

# The Black Cat

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## September 1901

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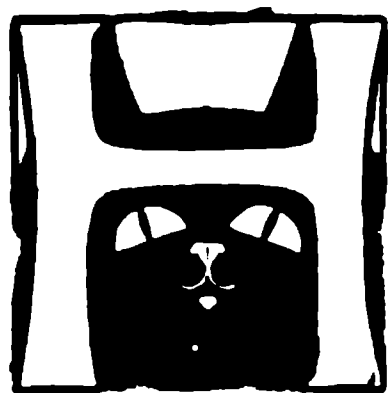
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## Gentlemen Unafraid.\*

BY FLORENCE GUERTIN TUTTLE.



HASTINGS had always been sensitive to atmospheric influences. He had, therefore, not been at Westmoreland twelve hours before he felt the presence of a subtle undercurrent. He divined, too, that he was not intended to fathom it. Whatever the mystery enveloping this old Virginia home, its occupants—two brothers, the last of their race—did not wish to become the means of enlightenment.

The brothers were marked by no peculiarity except a more than fraternal courtesy and mutual devotion. They were men of artistic instincts whom affluence had not enervated nor prevented from cultivating their talents. When weary with work and with being "citizens of the world," they came to this quiet home with its halo of past glory.

Hastings had been sent for as junior member of a New York firm to draw up a will for the elder brother. Oliver Crowninshield, savant and litterateur, had been troubled by a persistent insomnia brought on by overwork. He had produced a book of verse that had the merit of not disturbing the Rialto, while it brought joy to a discerning few.

Francis Crowninshield, the younger brother, was an artist and

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architect. Though abrupt and absent-minded, he possessed the saving quality of drollery which appreciated even his own shortcomings. This was supplemented by a gift of human kindness which made him a brother to all men. Though cordial in manner, each brother was enveloped in a reserve which generally accompanies a pure strain of gentle breeding. In feature Francis Crowninshield was comely, while Oliver was classic in regularity. In stature they were of the same medium height and build.

Hastings's work was soon finished. His intention had been to make a holiday of necessity and while he was on Southern soil to push "on to Richmond" to visit its scenes of Colonial, Revolutionary and Civil War interest.

His business transacted, he found himself remaining without apparent reason. One day Francis detained him with a sail down the James. The next, Oliver beguiled him in the library with a bibliophile's treasures. The brothers' love of Nature, their knowledge of men and of books, held him enchanted. Oliver was his favorite until opportunity threw him alone with Francis. Then Francis was the man whom his soul had thirsted to meet.

He felt now that these fascinations had been exerted with design. The brothers had deliberately delayed his departure. Why had each, last evening, with thinly-veneered eagerness and without the knowledge of the other, asked him to remain? What was the catastrophe each secretly hoped his presence might avert?

On the morning of the fourth day he went downstairs pondering the motive of his double invitation. In the square hall he stopped to look at the old portraits that lined its walls. The sword had been willingly wielded by the Crowninshield ancestry. Hastings noted the blue and yellow of the Continental uniform, the gray of the Confederacy, and even the red coats of King George. A slight noise diverted his attention. From the hall he could look through a vista into the billiard room. Standing upon a chair in this room Hastings saw Oliver Crowninshield. He had loosened the leather cord stretched across the billiard room to hold the scoring buttons. He now held this cord in his hands in the shape of a noose.

Involuntarily Hastings started forward. At the same time Francis Crowninshield entered the billiard room from an opposite

door. He hurried to his brother and gently took the cord. When he saw Hastings his manner assumed a sudden gaiety.

“Ah, brother!” he exclaimed, “are you trying to tidy the house so early? The critics say that you can make fairly good lines, but you can’t mend this one. It hasn’t been renewed since McClellan held a house-party here. Would you like to see one of our souvenirs of that stag visit, Mr. Hastings? Observe that door,” pointing to one of mahogany, set in the white wainscoating. “Our little brothers of the North were pleased to use its panels for pistol practice. See the bullet holes, if you please. An enterprising manager of a railroad has offered us a comfortable sum to open Westmoreland, which is closed the larger part of the year, to tourists who would enjoy feasting their eyes upon that door. The public, you know, has ever morbidly wished to see the scars and thrust its hands into the wounds.”

Hastings felt that Francis Crowninshield’s conversation was a subterfuge, yet to cover what he could not say.

“If you are interested in old portraits,” Oliver said, breaking his silence as they seated themselves at the breakfast table, “we must tell you the history of some of those in the hall. The man in the ruff, near the fireplace, fought in Bacon’s Rebellion. The faded gentleman next to him was once fiery and served under Cromwell. The Stuart portrait is our great-grandfather. He gave Cornwallis a sharp lesson in this section. Our race seems to have been born Dissenters, fearing neither gods nor devils—gentlemen unafraid.”

He was called from the room and Francis gave an abrupt laugh.

“Gentlemen Unafraid,” he quoted, as he placed his spoon in his grape fruit. “Don’t be too much impressed with our venerable valor, Mr. Hastings. The cowards didn’t get into canvas, that’s all. Posterity, you know, always idealizes. Confidentially, that old gentleman before whom you are expected to salaam was more celebrated for his punch than his punches. His son repaid him by being a dipsomaniac, while *his* issue, our grandfather, developed epilepsy.”

“And your father?” Hastings asked.

“Suffered from the sins of his fathers, of course,” in a tone which announced that further family communications had ceased.

A smell of burnt leather penetrated the air. Outside a gardener was burning refuse. When Hastings passed the billiard room he noticed that the leather cord had been removed.

As he sat writing letters at an old escritoire in his room, Francis Crowninshield entered. He apologized for his intrusion and then went with his usual abruptness to the heart of the matter that was agitating him.

"Mr. Hastings," he said, "I could see that your suspicions were aroused by the unfortunate scene in the billiard room this morning. I want to tell you the meaning of that scene, and why I have so urgently begged you to remain. Your presence may avert a tragedy. My brother, through overwork, has suffered from nervous exhaustion. This developed into melancholia, which has recently shown suicidal impulse. When I tell you that our father died in an insane asylum you may understand my reason for alarm."

A servant knocked and said Mr. Oliver desired his brother to join him at the stables.

"He does not wish me to be alone with you," Francis whispered after the servant had gone. "Would you mind taking a walk at eleven? Strike off to the left through the woods. I will meet you at the opening near the highway beyond. I must see you. It is asking much, I know, of you, a stranger, to remain, but —"

"Don't mention it, Mr. Crowninshield," Hastings replied, wishing to allay his host's suffering, his sympathies strongly stirred. "I will do what I can for you. Your brother is the gentlest gentleman I have ever met. Your devotion will save him, I know."

"Thank you," Francis Crowninshield said, shaking his hand appreciatively, and quickly left the room.

Hastings's mind refused to concentrate upon his letters. Suicidal mania seemed written upon the page. What a Nemesis to pursue one to whom Fate had otherwise been so generous!

Another knock at the door. At Hastings's word Oliver Crowninshield entered. His dreamy eyes were now alert. Hastings thought that he had never before seen beauty blended with refinement of so high an order in one man's face.

"I — I have something that I must say to you alone, Mr. Hastings," he began with dignity, yet evident embarrassment, "but hardly know how to begin. Do you believe in heredity?"

“Not necessarily,” Hastings answered, stooping to pick up a pin to hide his own embarrassment. He would have given his chances of a judgeship to escape this man’s self-humiliating confession.

“I asked you to remain at Westmoreland not solely for the great pleasure of your company,” the low tones continued, with the soft, fascinating Southern accent. “There is a terrible taint in our family.” He spoke slowly. Hastings felt an intense longing to help him — to spare him — but was bound not to speak. “Sometimes this taint appears as violent insanity — sometimes as a mild monomania. Or it takes the form of —” he moistened his lips, “suicidal tendency.”

The pathos of the case filled Hastings with a choking sensation. He could not listen to this man’s plea to be saved from himself.

“I understand,” he said quickly. “I shall write the firm that I shall remain on the James — for the hunting and fishing.”

“Thank you,” Oliver said, wiping his forehead and pale face. “Otherwise, I fear the most tragic results for — *my brother Francis.*”

Hastings recoiled.

“Your brother Francis?” he echoed.

“Yes,” covering his face with his hands. “He is struggling against suicidal mania.”

“Good God!” Hastings exclaimed, under his breath.

“You are shocked?” Oliver asked, regaining his composure now that his burden had been delivered. “The view of suicide is purely educational. What we call life may be the real death. The ancients did not consider suicide an evil. The hemlock draught was legitimate. The Stoics practised it. The Jews authorized it in preference to falling into the hands of an enemy. Is not disease an enemy? The Bible has two great suicides, Samson and Saul. Epictetus taught: ‘If you do not like your life you may leave it; the door is open.’”

“But surely you do not sanction such a course?” Hastings exclaimed in revulsion.

The iris of the soft brown eyes contracted. Their radii seemed to focus upon Hastings in two piercing points.

“Of course not,” Oliver replied softly. “I only wish to tell you that my brother is not alone in believing in the individual

right of exit when interest in the play has ceased. It is always the unsatisfied inquiring intellect that wishes to take this step. Think of the beacon lights of history who have gratified this impulse — Demosthenes, Mithridates, Hannibal — the Carthaginian wore poison constantly in a ring. And there are others too countless to name.”

Hastings felt like a man who had been shot twice in the same place. His brain was blurred. He longed to be alone and probe his wound.

“Of course you understand that the suicidal impulse is curable,” Oliver continued. Hastings had never before felt so completely the possibility and charm of music in the human voice. “Lord Clive in early life twice attempted suicide. But he lived long afterwards and gained power and fame.”

“Clive shot himself at fifty,” Hastings corrected.

A swift look of resentment shot over Oliver Crowninshield’s face. He was too much in love with his theories — too accustomed to having them accepted — to bear contradiction.

“There comes a time at least once to every thinking being when death is preferable to life,” he asserted.

“Yes, when the emotions have been abnormally strained,” Hastings argued. “But self-preservation is the first law of life. May you not be mistaken about your brother?”

“You mean because he is sane on every other subject? The desire for self-destruction may be present where there is no intellectual delusion. Moreover, the insane, when watched, will assume a cheerfulness for weeks. Don’t you know why I was taking that cord down this morning? It was as a preventive. Last night I found Francis testing a rope made of twisted towels.”

Again Hastings recoiled. One of these men was departing from the truth. Hastings realized the horror of his position when he became conscious that he could not determine which one.

When he was free he struck out for the woods. The beauty of the landscape was blotted out by the hideous abstractions of his thoughts. How often he had wished to visit an old-time Southern mansion! How often Fate grants our wishes, but in a form that crushes desire!

He saw Francis Crowninshield sitting upon a bawlder by the

highway. Hastings's first impulse was to tell him of his brother's awful countercharges. Then discretion bade him wait. The habitual instinct of the lawyer suggested that he hear both sides of the evidence. Wisdom must then weigh the testimony and decide which man was sane.

He chose carefully the words that he would say.

"Mr. Crowninshield," he began, "you told me you did not wish your brother to know that you had asked me to remain at Westmoreland. Yet he had already asked me, last evening, himself."

If Hastings had expected this statement to precipitate confusion he was disappointed.

"I am not surprised," Francis replied, his eyes moistening. "It was a pathetic appeal to be saved from himself. He is torn with the old, old conflict of good and evil forces. We cannot tell what superhuman efforts Oliver is making to win."

Hastings leaned against the fence, baffled. "I must retract my word of this morning," he said, trying another tack. He regarded his companion from the corner of his eye. "The case is too serious. I cannot remain. Your brother should be placed under scientific treatment."

"Have you had any experience with insane institutions? The mere presence of those demented would drive him mad."

"Then have a physician here."

"Oliver would resent it. His cunning would only more cleverly outwit us. This is not a case for drugs or surgery, Mr. Hastings. We must 'minister to a mind diseased.' The successful physician of the future must also be a metaphysician. At present I know of none such."

Hastings's eyes turned full and searched his companion's apparently frank features. Could he believe him? Consciousness replied, could he disbelieve him? Then he thought of the other brother's loving solicitude. How could he discredit him?

"Why not try travel?" Hastings suggested.

"And have him jump from a boat or train?"

Hastings shuddered.

"No, all that he needs Mr. Hastings, is careful watching and healthful diversion. I will supply the first. Your presence will offer the second. We will shoot, fish and explore the historic



places in the vicinity. Why should you shrink from remaining?" he demanded resentfully, reading Hastings's thoughts. "You would not have known of this weakness if I had not told you. Does not my brother offer unusual charm as a companion? His trouble is due to temperament as well as taint. Every poet is half mad. Byron said that he expected to die at the top first, like poor Swift. But my brother shall not die!" he exclaimed passionately. His face flushed. His eyes flamed. Hastings saw the pent-up passion contained in this man's nature. Was it the demon that was consuming him? Hastings wondered as he watched the paroxysm pass.

"I have made a study of this subject, Mr. Hastings," Francis continued, controlling himself. "Insanity is divided into two kinds—acute and chronic. Acute insanity is subdivided into general paralysis of the insane, chronic mania,"—counting them off on his fingers—"dementia, idiocy, imbecility and softening of the brain."

"For Heaven's sake stop, or I'll have them all," Hastings exclaimed.

"If you are to remain you must understand," Francis said firmly. "We fear only the unknown. Melancholia taking the form of suicidal impulse is curable. At least, so the best authorities assert. Homicidal tendency is not."

"I will remain," Hastings said, as the quickest way of cutting short the conversation. The brothers' mutual knowledge of this dread malady, he felt, confused rather than aided decision.

There was little sleep for Hastings that night. The situation seemed at once so simple, yet so insoluble. The natural method of appealing to the brothers must be rejected. Whichever one he appealed to would, of course, claim rationality. The insane, he knew, always asserted themselves sane. He could only curse his own credulity and the pretender's plausibility. That one of these men was playing a part he felt certain; the motive was to divert suspicion and gain a wider scope for his own action. Hastings's business was to discover which one. Even with heredity, he felt that it was highly improbable that both brothers should have developed the same tendency, showing itself in the same manner and at the same time.

Hastings had retired, but his eyes refused to close. His mental vision faced this improbable problem. Was ever man so placed? In the stillness he heard a sound. The front door below him creaked, as if gently opened. Instinct hurried him to the window before he realized that he had left the bed. A figure was moving across the lawn. It was one of the brothers. The gloom refused to reveal which one. The figure rejected the path and struck out for the river. Hastings's flesh crept, but he reached for his clothes. He must follow and save that life at any personal risk. As he hurriedly dressed, a second figure crossed the lawn. Now it broke into a run. It was the other brother, bent on rescue — faithful by night as well as day.

Hastings strained his eyes through the darkness. If only he might discover which was the pursued, which the pursuer! His presence now was not needed. With a coat thrown over his shoulders he sat down at the window to await results.

Presently, after what seemed an eternity, the woods appeared to move towards Hastings. Then the indefinite black blur resolved itself into two forms. Hastings strained forward. Which one? his mind demanded. Which one? As they approached he saw that the brothers had linked arms affectionately. They were talking now as if taking a customary stroll. There was no evidence of one leading, the other being led. Their cursed courtesy was veneering the tragedy which Hastings believed had been dangerously near completion. Their mutual manner, always so deferential, now seemed exaggerated, as if to baffle truth.

When the front door closed Hastings broke into a profuse perspiration. A weakness followed which showed him for the first time that he had nerves. He resolved to leave Westmoreland in the morning, then fell into an exhausted sleep.

The next morning Oliver Crowninshield found opportunity to whisper to Hastings: "I saved him again last night. The river — he was on the point of jumping in."

Hastings looked at the lustrous, intelligent eyes of Oliver Crowninshield and believed him. It was his brother whose monomania urged him to take his own life.

Half an hour later Francis led him to see an old sun dial that was in the rose garden.

“He tried it again last night,” he said simply. “It was the closest call that he has yet had.”

Hastings looked at the troubled features of Francis Crowninshield and believed him. It was his brother who was insane. Then he wondered if his own senses were leaving him, since conflicting convictions existed simultaneously in his own mind.

Hastings found that without great rudeness it was impossible to leave Westmoreland that day. The brothers had planned a day for his pleasure — a morning of duck shooting; an afternoon given to visiting historic spots.

In spite of the dark shadow which enveloped him, Hastings spent a red-letter day. No further mention was made of the imminent danger. The congenial charm of the men bound him to them as if by a spell. The fact of their mutual dependence upon him — the knowledge that a blight distorted the vision of one — made its appeal. Hastings responded with an affection more often the result of years of companionship than of days. When the brothers talked of Oliver’s nearly completed mediæval romance, Hastings saw that their minds were storehouses of old-world wisdom and lore. Pity replaced revulsion. Duty demanded that he remain. He must find a key to this problem. Its solution must not only solve but save.

The day out of doors had its effect. That night sleep was deep in the household.

The next morning in the breakfast room, before his brother appeared, Oliver Crowninshield lowered his newspaper to say:

“Francis tried to swallow his tongue last night.”

“That is absurd!” Hastings exclaimed.

“Of course it is, to a perfectly balanced mind,” Oliver replied sweetly. He never lost his equanimity, like Francis. “I could tell you of more ridiculous things than that.”

He left the room. At the same time Francis appeared.

“What was my brother saying to you, Mr. Hastings?” he asked eagerly.

“I prefer not to say,” Hastings replied.

“Is that quite fair? Considering the exigencies of the case, don’t you think we ought to pull together? Last night Oliver left the gas turned on in his room. I discovered it in time.”

“Strange that I did not detect it also,” Hastings replied.

Francis Crowninshield’s impetuosity came to the surface. His face darkened.

“I do not like your tone, Mr. Hastings,” he said icily, his eyes burning. “Again I ask you — what did my brother say?”

But they were interrupted and an explanation was impossible for the rest of the day.

That night, when Hastings went to his room to dress for dinner, he received a shock. He had declined the services of the brothers’ personal man and reached for his razor to shave himself. Around the case he found a strip of paper. He removed it and read these words: “The maximum of suicides occurs in June. For humanity’s sake remain through the month.” As he was not familiar with the brothers’ handwriting he could not say which hand had penned the note. But when he reached for his razor — *it was gone*.

Strained nerves now declared their utmost tension and apprehension reached its height. Hastings felt that he must recover that blade before he slept and at any cost.

He appeared at dinner in his evening clothes, but unshaven. He made no apologies but searched the brothers’ faces to detect which was the thief. Even now one might have the weapon concealed upon him. Hastings shuddered when he thought of the bloody work this night might hold. After dinner he would demand the razor when the brothers were together. The one who produced it would be the guilty man, unless fraternal devotion led each to deny all knowledge of the theft.

He went to his room first for a special brand of cigars. As he passed the dressing table something gleamed in the gas jet’s dim light. It was the ivory handle of his razor. Some diabolical agency had read his thoughts and, replacing the razor, had frustrated his dénouement!

He forced himself to return to the billiard room. He found Oliver Crowninshield reading, and Francis chalking a cue. Hastings noted the change in the brothers’ appearance in the few days since his arrival. Whichever one was deranged, whichever his brother’s keeper, the strain had told alike upon each. Hunted, fearful eyes, deepening pallor and fresh furrows told of great internal disturbance and even of exhausting physical unrest.



“Oliver has reached a second stage,” Francis whispered, trying his cue. “Auditory hallucinations. He thinks that he hears voices calling to him. Religious fanaticism is the most dangerous, you know.”

“And what have you?” Hastings asked, yet without the scorn his words implied. A sense of brotherhood with these men had supplemented pity. He wished to know only that he might help.

“I have grave fears for his recovery,” Francis replied, seriously.

Hastings had almost decided to believe him, when Oliver Crowninshield handed him a book.

“Have you ever been interested in the teachings of Zoroaster, Mr. Hastings?” he asked. “There is much wisdom not unlike our Proverbs, in the Persian Vedas. Yet they probably antedate Proverbs. Take this volume to your room and read some passages that I have marked.”

When Hastings was alone he found a note concealed in the book. “F — says,” it read, “that ‘when life is unbearable death is desirable and suicide justifiable.’ He suggests that we prove together that we are gentlemen unafraid.”

Hastings compared the two notes. But the writing was not the same. His mind returned to the razor. It was possible, he thought, that one hand had placed the first note, that another had taken the razor. Suspicion would be thrown, of course, upon the writer of the first message. If the determined man had taken his own razor, the theft would have been discovered by the servant.

What did that last clause in the second note mean? Had the madman an infernal plan to depart this world and take with him his much-loved brother? Did a double tragedy threaten?

Hastings paced the floor and made his plans. The house was isolated. It was too late to reach the nearest town to-night. He would leave at daybreak and report the case to a physician. He could no longer bear the responsibility. His presence seemed to develop cupidity, not to divert attention. He would not again face the brothers' suavity. Whether he wished it or not, the afflicted one should have the advantage of modern scientific treatment. Hastings packed his grip. Then, soothed by his decision, he fell asleep.

In the gray of the morning he was awakened by some one shaking him. He sprang at the dim outline beside his bed. As he grappled with it, he recognized the voice of the brothers' body servant.

"The house is on fire, Mr. Hastings," he said. "Let go and jump from the portico. The lower rooms are ablaze."

Smoke now curled in at the door.

"Your masters?" Hastings asked, as he pulled on some clothes.

"Have been warned. They will escape by the rear."

Hastings stepped out on the portico. Flames belched out of the lower windows, the pillared portico protecting him as he jumped. The man followed, the soft turf breaking the fall.

On the lawn frightened darkies ran about in confusion. A few carried futile pails of water; others, feeble garden hose.

The house had been ignited in many places, though not near Hastings's room. Hastings foresaw its doom.

"Where is Mr. Crowninshield?" he demanded. No one knew.

Hastings ran to the rear. As he reached it, a small chest flew out of an upper window. It broke as it fell, and closely written manuscript scattered itself over the grass.

"Bring a mattress — the ladders are useless," he cried to the herding servants. "Pick up those papers and guard that chest."

A mattress was brought from an out-house.

"Hold it," he commanded. Then he threw back his head and shouted to the upper windows. "We are holding a mattress. For God's sake, both of you — *one of you* — jump!"

Two figures leaned out of a topmost window, struggling, persuading, arguing, with arms entwined. One was pleading for life, his own and his brother's. One was in love with death and would not be denied. Hastings tried to fathom the problem in the grayness. But the similar height and build of the men hid the truth.

When neither man jumped, something in Hastings's head snapped. He paid for it later with brain fever. As the flames for the last time showed him the brothers, their arms, no longer struggling, were still entwined. The one who had lived faithful died faithful. When the house fell, a martyr was entombed!

