

The Black Cat



July 1896

ON THE LAST TRAIL.
N.W. PHILLIPS & RUPERT HUGHES.

A MESSAGE FROM WHERE?
L. FRANCIS BISHOP.

THE MAN WITH THE BOX.
GEORGE W. TRIPP.

WHAT THE MOON SAW.
ISABELLE MEREDITH.

IN MISS POLLY'S PEW.
ELLEN FRIZELL WYCOFF.



Ug6

THE SHORTSTORY PUBLISHING CO 144 HIGH ST. BOSTON, MASS.

A Message from Where?

BY L. FRANCIS BISHOP.



WHEN a young lad, I was rummaging one day through an attic filled with broken-down furniture, clothes, books, toys, and odds and ends of every description, which, having long ago served their purpose, were now scattered about these lonely rooms, dust-covered, faded, and forgotten.

At one end of the place, in a corner formed by a gable, I came upon my favorite mystery — an old cedar chest, which had stood there as long as I could recollect, always with the appearance of never having been unlocked. Being a dreamy, imaginative child, I filled the chest with every conceivable horror: children had been murdered and hidden beneath its heavy lid; tortures unspeakable had been inflicted within its neighborhood; the groans of the dead and the shrieks of the dying might, to my excited fancy, be heard in the echoes of the vast, dreary place surrounding it. At times I listened at the keyhole to find if, by some unknown power, those ill-fated infants might not still be living; sometimes I fancied even that I heard rustling whispers, again a sigh, until my blood ran cold with the fancies born of imagination.

Never having been allowed playmates by the grandmother who reared me, I grew to love these ghostly children of my own creation, who gradually came to be my comrades, and the confidants of all my childish sorrows. I was an only child and grandchild, and an orphan, my father and grandfather having been killed while fighting under the flag of the United States for the Union, while my mother had died at my birth.

One day, in my hunger for companionship, I picked up from the street a poor, starving kitten, and carried it home, where, however, I was promptly commanded to drop my newly found treasure into the pond at the foot of the hill. Had they bid me

drop myself into the pond I might very likely have done so, for I was ordinarily an obedient little soul, but the utter helplessness of that shivering little creature roused me to a great resolve. That afternoon I carried the forlorn kitten to the old cedar chest, knowing she would be safe, fancying no one knew of this deserted corner of the attic which I had always regarded as a special discovery of my own, and resolved to guard the secret of my wonderland in my comings and goings by every possible stratagem.

About this time my governess had cause to labor with me over the greasy state of my jacket pockets, but failed to trace their condition to the transmission of some of my own meals to my guest in the attic, who day by day grew sleek and round. Many a game of ball and romps we played, raising about us the dead dust and the ghostly echoes, which contrasted strangely with the gambols and graceful antics of my small companion.

Miss Celia, who was my governess,— if she had another name, I had not heard it,— was tall and thin, with a washed-out appearance, especially about the eyes, which were almost colorless, with heavy red lids, swollen as from weeping, and fringed with pale, sparse lashes; her nose was straight and delicate, her mouth thin, drawn, and pale, while her cheeks were painfully hollow, the bones of the face standing out in unpleasant prominence. I do not recollect that I ever saw her smile, and although she was strict with my lessons, it was in a spiritless way, as if forcing herself for conscience's sake to perform thoroughly and properly a duty in which she had little, if any, interest. During all those years of association I never got nearer her or came to know her better than on the first day when she began my instructions with the A, B, C. As for giving her affection, it never occurred to me; indeed, she seemed to repel the idea of love and tenderness. If the springs of human sympathy had ever gushed through her heart, it seemed to me that the waters must long since have dried up or sunk out of sight.

In the course of time my kitten, much to my delight, arrived at the dignity of having a family. Joy, however, speedily changed to consternation on my discovery of their ability for tumbling off the old chest, and sending up their shrill, small voices in anything but a mild protest. Indeed, it became speedily

apparent that I was in danger of being found out unless I could manage to find them a safer domicile—a problem that haunted me almost hourly, until finally it occurred to me to force open the chest, putting them inside instead of outside. Without stopping to meditate on the possible outcome of this reckless prying into the unknown, I found a hammer and chisel and set to work. At the second blow the hasp flew from the rotten wood.

Lifting the lid, trembling in every part of me, I was first greeted with a fine dust which bore to my nostrils the faint odor of dead violets. Presently, finding courage to open my eyes, I peered cautiously about into the far corners, where the shadows seemed to move, starting at every sound. At last, taking the purring young mother in my arms to gain courage from something warm and living, I bent to look upon the expected horror.

Was I dreaming, or in fairyland? There lay before me a mist of fairy-like ball dresses; laces, which I afterwards learned were of priceless value, silks, brocades, embroideries, and velvets! Young as I was and inexperienced in the price of woman's attire, I knew this was a find of considerable importance; but how came they to be here, why left, and why so neglected, were questions to which I failed to find an answer.

Reverently as if the fairies themselves had laid them there to brighten my lonely childhood, I took them out one by one. How the long ago seemed to exhale itself from their musty folds! Through the clouds of misty lace I almost fancied appeared the form of a woman; what was she like, I wondered. Was she living or dead, dark or fair; tall and radiant, or some small, ethereal creature who quickly passed to another sphere? Had she renounced the world, and vowed herself to poverty and celibacy, leaving all her bravery and finery here to molder and rust away unseen, things of feminine vanity put out of her life forever? Had she no relatives who might value them? Did my grandmother know of the existence of this chest and its contents, or had some pirate hidden it here for safe keeping, unknown to any one? Such were the fancies that crowded through my boyish mind, now alert for almost any romantic discovery. Examining the chest more boldly, I found that into either end there was built a long, shallow box with the lid fastened by brass hooks;

hastily undoing these, I discovered in one a purple morocco case filled with quaint old pieces of jewelry, among which I came upon a large seal ring with a crest; inside the gold was engraved, "From John to Jim." Putting these back in their places, I examined the box in the other side, but here I found what seemed at first only a lot of old letters, yellow with age, and faintly scented with violets.

Closer search, however, revealed at the bottom of the box a small oval case covered with faded violet velvet and fastened by an unseen spring that for several minutes resisted my clumsy fingers, trembling with delicious apprehension. But even my most romantic imaginings had failed to prepare me for the dreamlike loveliness of that face, exquisitely painted on ivory, that laughed back at me as the case disclosed its secret.

I had found, indeed, the fairy of the old chest! Peeping out from the fair ringlets of long ago, that oval face of fresh young maidenhood, those laughing blue eyes, luminous with the light that shines from an untroubled soul, that delicate nose and chin curving into the rounded cheek, those full, red, parted lips, dimpling away from the small white teeth, all held me enthralled. Opposite was the pictured face of a man. It was years before I understood the strength and magnetism of this man's face.

But, boy though I was, for the next five or six years of my life I was completely absorbed by the pictured beauty of the woman. At first she took the form of a fairy, risen from the ashes of the old chest; then a new fancy seized me, and I determined, when grown to manhood, to search the world for that face's owner, and when found to make her my wife.

Another favorite playground with me, especially when the fruit trees were ripening, was an old family burial-ground, a short distance back of the stables and now converted into an orchard. On some of the tombstones the dates ran back over two hundred years, and, with one or two exceptions, the stones were crumbly, dilapidated, and either fallen or tottering earthward; while the names and lettering on many of them were worn nearly smooth by the action of time and weather. It was a place almost as silent and deserted out-of-doors as the old attic was within.

About five or six years after the finding of the pictures, I came home from college for the summer holidays, having long ago outgrown the leading-strings of a governess. For some reason, unknown to me, however, Miss Celia still remained with us. Indeed, she had always been treated like one of the family, my grandmother showing great affection for her, although she was no kindred of ours.

Meantime the pictured face of the chest had continued to exert its old fascination over me, a fascination now strongly tinged with curiosity. Who was she? Where had she come from, and whence gone? were questions I asked in vain until one night, when, after the household had retired, I was seized with the impulse to play one of my boyish pranks, and stole softly out to the graveyard in search of fruit.

As I was reaching for some fine summer apples hanging over my head, I was startled by a groan, and instantly frozen into that position by a creeping, horrible fear; slowly my arms fell without volition of my own, and the next moment I dropped to the earth in a swoon of terror.

How long I lay there with my face buried in the damp, dew-wet grass I could not tell; but gradually I became conscious of another presence near me, and a presence of great suffering. First, I heard a sigh,—so sad and mournful it was like to break my own young heart to hear it,—followed by a woman's low, despairing sobs, so keen in their intensity of despair and pain that I found the courage to raise my head, and the impulse to go to her assistance, be she real or phantom.

But before I could struggle to my feet I heard a voice thrilling with an agony of longing cry: "Jim! Jim! Can you know now how I loved you, and how bitterly have expiated my sin in driving you to your death?"

For a moment only the tense and terrible grief of those despairing words penetrated my consciousness. The next instant something familiar in the tone sent me stumbling hastily in the direction of the sound. Yes, it was as I had thought,—the voice was the voice of Miss Celia! It was my old governess, who, late at night, wept alone in the deserted graveyard, where I had never seen her before. Was she asleep and walking through a dream,

or had she lost her reason? She was kneeling beside a grave at some distance from me, where the starlight fell soft and clear about her; again I heard her voice murmuring in an agony of prayer: "O God, how long before I lay my aching heart upon his breast to be at rest?" As I gazed upon her pale, worn face upturned to the faint, ghostly light, I felt that I rested very near the borderland between the living and the dead. Whatever her trouble, it went deep and was embittered with a touch of remorse. Turning quietly, I stole softly back to the house, that she might not know I had witnessed her sorrow.

The next day, having been vexed all night with the question, "Who was Jim?" I sought the grave where I had seen her kneeling the night before, and found a gray granite stone with this inscription: —

"JAMES G. FURGESON. •

A MAN OF GREAT COURAGE, WHO COULD AFFORD TO BE
MISUNDERSTOOD."

"James G. Furgeson!" Why, that was my own name! I pinched myself to see if I were really alive, or lying there dead and buried. It would give a creepy sensation to the stoutest-hearted man to stand beside a grave, and unexpectedly find his own name staring at him from the head of it. And this man with my own name was a man of courage, while I — well, I had never dreamed there was a grain of courage in my composition, until one occasion in my college life, which surprised me even more than it did my classmates. But who was this other James G. Furgeson? I had never heard him spoken of, and supposed myself the only one of that name. After puzzling over the matter for a good half hour I determined to ask "Mammy," my old black nurse, who had grown up with grandmother and knew all the family history; had there been such a man, she would know all about him. But on hearing my eager inquiry Mammy said only: "Shu-u-u, honey chile! Done yo' go fur to mention hees name in dis yere house, 'less yo' wants ter make yo' granmudder heap sor'ful: dat name ain' spoke no mo' cose it gwine make mo' en one heart hebby 'roun' yere. Now mine wut I tole yo', en

done yo' ax no mo' questions 'bout dat name. Does yo' hyear wat I'se tollen yo'?"

Plainly there was nothing to be gained from Mammy.

The following day Miss Celia was ill, they said; the doctor came, shaking his head gravely. I had never felt any affection for her, being rather repelled by her unattractive appearance and cold manner; but the glimpse I had caught that night of a deep and terrible suffering took strong hold upon me, and I felt a great sympathy for this poor, lonely creature who had guided my first hesitating steps along the path of learning.

For two days after this it rained steadily, a dull, drizzling, depressing kind of rain. The horses and dogs had failed to interest me. "Jim! Jim! Who was 'Jim'?" kept calling through my brain. Finally, going to the house, I sought Mammy and once more made an effort to coax from her an explanation.

"Go way frum dar, chile! ain' I done tole yo' dat yo' got nuffin ter do wid dat story? Does yo' 'spose, 'cose yo's gwine ter dat college, dat yo' is too big fo' me ter whoop yo' en make yo' mine me, wen I tole yo' shet up bout suffin? Yo' fine dat yo' ole mammy kin han'le yo' yit."

Giving Mammy a pinch on her fat arm, and dodging her right hand, which was aimed for a box of the ear, I made my way to the attic, where once more I studied the lovely features of my first and thus far only love.

I found the face unchanged; the same sweetness lingered about the mouth, the eyes still smiled back into mine with an innocent merriment, the long, fair curls nestled against the exquisitely rounded cheek, no sorrow marked the pictured face.

O happy, beautiful love of the long ago, where time made no heartrending changes!

Again I took from its purple morocco case the seal ring, again read the inscription "From John to Jim."

"Jim!" That name haunted me, following and facing me everywhere. John was my father's name, and Jim belonged to me. Who was this other Jim? Why must I ask no questions about him? In some unaccountable way I seemed to be near and dear to both names; while the ring itself, when I touched it, brought to me a presence I never had known, yet felt in every fiber of my

being. Was it a relative? or my father, who was killed before my birth? or the broken-hearted mother whose life passed away in giving me mine? What is this feeling of something near, yet ever beyond me? a something intangible of companionship in my loneliness, a touch of the now and here with the past and hereafter? What is this thing which almost speaks to my soul, yet eludes and escapes my physical consciousness at the moment it wakens it, an unknown, vanishing memory?

Carrying some of the old letters to the dim light which fell through small dust-covered panes in the top of the gable, I sought the knowledge of my picture-love through their medium. The first one I read, which bore a date in the fall of '63, was written in a firm, bold hand, and began as follows:—

“Dear and ever dear you are to me, my love, but what you ask is impossible. Your sister is fortunate, as you say, in having married a Southron.

“That I was so blessed in winning your love seems strange to me yet. I have but one regret at present,—that of bringing some pain into your life, where I would have nothing but brightness and happiness, which of right seems only to belong to you; otherwise, how immeasurably happy I am.

“When I look forward to the future and anticipate the coming years with you by my side, thinking of the pride my mother will feel in the beautiful daughter of the South I am bringing her, I can scarcely —”

Here the faded paper was torn, and the rest of the letter missing.

The next one was in a woman's fine old-time handwriting, bearing a later date.

“*Dear Jim*:— You say you love me; you also claim to be a man of courage; if that be true, ‘courage’ must be spelled and read differently in the North than we know it in the South; here we are loyal to our friends and those we claim to love, not in protestation, but in deed. I am a Southern woman from the heart out, and will never marry a man who takes up arms against me and my people.

“If you really loved me, you would join our soldiers and fight for me and my home; since you refuse, I must either think you do not love me, or that you are a coward.

“We need every man we can get in the field; I would rather see you there *dead* than here living, knowing you without courage.

Yours,

“CELIA.”

Dated — The Pine Plantation, Ga.

In the envelope was another letter penned by the same hand as the first one.

“*My Celia*: — For the last time I may call you so. My love for you has been so great that it held me here until too late to join my father and brother in the North, where I should be now fighting by their side for the old flag under which we all were born, North and South alike; think you I could fire upon it?

“As you know, my father is a Northern man, my mother a Southern woman; while I was born and reared in the North, my mother’s blood in me has always yearned for the South. You ask me to do what you would not do yourself, — take up arms against the land where I was born, and a long line of sires before me; to fire upon the flag that floated over my cradle. And much as I love you, I refuse to do so. You cannot believe me a coward, or you would never have given me your love.

“To-night I find my first relief from this terrible inaction and your injustice. The package which accompanies this letter will be delivered to you when you are safely conducted within the city limits. I remain here to try and protect your home from a band of blacks and white men who have planned attacking it to-night. I have known this for some time, and am proud to say there is not a Northern man among them. My one anxiety has been to place you and your sister in a place of safety, keeping the knowledge from you.

“There are only three of us, two old men and myself, against large numbers; the result is certain; but at least I know that here my duty is not conflicting, and points straight ahead of me. Do you understand now why I pleaded so hard for the farewell kiss which you refused me?

“It is impossible at this time to foretell how this war will terminate; but should it go against the South, the day will come when you may need friends. I ask you, when the war is over, to take my body home and have it placed in the old burial-ground where I played when a boy. I need say no more for your guidance; they will know what to do in the old homestead at the North where some day I had hoped to carry you, a bride.

“O my darling, how my heart goes out to you in longing to comfort you in your hour of sorrow! How I wish you had known me better! We men of the North may seem cold, but are not without courage, and know how to love as well as fight.

“I send you the ring brother John gave me when I came of age. Carry it back to him, if he still lives; if not, keep it.

“Good-by, and may God watch over us all this night, both North and South alike.

“Faithfully yours in life or death,

“JAMES G. FURGESON.”

This letter was marred with the stain of tears, being in places so blurred that many of the words had to be guessed at or fitted in. On the back, in a woman's trembling hand, was written, “They brought him to me the next day, riddled with bullets. Dead! dead! O my love! my love!”

Softly, reverently, I laid away the faded old letters. To have read more would have seemed a sacrilege. I seemed to have stepped into an open grave. At last I understood.

Stealing downstairs, I found the doctor going and my grandmother weeping. Turning with a sudden impulse, I ran to Miss Celia's room. But even before I crossed the threshold I knew what I should find within. At last God had answered her prayer, and she lay at rest, her face transfigured by the only happy expression I had ever seen her wear.

As the light fell over the poor, worn face I stooped and pressed a kiss on the dead lips of my first and unknown love, whispering as I did so, “For Jim!”