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The White Cat

[BY GELETT BURGESS, AUTHOR OF "VIVETTE."
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If I had needed to exercise my self-restraint on that other evening when she attempted to provoke me, it was much more necessary now, for she had become less differentiated, intellectually, from Joy; so much so, at least, as to permit me at times to give my imagination play; and fancy her, for the moment, the real Joy, my Joy in an alluring guise, tintured with wild fire. The line of cleavage now was more along moral lines. Edna's mind was evolving at the expense of her ethical nature. Her temptation was seductive and arrantly conceived to torment me; I was sure that it was intended to shake my allegiance to her rival self. It was like playing with edged tools to be alone with her. In her intervals of repose she fell so naturally into Joy's poses that it was disconcerting. It was like the Faerie Queen over again; like an errant knight, I was confronted by the image of my mistress so cunningly enchanted that I could not tell till she spoke that her body was obsessed by another spirit. She asked me much about the day before, and about what she had done and said. As the evening wore on and she could not defeat my continual evasions, she began to grow sullen and reserved. Finally, she appeared to give it up, and went upstairs with a sarcastic emphasis to her "Good night, Prig."

Next morning I lay in bed for some time after I awoke, planning my day. If it were Joy who appeared there, were several things to be decided upon and accomplished; if Edna, a conflict was imminent which caused me much anxiety. Queerly enough, the proposal I would have to make to Joy seemed almost as if it would be an ex post facto agreement. I had already announced my engagement to the doctor, but I had not made my bluff without holding a pretty good hand. I couldn't doubt, by this time, how Joy felt toward me.

At eight o'clock I heard the customary dialogue—Miss Fielding's door being still ajar—but I noticed that her voice was quick and excited. Leah was called in immediately, and the two women seemed to have more than the usual amount of talk together.

Next, I heard the dogs barking in answer to their names; but there were only three replies to Joy's calls today; Poor old Nokomis would never greet her mistress again. Then the door was closed. Joy evidently did not wait to have breakfast, as usual, in her room, for fifteen minutes later I heard her going downstairs.

Fearing that something was wrong, though I was sure, now, that it was Joy herself whom I had heard, I rose and dressed as quickly as I could. I found her in the library waiting for me.

She held a folded paper in her hand

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as she sat by the window, looking out listlessly. I bade her good morning; she looked up without a smile and silently handed me the paper. Unfolding it, I saw, written in a round, childish, vertical script, the words: "I know you now—Cat!"

"I found this pinned to my pillow when I woke up," she said. "It's from Edna." Then a faint, dreamy smile softened her lips as she said, "You see, even to her, I am the White Cat!"

"How do you know it's from Edna?" "It's her handwriting. She writes very differently from me."

I looked at it wondering. It was the first shot in the battle. "You see, she has found out. Her eyes are opened," Joy said.

"Yes, I was going to tell you about it today. I suspected it yesterday, and it has proved true. It complicates things immensely."

"Leah has told me that I struck her, too. Think of it! It makes me positively faint. What horrible part of me has come to the surface in Edna? What undiscovered self is it that is torturing me so? It's a hideous revelation. It shows how depraved I must be at heart."

"It isn't you!" I declared. "It's another woman, quite. It's only you in the sense that it would be you if you were intoxicated, or if you were dreaming, or insane. You mustn't think of yourself as in any way responsible."

"Then of course she's not, either?" "No more than a child, or an idiot. She uses your body and your mind, but she isn't you. It makes me feel that I am a puppet, a marionette, a thing of straw, a thing of mud, a thing of air, a thing of nothing."

"I think I can prove that to you," I answered, "but I have a great deal to say to you first."

I think she knew then; I think she hoped to hear what I was going to say; for she gave me her hand, and smiled up at me as she rose to go into breakfast. We sat down with Leah at the table.

I had taken it for granted that Leah had told Joy everything that had happened the day before, and so not wishing to grieve her further, I took care to say nothing about Nokomis. But the swelling on Leah's cheek could not be so easily ignored, and several times I saw the tears come into Joy's eyes at the sight of it.

"We were there the clock struck half-past eight. At the sound of the bell, an expression of abstraction came into it. It was as if she were trying to recall something that eluded her memory. Then she half rose, like a somnambulist."

"I think I'll run upstairs and telephone the doctor," she said, without looking at me.

"Why should you?" I asked, much surprised, after the way we had talked.

"I don't know," she said vaguely, looking about the room. "Oughtn't he to know how I treated Leah? Perhaps he can prevent that in some way."

"You'd better not, Joy," I said. "She stood for a moment irresolute, and then, as if urged by some extraneous impulse, she moved a little near the door."

"I just want to find out if he's coming down today," she said automatically.

ing some force that was drawing her out of the room, sat down limply, half rose again, resealed herself.

"Resist!" I said to her. Leah looked on without a word, breathless, her lips open.

Joy looked madly at me. "What is it, Chester? Tell me!"

"It's only a post-hypnotic suggestion, that's all. You must defeat it."

Then she literally shook herself free from the obsession. "Oh, why am I tortured and racked so!" she exclaimed. "Can't I be permitted to be myself when I am myself? Isn't it bad enough to be robbed of myself half the time without his imposing his will on me now? Why is he doing this?"

"That's just what I want to find out," I said. "The important thing is not to give in to him. His experiments may possibly be justified, but I don't think so. We certainly have good ground to suspect him. Have you quite got over your desire to telephone?"

"Yes—but it's queer—I can't still think of reasons why I might, though of course I agree with you that it's not best to. You see, I've only given up to you instead of to him. I'm quite in the dark now; I seem to have no will of my own. I can't judge, I can't understand even my own impulses. Well, if I'm blind you and Leah will lead me, won't you?"

She reached over and took Leah's hand affectionately.

When we finished breakfast, Joy and I went into the library. There was an old, gilt-framed, concave mirror there, over the fireplace, that gathered in and focused on its disk the whole room in one condensed, shadowy scene. Joy went up to it.

"Aren't we queer and strange in there?" she said. "It's so dim and ghostly; when I look up and see anyone in it, it always seems to me like some scene of Maeterlinck or Sudermann."

She walked over to another glass, more formal and more true, and looked at herself intently.

"Look at the lines about my eyes! They weren't there a year ago! My whole face has changed. . . I have grown ten years older this last month. . . My eyes themselves are different. . . There's another wrinkle. . . I wish my eyebrows were even. . . I believe my nose is one-sided, too. . ."

Her voice died away. I looked up and saw her gazing into the mirror with a strange intentness. Her brow was puckered into a frown. Suddenly her hand went to her heart with a gesture of horror.

"Oh!" she cried, and hid her face in her hands.

"What is it?" I asked.

"The doctor!" she exclaimed, shuddering.

"Tell me!" I insisted.

Instead, she sprang up and began to walk up and down the room, wringing her hands. "It's awful; it's all confused in my mind, like a dream—but I seem to remember things that never happened at all. Oh, did they ever happen?" she turned to demand of me in despair.

"That's what I want you to tell me," I said.

She dropped into her chair again and began to cry—"Oh, I can't tell you! I can't! It never happened. I'm sure! What does it mean, Chester?"

"It's probably what happened here yesterday," Edna—that you remember, Joy."

Never, never!"

"It isn't that," I protested. "I love you, Joy—I have loved you for a long time, and loving you, I want to save you, not only for your sake, but for my own as well. I want you for my wife, Joy! Don't you love me?"

Her tears had ceased and now she looked at me with bright eyes that burned softly.

"My dear," she said, "of course I love you! I think I have loved you ever since that first day you came here. But for that very reason I must say no. How could I ever drag you into this wretched trouble?"

"Oh, I'm in it all over, whether or no," I said. "Do you think I could ever leave you now? Were I only your friend, even, I'd have to stay with you; but I'm your lover, Joy! I'm most desperately in love with you. And I intend to have you, too!"

No matter what you say, no matter what you do, you're mine, and you can't get away from me. So you'd better just say 'yes' this moment."

She sat up and looked at me tenderly. "Don't speak of it again—not till all this problem is settled, at least. It's impossible. Do you think I could think of it after what has happened, after I've found out what I really am? If I am ever released from this spell—if I can ever forget what I've just found out, it will be time enough to speak of love. But not now, I beg of you. I'm the White Cat!"

"I've already told the doctor that we're engaged," I said.

"You told the doctor!" she exclaimed. "How could you?"

I repeated our conversation in the lane. Her momentary resentment at me died away at hearing the doctor's own announcement.

"Then perhaps Edna is in love with him, after all. That would account for much, and excuse everything, perhaps." She drew a sigh of relief at the thought of this palliation.

"I don't think she is, but she might be willing to marry him to get her freedom," I offered.

"But then, if Edna is in love, I have still less right to let you propose to me. Why, just think of it—it's incredible! If they're engaged—"

"They're not engaged, I'm sure."

"It makes no difference—she may care for him more than you think. It's fearful! I can't talk about it!"

"But she can't marry him! We must prevent that! Think of the horror of that possibility!"

To Be Continued.

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