

Weird Tales

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*A Fascinating Weird Story of
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The Tortoise-Shell Cat

By GREYE LA SPINA

Extract from a letter from Althea Benedict, Pine Valley Academy for Young Ladies, to Mrs. Wordsworth Benedict, New York City:

IN SPITE of your care to reserve a room for me, Miss Annette Lee called me into her office yesterday and begged me to share it with a new girl.

It seems that Vida is the only child of a very old friend of hers, Felix di Monserreau, a rich Louisiana planter. Miss Lee says she thinks I may have a good influence over my new room-mate, but she managed to evade my tactful inquiry as to what Vida's vices might be. She did seem awfully disturbed. She said that she appreciated my nice attitude; and if I found the companionship disturbed me, would I report it to her immediately? She was so agitated she just couldn't look me in the face. I can't imagine what can be the matter with Vida.

So far, my new room-mate appears to be rather nice. Her father has been most generous and our room is the envy of all the other girls. I would have written you earlier, mother, but we've been getting our new things settled.

Vida wants everything to go with her particular style of beauty! She confessed that she was perfectly miserable if she didn't have a background that suited her, and that she knew I wouldn't mind—particularly as she was willing to pay for the

decorations. So she has the room decorated in the most stunning fashion, in shades of orange and dull green, with heaps and heaps of down cushions. She says she loves to lie around on a pile of cushions, like a cat.

I wish you could see her. She's really a type of girl to attract attention anywhere with her dead-white skin, her dark red lips, her black hair and her eyes—. Her eyes are quite the queerest I've ever seen. They are narrow, long, slumbrous, with drooping lids through which she looks at one in her peculiar way. The iris is a kind of pale golden brown that gives the impression of warm yellow. When dusk comes, I've seen the pupil glowing with some strange iridescence, the iris a narrow yellow rim about it; for all the world, it makes me think of a cat's eye.

Don't forget to tell Cousin Edgar to send me the necklace he promised to bring me from Egypt. I've told the girls about it, and they're dying to see it.

YOUR ALTHEA.

The same to the same:

. . . Studies are going forward nicely. Nothing new, except a couple of rather queer things about my room-mate. I thought I'd better write you first, before saying anything to Miss Lee about it. Perhaps I'm only imagining things, anyway.

Vida is certainly a very odd girl,

mother. I am beginning to believe that she can see in the dark, with those strange eyes of hers. What makes me think so—you know how I love to change furniture around every little while? The other day I altered the position of everything in the room. Vida wasn't there, and before she came back the lights-out bell rang. I meant to stay awake and tell her not to fall over the table, that was in front of her bed, but when she did come I was so drowsy that I didn't get a chance to speak to her before she had reached her bed.

And, mother, she threaded her way among those things just as if she could see them perfectly; not a single moment of hesitation. It gave me the most eery feeling. I hid my head under the quilt, for I felt as if she were watching me in the dark. I know you'll laugh when you read this, but I didn't feel like laughing. And I still have an unpleasant feeling about it, for how could Vida walk so rapidly among those things, not one of which was in the same position she had seen them in last, unless she could actually see in the dark?

Last night another odd thing happened. There must have been crumbs in our wastebasket, for we heard a mouse rattling around in it. Just before I could switch on the light, I heard Vida bound across the room from her bed. When the light was on, she stood by the wastebasket with that mouse in her hands, and I can tell you it was a dead mouse! She looked so strange that I squeaked at her, "Vida!" She jumped, dropped the dead thing and scuttled back to bed. She seemed quite cross because I had put on the light, and I think she cried afterward in the dark, although I can't be sure of it.

Mother, does it seem uncanny to you? I wonder if this night-sight

is what Miss Annette referred to? I hate to say anything, for after all, what's the harm in it?

. . . . When is Cousin Edgar going to send that necklace?

The same to the same:

. . . . Something happened that I cannot help connecting with Vida. Yet I don't like to go to Miss Annette with it. I'm sure she will smile and tell me that I have an exceptionally lively imagination.

Vida and Natalie Cunningham had a dispute the other day about something or other, and Natalie looked it up and when she found Vida was right, she was sarcastic about it—Natalie, I mean. Vida just looked at her with those strange golden eyes glowing, bit her lip, and remained silent.

When we were alone afterward, Vida said to me, "Do you know, Althea, I'm afraid something unpleasant is going to happen to Natalie?"

I must have looked surprised, for she went on hastily:

"There's some kind of invisible guardian watching over me, Althea, that seems to know whenever anyone is unkind to me. For years I've observed that punishment is visited on everyone who crosses me or troubles me in any way. It has made me almost afraid of having a dispute with anyone, for if I permit myself—my real, inner self—to grow disturbed, something always happens to the person at the root of the trouble."

Of course, I hooted at her forebodings. I told her she was superstitious and silly. But, mother, that night Natalie Cunningham lost her favorite ring, a stunning emerald. It was stolen right off her dressing-table five minutes after Natalie turned off her light. She got up again to unlock the door for her room-mate, put on the light, and—the ring wasn't where she'd left it.

The door was still locked; the window was open, but it was a third-story window, as most of the dormitory windows in our building are, and there is no balcony under it.

Mysterious, wasn't it? Our floor monitor, Miss Poore, declared that Natalie must have dropped her ring on the floor, but Natalie has hunted and hunted. The ring certainly isn't in her room. Who took it? How? It frightened Natalie so that she is afraid to be alone in her room without a light.

The odd thing about it is the way that Vida looked at me when the girls told us about it. She actually wants me to believe that her "invisible guardian" stole the ring to punish Natalie for having been sarcastic to her. Did you ever?

I wonder if poor Vida is—well, just a bit flighty, mother?

How about that necklace?

The same to the same:

. . . I'm so excited that I can't write coherently. All the school is in an uproar over what took place last night. I am more disturbed than the rest, for I am beginning to have a suspicion that Vida is right when she says that unpleasant things happen to people who cross her. It makes me nervous, for fear she may get provoked at me for something. I don't know whether or not I ought to report the whole thing to Miss Annette; I'm afraid she'll think I'm romancing. Won't you please write me and tell me what to do?

Yesterday morning Vida's old colored mammy, Jinny, who is in Pine Valley in order to be near her charge, came up for Vida's laundry. Miss Poore came in while Vida was putting her soiled things together, and offered to help sort them over.

Mammy Jinny gave a kind of convulsive shiver. She looked up at Vida, staring hard at her for a moment. Vida stared back in a queer,

fixed way. Then my room-mate's eyes flashed yellow fire. She told Miss Poore in a kind of fury that she'd better mind her own business and not stick her old-maid nose into other people's private concerns.

Miss Poore was wild. (You can't blame her. It was really nasty of Vida). She took Vida by the shoulders and shook her hard. Vida didn't resist, but she looked at the floor monitor with such an expression of malice that Miss Poore actually stepped back in dismay.

"I'm sorry for you, Miss Poore," said Vida to her. "I'm afraid you are going to suffer severely for laying your hands on me. I'd save you if I could—but I can't."

Miss Poore went out of the room without answering. Vida gave the laundry to Mammy Jinny, who insisted upon taking laundry-bag and all. After the old colored woman had gone, Vida flung herself on her bed and cried for an hour. She said she was crying because she was sorry for Miss Poore. I failed at the time to see any significance in her remark, until after last night—

About two o'clock this morning, the whole floor was wakened by the most terrible screams coming from Miss Poore's room. I sprang out of bed and rushed into the hall, where I met the other girls, all pouring out of their rooms. We rushed to Miss Poore's room and she finally got her door open to let us in.

Mother, she was a sight! Face, hands, arms, were all covered with blood from bites and scratches. She was hysterical, and no wonder. She declared that some kind of wild animal had jumped in at her window and attacked her in the dark. The queer thing is, how did that creature—if there was one—get into her room and then out again before we opened the hall door? Her window was open, but it is a third-story one and there is no tree nearby from

which an animal could have sprung into her room.

She is in such a condition this morning that Miss Annette told us in chapel she would have to leave the school to recover from the nervous shock incident to the attack. The mystery of it is the only topic of conversation today, as you can imagine. And now for the odd part of it.

When I got back to my room, there lay Vida, apparently sound asleep. She hadn't been disturbed by all that racket. Some sleeper! I waked her and told her.

Mother, she lay awake the rest of the night crying and carrying on terribly, declaring it all her fault, although she couldn't help it. Her statement was rather confusing. She insisted it was her "invisible guardian" who had attacked Miss Poore, but she begged me not to tell anyone. Her advice was superfluous; if I went to Miss Annette with such a statement, she'd think either Vida was crazy or I was simple.

I tried to sleep, but I can tell you I left the light on. And I wasn't the only one; all the girls had lights in their rooms the rest of the night.

The coincidences are strange, aren't they, mother? Natalic displeases Vida and has her emerald ring mysteriously stolen. Miss Poore displeases Vida and gets scratched and bitten. But even a coincidence can't explain why a wild-cat should bite Miss Poore on Vida's behalf, can it?

Do please write me soon and tell me what I ought to do about informing Miss Annette.

The same to the same:

I TOOK your advice and told Miss Annette. She said she must trust my discretion not to let the other girls know anything she told me, and then admitted that Vida has been followed by this reputation in every school she's been in, until her father couldn't enter her in some

schools. Something unpleasant always happens to any person who displeases Vida di Monserreau. And although she disclaims having done anything, yet she declares it is done for her.

Miss Annette asked me if I wanted to have my room to myself. I thought that Vida really hadn't done anything to me, and she had certainly made our room, the nicest in school. I decided to let her stay on, and Miss Annette thanked me so heartily that I was actually embarrassed.

Why didn't you tell me Cousin Edgar was coming down? I couldn't imagine who it was, when I was called to the reception room to see a gentleman. Imagine my surprise!

He gave me the chain, mother, and it is perfectly precious! Have you seen it? It's tiny carved cats with their tails in their mouths, and the pendant is a great jade cat with topaz eyes. The girls are wild over it, and Vida particularly is simply crazy about it. She asked me if Cousin Edgar couldn't get her one like it.

Cousin Edgar said a rather funny thing. He clasped the chain about my neck and declared that I must promise not to take it off without his permission. Now, why do you suppose he did that? When I asked him, he just shrugged his shoulders and said something about your having shown him my letters. What have my letters to do with my promising not to take off the cat-chain?

Yesterday he came over to take me driving. When he came into the reception room, he thrust out his chin in that odd way of his and said abruptly: "There's a cat in the room. Thought Miss Annette didn't allow pet animals."

I knew there couldn't be one, but he insisted and began to look about the room. And then—the oddest thing, mother! We came upon Vida

di Monserreau, asleep in a big arm-chair by the fireplace. She had crouched on her knees, with her hands out on the arm of the chair and her chin on her outstretched hands, for all the world like a comfortable pussy-cat.

I said to Cousin Edgar: "Here's your cat," and laughed.

He looked at Vida closely. Then he said softly to me, "Althea, you are speaking more to the point than is your wont." (You know how he loves to tease me, mother.) "Introduce me to the pussy," said he.

I waked Vida. She was terribly embarrassed to have been seen in such an unconventional pose, but she told me afterward that she liked Cousin Edgar more than any other man she'd ever met. I think he liked her, too, although, of course, he didn't say much to me about it.

Vida asked him, almost at once, if he didn't have another cat-chain like mine. She'd taken a tremendous fancy to it, she said.

"Perhaps you can prevail upon Althea to give you hers. If you can, I'll get her something else to take its place."

At this suggestion of his, Vida turned imploring eyes upon me. Mother, I was disturbed. I thought of what had happened to Natalie and to Miss Poore, and I wondered if something horrible would happen to me if I refused to give Vida my chain. So I just put it to her point-blank.

"What will happen to me if I don't give my chain to you, Vida?"

"Nothing to you, Althea, darling. I could never be really angry at you," she whispered.

"Then please don't ask me to give up my chain," I begged.

I looked back as I went from the room with Cousin Edgar, and her eyes were on me in the most wistful way. Poor Vida!

. . . I wonder what the attraction is? Cousin Edgar is remaining here for an indefinite visit, he says. I do hope he hasn't fallen in love with Alma Henning: I simply cannot bear that girl. I suppose he won't ask my advice, though, if he has fallen in love with one of the girls. Belle Bragg is wild over him, and Natalie thinks him scrumptious.

He has old Peter with him and is stopping at the little hotel in Pine Valley.

The same to the same:

. . . I suppose I ought to tell you some things I've hardly dared write before because they are so—well, so extraordinary. I've been afraid you might think something the matter with my brain, because I'd been studying too hard. Cousin Edgar says it is in good condition and my head straight on my shoulders and to write you the whole thing, exactly what I thought about it.

Mother, there is something uncanny about Vida di Monserreau. I told you how catlike she was at times, and how she loves sitting in the dark, or prowling about the room in the dark.

The other day I came into the room ten minutes before lights-out. The room was empty when I turned on the light. But as I went to my desk, a great tortoise-shell cat was stretching itself lazily in the armchair where Vida loves to sit, near the window.

Like a flash Miss Poore's experience passed through my mind and I started for the door. As I got to the hall, I turned around, and—mother, believe me or not—there wasn't a sign of a cat. But sitting in the armchair, staring at me with those queer yellow eyes of hers, was Vida di Monserreau.

I sat down on a chair near the door and breathed hard for a moment. Then I said, "My gracious, Vida, how you startled me! I didn't see you when I came in. What happened to the cat?"

"Cat!" says she, yawning. What cat?" She stretched her arms lazily and settled herself comfortably on the cushions.

I can tell you I felt queer. My eyes had played me a very strange trick, making me see a striped black and yellow cat where Vida was sitting. I felt it best to say no more to her for fear she might think me out of my head. But the more I think about it, the more I am convinced that there was a cat.

And if I did see a cat, stretching and yawning in the armchair, where, if you please, was Vida when I was looking at the cat? And where did the animal get to? (I looked everywhere before I'd go to bed, although I didn't tell Vida what for. I pretended I'd mislaid my gym slippers, that were all the time in my locker. I could feel her yellow eyes on me while I pecked under the beds and around.)

When I happened to mention the incident to Cousin Edgar, he told me not to forget that I'd promised not to remove the chain he'd given me. He said something about its being a talisman to ward off evil influences.

Now, mother, don't write and tell me not to study so hard! Cousin Edgar doesn't think I'm crazy or delirious, so I guess you needn't.

The same to the same:

. . . This morning Cousin Edgar called me on the telephone to ask if anything had been stolen from one of the girls last night. There had. Grace Dreene had lost a locket and chain. Cousin Edgar asked if the locket had her initials on it in chip diamonds! How did he know? I'll tell you.

Last night he was sleepless, so he took a walk up here. The moon was shining directly on my side of the dormitory and he distinctly saw a great tortoise-shell cat come out of what he thought was my room.

There is a very narrow ledge around the building, under the windows, about three inches wide. The cat walked along that ledge until it reached Grace's window, where it jumped in. After a moment it came out with something glittering in its mouth!

Cousin Edgar hissed, "Scat!" The cat hesitated, startled, and the thing went flashing from its mouth to the ground. Cousin Edgar watched it go back to my window, then he picked up the article. It was Grace's locket and chain. The cat had stolen it from Grace's room! Did you ever hear of anything so queer, mother? I've read of monkeys and jackdaws, but a cat!

Cousin Edgar mailed the chain to Grace. Fancy the astonishment of the girls when the stolen thing came back through the mail!

But what do you make of it? The cat came out of, and went back into, my room! The things I do think are so extraordinary that I'm afraid to say them, even to myself.

From Captain Edgar Benedict's notebook:

AFTER having found out all I could from Althea about the strange facts in this most interesting case, I determined to follow the only clue that presented itself, i. e., the old colored mammy. It seems that she called regularly every Tuesday, so I made it a point to linger near the academy on a Tuesday morning, and was rewarded by seeing the old woman appear bright and early for her young mistress' laundry.

She is a queer character. Far from being the decrepit old creature I had been led to expect by Althea's description, she is a tall, handsome mulatto woman with flashing eyes that hold a strange magnetism in their direct, unblinking gaze. Her face is deeply lined with wrinkles that to my opinion have been etched by the character of her thoughts rather

than by the hand of time. She carries herself humbly when in the presence of academy people, but I have seen her, once out of sight of the school, straighten up that gaunt form and throw her head back proudly, altering her dragging walk into a brisk and lively stride.

She carried the young lady's fresh laundry into the academy and in half an hour came out laden with the soiled laundry, which she had in an embroidered laundry-bag. Once out of the sight of the school, she broke into a rapid, swinging walk, and I had much ado to keep her in sight. She reached Pine Valley and made for the negro quarters, where she entered a house that I noted carefully.

As I wanted very much to get a personal impression, I knocked at her door, and inquired if she could do my laundry work. She stared at me, pride in those black eyes of hers. Then she said very curtly that she did washing for one person only, and shut the door in my face. There is a fierce, implacable atmosphere about that old black woman. I would dislike tremendously to arouse her hatred.

. . . Just gotten back from a night visit to Mammy Jinny's cabin. Fortunately, when I got there, she had left a full inch of space between the window frame and the lower edge of the window shade. Through it, I got a fine view of the old witch—for witch she certainly is, and somehow involved in the mysterious happenings at the academy.

It is not the first time I have watched a witch's incantations. But I have never before had such a strong personal interest in them.

The old negress pulled out the laundry from the bag, and with it tumbled a flashing emerald ring! That must have been the ring of Natalie Cunningham. How did it get into Vida di Monserreau's soiled laundry, unless put there by Vida

herself? Is Vida an accomplice or an innocent victim?

Mammy Jinny now drew from her bosom a stocking, and shook out of it as fine a collection of rings, brooches, bracelets, chains, as I've ever seen outside a jeweler's shop. She laid the emerald ring with them and sat staring at her plunder. After a while, she pushed it back into its hiding-place. Then she began to pace the dirt floor of her squalid cabin.

As she walked, she muttered. Sometimes she wrung her hands. Fragments of her words drifted to my ears, as I listened.

"My baby Vida—my little missy! Forgive me, missy! But you must pay for your father's crime. I cannot forgive him!"

All at once she flung herself down before the hearth, for all the world like a great cat and began to stare unblinkingly into the smoldering embers. By my watch, she remained in that posture absolutely motionless for fully two hours, during which I honestly wished I were elsewhere; there was something about her tense attitude that conveyed a baleful significance to my intuition. I knew that she was projecting her mental powers to accomplish her black purposes, like the evil old witch she was. It was hardly an agreeable situation for me, but I dared not move until she herself began to stir.

I have an idea that the witch, the tortoise-shell cat and the odd Vida are more closely connected than might seem credible. I must take Althea somewhat into my confidence.

. . . My plan worked perfectly. Vida was very happy to possess the cat-chain and easily agreed not to take it off. Last night I kept watch over the old negress, and Althea—at my request—watched Vida. Vida slept peacefully through the very hours when I watched Mammy Jinny sweating and working her incantations in vain.

... I am on the right track. Althea tells me that Mammy Jinny came into the academy and ordered Vida to take off the cat-chain. Vida refused with what seemed natural indignation. Mammy Jinny told her the chain was "bad voodoo." Vida stood firm. The old negress was so furious that when she left, she forgot to bow herself, and strode away, full height, much to Vida's astonishment.

... Althea has been carrying out my further directions with a cleverness and tact that does her credit. She snipped one of the links in the chain when Vida wasn't looking, and Vida has asked me to have it repaired, as my cousin suggested. Tonight Vida will be without the protection of the chain. I have instructed Althea as to her part, and I shall myself watch the old witch.

... All last night Mammy Jinny worked her spells. They were successful this time. Althea has told me what happened.

Althea saw the cat steal from Vida's bed to the window, and return with a stolen bracelet in its mouth. It dropped the article into Vida's laundry-bag. Then, as Althea expressed it, the cat sprang into Vida's bed, and—there lay Vida, peacefully sleeping! No wonder Althea couldn't close her eyes the rest of the night.

When one of the girl's chums came in to say that a bracelet was missing, Althea had it ready to return. She said she had picked it up in the hall.

I am going to put a stop to the whole business. It is voodoo, pure and simple, with a taint of the devil that is unpleasant, to say the least. Whatever the old negress' intentions, she must not attempt to carry them out by means of an innocent young white girl who has somehow fallen under her dominant will-power. If I cannot put a quick stop to it, I shall tell Vida di Monserreau exactly what she has to fear, and provide her with a talisman.

LAST night was certainly a thrilling one from start to finish. I sent old Peter to remain outside Mammy Jinny's cabin, for I wanted a full report of her actions. I myself, with Miss Annette's kind cooperation, hung a stout rope-ladder from Althea's window while the two inmates of the room were in the gymnasium, and covered the top with pillows to conceal it from prying eyes.

At about one-thirty a. m., the great cat came out of Althea's window—left open for this purpose—and went out upon the narrow ledge. It made me hold my breath. (What if it had fallen? The thought makes me shudder yet.) It disappeared within another open window, and I went quickly under the window and called to Althea that it was the fifth window. She closed hers at once and went to Belle Bragg's room, where the cat had gone in.

Both girls saw it go out of the window. Then Belle looked at her dressing-table and found her wrist-watch missing. Althea said she thought one of the girls had borrowed it and would bring it back in the morning. Then Belle closed her window—a vain precaution—and Althea returned to her own room.

Meantime, I had mounted the ladder quietly until I was directly under Althea's window, where I braced myself strongly for what I had in mind would follow.

The cat found the window closed. It beat with its forepaws at the pane in a pitiful manner.

I reached up and tossed the repaired cat-chain about its neck. Although I had rather anticipated what followed, it made me gasp, for it was the limp, unconscious body of Vida di Monserreau that I supported in my arms!

Althea opened the window and between us we got the poor girl on to her bed. I warned Althea to be silent and was off to find old Peter and get his report.

I was thoroughly provoked when I found he was not on watch outside the cabin as I had expected him to be. Then I peered under the window-shade. What I saw was my old black Peter, squatting on the floor before the hearth, his arm about that old witch and her head resting on his shoulder!

I was furious! I gave a thundering rap at the door. Peter let me in. But the old scoundrel, instead of seeming ashamed and guilty, met me with a broad grin that showed his white teeth from ear to ear. To my further astonishment, Mammy Jinny rose to her full height with a grin that matched his.

It took my breath away. I demanded an explanation. Between them, it was mighty hard to find out the truth, for it was a long story that went back to the young girlhood of the old negress.

She and Peter were slaves, owned by Vida's grandfather. When a valuable ring was missing, the old man charged Peter with the theft, and sold him into a distant state where he could never hope to see his wife again. Jinny knew the facts, but what good would it have done her to have told them? She might have received a whipping. She knew that her young master had given the ring to a white girl whom he was courting on the sly.

Jinny appealed to "young marse." He laughed in her face. She deter-

mined then to be revenged. Concealing her hatred, she demanded and received the care of Vida, when "young marse's" wife died in childbirth.

From that time on, Mammy Jinny worked out her plans, using her knowledge of voodoo, until she had so bent the child's will to hers that Vida was absolutely responsive to the old negress' thoughts. How she performed the apparent metamorphosis I had seen, she would not tell, however, but only looked at me defiantly out of her proud eyes.

Mammy's idea of revenge seems to have been to fasten the disgrace of theft upon Vida di Monserreau, thus shaming "young marse." Her methods of accomplishing her end are, like all methods of black magic, better left undisclosed to the general public.

As old Peter has long owed me loyalty, since I saved his life years ago, I had little difficulty in persuading him to take his wife to Jamaica, from which place they were originally bought, and where Peter in later years returned, in hope of meeting Jinny there once more. They will be out of Vida's life henceforth.

This does not mean that Vida is to go unprotected. I shall take care of that, with the permission of her father. But I do not believe that old Jinny will ever again crouch in invocation to the Evil Powers to bring the tortoise-shell cat into materialization at Vida's expense.