

The Cat Called Carlos

By H. F. LESLIE

THE old Melotte place was a place of brooding mystery, of silence, and weird shadows crouching.

Never a sound of life came from within its mouldering walls; never a light gleamed from its vacant windows; never a sign in the dark silence told that the place was tenanted—except when the moon would reach a long finger of light down through the pines that crowned the ragged ledge across the road to point out a single window and a white face there, staring into the night; a white face watching—listening. . .

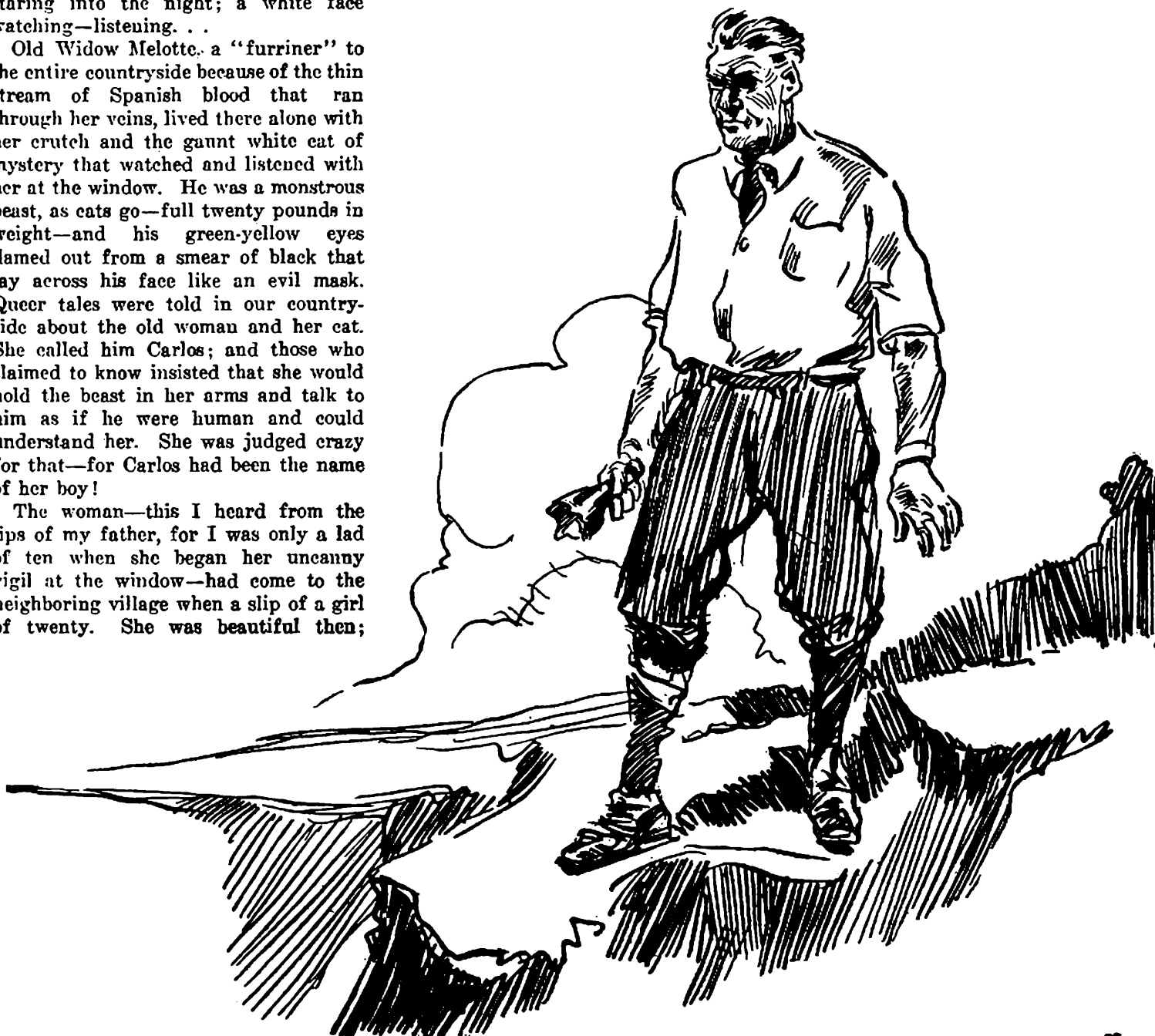
Old Widow Melotte, a "furriner" to the entire countryside because of the thin stream of Spanish blood that ran through her veins, lived there alone with her crutch and the gaunt white cat of mystery that watched and listened with her at the window. He was a monstrous beast, as cats go—full twenty pounds in weight—and his green-yellow eyes flamed out from a smear of black that lay across his face like an evil mask. Queer tales were told in our countryside about the old woman and her cat. She called him Carlos; and those who claimed to know insisted that she would hold the beast in her arms and talk to him as if he were human and could understand her. She was judged crazy for that—for Carlos had been the name of her boy!

The woman—this I heard from the lips of my father, for I was only a lad of ten when she began her uncanny vigil at the window—had come to the neighboring village when a slip of a girl of twenty. She was beautiful then;

beautiful with a charm and fire not often found in our quiet country girls. Her dancing feet, the sharp *click* of her castanets, her flashing smile of white teeth between red lips, called a challenge to the young men of the village.

Among them all, the keenest rivalry for her favor lay between big Joe Melotte and the ne'er-do-well Vint Willis. She married Melotte. Willis was a poor loser. Others who had known the warmth of her smile, and had hoped for a time,

wished them well and danced at their wedding; but Willis came at the height of the merrymaking with drunken threats in his mouth. In the glow of the moment she defied him, weaving a tantalizing dance before him and snapping her black castanets in his face, until he lost his head and would have laid hands upon her had Melotte not struck him down. They carried him away with his nose on the side of his face from the blow; and next day he left the village.



Melotte took his wife home. A year later the boy, Carlos, was born. And in two years more she was a widow. Strong and unafraid, she lived on and somehow achieved a living for herself and boy from the little farm.

The man Willis stayed away for a dozen years; then he came back. Fearing the ridicule of those who would remember his wrecked face and that wedding night, he built himself a rough camp in the woods and lived there alone. He tried to establish himself in the favor of Widow Melotte; but she would have none of him. It became his habit to sit brooding in the shadow of the pines atop the ledge where he could look down upon the woman and her boy at work in the fields.

Carlos was fourteen then—old enough to carry his dead father's gun and supply their frugal table with what game the woodlands afforded. Willis was a drunken loafer with a great passion for hunting and fishing. He won the boy—could show him where big trout lurked in hidden pools; where part-ridges fed in alder swamps and on secluded ridges; thickets where the deer hid cunningly. The evil spell of the man was powerful, and many a stolen visit the boy made to the camp in the woods.

I was only a lad of ten when Carlos met his death. That was more than twenty years ago; but if I should live to be a hundred I shall never forget that gray day of tragedy. Father had me with him in the buggy that day. We were coming home from the village, had just topped the rise that gave us close view of the Melotte place, when we heard the woman scream. We saw her leap from the doorway of the old brick house and run swiftly across the road. The red and yellow of her dress looked like a windblown flame as she ran. We saw her stumble among the rocks of the roadside, twist and fall, and then go dragging herself on toward the shadow of the ledge.

We found her at the foot of the ledge among the rocks and brier bushes with her arms round the broken body of her boy, pleading for his voice. Thorns had raked her skin, and the expression of hate on the bloody face that she finally flung back to look at the ledge above us was one to remember until death.

We followed her gaze and saw the head of Vint Willis come sliding slowly into view over the rim of the ledge. Dull comprehension and terror were battling in his ugly crook-nosed face. Then it seemed that every drop of blood drained from his flesh and left it gray as ashes when his eyes met those of the woman.

I had a strange fancy that there was an invisible wire from eye to eye and that I could hear the thin crackle of sparks between them. The tension broke when she suddenly flung her arms above her head and snarled some words in a tongue that I could not understand. She fell forward then, upon her face; I thought she was dead.

Father wasted no words. He ordered Vint Willis to come down and help him; and the man came, stumbling down the winding path that led from the ledge top near to where we stood.

The neck of a broken bottle was clenched tight in Carlos' hand, and bits of glass tinkled on rock when father lifted the boy in his arms. The odor of liquor was heavy all around us. Father faced Willis, cursed him; his voice was brittle as hard steel.

"You'll swing for this—I ought to fix you now! . . . Help Mis Melotte there—she's fainted—hurt, too!"

Father started for the house with Carlos. I watched Willis, fascinated by the look on his crooked face. He had not moved, was staring past me. I turned—and I saw a cat, a white cat, half-grown and gaunt, crouching close beside the prostrate woman on the very spot where the boy had lain across the jagged rocks!

The ears of the beast were flat against his snaky skull, his lips drawn away from his teeth in a hissing snarl; and from a smear of black that lay across his face his green-yellow eyes were blazing out upon the man with a look that made my flesh creep. And there Vint Willis stood, swaying uncertainly on his feet and staring at the snarling cat. Then he wheeled with a drunken oath and lurched back up the path. The shadows of the pines received him, and I heard a snatch of maudlin song come drifting down the ledge.

FATHER came back swiftly.

"Where's Willis?" he demanded.

I pointed up the path; and for the second time that day I heard him curse the man. Then he bade me turn the team around and drive back to the village after the doctor while he carried the woman to the house.

I laid the whip on the old mare; and well within an hour I was back with the doctor. I followed close upon his heels when he went into the house with his black bag.

"The boy is dead," father told him.

He had carried the woman to her bed. He led the doctor there, bidding me to stay in the living-room while they straightened her twisted leg. I was afraid to be alone, but I forced myself to huddle in a great chair and wait with

fast beating heart for them to finish their work behind the closed door.

Twilight shadows were creeping round me, filling the somber room. The tall clock in the corner began to seem alive as it tolled off the long seconds with slow and hollow voice. Fear grew into terror; and when I saw the eyes of the strange cat blazing out upon me from the shadows at the foot of the clock, I shivered with dread and fled to the side of my father.

They were questioning the woman as to what she had seen atop the ledge; but she held grim silence, speaking only to bid them "no" when they proposed to send the sheriff after Vint Willis. The smouldering fire in her black eyes when his name was mentioned was like that in the eyes of the white cat—fire, yet it chilled me to the bone!

When we reached home, father sent my sister to stay with the woman until she should be able to walk again. Then he took his rifle from the pegs over the door and went himself to the camp of Vint Willis. He found the place deserted, locked. The man was gone.

Willis did not come back. The weeks rolled on to months, and the months to years, and his name became a memory.

The Widow Melotte grew old with the passing of these years. She lived on alone with her crutch and the gaunt beast of a cat—a crazed woman, waiting, watching, listening through the years. And her place fell into decay, became a place of silent ruin by day and of sinister menace when the shadows of night closed down.

Without means, she lived on the charity of the neighbors. It was my duty to carry the milk that father gave to her each day—milk that she divided with scrupulous care with the gaunt white cat! The terror that had gripped me, when in that somber room I had seen the eyes of the beast upon me, never left me. It dried my throat and dragged at my feet on the nights when milking was late and those sinister shadows lay thick about the place when I drew near. I feared to enter the gloomy house, feared with a terror that I could not define. The stagnant night air about the place seemed always charged with grim expectancy.

Often, when I had set the milk upon her table and put my hand to the latch to go, she would hold up her bony hand to bid me silence while she bent her head to listen—listen as she did at the dark window at night! Listen for something she could not quite hear. . . And the gaunt cat would lift his snaky head and listen with her, his green-yellow eyes chilling me to inaction in that uncanny

silence, silence broken only by the hollow beating of the old clock in the corner. Then she would drop her hand and shake her head, and mumble, "Not to-night."

And the clock would echo her words—*Not. . . tonight! Not. . . tonight!*

AS I grew older, my nameless dread to enter the place grew upon me; yet through the formless pattern of my fears ran a thread of prickling curiosity. I could not dispel the fancy that I was an unwilling spectator of some weird drama stretching through the years, waiting for some terrifying climax.

There came a night when I was later than usual with the milking, and it was full dark before I set out for the Melotte place. It was a soundless night in mid-August, sultry, oppressive with the promise of approaching storm. There was continuous play of lightning in the western sky, with never a rumble of thunder to break the ominous quiet.

The whole world seemed muffled when I came in sight of the Melotte place. I paused, tried to moisten my dry lips with a dryer tongue while I watched the play of the lightning over the dull gray of the barn and the sullen red of the house itself. The weird glimmer played over the curtainless windows like torchlight over oily pools of stagnant water.

As I drew close to the house, reluctant feet dragging, I saw the old woman's face at the open window, listening—listening for something in the soundless night! So tense was her posture, so wild her staring eyes, that I caught myself listening, too, with bated breath, while a cold hand seemed to brush my spine when I saw the gleaming eyes of the cat close beside her—the cat she called Carlos.

I had never seen the woman smile; but now a slow grimace came writhing over her withered face, a smile of malevolent triumph that made my flesh crawl. Then she nodded her head decisively—and in that dead silence I could hear the muffled beating of the old clock behind the walls, beating words into my straining ears with each measured swing of the pendulum:

Tonight. . . tonight! Tonight. . . tonight!

Like a sleeper powerless in the grip of some fantastic dream, I stood there beside the great elm tree. I saw the woman throw back her head and laugh—but no sound came from her throat. She rose from her chair, paused a moment with that unholy smile twisting

over her features; then she passed into black shadow beyond my vision. I heard her crutch clatter sharply to the floor.

That sound seemed to break the chains that held me. Like a swimmer up from a deep dive, I shook my head and gasped. I turned to flee the place.

But another sound came to my nervously acute senses, halted my flight before it had begun. It was a cadence of song far down the road, faint upon the still air. It stirred me with elusive memory. . . The tongue of the singer was thick, maudlin the song. Nearer—louder—and in a flash of memory I recognized the voice, the song! I had heard it twenty years ago, drifting down the ledge.

Vint Willis was coming back!

SUDDEN weakness seized my legs; I sank down in the tall grass of the dooryard.

The man passed through the hollow, mounted the gentle hill and came into view. There was stumble and drag to his legs, and little puffs of road dust curled up around his ankles as his feet came heavily down.

My attention was brought back sharply to the house by the *click* of a latch. The door swung slowly open and the woman faltered into view. Her crutch was discarded, and she was clad in a dress of white—a bridal dress! Across her shrunken shoulders, over the shimmering gown, lay a mantilla of black lace. A jeweled Spanish comb sparkled in her hair, and on her hands were castanets! Beside her crouched the gaunt white cat, his green-yellow eyes flaming with baleful fire upon the man weaving his unsteady way along the road.

She stepped out upon the door-rock, unsteadily down to the grass of the path. Then her hands went up, and I heard the *click* of castanets. There was no breath of air astir in the sultry oppressiveness of the night, yet the leaves of the great elm above me seemed to stir with whispering melody, a whisper that set my scalp atingle. Again the castanets clicked sharply—and the strains of a Spanish dance sang through my dizzy brain while those castanets rapped out the emphasis!

Slowly she moved down the path. Slowly. . . Then she whirled out into the dust of the road in the figure of a dance, directly in the path of the approaching man.

He halted, passed a bewildered hand across his eyes, tried to speak. Twice his mouth opened, but no sound came.

She was close to him. A tremor raced through his body, and he found his voice, laughed drunkenly and put out his hands to grasp her. But she eluded him, whirled away while he mounted an oath and stumbled after her.

Elusive as the figure of a dream, across the road, into the looming shadow of the ledge, up the winding path that led to the top she made her way and he followed, stumbling, cursing. . . . And there, on the rim of the ledge against the dark backdrop of the pines, she danced in her wedding dress—danced as she must have danced on her wedding night!

On the dangerous edge of the fall she danced, tantalized the man with mocking shoulders and beckoning arms like two white snakes weaving in the lightning glare. . . .

He leaped for her. She swung away from him. He lurched past her, stumbled on the brink of the ledge, fell to his knees and tottered there—swayed out—out—

In that breathless moment the muffled voice of the old clock came through the walls. . . .

The man recovered his balance, dragged himself erect, stood with feet braced wide.

In silent fury the woman hurled herself toward him. He gave back a step. She faltered, swayed; then her arms dropped and she collapsed like a bit of white cloth unsupported.

The man laughed with drunken exultation, bent to put his hands upon her. Then a sudden cry broke from his throat, blood-chilling in that weird silence:

"My God—Carlos! Carlos!"

He staggered back, futile hands clutching at the gaunt white demon of a cat that leaped upon him from the shadows and fastened at his face. He floundered back—back and over the rim of the ledge.

I found my legs then. The suffocating terror that had held me loosed its grip, and I hurried up the path to the top of the ledge.

The Widow Melotte was dead. I found Willis broken on the ragged rocks below, a look of ghastly terror fixed in his glassy eyes and on his ugly, twisted face.

The gaunt white cat—the cat called Carlos—had vanished!

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