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The BRIMSTONE CAT

by ELLEN M. RAMSAY



"For this piece of work, you are no longer hangman and jailer," said Queen Elizabeth, and there was indignation in her voice.

FROM my earliest memory as a small child, I have hated cats. They fill me with an indescribable feeling of dread and horror that amounts almost to an illness in their presence. Snakes I can bear, and of all other animals I am fond, but cats to me are creatures most loathsome.

Mrs. O'Flynn, my landlady, has a gray cat with a yellow spot on its head, as though the devil had branded his servant with brimstone before sending it into the world. Such has always been my fancy of Mrs. O'Flynn's cat.

But then I am queer. My friends—certain of them—apologize for me as queer. I have some fame as a writer of stories and they forgive me my queerness on that score.

My name is Govern Aristé, a queer name. I have queer fancies and I number among my friends (those friends who do not apologize for me)

queer people. Such a friend is Amir Das, who does not laugh at my hatred of cats, nor think me queer because of it.

"For everything in the world, my friend, there is a reason," this Amir Das, who is a Hindoo philosopher, has often told me.

Tonight we discussed the matter again over our tea. Amir Das, it should be mentioned, is a graduate of Oxford, where he acquired an English fondness for afternoon tea. When he appears at my rooms before 5 o'clock of an afternoon—and this is the time he most often chooses for his visits—it is Mrs. O'Flynn herself who steps in and brews the cheering beverage for us, after the manner that only one brought up in the "ould country" can.

"As I have said," the Hindoo continued, "for everything in this world or any other world, there is a reason. That is the law of all nature. For

every cause there is an effect. For every effect there has been a cause.

"I place my hand in that fire which flames on your hearth. It burns me and I take my hand away. Never will I put my hand in fire again. It has hurt me and I fear it. Cause has produced effect. Do we desire knowledge? We must ever seek to know the causes of the effects we see.

"Now this fear, this horror, you have for cats: when you were a baby, a small child perhaps, a cat frightened you?"

"My mother says not, but that I cried at sight of one, even before I could talk," I told him. "And she had always loved cats. She had five of the animals as pets at the time of my birth, but even as a baby I showed such signs of fright at them, she gave them, every one, away. We never had a cat afterward, and my dislike of the creatures continued as I grew older."

"Then, my friend, your feeling for these animals is the unconscious remembrance of another life. Sometime, somewhere, misfortune came to you in the guise of a cat. We people of the East know these things to be true.

"But you of the West, with your numerous schools and your much education, laugh at the thought that the soul may live through many lives, coming into different bodies, and acting different dramas, but learning each time a little bit more of that which it has willed to learn, and working all these experiences into one perfect plot in the end.

"You laugh, although daily you see about you proof of the truth of these things, which my people have taught and known for ages. A man is introduced to a maiden, and with the meeting of their eyes he knows that she is the one among all others for whom he has been seeking. And she, too, meeting his ardent glance

(for the soul looks out through the eyes) knows that he is the man of her heart.

"Recognition leaps like a flash of electric flame between them. You of the West term it 'love at first sight;' but we of the East say 'love, not at first sight, but love for each other many times in many lives has been the joy of that man and that maid.' And insofar as they have loved truly in the past, they seek for and find the beloved again. Does not your Scripture say, 'Love is stronger than the grave'?"

"Then have I not met the one I loved in the past," I told him. "Many lives must I have loved myself alone, for I have always been content to be a bachelor, and no woman has ever appeared to me as desirable above all other women. But we were speaking of cats, not love, my friend."

"We speak of reincarnation, the chapters of life," replied the Hindoo. "And your hatred of cats, Aristé, is doubtless part of a chapter now past—a chapter perhaps you are happier for not remembering."

After some further talk of the same nature but more deeply philosophical, Amir Das left me to ponder his statements in the cozy firelight of the old-fashioned fireplace. This fireplace, together with Mrs. O'Flynn's tea-making abilities, has kept me for many months a contented lodger in the warm-hearted Irish-woman's house, in spite of the detestable cat that she insists on keeping.

The fiendish voice of this cat I now heard wailing from a distant part of the house. I presumed that probably it had been locked into some room, as it accompanied Mrs. O'Flynn, a prowling shadow, on one of her busy housewifely rounds.

I watched the red fire on the hearth and thought of what my Hindoo friend had said. I thought of

love and of cats, and holding my mind stilled, while I looked at the dancing flames, I tried to bring out of my memory some reason for my hatred of cats.

2

I MUST have dozed, for I started up from my seat confused and somewhat dazed. As one who recalls the dim memories of a dream I remembered that I was Govern Aristé, a writer of stories, who lived in— The memory of dreams dims as one wakes, and so did the memory of Govern Aristé slip into the inaccessible places of my consciousness.

But what matter? I, Peter Byfield, poor young student in London Town, had long been given to dreaming. I laughed at myself somewhat grimly to find that I had been entertaining but one more fantastic fancy.

“Ay! Peter! didst thou not dream so much, more wouldst thou accomplish,” I scoffed to myself. Having lived for many years alone, I had acquired the habit of lonesome people who talk with themselves in lieu of better (or worse) company.

The fire on the hearth was almost dead and I stooped to place upon it another fagot. Then I looked at the small pile of unburned fagots by the hearthside, wondering how long they would last to keep some of the chill of London rain and fog out of my attic room. More fagots meant money, of which I had but little store.

The hearth was of roughly cut stone and the attic room was humbly furnished with cot and chair and in one corner a table on which were strange crucibles and retorts, and above it a shelf whereon were books and manuscripts. But however humble my room, it contained all the mysteries of life for me, save only one.

That one I had met some days past in the queen’s hunting park, where

unlawfully I sought for herbs and rocks that would help me in my studies of alchemy. I had come upon this arch mystery of all, in an open space between the trees, dismounted beside her horse. In her hands she nursed a falcon with a broken wing.

She was a tiny thing with red-gold curls, and in one cheek was a dimple that a man might not look upon over-long without a mad desire to kiss it.

I, who should have fled because I broke the law by being in this place at all, stood transfixed, looking with heart and eyes at the vision before me.

Then the maiden turned, raising her gaze to mine, and I saw that her eyes were of a blue like that of the sea on a calm summer afternoon. But more had they than color. They gave the man that looked into them a feeling of rest and harbor such as a voyager might have when after a long and weary journey to many ports, he comes at last home.

As I looked into her eyes and she into mine, I knew not only that this was the most beautiful woman I had ever seen, but that she was my true love and that I could never care for any other. I forgot that I, although ambitious and the son of a noble father, was but a poor student, who might scarcely dare to love a high lady such as her appearance proclaimed her to be.

True, my studies were of alchemy, and should I find the philosopher’s stone, in which men of that day believed and for which they spent long years of study and search, I would have all power at my command.

My father had been a noble of Henry VIII’s court, but had displeased the king and been forced to flee England. An adventurer, he had journeyed in many far countries, where he had studied strange sciences with stranger teachers, among them the Moorish teachers of Araby.

In one of these foreign lands—I knew knew not where nor of what mother—I had been born.

And he had brought back to England with him in his old age, along with the small boy that was I, a marvelous collection of books and manuscripts. Some of these he had taught me to read. For others he had given me a clue to the inner meaning they contained. And for all he had inspired in me the thirst to understand, a thirst that had continued with me unquenched after his death several years previously.

Something I knew of the philosopher's stone, by which base metal, such as lead, might be transmuted to gold, and by which old men had their old age renewed as youth. And for this philosopher's stone I became one of the searchers, hoping with my experiments and the knowledge contained in my precious books that I might some day find the miracle-working talisman.

Thus had my room, with its crucibles, retorts, books and potions among which I daily experimented, contained all the mysteries of life for me, until the day I met in the royal park the Lady Edith Estes, attendant to Her Majesty, Queen Elizabeth.

Then had I, Peter Byfield, taken back to my attic with the injured falcon, whose wing I had promised to try to cure, the greatest and sweetest mystery of all—a mystery that pulsed in my heart like a song and that brought between my eyes and the books I would fain have studied, visions of golden curls, a magic dimple and eyes like blue pools of heaven.

The last mystery bid fair to put to rout and take the place of all the other mysteries whose solution I had so long sought.

In my study of alchemy, I do not boast but say truly, I had learned more of physick than many physicians of my time. It thus happened that on the day I awoke from my

strange dream of a life in which my name was Govern Aristé, I found the injured falcon apparently recovered.

With all the skill that I possessed I had wound strips of cloth to bind the wing to the bird's body, until the broken bones could grow together again. I had kept the restless falcon quiet by having it hooded all that time. Now I removed the hood and the bird flew about my room with wing but slightly stiff. I had made good my promise to the Lady Estes that I could cure her pet.

Exultant that I had served my beloved in even so small a thing, I caught the bird, hooded it again and chained it to my wrist. Then I went forth to seek its mistress.

She had told me that I could ask for a certain servant at the palace, who in turn would call her. This I did and shortly found myself again in that radiant presence. Doffing my cap, I bowed low in the fashion of a courtier.

My tongue, false friend, had left me. As at that other meeting in the park, I could say but a few stiff words, the while I told her of how it had been my great pleasure to cure so fine a bird.

She had a purse in her hand, but my courtly manner must have made her know that I was no hireling to be paid with a gift of money. Instead she gave me a more precious gift—the memory of her smile as she thanked me with gracious words.

And I, having reflected well on the difference in station between a great court lady and a poor student, hastened to excuse myself, lest I forget and throwing myself at her feet declare the passion I felt.

Neither at the time she had found me in the park, nor now, did she make reference to the fact that it had been unlawful for me to wander in the royal hunting preserves. But any fear I might have had that

she would make known her discovery of my presence there, had been forgotten from the first glimpse of her.

Even prison or punishment were well worth enduring for the rapture that had become mine. So I mused as I turned my steps from the palace toward the poor tenement that held my attic room.

In such a frame of mind it was that I came upon young Tom Smythe, the jailer's son, and the cat that he tortured as sport for his companions. It was a gray cat, which later I discovered had a sulfur-colored patch upon its head.

But at the time, I saw only the manner in which young Tom had tied the animal stretched out on its back with its four feet drawn by cords to four stakes, so that the boy might draw and quarter it, even as his father, Tom the hangman, had that day executed a poor wretch, sentenced to be drawn and quartered for treason to the crown.

Around young Tom had gathered a crowd of admiring youngsters. Tom with a knife—who knows where small boys obtain the instruments for their devilments?—had raised his arm for the first stroke that would slit the cat's body lengthwise. Meanwhile, the animal yowled in an agony that but added to the glee of the spectators.

Surely the memory of Govern Aristé was far from the thought of Peter Byfield, for I, Peter Byfield, on that day did not hate cats. I loved them, as I did all other animals, and the sight of the tormented creature before me filled me with a great pity and a great rage at the young fiend who had undertaken this cruelty.

With two strides I had parted the surprized children and seized the knife from the would-be executioner. Four strokes I made with it at the binding ropes, and the gray cat with a yellow spot upon its head bounded

from the earth as only a frightened cat can and whisked up the roof of the nearest house to live eight more lives, fate favoring.

Even then all might have been well, had not the rage of my heart demanded vengeance upon the person of the young rascal. The boy was a bully, the leader of all the lads of the neighborhood, but now I humbled him before the eyes of his frightened playmates. Right lustily I laid onto him, holding him across my knee with one hand and applying stout strokes with the other, until he wailed as loud as the cat had done. Nor did I heed nor care that a black hatred was born in the blubbing bully's mind, when finally I released him. With short words I told him what measures I would take, should I again find him ill-treating a cat or any other animal.

Then, wearied, and my thoughts once more turning to the vision of the Lady Edith Estes, I sought my lodging, determined to work with renewed effort in my search for the philosopher's stone that meant wealth and fame and perchance the winning of my love.

Late that night I worked, measuring and mixing new potions that might lead me to the elixir of life. As I bent to my task I was startled by a wailing cry from the roof of an adjoining house upon which my attic window looked out.

I opened the window, and a cat sprang into the room. It was a gray cat, with a yellow spot upon its head, a most vile and draggled-appearing cat, and it cried to me with plaintive insistence which bespoke its opinion that a life saved—even a cat's life—was worth little, unless that life might have food and shelter.

I gave the beast some of the gruel and milk that formed my simple supper. It ate and curled up on the hearth, purring and content.

Such was the manner in which I, Peter Byfield, came to make a companion and pet of the gray cat.

3

IN THE day and age when Peter Byfield rescued the gray cat, men held many superstitions. It was not well, even in that England which was then coming to birth as a great nation and which allowed more freedom of thought and action to its inhabitants than any other country, for a man to be too markedly different from his neighbors. Those who studied alchemy might well be careful that they be not accused in the popular mind as pursuing other and unsanctified studies.

Young Tom Smythe, whom Peter Byfield held over his knee and beat on the day the youth tried to draw and quarter the gray cat, chanced to fall ill of a colic the week after that episode. Young Tom had told his father, who was the chief hangman of London Town, of the treatment accorded him by the alchemist.

The elder Tom, although a brutal, evil fellow who could, and did, on occasion beat his son most cruelly, yet in this case resented the fact that a stranger had taken upon himself this parental task. He resented, furthermore, that the stranger had done this for so simple a cause as anger at the innocent boyish sport of executing a stray cat. Tom, the elder, when he heard the story, cursed that stranger and swore that he would have revenge upon him.

When young Tom fell ill, after he had feasted uninvited of green apples stolen from a private garden, an ugly thought raised itself in the brain of his father. (Young Tom, it may be said, had told no one of the green apples.)

Only a few days before, it had been the hangman's pleasant duty to officiate at the last events in the life

of a poor old woman, accused by her neighbors of witchcraft and of causing a sickness among some children in her neighborhood. The wretched creature had been tried, tortured, and confessing under the torture, had been condemned to die as a witch.

Tom senior had carried out the torture which had made the victim admit her guilt, and it had fallen to him, nothing loth, to tie the frantic woman to the stake and pile and light the fagots that destroyed her body and presumably carried her soul back to its master in his flaming pit.

Now a cunning train of thought built itself up in Tom's mind. A man of more or less mystery, a student of strange things, whom all his neighbors knew to spend long hours in brewing unknown compounds—for what devilish purpose no one knew—had recently shown anger against the hangman's child. More, he had beaten that child and threatened him, and the lad had fallen ill shortly afterward.

This surely was the working of sorcery and the deed of one who had sold himself to the devil. To verify his suspicions, the elder Tom, who lived not far from the lodging of Peter Byfield, made inquiry among the neighbors of the alchemist, nor was he adverse to starting strange rumors about the student.

Then it was that those who knew the alchemist began to spread queer tales of the man. They recalled that this Peter Byfield spent much time alone in his attic room, to which he seldom if ever invited guests. It was rumored that the room contained strange things, crucibles, retorts and drugs—all the paraphernalia for making a witch's brew.

They remembered that the alchemist had never been over-neighborly, although he had been known to do such deeds of charity as to give bread to the hungry. He had even bestowed money on those in need.

Doubtless a man who was the servant of Satan could easily make bread by black magic or even produce money by his sorcery. It was known that he had magically cured a falcon with a broken wing which he had been seen bringing home one day almost dead and had later taken away with him apparently sound.

Those whom Peter Byfield had helped in their need now began to pray God that they had not taken aid from a servant of the devil, or having done so innocently, that this would not be accounted a sin to them.

They began to watch this man of mystery. And then it was that they discovered damning and crowning proof of their suspicions.

Peter Byfield, it was learned, had as companion a cat—a gray cat with a yellow spot upon its head—verily the cat that the alchemist had rescued from the hands of young Tom Smythe.

This solved the matter completely and made the evidence conclusive. Why else would a man take pains to save a cat from death, were that cat not his familiar, his demon companion?

Tom, the elder, sought the judge, a friend of his, to whom he told his suspicions and the hearsay evidence he had gathered.

Of all these things, meanwhile, was Peter Byfield happily ignorant. But the young alchemist undertook more diligently than ever the studies that he sought to master, spurred on by the vision in his lonesome young heart, the vision of the beautiful Lady Edith Estes.

4

AND so it chanced on a day not more than two weeks after the day on which I rescued the cat, that I, Peter Byfield, unaware of the evil plotted against me by the hangman, had my experiments rudely inter-

rupted by the entrance into my attic room of four armed men of the law. Without ceremony, I found myself arrested and carried to jail, accused of one of the most serious charges of the day—witchcraft.

The gray cat, reposing before my hearth in all the purring content of a well-fed animal, was taken as proof against me. Tom, the elder, who was among the men that arrested me, had cunningly provided a sack for the cat, and it had been the triumph of young Tom, now somewhat recovered from his sickness, to capture the animal and throw it into the bag.

I found myself in a dark dungeon and in a most perilous position, for of all the crimes at that time recognized by law, witchcraft was accounted especially heinous, and had as its punishment the most terrible forms of death.

Likewise, it was the most difficult charge of all, from which a man could vindicate himself. A man under suspicion of being a sorcerer might be—and was—tortured in the most brutal manner to obtain a confession. If he did not confess, he laid himself liable to conviction for that very reason, as being protected by his master, the devil.

The law dealt hardly with persons accused of witchcraft—all of which I knew. Even the image of the maid with the blue eyes, the golden curls and kiss-inviting dimple, faded from my thoughts, though still held deep in my heart, as the realization of my plight came upon me.

My fears were well-founded. When I refused to acknowledge guilt of the crime of which I was accused, the ignorant, cruel judge, urged on by the brutal hangman, ordered me to be tortured until I should confess such guilt.

First they pricked me with needles to find if I had on me anywhere the invulnerable spot. This was the spot,

supposed to be without feeling, where I had been sealed by my master, the devil.

When this torture failed, my flesh ever quivering at the needle's thrust, they put me on the rack. However, I, Peter Byfield, used the strength of my will and refused to confess myself guilty of that of which I was innocent. I denied that the sickness of young Tom had been the result of any evil work on my part.

I admitted that I was a student of alchemy, seeking the philosopher's stone. But I maintained that I sought this stone, not for myself alone, but for the good I might do with it to mankind. As proof of my honest intention, I pointed out the charitable deeds I had done to those in need. My rescue of the gray cat, I explained, had been because of my love for dumb creatures.

But a judge and accusers who could authorize and witness such torture of a human being as the torture to which I was put could not understand one whose plea was that he had saved an animal from suffering.

They gave me respite from the rack and sought other means of making me confess. And then it was that the genius of Tom, the hangman, invented a torture more diabolical than Satan himself, it would seem, could have devised.

Tom's attention had been called to the sack, which held the gray cat, by continued and frenzied caterwaulings on the part of that animal, which the jailer's brutal kicks did not still. Putting his hand within the sack, he sought to bring forth my companion in guilt and misery.

The cat had sharp claws, and Tom had been well scratched before he finally gave up the attempt and retied the creature in the bag. Then there had flashed into his mind the fiendish scheme for an excruciating torture on me, the cat's master: Peter Byfield and the gray cat

should be tied into a sack as fellows. So might this sorcerer's own familiar spirit of evil be used to bring about the man's ruin. Tom told his plan to the judge, who immediately saw its possibilities and ordered its execution.

Thus I found myself stripped and tied from the neck down in a huge sack, and with me as companion the gray cat, crazed and frantic, now ready to claw its erstwhile master as though indeed it were a demon.

This sack was then tied by ropes to posts so that it hung hammock-fashion; while Tom, the hangman, swung it, turning me first face down and then on my back, as he prodded the cat with a rod to keep it ever moving in its clawing frenzy.

Horror of horrors, beyond the power of words to tell! The agony of that torture! The screaming pain, as the sharp claws tore my body, already so brutally tortured and racked.

The human body can stand much, but the human nerves have a limit of endurance. And I, as Peter Byfield, had a sensitiveness of nerves ahead of my day. Otherwise, I would not have had the sympathy that had made me stoop to free a tormented cat in the streets.

The tearing of that cat's claws on my bare body was now the most frightful torture that human (say rather satanical) ingenuity could have devised. By will, almost more than human, I fought with myself that I should not confess to a crime I had not committed.

Then did I beg of my torturers that they put me to death, for death—even death by the fire and stake—appeared to me as a haven of rest and peace.

And at last, finding that I would not confess, they freed me from the sack. The judge was loth to condemn without a confession, but since it appeared that this could not be ob-

tained, he deliberated weightily and finally gave it as his opinion that there was sufficient criminal evidence for conviction.

The very fact that I had not confessed, the judge averred, was due to the hardening of my heart and will through strength given me in my hour of trial by my unholy master.

So upon me he pronounced sentence that I should on the following day, at high noon, be burned at the stake as a warning to other witches, wizards and sorcerers.

With me, condemned to share my fate, was the gray cat. The judge had noted the yellow spot on the creature's head, and with the logic of the day had made it another link in the chain of evidence that led to my undoing.

This yellow spot was, doubtless, a smoke-spot of brimstone, said the judge, which had left its mark upon the cat when the creature came from the bottomless pit. Fitting, indeed, that the flames should return it thither.

I heard my death sentence as a boon, granted in mercy by heaven. Then I was taken back to my rude dungeon to suffer a night of pain from my broken and bleeding body, and from my heart which said that never again should I stand in the bright glory of a May morning and see her, as I had first seen her—the fair, dear lady of my heart.

IT WAS a gray tomorrow that followed that gray day of torture. As noon approached, I was led to the place of execution, a public square, while a ribald crowd followed and hooted me, adjuring me to call upon my master, the devil, to save me from death.

Tom, the hangman, was to have his final triumph, for he it was who chained me to the iron stake. At my feet he tethered by another chain the brimstone-spotted cat, now somewhat

subdued by torment. High about us he piled fagots, and then, everything being ready, approached with his lighted torch, while on his surly face was the smile of a fiend.

Grimly I shut my eyes and prayed to the God of love, in whom I had believed until that yesterday of torture, that he might give me strength to die as befitted the son of a noble father.

Surely the hangman had lighted the fagots by now—or was he holding back to prolong my agony? I waited to feel the breath of the flame. Almost I thought my body would not shrink from its warm embrace, but would welcome its fiery kiss of death, as setting free a soul prisoned in a body that had been a dungeon of terrors.

And then—perchance it were a delusion born of my weakness and pain—I heard a voice speak, staying my executioner. It was a voice with a clear, sweet tone, such a voice as an angel might have, but in it was command that would not be denied.

“Stay!” it commanded. “What is this you do and why is this poor man so condemned?”

The gruff voice of the hangman answered.

“He is a wizard, your ladyship. He cast a spell upon my child, who would have perished of a strange sickness, had we not found this man and put him here, where shortly the flames will take him back to his master, Satan, and his vile cat with him.”

“Is there a cat?” asked the voice. “Let me see this animal.”

“’Tis beneath the fagots, your ladyship.”

“I would see it, I say.”

There was a rustle as Tom moved the fagots, and perceiving that this must be more than delusion, I opened my eyes, to see what person had dared interfere with the course of the law, and whom it was the hangman obeyed.

I gazed into the face of an angel, indeed.

Little she was, with red-gold curls and a dimple in one cheek that a man might not look upon without a mad desire to kiss it. And her eyes—in the blue of them, like the blue of the sea on a calm summer afternoon, there was rest and harbor for a man's soul. But more than that, there was such a flame of pity and indignation that I knew—what I had almost doubted—that a God of love still reigned in a dark age and that there was one human being in the world, besides myself, who would understand the kindness I had done a cat.

To the lady of the curls and eyes of blue, Tom, the hangman, held out the cat, the while telling the story of Peter Byfield, wizard, and his familiar who possessed this animal. The lady listened, looking at the condemned man, but the horror that showed in her face at the recital was at the hangman's story of Peter Byfield's sufferings rather than horror of the sorcerer himself.

Then a strange thing happened. The girl stretched forth her hand as though she would pet the cat, and when the jailer would have remonstrated, commanded him haughtily and took the half-dead animal in her hands.

As if by magic, the tormented beast ceased its struggles, and raising its head sought with evident fondness for the stroking caress of her fingers. Another voice—a deep, mellow voice, albeit that of a woman—spoke.

"Be careful, my Lady Edith," it chided, "or this hangman will accuse you, also, of witchcraft, when you so easily charm Satan's servants."

"Do you look, Your Majesty," replied the girl. "It is the cat that we rescued in the Royal Park a half-year ago. See! here is the brown spot upon its head. Remember you not how the dogs had the animal at bay and how it turned and faced

them so pluckily? You and the Earl of Leicester and I came upon them, and the earl made quip of the fact that this cat wore upon its head, hair of the color of Your Majesty's hair, that denotes in its possessor unconquerable spirit, as Spanish galleons so lately sunk off our coasts bear witness for England's unconquerable queen."

"I do remember the happening," replied the second voice. "You took the cat and made of it your pet, but it has been lost some days now, as you say."

With effort, I turned my eyes for a minute from the fair face that held them so adoringly enthralled. Then I saw that the other speaker was a woman of most royal presence. No need to note the color of the hair which England's virgin queen had made the fashion of court ladies; no need to hear the tiny lady-in-waiting address her as "Your Majesty." I knew that I stood before Elizabeth, Queen of England, and that by miracle a chance had opened that might give me my life.

"Mercy! in the name of God, mercy, Your Majesty!" I cried. "If this be your cat, then do not let them kill me for having saved its life. They accuse me as a dealer in witchcraft, but as God is my witness, I have done no wrong. I but saved this cat from the hands of the son of this vile hangman. The boy would have killed it most cruelly, had I not taken the beast from him. Of the lad's illness, I know nothing and am guiltless."

"Is the boy yet ill?" asked the queen, turning to the hangman.

"He was most ill, Your Majesty," said the man somewhat sullenly, "though now he seems recovered. But who can say how long he may stay thus sound, if he be under the spell of a wizard?"

"This man is not a wizard. Nor would he hurt any lad, Your Majesty.

On that I would pledge my soul," said the Lady Edith, now stepping forward. "The guilty confess their crimes and he has not so done."

"Nay, he would not," said the hangman. "The devil gave him strength to stand even the torture of being in the sack with the cat."

Then he told them with evil glee of the fiendish torment he had devised.

The small lady-in-waiting, who had, since first my gaze met hers, comforted me with her blue eyes of pity, shuddered at the recital even more than she had before. She turned so white I thought she would swoon.

"Ah! Your Majesty!" she again pleaded, as the jailer finished his recital; "this man could not hurt a lad. He it is who healed your pet falcon of its broken wing. Do you not recall how I told you of him?"

"Give us your story, my man!" commanded the queen. "I remember the falcon, and chided the Lady Edith that she did not bring you to my presence for a fitting reward of your skill."

So commanded, I told her all my story—how I had studied alchemy and physic that would teach me to heal a sick bird, how I had rescued the cat, how the animal had come to me for shelter and how Tom, the hangman's son, having fallen ill of colic during green apple season, his father had wrongly accused me of witchcraft and evil practise against the lad.

Then I told her of the tortures I had endured, but that I had not confessed even when they put me in the sack with the cat.

The Lady Edith Estes shuddered again and again during the narrative of my tortures, but the queen listened quietly. However, there was indignation in her voice as she asked at the end of my story:

"What judge condemned you?

And how came he to practise on you a torture not in accordance with our laws? It shall go hardly with this judge, and with you, too, man," she added, addressing the hangman. "For this piece of work, you are no longer hangman and jailer, but must earn your living by other means than such zealous practises of cruelties on gentlemen. You are indeed a gentleman's son?" she queried me.

I replied that I was and told her my father's history, making much of the fact that coming back to England in the beginning of her reign, he had ever been a loyal adherent of the crown.

As I talked, the Lady Edith Estes continued to pet the gray cat, now quite calmed. Then she turned beseeching eyes upon the queen, beseeching eyes that won from her sovereign a smile. So sweet was my little lady that she might even woo favors from members of her own sex. Now it seemed that the queen had listened to her pleading and made judgment thereby.

"Serious and grievous wrong has been done to Peter Byfield," said the queen. "I am convinced that he is an innocent man and therefore I pardon him fully and freely. Unloose the man," she commanded the hangman.

Faint and weak, I had almost fallen when Tom, sullen albeit abashed, released me. A soldier from the queen's retinue supported me, while Her Majesty commanded that I be taken to the palace for treatment by her court physician.

"We shall make you physician to our animals," she announced. "And perchance if we find your story true and yourself worthy, we shall restore you to your father's rank and title. What think you of that, my Lady Edith? Will that be reward sufficient for this wonderful doctor of yours, of whom you have talked so much since

the day he mended our falcon's wing?"

Bracing myself against my faintness, I turned to make thanks to the Lady Edith, who had saved my life. And I saw in the blush on her cheek, which had followed the queen's words, a hope that perchance there should be even greater reward for me than the queen had mentioned.

I reached forward to raise the small lady's hand to my lips. It lay upon the cat that she had been petting. I touched the animal as I did so, and at that touch there rose in me such an abhorrence, such a dread and loathing and hatred for this creature through which I had suffered so much, that I staggered back in my weakness. I remember falling, falling, and then——

5

"SURE, and don't start so, Mr. Aristé! I'm but come in to clear away the tea things."

So spoke the voice of my landlady, Mrs. O'Flynn, waking me from a strange dream that I, Govern Aristé, had had—a dream wherein I played a rôle under the name and being of Peter Byfield; a dream of such vividness that it did not depart as most dreams do, but remained with me, clear, distinct in every detail.

"Is that your cat that is howling so, Mrs. O'Flynn?" I asked.

"It is, and it may kape on its howling, for all of me," replied my landlady. "It tried to eat up me lovely new singer canary, and I'm locking the ungrateful baste up for a lesson to it not to jump on the cages of tin-dollar birds. I know you don't like the animal, Mr. Aristé, nor any cats. But it's really a good crayture and kills many a mouse."

"Mice are well enough, but when it brings about the death of a man——" I reflected, but aloud I mere-

ly announced my intention of strolling forth for a walk.

I felt that I needed the calming effect of the cold night air. Many stories I have written. Writing is my trade. But never before had I lived my plot as I had tonight.

Was it merely a fantastic idea for a story that had come to me, I wondered. Or had I, Govern Aristé, once lived in the body of Peter Byfield? Had Peter Byfield been a real person? It had been a real enough experience, those several days in the life of the young alchemist that I had lived through, during the half-hour between the going of Amir Das and the coming of Mrs. O'Flynn; while Govern Aristé slept in his chair before the open fire and Mrs. O'Flynn's gray cat yowled its penance for the attempted massacre of a "tin-dollar" canary.

What a tale it would make! But I must turn it over in my mind and clear my thoughts. I walked down the hall and stepped outside, closing the door on a last despairing wail from the imprisoned cat.

The thought came to me that I might be losing my mind. People sometimes did. Perhaps I was having hallucinations, or it might be that my friend Amir Das had hypnotized me and sent me this dream to make me believe his strange theories of reincarnation.

Such was my thought as I walked, I knew not where. Suddenly my reverery was broken by a woman's shrill scream. I paused and looked up a side street whence the cry seemed to come.

There was the sound of running steps and a girl flung herself upon me, almost into my arms.

"Help me! help me!" she cried.

Behind her came two men of rough appearance. I am not tall, and I suppose I did not look formidable. The men did not stop but continued

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The Brimstone Cat

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toward us, and one of them raised his hand, in which there was a heavy club.

Another of my queer friends is Hari Tosuki, the Japanese wrestler. From him I once learned something of ju-jitsu. Now that knowledge stood me in good stead. I threw the man with the club, felling him with a catch that broke his arm and knocked him senseless. Then I grappled with the other villain—an ugly, evil creature, powerful but with a misshapen back, as I discovered when I finally had him down.

Meanwhile, the girl, instead of fainting or crying out again, had fled down the street. She came back, just as I was reflecting with some pride that I had done credit to Hari, my teacher. With her were two big policemen.

They put handcuffs on our assailants and the girl told her story, while one of the policemen made notes for the charge that should be entered against the thugs.

The girl had been on an errand in this part of the city, where she was a stranger. The errand had detained her much later than she expected, and in the dusk she had lost her way. The two ruffians had held her up, and, infuriated when they found that she had but a few cents in her pocketbook, had attempted further outrage. She had broken away and fled down the side street, coming upon me.

As she told her story, I looked at her for the first time. Or was it the first time? She was a tiny thing with red-gold curls and a dimple in one cheek that made my heart pound madly with a desire to kiss it. Her eyes were of a clear blue like that of the sea on a calm summer afternoon and as I looked into them I knew

why Govern Aristé had never found other women fair.

I had been as a voyager who sails on a long journey, seeking he knows not what, until on a clear day he comes to a bay of calm blue water that is his harbor and his home.

As I looked into her eyes, I saw recognition of me leap into her own.

"My name is Govern Aristé, and I am sure I have met you before," I told her. "May I call a taxi and take you home?"

"And I have met you, although I do not recall where," she replied. "Your name is an odd one but I do not seem to remember it."

"I have always wished for a comfortable, sensible name," I confided, "such a name as Peter."

"Peter would suit you much better," she agreed. "My name is Edith Montgomery. I live with my father, who will be much worried at my late return. I shall be very glad to have you take me home."

I hailed a passing taxi. As we climbed into it, the police patrol drove up and a big policeman led the deformed ruffian toward it. The man turned and cursed me, the cause of his misfortune; and in his evil face, now under the strong light of the machine's headlight, I saw distinctly the brutal features of Tom, the hangman of London Town.

But I had other things to think of than hangmen. A May morning in the hunting park of good Queen Bess or a taxicab in a dark city street—when a man finds romance, what matters the setting? The rapture is the same.

In some way—I can not remember the details—we reached my lady's home. She left me with a sweet-spoken good-bye and an invitation to call on the morrow and receive her father's thanks, after she had told him the story of her unpleasant adventure.

Somehow—I can not remember the

details—I reached again this room in Mrs. O'Flynn's house, where the damnable cat has now ceased its caterwauling.

I have written this story—what a story!—as best I might, when a vision ever comes between me and my typewriter, the vision of the sweetest, fairest face in the world. What hair! what eyes! and what a bewitching mouth! And her blush! Yes, she blushed at the look I gave her when I bade her good-night. Once before I have seen her blush, when I raised her hand to my lips and touched the body of the brimstone cat—

Or did I? Was my dream of Peter Byfield a story only? Ah! the story I am about to live is real enough, but was the other chapter real? Have the doors of the past opened to give me a glimpse of a chapter of life now gone but to be continued in a new setting?

Amir Das would say so, and there are others who so believe. Amir Das has told me in our discussions that the philosopher's stone, which the alchemists of old sought, is the power that some few men in East and West seek today—the power whereby soul and spirit conquer all earthly things. One who finds this power is never born on earth again as mere man. Thus teach the sages of the East. He has lived through all the chapters of life that were allotted to him in the beginning.

I have not found the philosopher's stone, but I have found something dearer to me than my own life.

Did Peter Byfield live? I do not know. But two things I do know. One of them is that some day, and that a day not long distant, I shall marry the lady of my heart—the girl of the red-gold curls and the eyes that are my doors to heaven. The other?

The other is that I shall always hate cats.