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The White Cat

[BY GELETT BURGESS, AUTHOR OF "VIVETTE".
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PART SECOND.

CHAPTER I.

My machine had been repaired for a week, but I had not had it brought up to town, when I received a note from Leah. It was dated "Tuesday."

"Come down immediately," she wrote, "if you can think of a plausible pretext but don't say that I sent for you. Miss Fielding will not ask you herself, but we need you very much. I trust to you."

I took an early afternoon train the next day, and finding no one to meet me at the station, engaged a carriage to take me over to Miss Fielding's place. My driver would, I am sure, have been glad to gossip with me upon the lady's affairs, but I headed off all his hints, knowing pretty well from Uncle Jerdon's insinuations what the tenor of the neighborhood talk must be.

Midmeadows was about four miles from the station, and a half-mile back from the county road. The house was approached by two long lanes overgrown with shrubbery and hazels, one from the seaside on the east, and one from the main road on the north. We took the latter, a wild and tangled wagon track, filled with stones and hummocks, and worn into deep holes. The boughs of trees constantly scraped across the top of the buggy and often hung low enough to threaten our eyes. Near the house, the lane took a turn round the corner of an extensive, old-fashioned garden of hollyhocks, rose bushes, poppies and violets, then swung up to the green, eight-paneled front door, with its transom of old bulls-eye panes. The house came in close to the garden, partly inclosing it on two sides. To the right of the house vegetables were planted, with meadows beyond, and behind, the hill rose almost from the stable. The whole place had a charming natural wildness, and seemed as if it was miles away from any other human habitation; but it was not uncared for; its natural features had been amended and composed with the care of a true artist.

The house itself was long and low, covered with unstained shingles. A great square brick chimney rose from the middle of the gambrel roof. The lower windows were leaded and built into wide bays, but they showed above the little-paned sashes of the original building. The front was almost hidden by climbing Cecil Bruner roses, now odorously in bloom. The southern side was lined with a row of geraniums which rose in huge bushes. Here, in the second story, was another bay window of curious construction, somewhat resembling the stern of an old galleon. It was Miss Fielding's sitting-room, which I had not yet visited.

The place seemed deserted, for not even the dogs were visible. I got out and knocked while my driver waited curiously to catch what was probably a rare glimpse of the mistress of the house.

Joy herself, wearing a white duck sailor suit, with a red handkerchief knotted about her neck, answered my knock. She held her hand to her eyes to shade them from the rays of the

afternoon sun, so that I could not, at first, quite make out her expression. The first thing she showed, after her surprise, was a most cordial satisfaction at seeing me. She did not, apparently expect me, but my presence delighted her. I saw next that she was in trouble. The very intensity of her welcome alarmed me. The two vertical lines between her brows were deeply cut into her forehead, her lips were quivering, there were dark circles under her eyes.

"She drew me quickly into the library, and I saw terror in her look. Her cheeks were pale and wan. Her hand trembled, as it lay on the back of a chair where she leaned."

"Oh, I am so glad you have come!" had been her first speech, murmured in the hall, and it was repeated now as I stood before her. "I am so glad you have come! I need you so!"

I had fancied before that her face was one capable of expressing tragedy—not every woman's is. Tragedy shadowed her face now, giving her a newer, more dramatic beauty so moving that help wondering at it.

"You are not well," I exclaimed. "Oh, well enough," she replied. "Something is the matter—what is it?"

"Sit down and I'll try to tell you." She dropped into a chair, with her elbow on the table, letting her cheek fall into the hollow of her palm. Her eyes closed for a moment, the soft, long lashes shading her pale cheek.

"She shook herself and sat erect. 'I'm so sleepy!' she moaned. 'I haven't slept since night before last.'"

I sprang up from the window seat. "Won't you lie down here and rest?" Do!" I pleaded.

"Oh, I don't dare! I don't dare!" she cried.

"Tell me what is troubling you, so that I may try to help you!" She looked up and said, "Leah has gone!" and put out a hand that trembled with a despairing gesture.

"Gone?" I repeated. "Where?" "I don't know where. I don't know when she went. I don't know even why."

"Do you fear she has met with an accident?" "Oh, no, not that. Worse than that!" she spoke helplessly.

"Worse?" I could not understand. "I mean I think I must have driven her away."

"I still could not guess. 'Why, how could you have done that? You mean that she took offense at something, perhaps?'"

"Oh, I must have made it impossible for her to stay." "But what did you do? She was devoted to you."

She sprang up and waited out with bitter vehemence. "Oh, I don't know! I don't know! If I only knew, I could do something. But what can I do, now? She's gone. She was my right hand, my eyes, my ears, my memory—but it's not that! It is that I could have been cruel enough to her to drive her away. Where is she? Where could she have gone, do you think? I've waited and waited to hear from her, or for her to come back—two whole days! I didn't go to bed at all last night. I didn't dare, lest she should come while I was asleep."

"You expect her to return, then?" She was walking up and down the room, her hands clasped behind her back tightly. I could see that she was on the verge of hysteria. She turned to me again, and said:

"Oh, Leah would never abandon me, never! She's too true for that. But she's afraid to come back!" I went up to her and led her gently to the seat.

"Now," I said, "tell me exactly what has happened."

She broke out again wildly, her face twitching with excitement. "I don't know! Don't you see I don't know? That's the horror of it! I may have killed her, for all I know!"

"Ah! do you mean," I began, afraid to say it, "that you've forgotten?" She stared at me. "Forgotten? Well, you may call it that. Yes, I've forgotten." She put her face into the pillow and began to sob convulsively. After this nervous crisis had spent itself she sat up, wiped her eyes and said with a faint, spectral smile:

"Oh, I'll have to tell you everything, now. I can't bear it any longer. It was bad enough while I had Leah to depend upon, but now I must have

somebody to confide in, or I shall go mad—I haven't already gone mad."

I looked over at the table where I noticed a coffee pot, and a cup on a saucer. "How much coffee have you drunk?" I asked.

"Oh, I don't know. Cup after cup. I've been drinking it all day to keep me awake."

"That accounts for your nerves. You must rest. If you sleep a little, you'll get your strength back."

She sprang up suddenly, her gripped fists raised, her head thrown back in a sudden new access of alarm. "Oh, no, no, no! You don't understand! I haven't slept! I'm afraid—afraid! How do I know what may happen, now when I'm so worn out?"

I had done considerable thinking while I was away, and I had done some reading as well. I was beginning now to make it out, piece by piece, and put it together in an astonishing whole. It was too late, in this crisis for reserves, too late for me to keep to my promise of not trying to know. The girl was distraught and alone. And, indeed, the door to the cupboard where her skeleton had been hidden was now well ajar.

"You are afraid, you mean, of the other one?" I brought it out deliberately. She stared at me, like a somnambulist.

"Yes," she whispered, "of the 'other one.'"

Then for the first time, and quite unconsciously, I think, she used my name. It seemed so natural to me that I was not surprised.

"Oh, I'm so glad you know, at last, Chester. I'm so glad that it will be easier to tell you." She put her hand on my arm and looked up at me in tender confidence. "Now you know why I called myself 'The White Cat.'"

"Yes, I see. Don't be alarmed, I'll help you. You must calm yourself you know."

"Yes, I know you do. You must tell me all about it sometime. How you must have hated me!"

"Perhaps I can manage her, but no matter about her now. We must think it all out, and decide calmly what to do. I'm not afraid. Trust me, and I'll see you through. It will all come out right, I'm sure."

I went on so purposely, iterating such phrases to lull her, and key down the intense strain which wrought upon her. Her eyes kept on me, and I saw my influence work—my suggestion, I might say, since it was purposely hypnotic. Her hysteria made her abnormally sensitive to the treatment. She relaxed her attitude slightly, sighed, and dropped back among the silken pillows behind her.

"Oh, you're so good!" she breathed. "You will help me, I'm sure. You have helped me already! You're so strong—it's such a comfort to have you here!" She reached her hand out shyly and put it in mine, where it lay, small and cold. It was the first time she had done so, except under the direct stress of an earnestness strong enough to rob the act of any personal suggestion. It was a distinct caress, fearless and genuine.

"Now," I said, "begin at the beginning, and tell me all about what has happened."

She took it up again with a new courage. "As I've said, I don't know when Leah left. I only know that when I rang for her yesterday morning she didn't come. I went into her room and she wasn't there. She was not downstairs. King didn't know anything about it."

"Nor Uncle Jerdon?" "Uncle Jerdon has been away for three days visiting his nephew, who's ill. You see, she—the other one—was here for two days running. It hasn't happened so far years. So whether it happened, whatever did happen, on Monday or Tuesday, I can't tell. Leah might have left either day."

"How do you know that 'the other one' was here for two days?" "Only because Sunday is the last thing I remember before yesterday morning. The doctor was down then. You know that there's a hiatus when she's here—a perfect blank in my memory. I lose time, as she does, when I'm here."

Her mention of the doctor started a new train of thought, but I put that by for the present, to tell her the letter I had received from Leah, which made it probable that she had left on Tuesday, the second day of "the other one." The situation was serious enough, I was sure, for me to disobey Leah's injunction to secrecy.

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"Oh," said Joy, "that relieves my mind a little. It shows that Leah had a plan, and she must have stayed somewhere near here, expecting you, though how she happened to miss you I don't see. It's quite right for you to have told me, for I had already telephoned to you—today, after you started. I was surprised to see you

Advertiser
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appear so soon for that reason. I was at my wits' end yesterday, but I hated to drag you into this. But what could I do? Dr. Copin has gone out of town for a few days."

"I'm glad you sent for me," I said. "I shan't have to feel that I'm intruding. But now the question is, why doesn't Leah come back? Why didn't she wait for me at the station?"

"She must have been awfully frightened, to have gone away like this," Joy said.

"Perhaps she discharged her—I know she complained of Leah a good deal."

"Yes, I've thought of that. But I fear it's even worse."

[To be Continued.]

MANY WEIGH HALF A TON

Brooklyn Woman Suffers From Disease That Increases Weight.

New York, Sept. 12.—Afflicted with a rare disease, elephantiasis, Mrs. Juliette Felt is confined in the Kings county hospital, Brooklyn, her body slowly but surely increasing in size. She now weighs 525 pounds.

Physicians declare it is the most malignant and remarkable case of elephantiasis that had been brought to the attention of the medical fraternity. The doctors declare she may weigh more than half a ton in ten years.

A caravan of about 50 gipsies arrived at Maumenge, near Paris, recently, to the great alarm of the inhabitants. The police decided to arrest them all. On the following day the gipsies asked for the morning papers to see what they were accused of.

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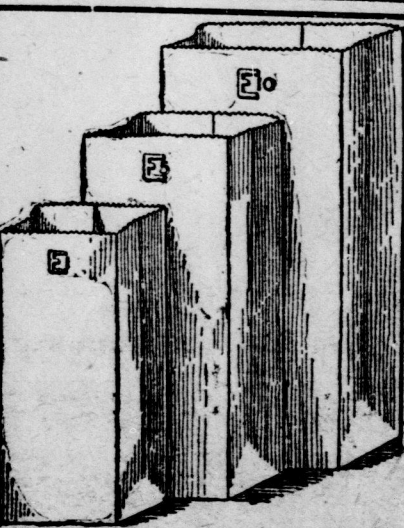
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