



# The Black Cat's Eyes

By Benjamin F. Ferrill

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**Hidden horror lurked in the lonely cabin and Bob Barlow felt the weird fear of the supernatural. Then, in the middle of the night, he awakened to see the devil cat, its burning eyes fastened on the mysterious mirror.**

**T**WO drops of blood. Surely there was nothing in that to warrant the start he'd felt upon noting them, Bob Barlow thought. Yet he felt an eery, uncomfortable sensation creep over him as he continued to regard the two little cherry-red spots in the path before him.

Such nerve antics were unusual for Bob Barlow. For several weeks since quitting a salaried mining job that had grown too tame for his inclinations, he had been prospecting on his own the gold country of the surrounding mountains. "There's gold up there that hasn't never been found," he'd said grinningly when questioned by his ex-boss as to future plans. But even as he replied he knew that it was the lure of the out-trails that was calling—not gold alone.

Just turning twenty-six, tall, lean, muscled like a mountain lion from weeks of carrying a pack through the hills, and with a pair of unusually keen gray eyes set in his weather-bronzed, regular featured face, he had rarely known that he had nerves. The fact now somehow vaguely irritated

him; and at once he set about to explain the spots that had startled him. "Huh there must somebody live in that cabin after all, and whoever it is has just gone in with some sort of game they've shot," Barlow began, but paused a little sheepishly as he noted there were no boot marks or tracks of any sort along the path. As he thought back he remembered also that he had not heard a gun shot all day.

Removing his gaze from the ground he scanned his surroundings critically. The way he'd been following was through a rocky and winding gulch or gorge. Beginning within a few hundred feet on either side of him and ascending sharply, the spruce and pine grown mountain walls rose up and up to where, high above timberline, he could see the rays of the late afternoon sun touching the patches of everlasting snow with orange and red. A small brown, freckle-breasted bird lit in a slim aspen nearby; then disappeared with a flutter of alarm into the gloomy spruce forest at sight of the stranger.

Brief as its stay had been, Barlow noted the bird and he grunted a little disgustedly. "There goes another good idea gone wrong. Hermit thrushes don't hang around cabins where anybody lives, shy as they are. Still there *must* somebody live there," he added, again hopefully scanning the time-grayed cabin before him for signs of life. It took only a glance, however, to see that it was untenanted. A side path that sloped down to the gurgling creek some yards distant was clear of tracks, showing that no one from the cabin had been down after water recently. The chopping block to one side of the door showed no signs of having furnished firewood in months. The door of the cabin stood dejectedly half open; and there were several drifted leaves lying on the single squared log step before the door.

"Well, anyway, it's getting night so here's where I roost, bloodsigns or no bloodsigns," Barlow muttered a little irritably. He'd already tried calling without effect. And now slipping the heavy pack from his shoulders he boldly approached the door and pushed it open. As he did so he once more felt the skin prickle along his spine: and his right hand settled quickly on the butt of the .38 Colt revolver that rested in a belt holster against his hip.

But there was no one there. A glance around the interior of the one-room cabin showed it to be bare of food, cooking equipment, articles of clothing or anything that had to do with present occupancy. The total furnishings of the cabin appeared to be two shelf-like wooden bunks, built against the wall one over the other to save space, and a table and two backless benches. There was no cook stove. But the wide stone fireplace at the opposite end of the room from the door, with a woodbox on one side of it and a shelf cupboard on the other showed where meals had been prepared.

"Fair enough," Barlow said, completing his brief survey. "It'll beat camping out a lot, pinchy as the nights are up here." Going outside he returned with his pack and dumped it down by the bench inside the door. In it were the few cooking utensils, food, blanket and other necessities he carried; and he at once proceeded to get out the immediately needed articles. Then as he straightened up with a small frying pan in one hand and a coffee pot in the other, he started suddenly as his eyes fell on an object against the wall over the bench—an ancient wall mirror. Quickly recognizing it for what it was, Bob Barlow grinned in relief. "I'm a son of a gun if I'm not getting

jumpy as a rabbit. Here I see myself in a looking glass and almost pull my gun. Looks like I'd ought to have noticed the thing at the first look around anyway. I'd better build up a fire so I can see all the corners, else a pack rat might come out and scare me away."

GOING outside again he returned in a few minutes with an armload of dead spruce and pine twigs and branches and dumped them by the fireplace. Breaking up some of the twigs he bent forward; but without laying them down he paused, staring intently into the fireplace. Leaning closer to the heap of ashes on the stones he sniffed suspiciously. Still unsatisfied he picked up the end of a charred stick and smelled it. Then rising abruptly he crossed to the bunk and examined the heap of spruce boughs that the last occupant of the cabin had left. The spruce needles and twigs were dry and brittle; and with his doubts at rest Barlow returned to building his fire, "Danged if these ashes don't *smell* fresh; but it can't be," he decided. "If anybody had been living in here recently they would certainly have cut fresh branches and not laid in there and been stabbed with them dry needles."

Within a few minutes he had a cheerful blaze going and his coffee pot and a pan of bacon on the fire. And while this was getting ready he glanced around the room more carefully. His examination at first showed nothing but what he had noticed upon entering. The bunks, the tables and the two benches, one by the table and the other by the door beneath the mirror, were all there seemed to be in the one-room cabin with the exception of the woodbox and cupboard. It took only a glance to show that the cupboard was bare, and a look into the big, deep-sided woodbox showed that it also was empty. Then as he was about to cease his inspection, Barlow noted some object under the bench by the door. Crossing quickly he drew it out, and found it to be a hatchet. But the point that held his attention was the fact that with the exception of a single reddish spot on the forward tip of the blade, it was clean and unruined. Rubbing his thumb over the spot he glanced at it, and uttered a sharp exclamation as he did so. Returning quickly to the fire he held the hatchet in the light and examined it again.

"Now what's a fellow to make of that?" he muttered perplexedly. "That hatchet has been used recently; in the last hour or so, in fact, and not for cutting wood either! That's blood on it sure as

thunder. I wonder——” Bob Barlow began, staring toward the open door and his mind going back to the two drops of blood he had seen in the path outside. But with the thought unfinished he paused, his eyes bulging and his jaw sagging. Poised in the doorway ready for instant flight and with its great yellow eyes regarding him, seemingly half in fear and half in defiance, stood a huge coal black cat!

In a sudden spirit of vengefulness at the start the creature had given him, Barlow's hand snapped to his holster, but recovering himself just in time he slid the weapon slowly back in its case. “Cat, you mustn't mind my manners; come right in and set. Supper'll be ready shortly; I guess it was the smell of this bacon that brought you. I don't usually draw my gun on visitors; but there's something about this cabin that's not right. And I'll be triply and teetotally damned if you didn't give me some scare,” Barlow apologized. “Kitty, kitty,” he added coaxingly.

For a moment longer the changeless, moon-yellow eyes of the cat regarded the speaker glassily. Then apparently convinced of Barlow's honesty of intent, it moved over to the right side of the door and crept quickly and fearfully into the room. Once well inside the cabin it turned alertly about, staring at the wall above the bench. With the same queer tingle that he had felt earlier in the evening ripping along his spine, Bob Barlow gazed in the direction the cat was looking, then laughed. “Why, you durn fool, you're as bad as I was. That's just a mirror you're looking at and all you see is yourself. Come over and have some grub,” Barlow said as he saw that it was the mirror the cat was staring at.

But the cat was not so easily satisfied. For some seconds it continued to peer watchfully at its reflection in the mirror, that slanted slightly downward from its peg over the old wash bench. Presently moving quickly and silently over to the fire it snatched hungrily at the strip of bacon Barlow held out to it. With the meat in its mouth it turned facing the mirror again, and kept its eyes on the glass while it ate.

**B**EING wolf-hungry himself, Bob Barlow paid no further attention to the black cat until he had satisfied his own appetite. Then, noticing that it was still watching the mirror, he grunted explosively, “Puss, you get on my nerves. What do you think that looking glass is anyway?” Rising he crossed to where the mirror hung and studied both it and the boards along the wall around it intently.

His examination proving fruitless, he returned to the fire. Throwing a new supply of fuel on the embers, he seated himself on the bench and felt for his tobacco, carried in the breast pocket of his wool shirt. Having rolled and lit his cigarette, he was replacing the makings in his pocket when his fingers struck some forgotten lump in the pocket bottom. Taking out the object he regarded it curiously; then nodded to himself and began to unfold it as he recognized what it was.

Several days before while replenishing his supplies in the foothill town of Spruceville, the sheriff had recognized him for a prospector and handed him the paper. “Here's the description of a hombre I'd sartin' like to get hold of,” the officer had said. “Keep this and if you meet the feller that matches the likeness of it throw your gun on him and fetch him in; it'll pay you better'n gold huntin'. Don't take no chances if you *should* meet him,” the grizzled sheriff added seriously. “He's wanted for about everything 'cept bein' slow to shoot, and he ain't going to be fetched in easy. Last heard of he was headed up in them mountains; but that was sev'ral weeks back. Still, though, you can't be sure.”

With no intention of turning man-hunter, but not wanting to offend the sheriff, Barlow had slipped the sheet into his pocket and forgotten it. Now for the first time he examined the picture of the wanted man and read the description through to the end. Then rolling the paper into a little ball he pitched it carelessly into the fire. Turning around he looked for the cat and was surprised to see that it was in the same place, near the center of the room. Although it had settled down comfortably, it still faced the mirror. And Barlow grunted wrathfully as he noticed by the reflection in the glass that its yellow eyes were wide awake and alert.

“Huh, you're no company a-tall,” Barlow said. “All you do is set there and look at yourself. Soon as daylight comes I'm going to make an effort to learn what that hatchet chopped and who did the chopping and how come those drops of blood on the path. And if I don't find out I'm going to mistrust black cats from this date on.” Settling back on the bench, he rolled another cigarette and stared thoughtfully into the fire for a long time, thinking of the country he'd covered that day and of the direction he expected to take on the morrow. Finally when the fire had burned itself to a bed of glowing embers Barlow rose and crossing to the door shut it and propped the bench against it.

Unrolling his blanket, he spread it in front of the fireplace and lay down. While he was doing this, the black cat retreated to a far corner of the room, watching him doubtfully. But as soon as he became still it moved noiselessly to its old position, facing the mirror.

Seeing the act, it was all Bob Barlow could do to keep from swearing aloud at the animal. Once more he felt the cold, uncomfortable prickle along his spine, stronger now than he'd felt it on any of the previous occasions, he thought. Most heartily he wished he'd never seen the old cabin and had camped under a spruce tree instead. But now that the thing was done, he found a stubborn streak cropping up from somewhere in his make-up that refused to let him pack up and leave. Grimly he made a mental resolve that come what may he was going to stay in that cabin until morning. Whether he slept or not, didn't matter. He was in no hurry and could sleep the next day; but remain there he would.

**S**LIPPING his gun from its holster and turning his back to the fire Barlow studied the black cat and the mirror it watched. There *was* something creepy about the whole business, he admitted to himself with a feeling more akin to stark fear than he would have cared to acknowledge. What had caused the two drops of blood on the path outside the door? They had been fresh when he first noticed them, only a few minutes old apparently. What also had caused the stain on the hatchet found under the bench, and who had wielded it? Then where had the cat come from? What was it doing in that lonely locality? Why had it stared at him so from the doorway? And, last, why in heaven's name did it continue to stare at the dingy old mirror slanting downward from the wall at the opposite end of the cabin?

Point by point Barlow puzzled over the thing and found no answer. For a long time then he lay trying to connect up the various facts in some way, but here again he finally admitted himself bested. Almost imperceptibly while he mused, the bed of coals in the fireplace glowed less bright; and so gradually that an eye could hardly have detected the change the light in the room faded from ruddy bronze to gray. Drowsily, Barlow made a mental note that he'd have to get up shortly and put on some more wood; he lay there for just a few seconds longer, though, Gosh, he was tired from his all-day hike, since he came to think of it.

**H**OW long he'd slept or whether he'd slept at all, Bob Barlow was unable to say, nor did he know what had awakened him. Certain it was that he was wide awake and alert in the space of an instant. In the dim gray gloom that filled the room, the first object to catch his eye was the black cat. And even in that first brief awakening glimpse he had of it, it appeared larger—a huge, black devil cat, twice the size it had looked when he saw it last. Then the truth struck him with blood-chilling clearness. It *was* larger! It was no longer sitting, but standing to its full gaunt height. The hair along its back stood straight up; and its tail was ballooned out seemingly half as large as the cat. It was scared. It saw something approaching. Some nameless creeping terror that only its unsleeping night-keen eyes could follow in the almost black night of the room. Yet it was still facing the mirror!

*"It sees a reflection!"* Throaty and hoarse, the words broke from Barlow's dry lips. Of a sudden he at last guessed the full import of the thing. With all the quickness he could muster he rolled over—pitching off the blanket with one hand, leveling his gun with the other.

Instantly there was a red flash and a deafening roar from the woodbox by the chimney! In the same hundredth part of a second Barlow centered his big .38 Colt on the jet flame and, holding the trigger back, thumb-fanned the gun swifter than he'd ever before thought a revolver mechanism could operate. "One, two, three, four," he counted the shots grimly; then paused as he saw that no answering flashes were coming from the spot he'd seen the first red spurt of flame.

"Don't shoot any more—you've shot my gun out of my hand and I can't find the damn thing. I'm done. I give up," a harsh voice snarled out as the sound of the explosions died away.

Rising warily, Barlow threw a handful of dry twigs and leaves on the ashes in the fireplace and moved quickly to one side as the fire blazed up; but relaxed slightly as he saw the other's pistol a safe distance beyond reach. For a space Barlow studied the hard-eyed, hard-faced, thick set figure that protruded head and shoulders from the woodbox. Somewhere, it seemed that he'd seen the other before. "Come on out," he ordered. And even as he spoke he suddenly remembered where he'd seen that head and shoulder view before. It had been on the circular he'd recently read and thrown into the fire!

Taking his pack cord, Barlow quickly and

securely tied his prisoner's hands behind him. "I won't tie your feet. It'll be daylight shortly now and we'll be starting for the sheriff at Spruceville then," Barlow said, as he secured the gun from the floor and proceeded to search the other for further weapons.

The desperado eyed him sullenly. "How did you know I was down there?" he growled finally. "I took all sorts of care to keep anybody from getting on to me living here, after I camped here one night and happened to find that the bottom of that woodbox was really a trap door leading to a cellar and that the box rim was made to hide it. I'd run across plenty of old empty cabins in this mining country; but none made as handy as this, and I figured it was just the sort of place I needed to hide out in for a while. Of course, I had to build fires to cook. But I slept in the top bunk and left the lower one like it was, and kept all my stuff down there in the cellar. I even stayed off the paths when walking around outside, and left everything else just like it was."

"I watched your cat," Bob Barlow admitted honestly. "He seemed to have a particular fancy for that mirror; but I thought all along he was only seeing himself. Then just when you were creeping up out of the woodbox I woke and got a last minute hunch that he really saw a *reflection* of something. Remembering that the woodbox and a little part of the floor was all the mirror showed, the rest was easy."

"That black devil's not mine! He come here

several days ago and I couldn't run him off or get my hands on him and didn't dare risk the sound of a shot just to kill him. I saw you coming up the gorge some time before you got here and ran the cat into the woods with rocks and went down the cellar, thinking you'd pass when you saw the cabin was empty. Then shortly before you reached the cabin I raised the trap door to see where you were. And there was that cat again, sitting here in the room facing toward the door just like he was waiting for you to show up. He'd never seen me go down in the cellar so I didn't figure he could give me away. But not taking any chances I threw the hatchet at him. I hit him, too, but he jumped out the door and ran," Barlow's prisoner said.

"The hell!" Bob Barlow exploded, and stepped quickly across to the bunk under which the black cat crouched. Bending close he noted that just back of one of the cat's shoulders was a short ugly gash where the front point of the hatchet blade had struck it. Barlow grinned suddenly as he realized that the cat, leaping through the door, had left the two drops of blood in the path. With this the entire mystery was cleared, for he now knew the truth. That the black cat sitting facing the mirror when the man had suddenly risen from the box had really seen him in the mirror. But with the man behind it as he was and knowing nothing of the cellar, the blow had seemed to the cat to come from the glass. This then was the reason it had constantly watched the mirror for further danger.