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KINGSMILL'S

## The White Cat

[BY GELETT BURGESS, AUTHOR OF "VIVETTE." Copyright by Bobbs-Merrill Company.]

"Trust me for that," I said.

"So Joy wants you to come?" she continued. "I suppose you'd never come down just to see me! You must tell me about Joy. Is she nice?"

"She's lovely. Oh, you love her, Edna. It's a pity you can't know her. It would save so much trouble!"

"Oh, are you in love with her, then?"

"I'm very fond of her!"

"She slapped her fan viciously and bit her lip. Then:

"I'm sure you like her much better than you do me, anyway—don't you?"

"I know her better than I do you, Edna, and she has always been nice to me."

"And haven't I? Didn't I dress up for you, sir?"

"I have a letter to you from her—would you like to read it?"

"She held out her hand for it impatiently, and I gave her the note. She glanced it over, then tore it up spitefully."

"Edna!" she exclaimed. "If I could only see her, if I could only talk to her once! I'd tell her what I thought of her! Oh, I'll give her something to forgive!"

"She looked about her, as if for something particularly Joy's upon which to vent her anger."

"Just then, as luck would have it, Leah entered the room with a vase of flowers."

"Get out of here, you black hussy!" Edna cried. "Don't you see I'm busy? Your place is in the kitchen!"

"Leah turned and left without a word."

"I've stood enough from that nigger," Edna said. "I'm going to get rid of her this very day."

"You said you'd keep her as long as I stayed," I interposed.

"Oh, Joy asked you to plead for her, I suppose! You're only here hoping to get a chance to see Joy, anyway! How did you get in yesterday, anyway? What happened? I'd forgotten all about that! What did I do in the evening? I can't remember. Were you here then, with Joy?"

"You fainted away at the dinner table."

"So you had your evening with Joy all right? Oh, what do you care for me? Nothing! You hate me, I believe! The next moment she was crying, but before I could assuage her, she had risen abruptly and run upstairs."

"I passed quickly into the kitchen and spoke to Leah."

"Has Uncle Jerdon gone?"

"Yes."

"Then keep out of the way as much as possible. I'm more ready."

"I went up to my own room, and took the revolver from my handbag and loaded it with the blank cartridges. Scarcely had I slipped the

weapons into my pocket when Edna burst into the room with her arms full of dresses. She held out the pale green silk peignoir in which I had first seen Miss Fielding."

"Does Joy wear this?" she asked.

"Yes, sometimes," I answered.

"Well," she said, "she never will fascinate you in it again!" And with a single violent gesture, she ripped it from top to bottom. She took up another gown and tore that in two, also. She had begun, on a third when I went up to her and stopped her hand."

"Edna, you mustn't!" I commanded.

"She threw the whole heap upon the floor and clasped her bare arms about my neck. 'Oh, I hate her! I hate her!' she wept. 'You are in love with her, aren't you? You know you are! What have I done that you should hate me so? You know how I like you—why don't you love me a little?'"

"Aren't you engaged to the doctor?" I asked, letting her stay with her face near mine. It did not seem wrong—it was Joy's own face.

"Oh, I suppose I am, but what does that matter? Mayn't I like you, too? He's the only friend I have. He's helping me! He's trying to free me! What are you doing? Are you helping me, Chet?"

"It was hard enough to answer her question. What could I say? Somehow, even now, I could not lie to her outright—not while looking deep into Joy's own eyes."

"If you had shown any mercy to Joy, if you were desired to be friends with her, I might try to save you," I said. "But after this, how can I?"

"Oh, I'll be friends with her—I'll do anything if you'll only love me, Chet! Why can't we both love you? I'll promise not to be jealous; we'll share you. If you marry her, then I'll have me, too, and I'll have you!"

"She looked up at me with wistful eyes—Joy's eyes—and Joy's arms were still about me. Never had Joy clung to me so closely and tenderly. It was as if I could do to put her away and answer her preposterous suggestion."

"But you're engaged to the doctor—he told me so—"

"I'll break it off with him—I won't have anything more to do with him—I'll telephone to him now!" She even started to go to her room.

"I was in a tumult of emotion. How could I begin my work when she acted in this way—as I had least expected? True, I knew that probably in a moment her fickle mood would change, but I could not begin yet. I held her back."

"You know," I said, "that the doctor is plotting to get rid of Joy for ever. You know, and I know, that that's the way he's been trying to help you. How can I care for you when I know that is your purpose?"

"God knows I loathed myself for the hypocrisy but I was at my wit's end. She stopped and looked at me reproachfully. 'Ah, you are in love with her, then! I thought so! She's everything, and I'm nothing to you!'"

"She flung away again in a new rage and walked proudly, scornfully downstairs. I followed her. Just before she caught up with her, I heard her angry voice ring out."

"Oh, you sneak! Didn't I tell you to stay in the kitchen? Take that for your impertinence, you wench!"

"There was the sound of a blow and a scream. I ran in and found Leah with her face bleeding. Edna, gorgeous in her silken gown, stood lowering like a furious queen, a heavy bronze paper weight in her hand."

"Immediately," she cried, her voice strident with passion. "I've had enough of your tricks! I want you to know I'm mistress here!"

"Leah appealed to me with a glance. I nodded, pointing behind Edna's back, outdoors, to the old cabin. Leah disappeared, weeping. I went up to Edna."

"Do you expect me to love you when you act in this cruel way?" I asked in a quiet tone.

"She stormed up and down, striding like a leopard in a cage, swishing this way and that, her fists firmly clenched."

"Oh, she's in league with you and Joy. I know all about it! She spies on me—hides things from me—tells on me! She and you are trying your best to get rid of me—the doctor said so! You are plotting to

destroy me right now!" she flashed out, turning to her, her lips quivering with excitement. "I can tell! I know! You may go, too, Mr. Castle. I'm through with you, too! Leave this house, please!"

I tried to pacify her, thinking that distraught with the violent moods she had shown today a reaction would soon come. She was almost hysterical, and I waited for the reaction of feeling, without heeding her words. In a moment it came. It was as if an angel and a devil were contending in her for the mastery, but the angel won again."

"She sat down limply in a chair that was drawn up to the secretary, and the tears came to her eyes. Leah got out the front door and hurried down the lane."

"Oh, I'm so wretched!" Edna complained bitterly. "I haven't a friend—not even Dr. Coplin. All he wants is my money, and all you want is Joy. Oh, Chet, let me be your friend! Let me be your friend—you may stay—I'll be good, sure I will! I'll do anything if you'll only love me and be good to me! I'll take Leah back; I'll dismiss the doctor. Why was I sent here, anyway? Nobody wants me. Nobody cares for me!"

"She looked up at me and held out her hand. It was the stricken, appealing for protection to the hunters. I had never seen her so gentle and tender. It was, for the moment, as if Joy herself were pleading for her life."

"As I stood there, watching her, debating what to do, her head dropped to her left hand. With her right she had taken up a pencil which lay there upon the blotter—circles and crosses and zigzag scrawls. But, even as she turned to me again, her eyes softened, I saw her right hand move more regularly over the paper blotter. She was writing, and writing automatically, without looking at what she was doing. A sudden idea came to me that the writing was inspired by some subconscious, subliminal self and I must let it have free play, that I must divert her thought from that hand."

"So I walked up to her and touched her head, stroking her soft, brown hair. 'Poor girl!' I said; 'I wish I could answer your questions; I wish I might help you. Perhaps we can think out a way. We'll talk it over and see.'"

"Her hand was still writing, as she looked up at me and listened."

"But you must tell me all about the doctor, and what he is doing. Is he coming down here today?"

"She leaned affectionately against my side, her hand still working unconsciously. 'I don't know,' she said. 'He may come on the eleven o'clock train, perhaps.'"

"This was unexpected. I had little time, then, in which to act. But now her hand had stopped, and I bent over her shoulder to look at the blotter."

"She turned her face to me again and said: 'Won't you please kiss me, Chet? You've never kissed me! I'm sure you've kissed Joy!'"

"Then, following my glance, she saw the writing for the first time. 'Oh, how funny! I didn't know it. What is it, anyway?' Then she read aloud: 'Don't hesitate! Cut off my head and my tail! Hurry! White Cat.'"

"How absurd!" she commented. "See, it isn't my handwriting at all! It isn't anything like it. But it's like it! It's like it!" she burst out, and she jumped up, staring at me. "What does it mean?"

"I had recognized the handwriting at the same instant, and was as surprised as she."

"It's Joy's!" she repeated, her voice now almost a scream. "Oh, but she is a cat! I believe she's trying to get rid of me! She wants you to kill me! Tell me, Chet, what does it mean?"

"I didn't answer, for the shock of this communication bewildered me. It was like the voice of a ghost, urging me. It was Joy, calling up from Edna's subconsciousness. I was sure of it."

"It's Joy!" she cried a third time.

as she got the meaning too. "She's trying to call you, through me! She loves you, and you love her. I know it! You're trying to murder me! But I'll not let her have you! I'll kill you first!"

She stood with her little fists doubled, shaking with fury, her nostrils dilated, her cheeks gone white, her lips apart, showing the little uneven line of clenched teeth. The strap of her gown had fallen partly off, leaving one smooth, creamy shoulder bare, the golden wreath of laurel was tipped sideways in her hair."

Then, in a quick whirlwind of passion, she snatched the silver-handled poker by the fireplace, raised it, and struck at me with all her strength. Slight as she was, and weak, ordinarily her emotion gave her an unnatural power. The blow grazed my cheek, plowing a deep, ragged furrow through the skin. I grabbed the weapon from her, and she stood defiantly before me, blazing in all her finery."

The time had at last come to act. [To be Continued.]

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