness, Draycott turned and retraced his way home.

Yet at every step he took, he could mentally see the cat; see its eyes regarding him in the swirling wraiths of mist rising from the wet ground, could hear as though afar off its plaintive mewling.

‘Nasty, rotten little beast,’ he muttered thickly, rubbing his unshaven chin reminiscently. ‘About as bad as its mistress. Funny to think how they both went down in the tarn.’ He brooded over that and in a vicious, vengeful frame of mind finally gained the farm once more.

That night he slept badly, and was glad to get up in the coldness of the very early morning and prepare for his small milk round. For a reason he could not fathom, he found it impossible to rid himself altogether of the memory of that animal.

It had gone down so swiftly, so silently. Just that little vortex of bubbles. Just like his wife had done, helpless, never to be found again. No body—no proof. That had been clever! Now she was with her beloved cat again on the other side of eternity—

Draycott surprised himself standing with his mouth gaping, pursuing his reflections. With a start he realized how far his conscience had taken him back along the road of murder and hate. Pulling himself together, he forced himself to attend to his work and prepared for the morning round.

Things seemed different that morning. Everybody he met seemed apart from his own troubles. By the time he arrived home again in the late evening, a somber and heavy gloom had descended upon him. He was alone; his two cowhands had left for the day. In morose silence he prepared his solitary meal.

As he slowly ate by the light of the oil lamp, his eyes settled on the shadowy spot where the cat had always squatted at mealtimes. In his mind’s eye he could again see those big, silently accusing eyes, the only eyes that had seen him murder his wife and drag her out in the dead of night to the tarn. The animal had followed at his heels, been the only silent witness to the crime. He reflected that he would have drowned it there and then had it not been for his wife’s dying threat.

Well, what of it? He smiled twistedly. The cat was dead now, and no harm had come to him. Obviously her words had been the ravings of one on the edge of eternity.

Just the same, it mightn't do any harm to have a look at the tarn and reassure himself. He couldn't altogether feel too sure that all was well there.

'Chasin' a crazy idea, I guess,' was his growling comment, as he rose and lighted a storm lantern. 'About time I took myself in hand, instead of behavin' like a durned fool.'

He slipped into his oilskins, seized the lamp and went outside. Soft drizzling rain was falling, making the ground of the fields beyond the farm sodden and mushy. He progressed deliberately, alone in a world of cold and dankness. His emotions dropped to zero. Jaw outthrust, eyes staring ahead, he clumped steadily in the tarn's direction.

Finally he gained it. Setting down his lamp on a ledge of rock, he stared reflectively into the stenching stagnation below. A low sigh of relief escaped him at seeing nothing different. His inner expectations of some supernatural manifestation were unrealized.

He turned to go at length, satisfied—then abruptly stopped. The storm lantern nearly fell from his hands with fright, and his goggling eyes fixed themselves on the mushy, ill-defined path at his feet. For there, clearly imprinted, were the marks of an animal's foot. A large foot, too, complete with claws, heading away from the tarn.

Draycott had no idea how long he was held transfixed by that unexpected sight. It held his body and soul with its spell, but at last his eyes jerked from the imprints to the tarn again. A quivering hand pulled shudderingly at his lower lip.

'No—no, it can't be!' he shouted hoarsely. 'You couldn't have gotten out of that tarn! You couldn't!'

He fell silent again, shaking so violently that he had to rest for a moment against a nearby rock. The oppressive quiet hemmed him in. His scared, disordered mind painted that quiet with all manner of incredible fantasies. He could have sworn that he heard the voice of his wife, thin and far distant, rising from those murky depths—accusing him, laughing at him, triumphant in the knowledge that her beloved cat was abroad in the dark waiting to spring, to exact a tearing, snapping vengeance for the brutal thing he had done.

Weak from strain, he forced himself up at last and staggered shakily along the path. Immediately he left it, the tracks of those feline feet vanished in the crushed and rain-sodden grass of the moorland. Fright was cramping him now. He went forward at a half run, convinced that some shadowy terror was waiting to emerge from the tarn and seize him.

It was then, as he ran, that he became conscious of something else. Not an echo of his own sogging, sloughing footfalls, but a deliberate and steady padding in the gloom some little distance behind him. When he stopped the sound stopped too, and left him alone in that horrible, dank emptiness.

He twisted a fearful face toward the dark behind him, but saw nothing. He went on again, more slowly, not looking where he was going—and suddenly found himself flat on his face in the mud with the storm lantern dashed out beside him.

'Who's—who's there?' he screamed hoarsely, as he scrambled up again. 'Why are you following me like this? Who are you?'

There was no response save the croak of a bullfrog at his feet, sending his heart slamming harder than ever. For a full minute he stood gaping into the drenching, obscuring mist, then there came to his ears a low and chilling whine like the cry of a whipped puppy. Instantly his mind flashed back to the plaintive cry the cat had given when he'd pushed it in the sack.

'You!' he shouted hoarsely. 'You're out of the tarn—dead! You're three times your size! Waiting there in the dark—'

He twirled back again and commenced to run blindly through the abyss, heart bumping against his side until he thought it would fail him and drop him into eternity. The padding feet were swifter now, bounding after him, carrying something he couldn't see but which his anguished mind knew was some gargantuan reincarnation of the helpless animal he had drowned. The warning of his dead wife was coming true—

By the time he reached his cottage he was in a pitiable state. Mud-smothered and drenched in rain and sweat, hand shaking so much he could hardly raise the door latch. He stumbled blindly within and fumbled with matches—stood shivering violently as the yellow flame kindled into an amber glow.

Silence grouped around the farm now—heavy, suggestive silence that had a portent of impending disaster. Draycott found himself moving about on tiptoe, afraid to disturb the quiet. His oilskins rustled unnervingly as he tugged them off amidst a shower of raindrops.

Then he moved to the fireplace and tried to coax the smouldering embers into some semblance of life. Failing, he sat by the darkened grate in the deep shadows and tried to compose himself.

His mind was on fire now. Memories of his wife and the cat pulsed alternately through his brain. The tarn, the prints of the enlarged cat, the wail in the mist, the soft footfalls that had followed him back—they were all gigantically magnified in his brain, sent gelid stiffness into his joints and nerves.

Suddenly he stiffened. That wailing again! It reached him clearly from the silence outside, the wail of an angry, lonely beast. Trembling he rose up and snatched down a rifle from the wall, though even as he did so he knew it would be useless against something reincarnated from death itself.

Step by step, shaking with each movement, he went to the window and pulled aside the faded curtains. What he saw was an actual physical as well as mental shock. Dimly visible in the reflected light from the swinging oil lamp was the face of the drowned cat, incredibly huge and ferocious, fur plastered wetly to its head just as it had emerged from those water logged depths.

Dazed, weakened with horror, Draycott's terrified eyes fixed their gaze upon the horrible fanged teeth, upper lip drawn back in a hideous snarl of vengeful cruelty.

Then the eyes—brazen, malevolent orbs boring from the midst of that frame of sodden fur. Blazing green, catching the light—Draycott fell backwards, overpowered with the shock, and groped weakly for the table for support.

After a while he steadied himself and slammed over the huge bar of wood that bolted the door, tremblingly clutched his gun once more as there came a fiendish scratching and tearing at the woodwork, accompanied by a throaty growling and snarling.

'You can't come back!' Draycott screamed madly. 'Evelyn, my wife, if you are anywhere within hearing, call off this terrible cat! I can stand anything but this monstrous reincarnation of the creature I destroyed! Please—please, I beg of you! You were right in saying that the cat's death would avenge you! I admit it! Take it away!'

As though in response to his sobbing entreaty silence fell again. There were no sounds from outside. Little by little Draycott began to recover himself, gradually convinced himself that somewhere in the unknown his long-dead wife had heard him and recalled the hideous reincarnation back to the mystic hell from which it had emerged.

He relaxed a little and cautiously lifted the heavy wooden bar from the door—opened it very gently. But the instant he did so something vomited from the dark outside to the

accompaniment of a piercing, paralyzing shriek. A vast body, terrible claws outspread, hurtled inwards and struck Draycott clean in the chest, sending him hurtling backwards helplessly.

‘Evelyn!’ he yelled madly, struggling frantically. ‘Evelyn! Call off this cat of yours! Call off this cat—!’

Then his words froze as his arms stiffened helplessly, powerless to ward off that fanged abyss of death closing in upon him—

The following day the *Little Benton Times* carried a report that was brief but significant. It read:

Mr. Revil Draycott, well-known farmer of Little Benton, met his death last night in tragic circumstances. All day yesterday a tiger, escaped from the Little Benton circus, was being searched for unsuccessfully, owing to the mist. Its trail was finally picked up at Gilpin’s Tarn and the animal itself was found at Mr. Draycott’s farm. Unfortunately Mr. Draycott was evidently killed in trying to attack the tiger, which had obviously been attracted to the farm by the livestock.

The tiger is now back in the circus and Mr. Draycott’s death will be much regretted by those who knew him.

[[The end of *Beast of the Tarn* by John Russell Fearn]]