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Title: Tiger Cat

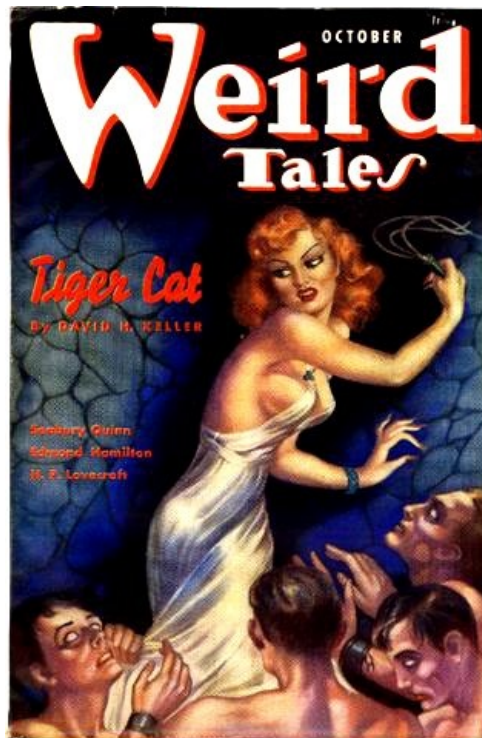
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Release Date: May 31, 2010 [EBook #32630]

Language: English

Credits: Produced by Greg Weeks, Mary Meehan and the Online Distributed Proofreading Team at <https://www.pgdp.net>

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Tiger Cat

By DAVID H. KELLER

[Transcriber Note: This etext was produced from Weird Tales October 1937. Extensive research did not uncover any evidence that the U.S. copyright on this publication was renewed.]

The man tried his best to sell me the house. He was confident that I would like it. Repeatedly he called my attention to the view.

There was something in what he said about the view. The villa on the top of a mountain commanded a vision of the valley, vine-clad and cottage-studded. It was an irregular bowl of green, dotted with stone houses which were whitewashed to almost painful brilliancy.

The valley was three and a third miles at its greatest width. Standing at the front door of the house, an expert marksman with telescopic sight could have placed a rifle bullet in each of the white marks of cottages. They nestled like little pearls amid a sea of green grape-vines.

"A wonderful view, *Signor*," the real-estate agent repeated. "That scene, at any time of the year,

*A grim tale of torture,
and the blind men who
were chained to pillars
in an underground cave*

is worth twice what I am asking for the villa."

"But I can see all this without buying," I argued.

"Not without trespassing."

"But the place is old. It has no running water."

"Wrong!" and he smiled expansively, showing a row of gold-filled teeth. "Listen."

We were silent.

There came to us the sound of bubbling water. Turning, I traced the sound. I found a marble Cupid spurting water in a most peculiar way into a wall basin. I smiled and commented.

"There is one like that in Brussels and another in Madrid. But this is very fine. However, I referred to running water in a modern bathroom."

"But why bathe when you can sit here and enjoy the view?"

He was impossible. So, I wrote a check, took his bill of sale and became the owner of a mountain, topped by a stone house that seemed to be half ruin. But he did not know, and I did not tell him that I considered the fountain alone worth the price that I had paid. In fact, I had come to Italy to buy that fountain if I could; buy it and take it back to America with me. I knew all about that curious piece of marble. George Seabrook had written to me about it. Just one letter, and then he had gone on, goodness knows where. George was like that, always on the move. Now I owned the fountain and was already planning where I should place it in my New York home. Certainly not in the rose garden.

I sat down on a marble bench and looked down on the valley. The real-estate man was right. It was a delicate, delicious piece of scenery. The surrounding mountains were high enough to throw a constant shadow on some part of the valley except at high noon. There was no sign of life, but I was sure that the vineyards were alive with husband-men and their families. An eagle floated serenely on the upper air currents, automatically adjusting himself to their constant changing.

Stretching myself, I gave one look at my car and then walked into the house.

In the kitchen two peasants sat, an old man and an old woman. They rose as I entered.

"Who are you?" I asked in English.

They simply smiled and waved their hands. I repeated my question in Italian.

"We serve," the man replied.

"Serve whom?"

"Whoever is the master."

"Have you been here long?"

"We have always been here. It is our home."

His statement amused me, and I commented, "The masters come and go, but you remain?"

"It seems so."

"Many masters?"

"Alas! yes. They come and go. Nice young men, like you, but they do not stay. They buy and look at the view, and eat with us a few days and then they are gone."

"And then the villa is sold again?"

The man shrugged. "How should we know? We simply serve."

"Then prepare me my dinner. And serve it outside, under the grapevine, where I can see the view."

The woman started to obey. The man came nearer.

"Shall I carry your bags to the bedroom?"

"Yes. And I will go with you and unpack."

He took me to a room on the second floor. There was a bed there and a very old chest of drawers. The floor, everything about the room was spotlessly clean. The walls had been freshly whitewashed. Their smooth whiteness suggested wonderful possibilities for despoliation, the drawing of a picture, the writing of a poem, the careless writhing autograph that caused my relatives so much despair.

"Have all the masters slept here?" I asked carelessly.

"All."

"Was there one by the name of George Seabrook?"

"I think so. But they come and go. I am old and forget."

"And all these masters, none of them ever wrote on the walls?"

"Of a certainty. All wrote with pencil what they desired to write. Who should say they should not? For did not the villa belong to them while they were here? But always we prepared for the new master, and made the walls clean and beautiful again."

"You were always sure that there would be a new master?"

"Certainly. Someone must pay us our wages."

I gravely placed a gold piece in his itching palm, asking, "What did they write on the walls?"

He looked at me with old, unblinking eyes. Owl eyes! That is what they were, and he slowly said,

"Each wrote or drew as his fancy led him, for they were the masters and could do as they wished."

"But what were the words?"

"I cannot speak English, or read it."

Evidently, the man was not going to talk. To me the entire situation was most interesting. Same servants, same villa, many masters. They came and bought and wrote on the wall and left, and then my real-estate friend sold the house again. A fine racket!

Downstairs, outdoors, under the grapevine, eating a good Italian meal, looking at the wonderful view, I came to laugh at my suspicions. I ate spaghetti, olives, dark bread and wine. Silence hung heavily over the sullen sleepy afternoon. The sky became copper-colored. It was about to rain. The old man came and showed me a place to put my car, a recess in the wall of the house, open at one end, but sheltered from the weather. The stone floor was black with grease; more than one automobile had been kept there.

"Other cars have been here," I ventured.

"All the masters had cars," the old man replied.

Back on the stone gallery I waited for the storm to break. At last it came in a solid wall of gray wetness across the valley. Nearer and nearer it came till it deluged my villa and drove me inside.

The woman was lighting candles. I took one from her hand.

"I want to look through the house," I explained.

She made no protest; so I started exploring the first floor. One room was evidently the sleeping-quarters for the servants; another was the kitchen, and the remaining two might have served in the old days for dining-room and drawing-room. There was little furniture, and the walls were gray with time and mold. One flight of stone stairs led upward to the bedroom, another to the cellar. I decided to go downstairs.

They were steps, not made of masonry, but apparently carved out of the living rock. The cellar was simply a cubical hole in the mountain. It all looked very old. I had the uneasy feeling that originally that cellar had been a tomb and that later the house had been built over it. But, once at the bottom, there was nothing to indicate a sepulcher. A few small casks of wine, some junk, odds of rope and rusty iron, those were in the corners; otherwise, the room was empty, and dusty.

"It is an odd room," I commented to myself. It seemed in some way out of place and out of shape and size for the villa above it. I had expected something more, something larger, gloomier. Walking around, I examined the walls, and then something came to my alert senses.

Three sides of the room were carved out of rock, but the remaining side was of masonry, and in that side there was a door. A door! And why should a door be there except to lead to another room? There was a door, and that presupposed something on the other side. And what a door it was! More of a barricade than a partition. The iron hinges were built to support weight and give complete defense and support. There was a keyhole, and if the key corresponded with the size of the hole, it was the largest that I had ever heard of.

Naturally, I wanted to open the door. As master of the villa, I had a right to. Upstairs the old woman seemed unable to understand me and ended by telling me to see her husband. He, in turn, seemed incapable of following my stream of talk. At last, I took him to the door and pointed to the keyhole. In English, Italian and sign language I told him rather emphatically that I wanted the key to that door. At last he was willing to admit that he understood my questions. He shook his head. He had never had the key to that door. Yes, he knew that there was such a door, but he had never been on the other side. It was very old. Perhaps his ancestors understood about it, but they were all dead. He made me tired, so much so that I rested by placing a hand on the butt of the upper hinge. I knew that he was deceiving me. Lived there all his life and never saw the door

open!

"And you have no key to that door?" I repeated.

"No. I have no key."

"Who has the key?"

"The owner of the house."

"But I own it."

"Yes, you are the master; but I mean the one who owns it all the time."

"So, the various masters do not really buy the place?"

"They buy it, but they come and go."

"But the owner keeps on selling it and owning it?"

"Yes."

"Must be a profitable business. And who owns it?"

"Donna Marchesi."

"I think I met her yesterday in Sorona."

"Yes, that is where she lives."

The storm had passed. Sorona was only two miles away, on the other side of the mountain. The cellar, the door, the mysterious uncertainty on the other side intrigued me. I told the man that I would be back by supper, and I went to my bedroom to change, preparatory to making an afternoon call.

In the room I found my hand black with oil.

And that told me a good many things, as it was the hand that had rested against the upper hinge of the door. I washed the hand, changed my clothes and drove my car to Sorona.

Fortunately, the Donna Marchesi was at home. I might have met her before, but I now saw her ethereal beauty for the first time. At least, it seemed ethereal at the first moment. In some ways she was the most beautiful woman that I had ever seen: skin white as milk, hair a tawny red, piled in great masses on her head, and eyes of a peculiar green, with pupils that were slots instead of circles. She wore her nails long, and they were tinted red to match the Titian of her hair. She seemed surprised to have me call on her, and more surprised to hear of my errand.

"You bought the villa?" she asked.

"Yes. Though, when I bought it, I did not know that you were the owner. The agent never stated whom he was acting for."

"I know," she said with a smile. "Franco is peculiar that way. He always pretends that he owns the place."

"No doubt he has used it more than once."

"I fear so. The place seems to be unfortunate. I sell it with a reserve clause. The owner must live there. And no one seems to want to stay; so the place reverts back to me."

"It seems to be an old place."

"Very old. It has been in my family for generations. I have tried to get rid of it, but what can I do when the young men will not stay?"

She shrugged her shoulders expressively. I countered with,

"Perhaps if they knew, as I do, that you owned the property, they would be content to stay, for ever, in Sorona."

"Prettily said," she answered. Then the room became silent, and I heard her heavy breathing, like the deep purr of a cat.

"They come and go," she said at last.

"And, when they go, you sell to another?" I asked.

"Naturally, and with the hope that one will stay."

"I have come for the key," I said bluntly, "the key to the cellar door."

"Are you sure you want it?"

"Absolutely! It is my villa and my cellar and my door. I want the key. I want to see what is on the

other side of the door."

And then it was that I saw the pupils of her eyes narrow to livid slits. She looked at me for a second, for five, and then opening a drawer in a cabinet near her chair, she took out the key and handed it to me. It was a tool worthy of the door that it was supposed to open, being fully eight inches long and a pound in weight.

Taking it, I thanked her and said good-bye. Fifteen minutes later I was back, profuse in my apologies: I was temperamental, I explained, and I frequently changed my mind. Whatever was on the other side of the door could stay there, as far as I was concerned. Then again I kissed her hand farewell.

On the side street I passed through the door of a locksmith and waited while he completed a key. He was following a wax impression of the original key. An hour later I was on the way back to the villa, with the key in my pocket, a key that I was sure would unlock the door, and I was confident that the lady with the cat eyes felt sure that I had lost all interest in that door and what was beyond it.

The full moon was just appearing over the mountains when I drove my car up to the villa. I was tired, but happy. Taking the candlestick in my hand, which candlestick was handed to me with a deep bow by the old woman, I ascended the stairs to my bedroom. And soon I was fast asleep.

I awoke with a start. The moon was still shining. It was midnight. I heard, or thought I heard, a deep moaning. It sounded a little like waves beating on a rockbound coast. Then it ceased and was replaced by a musical element that came in certain stately measures. Those sounds were in the room, but they came from far away; only by straining my sense of sound to the utmost could I hear anything.

Slippers on my feet, flashlight in my hand and the key in the pocket of my dressing-gown, I slowly descended the stairs. Loud snores from the servants' room told, or seemed to tell, of their deep slumbers. Down into the cellar I went and put the key into the hole of the lock. The key turned easily—no rust there—the springs and the tumblers had been well oiled, like the hinges. It was evident that the door had been used often. Turning the light on the hinges, I saw what had made my hand black with oil. Earnestly I damned the servants. They knew about the door. They knew what was on the other side!

Just as I was about to open the door I heard a woman's voice singing in Italian; it sounded like a selection from an opera. It was followed by applause, and then a moaning, and one shrill cry, as though someone had been hurt. There was no doubt now as to where the sounds that I heard in my room had come from; they had come from the other side of the door. There was a mystery there for me to solve. But I was not ready to solve it; so I turned the key noiselessly, and with the door locked, tiptoed back to my bed.

There I tried to put two and two together. They made five, seven, a million vague admixtures of impossible results, all filled with weird forebodings. But never did they make four, and till they did, I knew the answers to be wrong, for two and two had to make four.

Many changes of masters! One after another they came and bought and disappeared. A whitewashed wall. What secrets were covered with that whitewash? A door in a cellar. And what devilry went on behind it? A key and a well-oiled lock, and servants that knew everything. In vain the question came to me. *What is back of the door?* There was no ready answer. But, Donna Marchesi knew! Was it her voice that I had heard? She knew almost everything about it, but there was one thing that I knew and she did not. She did not know that I could pass through the door and find out what was on the other side. She did not know that I had a key.

The next day I pleaded indisposition and spent most of the hours idling and drowsing in my chamber. Not till nearly midnight did I venture down. The servants were certainly asleep that time. A dose of chloral in their wine had attended to the certainty of their slumbers. Fully dressed, with an automatic in my pocket, I reached the cellar and opened the door. It swung noiselessly on its well-greased hinges. The darkness on the other side was the blackness of hell. An indescribable odor came to me, a prison smell and with it the soft half sob, half laugh of sleeping children, dreaming in their sleep, and not happy.

I flashed the light around the room. It was not a room but a cavern, a cave that extended far into the distance, the roof supported by stone pillars, set at regular intervals. As far as my light would carry I saw the long rows of white columns.

And to each pillar was bound a man, by chains. They were resting on the stone floor, twenty or more of them, and all asleep. Snores, grunts and weary sighs came from them, but not a single eyelid opened. Even when I flashed the light in their faces their eyes were shut.

And those faces sickened me; white and drawn and filled with the lines of deep suffering. All were covered with scars; long, narrow, deep scars, some fresh and red, others old and dead-white. At last, the sunken eyelids and the inability to see my flashlight and respond told me the nauseating truth. Those men were all blind.



"Looking eternally into the blackness of his life and chained to a pillar of stone."

A pleasant sight! One blind man, looking eternally into the blackness of his life, and chained to a pillar of stone—that was bad enough; but multiply that by twenty! Was it worse? Could it be worse? Could twenty men suffer more than one man? And then a thought came to me, a terrible, impossible thought, so horrible that I doubted my logic. But now two and two were beginning to make four. Could those men be the *masters*? They came and bought and left—to go to the cellar and stay there!

"Oh! Donna Marchesi!" I whispered. "How about those cat-eyes? If you had a hand in this, you are not a woman. You are a tiger."

I thought that I understood part of it. The latest master came to her for the key to the cellar, and then, when he once passed through the door he never left. She and her servants were not there to welcome me that night, because she did not know that I had a key.

The thought came to me that perhaps one of those sleeping men was George Seabrook. He and I used to play tennis together and we knew each other like brothers. He had a large scar on the back of his right hand; a livid star-shaped scar. With that in mind, I walked carefully from sleeping man to sleeping man, looking at their right hands. And I found a right hand with a scar that was shaped like the one I knew so well. But that blind man, only a skin-covered skeleton, chained to a bed of stone! That could not be my gay young tennis player, George!

The discovery nauseated me. What did it mean? What *could* it mean? If the Donna Marchesi was back of all that misery, what was her motive?

Down the long cave-like room I went. There seemed to be no end to it, though many of the columns were surrounded with empty chains. Only those near the door had their human flies in the trap. In the opposite direction the rows of pillars stretched into a far oblivion. I thought that at the end there was the black mouth of a tunnel, but I could not be sure and dared not go that far to explore the truth. Then, out of that tunnel, I heard a voice come, a singing voice. Slipping my shoes off, I ran back near the door and hid as best I could in a dark recess, back of a far piece of stone. I stood there in the darkness, my torch out, the handle of the revolver in my hand.

The singing grew louder and louder, and then the singer came into view. It was none other than Donna Marchesi! She carried a lantern in one hand and a basket in the other. Hanging the lantern on a nail, she took the basket and went from one sleeping man to another. With each her performance was the same; she awakened them with a kick in the face, and then, when they sat up crying with pain, she placed a hard roll of bread in their blind, trembling, outstretched hand. With all fed, there was silence save for gnawing teeth breaking through the hard crusts. The poor devils were hungry, starving slowly to death, and how they wolfed the bread! She laughed with animal delight as they cried for more. Standing under the lamp, a lovely devil in her decolleté dress, she laughed at them. I swear I saw her yellow eyes, dilated in the semi-darkness!

Suddenly she gave the command,

"Up! you dogs, *up!*"

Like well-trained animals they rose to their feet, clumsily, but as fast as they could under the

handicap of trembling limbs and heavy chains. Two were slow in obeying, and those she struck across the face with a small whip, till they whined with pain.

They stood there in silence, twenty odd blind men, chained against as many pillars of stone; and then the woman, standing in the middle of them, started to sing. It was a well-trained voice, but metallic, and her high notes had in them the cry of a wild animal. No feminine softness there. She sang from an Italian opera, and I knew that I had heard that song before. While she sang, her audience waited silently. At last she finished, and they started to applaud. Shrunken hands beat noisily against shrunken hands.

She seemed to watch them carefully, as though she were measuring the degree of their appreciation. One man did not satisfy her. She went over and dug into his face with long strokes of those long red nails until his face was red and her fingers bloody. And when she finished her second song that man clapped louder than any of them. He had learned his lesson.

She ended by giving them each another roll and a dipper of water. Then, lantern and basket in her hands, she walked away and disappeared down the tunnel. The blind men, crying and cursing in their impotent rage, sank down on their stone beds.

I went to my friend, and took his hand.

"George! George Seabrook!" I whispered.

He sat up and cried, "Who calls me? Who is there?"

I told him, and he started to cry. At last he became quiet enough to talk to me. What he told me, with slight variants, was the story of all the men there and all the men who had been there but who had died. Each man had been master for a day or a week. Each had found the cellar door and had come to the Donna Marchesi for the key. Some had been suspicious and had written their thoughts on the wall of their bedroom. But one and all had, in the end, found their curiosity more than they could resist and had opened the door. On the other side they had been overpowered and chained to a pillar, and there they had remained till they died. Some of them lived longer than the rest. Smith of Boston had been there over two years, though he was coughing badly and did not think that he could last much longer. Seabrook told me their names. They were the best blood of America, with three Englishmen and one Frenchman.

"And are you all blind?" I whispered, dreading the answer.

"Yes. That happens the first night we are here. She does it with her nails."

"And she comes every night?"

"Every night. She feeds us and sings to us and we applaud. When one of us dies, she unchains the body, and throws it down a hole somewhere. She talks to us about that hole sometimes and brags that she is going to fill it up before she stops."

"But who is helping her?"

"I think it is the real-estate man. Of course, the old devils upstairs help. I think that they must drug us. Some of the men say that they went to sleep in their beds and woke, chained to their posts."

My voice trembled as I bent over and whispered in his ear, "What would you do, George, if she came and sang, and you found that you were not chained? You and the other men not chained? What would you men do, George?"

"Ask them," he snarled. "Ask them, one at a time. But I know what I would do. I know!"

And he started to cry, because he could not do it the next second; cried from rage and helplessness till the tears ran from his empty sockets.

"Does she always come at the same time?"

"As far as I know. But time is nothing to us. We just wait for death."

"Are the chains locked?"

"Yes. And she must have the key. But we could file the links if only we had files. If only each of us had a file, we could get free. Perhaps the man upstairs has a key, but I hardly think so."

"Did you write on that pretty wall upstairs, the whitewashed wall?"

"I did; I think we all did. One man wrote a sonnet to the woman, verses in her honor, telling about her beautiful eyes. He raved about that poem for hours while he was dying. Did you ever see it on the wall?"

"I did not see it. The old people whitewash the walls before each new master comes."

"I thought so."

"Are you sure you would know what to do, George, if she sang to you and you were loose?"

"Yes, we would know."

So I left him, promising an end to the matter as soon as I could arrange it.

The next day saw me calling on the Donna Marchesi. I took her flowers that time, a corsage of vivid purple and scarlet orchids. She entertained me in her music room and I, taking the hint, asked her to sing. Shyly, almost with reluctance, she did as I asked. She sang the selection from the Italian opera that I knew so well. I was generous in my applause.

She smiled.

"You like to hear me sing?"

"Indeed! I want to hear you again. I could hear you daily without growing tired."

"You're nice," she purred. "Perhaps it could be arranged."

"You are too modest. You have a wonderful voice. Why not give it to the world?"

"I sang once in public," she sighed. "It was in New York, at a private musical. There were many men there. Perhaps it was stage fright; my voice broke badly, and the audience, especially the men, were not kind. I am not sure, but I thought that I heard some of them hiss me."

"Surely not!" I protested.

"Indeed, so. But no man has hissed my singing since then."

"I hope not!" I replied indignantly. "You have a wonderful voice, and, when I applauded you, I was sincere. By the way, may I change my mind and ask for the key to the door in the cellar?"

"Do you want it, really want it, my friend?"

"I am sure I do. I may never use it, but it will please me to have it. Little things in life make me happy, and this key is a little thing."

"Then you shall have it. Will you do me a favor? Wait till Sunday to use it. Today is Friday, and you will not have to wait many hours."

"It will be a pleasure to do as you desire," I replied, kissing her hand. "And shall I hear you sing again? May I come often to hear you sing?"

"I promise you that," she sighed. "I am sure that you will hear me sing often in the future. I feel that in some way our fates approach the same star."

I looked into her eyes, her yellow cat-eyes, and I was sure that she spoke the truth. Destiny had certainly brought me to find her in Sorona.

I bought two dozen rat-tailed files, and dashed across the mountains to Milan. There I was closeted with the consuls of three nations: England, France and my own. They did not want to believe my story. I gave them names, and they had to admit that there had been inquiries, but they felt that the main details were nightmares, resulting from an over-use of Italian wines. But I insisted that I was not drunk with new wine. At last, they called in the chief of the detective bureau. He knew Franco, the real-estate agent; also the lady in question. And he had heard something of the villa; not much, but vague whisperings.

"We will be there Saturday night," he promised. "That leaves you tonight. The lady will not try to trap you till Sunday. Can you attend to the old people?"

"They will be harmless. See that Franco does not have a chance to escape. Here is the extra key to the door. I will go through before twelve. When I am ready, I will open the door. If I am not out by one in the morning, you come through with your police. Do we all understand?"

"I understand," said the American consul. "But I still think you are dreaming."

Back at the villa, I again drugged the old people, not much, but enough to insure their sleep that night. They liked me. I was liberal with my gold, and I carelessly showed them where I kept my reserve.

Then I went through the door. Again I heard the Donna Marchesi sing to an audience that would never hiss her. She left, and I started to distribute the files. From one blind wretch to the next I went, whispering words of cheer and instruction for the next night. They were to cut through a link in the chain, but in such a way that the Tiger Cat would not suspect that they had gained their liberty. Were they pleased to have a hope of freedom? I am not sure, but they were delighted at another prospect.

The next night I doubled the tips to the old servants. With tears of gratitude in their eyes, they thanked me as they called me their dear master. I put them to sleep as though they were babies. In fact, I wondered at the time if they would ever recover from the dose of chloral I gave them. I did not even bother to tie them, but just tossed them on their beds.

At half past ten, automobiles began to arrive with darkened lights. We had a lengthy conference,

and soon after eleven I went through the door. I lost no time in making sure that each of the blind mice was a free man, but I insisted that they act as though bound till the proper time. They were trembling, but it was not from fear, not that time.

Back in my hiding-place I waited, and soon I heard the singing voice. Ten minutes later the Donna Marchesi had her lantern hung on the nail. Ah! She was more beautiful that night than I had ever seen her. Dressed in filmy white, her beautiful body, lovely hair, long lithe limbs would have bound any man to her through eternity. She seemed to sense that beauty, for, after giving out the first supply of rolls, she varied her program. She told her audience how she had dressed that evening for their special pleasure. She described her jewels and her costume. She almost became grandiose as she told of her beauty, and, driving in the dagger, she twisted it as she reminded them that never would they be able to see her, never touch her or kiss her hand. All they could do was to hear her sing, applaud and at last die.

Of all the terrible things in her life that little talk to those blind men was the climax.

And then she sang. I watched her closely, and I saw what I suspected. She sang with her eyes closed. Was she in fancy seeming that she was in an opera-house before thousands of spellbound admirers? Who knows? But ever as she sang that night her eyes were closed, and even as she came to a close, waiting for the usual applause, her eyes were closed.

She waited in the silence for the clap of hands. It did not come. With terrific anger, she whirled to her basket and reached for her whip.

"Dogs!" she cried. "Have you so soon forgot your lesson?"

And then she realized that the twenty blind men were closing in on her. They were silent, but their outstretched hands were feeling for something that they wanted very much. Even when her whip started to cut, they were silent. Then one man touched her. To her credit, there was no sign of fear. She knew what had happened. She must have known, but she was not afraid. Her single scream was nothing but the battle-cry of the tiger cat going into action.

There was a single cry, and that was all. The men reached for what they wanted in silence. For a while they were all in a struggling group on their feet, but soon they were all on the ground. It was simply a mass, and under that mass was a biting, scratching, fighting, dying animal.

I couldn't stand it. I had planned it all, I wanted it all to happen, but when it came, I just couldn't stand it. Covered with the sweat of fear, I ran to the door and unlocked it. I swung it open, went through the doorway, closed it and locked it again. The men, waiting for me in the cellar, looked on with doubt. It seemed that they were right in thinking that my tale was an alcoholic one.

"Give me whisky!" I gasped, as I dropped on the floor.

In a few minutes I had recovered.

"Open the door," I ordered. "And bring the blind men out."

One at a time they were brought to the kitchen, and identified. Some were terribly mutilated in the face, long deep scratches, and even pieces bitten out, and one had the corner of his mouth torn. Most of them were sobbing hysterically, but, in some way, though none said so, I judged that they were all happy.

We went back to the cellar and through the door. On the stone floor was a clotted mass of red and white.

"What's that?" asked the American consul.

"I think that is the Donna Marchesi," I replied. "She must have met with an accident."

*** END OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK TIGER CAT ***

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