

The White Cat

[BY GELETT BURGESS, AUTHOR OF "VIVETTE."
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"She's a remarkable girl—I was going to add 'for a negress,' but I needn't qualify it."

"Oh, no! You don't know how fine she is." Seating herself she added, as if to herself, in a sort of sigh: "What that girl has done for me!"

"I am sure that she would say just that of you," I remarked.

"Oh, I try her a good deal, sometimes. Her mother was my nurse. When I sent for Leah, I didn't expect to get anything more than, perhaps, some of the hereditary devotion darkies have, even if I got that. But I got a friend. You can't trust her too far, Mr. Castle, believe me! She's pure gold."

It happened that, as she spoke, Leah herself came into the room with letters for me. Miss Fielding took the girl's hand and pressed it against her own cheek affectionately. As she did so, I noticed a peculiar scar—a livid, U-shaped mark on Leah's wrist. It was the sort of scar that might be left from the wound of a carving tool—one of the narrower gouges.

"Was I very horrid yesterday, Leah?" Miss Fielding asked, looking up into the fine brown face.

"Oh, please, Miss Joy!" Leah begged unhesitatingly.

"Of course you understand, Leah: I only want Mr. Castle to know I'm sorry," Miss Fielding insisted.

"I need only to look at you to be

sure you're sorry, and to look at Leah to be sure that there's no need of it," I declared. "At any rate, there's no need of my understanding. In fact that's just what I thought you didn't want me to do. Isn't it?"

Leah looked quickly from me to Miss Fielding, and back again.

"Yes, I suppose it is," Miss Fielding said slowly, thoughtfully. "Let's get back on the island again. I'm sure it's big enough for us."

We stayed, therefore, "on the island," all that afternoon, touching, that is, but lightly on personal topics. But though we did not go wide, we went deep enough to make the talk hold us absorbed for an hour or more. In quite another way, I think, we went far, as well. Miss Fielding was a stimulating conversationalist. She made me feel at my best. She had that happy way of meeting me on my own ground every little while, then going on, and giving me a hand up to hers, and so by a series of alternate agreements and divergences, keeping the discussion both sympathetic and various. In most of this quick give-and-take Leah was a passive listener unless specially appealed to, at which times she often expressed herself succinctly and sapiently that Miss Fielding and I looked at her, and then at one another with a comic expression of admiration and depreciation of our own powers.

With such conversation the day went fast. In the afternoon Miss Fielding read to me, and in the evening I spent two or three hours in passive delight listening to her violin.

My pain had almost subsided now, and I looked forward with some thing more poignant than regret at being able to be up and about, knowing that would mean the beginning of the end of our companionship.

CHAPTER VI.

The next morning Miss Fielding slept late, and her breakfast order was, as it had been two days before, prosaic. Then also she gave me a presentment. I looked curiously for the first sight of her to confirm or destroy a theory that I had been incubating during my long night hours alone. The fact that, as I ate my breakfast, I could hear her whistling in her room helped along my hypothesis. So did Leah's apparent mental detachment.

Miss Fielding rapped into my room at about half-past nine, and with a laugh and a "Good morning, Chet!" pounced up to my bed. My theory instantly gained plausibility. Her manner was what I had anticipated. Her dress also was significant.

She had on a fussy sort of silk waist, inappropriate, I thought, with her cloth walking skirt. Her hair was elaborately "marcelled," and she wore bangles that clinked on her wrists; there was the same odor of Santal that I had previously noticed. What was most suggestive was that this get-up was apparently meant to impress me. At least, that was how I interpreted her coquettish smile. I should not care to say that she showed actual poor taste—it was only, I thought, poor taste for her. She needed such adjuncts of fashion so little.

"See here," she said, tossing her head and pointing at me dramatically, "you're getting altogether too lazy. I think that you've been in bed long enough. I'm going to get you down stairs today. The doctor said three or four days in bed would do, and now it's five. How do you feel?" She shook the post of my bed with mock ferocity, as if to expend some surplus energy. There seemed to be an extra ounce of blood in her this morning.

"Oh, I'm game!" I replied. "Nothing would suit me better."

"I'll get the library ready, then; Leah and Uncle Jerdon will help you down. Then you can watch me work. If you don't mind, I'm trying to finish my coffee." She felt thoughtfully of her lips. "I'll get quite a muscle before I'm through. I shall have driven about twelve hundred nails by the time it's done."

She walked to the door, swinging her arms, and called, "Leah! Come up here! Quick!"

Leah appeared out of breath, as if, for the moment, she had expected that an accident had happened. She gave a quick comprehensive look about.

"Leah, we're going to get Mr. Castle downstairs today. Is Uncle Jerdon about?"

"Do you think Mr. Castle is well enough to be moved, yet?" Leah ventured.

"Didn't I say he was going downstairs?" Miss Fielding repeated impatiently. "I think we can decide that question. You do as I say. Go and get Uncle Jerdon, and be quick about it, too!"

"She's spoiled. She thinks she runs this house," Miss Fielding complained to me, when Leah had left.

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I said nothing, watching her closely. My theory was now pretty well substantiated. I could not pass this scene off as merely one of the "moods" that she and Leah had both mentioned. There was something definitely wrong with Miss Fielding today—something more than a mere whim of temper. There had been something wrong two days before, when she had acted similarly. She was distinctly not herself, if her normal self was the graceful, delicate, tactful creature who had first charmed me.

It was not only her mood or her taste in costume that seemed different. It was something not quite describable which seemed to permeate her whole personality. She had taken a chair and sat with her right arm cast up over the back. The angle of her raised elbow threw her into a distinctly awkward position. Her gestures, too, were characteristic of this mysterious difference. When they were not distinctly imitative, as in mimicking Uncle Jerdon's table manners, they were irrelevant, mere spasmodic exhibitions of activity—as when she caught the fly, or swung her arms with active tennislike gestures. This spontaneous irrelevancy she showed now in the way she doubled her fists and brought them athletically to her shoulders, as she talked, or, raising her foot a little, made circles with her toe, showing the slenderness and suppleness of her ankle. I don't say that all this ebullition of high spirits wasn't in its way charming. It was. But it was different from the way she had acted yesterday. Perhaps I can best describe it by saying that she seemed quite ten years younger.

She sprang up and, apropos of nothing at all, proceeded to dance or hop sideways across the room and back hilariously, in sheer excess of vigor. It was what she called "galumphing," and from time to time, during the day, usually at the end of some little overserious conversation, she repeated the performance, to my great amusement and delight. It was the absurdly meaningless galumphing of a kid, but it was so delicious in its inconsequence that every time it provoked my laughter.

While we were talking nonsense there Leah came up with Uncle Jerdon. Uncle Jerdon was distinctly a straw-chewing farmer, quaintly original, confident, droll. He was well on in years, a dried-up, wrinkled, New England type—the chin-bearded, toothless bachelor with sparse, straw-colored hair, long in the neck, and twinkling blue eyes full of good nature. He wore overalls and reeked of the stable.

Miss Fielding introduced him, and I shook his skinny hand.

"Well," he drawled, "thinkin' about movin', be ye? I guess Leah an' me'll make a pretty good elevator. I'll help ye get dressed, fast—an' then we'll take ye up tenderly, lift ye with care."

The two women left while I got my clothes on. It felt good to leave the bed.

"We've been a tinkerin' on that air machine of yours, but it's a little bit too much for us, I guess," Uncle Jerdon said. "You'll have to send down a man I expect. I wouldn't ride in one o' them pesky things for all the gold of Ophir, nosire, bob! When I want to go to ride I want to see the back of a good horse—I know I'll get home by sun-down."

He monologued away thus as he helped me into my clothes, and when I had finished called to Leah.

She came in, and I took an arm of each, though I scarcely needed their help. We descended a narrow, paneled stairway slowly but safely, without causing me any pain, and turned into a door on the left-hand side of the lower hall. There I found a four-legged chair ready for me, drawn up before a wide brick fireplace where an oak log was burning. Uncle Jerdon led me with a wink at seeing Leah placing a footstool for me and drawing up a taboret on which were cigars and cigarettes. There ensconced, I looked about with interest.

It was a large room, finished all in paneled unvarnished redwood, most beautiful in color—a lighter red than mahogany, with more softness and bloom. Two sides were lined with book-cases, except for the chimney-breast; another was almost filled with a broad bow window of leaded glass with a deep seat covered with corduroy cushions. The wall space was well supported by carved brackets part way up, and a cornice above that. Between the adzed beams of the ceiling were panels of old Spanish leather lacquered and stamped. The whole effect was a modified French Renaissance worked out with many charming originalities of detail. The pillars, the ornate moldings and graceful consoles, showed handicraft of an interesting sort. They seemed to have been carved by some artistic amateur, being boldly cut without the machine-like regularity of the professional. There was, besides the unusualness of the wood, much to interest me as an architect.

The library was well filled without appearing crowded, and everything, furniture and appointments, betokened, as had my chamber, not only taste but luxury. It was evident that Miss Fielding was very well off, and knew how to use her money. It was as evident that she had a strong personality, for there were details that were unique. A large prism of rock crystal, for instance, carelessly resting in the sunshine upon the dull brown cushions of the window seat, threw a prismatic spot of splendor upon the ceiling. It was like a gorgeous butterfly pinned to the leather. There was a silver cage of waiting Japanese mice upon the mantel, little grotesque, pish creatures that spun wheels, played their necks with their paws and nibbled at rice. The books, too, were arranged upon the shelves apparently not as regards subjects, but rather on account of their bindings, giving masses of color, green and red and brown and black and white.

But it had all been indubitably so well lived in, its properties all ministered so to one's comfort, and the tones were all so restful and admirably composed, that I could imagine no more charming environment for a rainy day with Miss Fielding.

[To be Continued.]

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The regulation requiring the barber's attendance was a standing order, dating apparently from the reign of Edward IV. It is preserved in the "Liber Niger Domus Regis," and its wording seems to imply that the solemn washings were partial and special rather than thorough, and that the King's majesty often did without them.

The royal barber, who was also a groom of the privy chamber and one of the fifteen persons allowed to enter it, was also required to shave the King daily, "having in readiness his water, basins, knives, combs, scissors and such other stuffs as to his room doth appertain for trimming."

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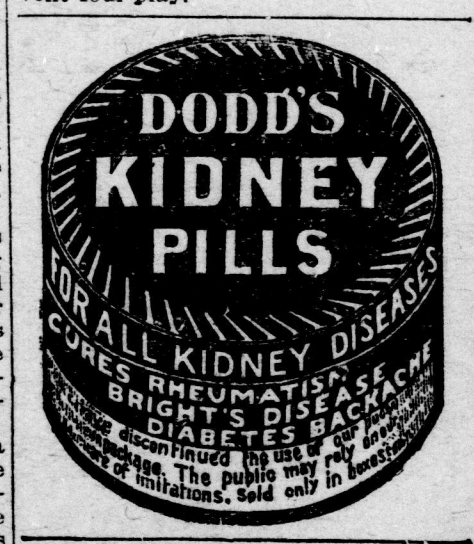
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and dressing of the King's head and beard." He was further required to "take a special regard to the pure and clean keeping of his own person and apparel, using himself always honestly in his conversation, without resorting to the company of vile persons," and so on. Thus we have the beginning of asepsis. When he was shaving the King a knight of the chamber or a squire of the body, or both, were required to be present in order to prevent foul play.



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