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Chapter 19 - The Cats

MISS DUNROSS had so completely perplexed me, that I was at a loss what to say next.

To ask her plainly why it was necessary to keep the room in darkness while she remained in it, might prove (for all I knew to the contrary) to be an act of positive rudeness. To venture on any general expression of sympathy with her, knowing absolutely nothing of the circumstances, might place us both in an embarrassing position at the outset of our acquaintance. The one thing I could do was to beg that the present arrangement of the room might not be disturbed, and to leave her to decide as to whether she should admit me to her confidence or exclude me from it, at her own sole discretion.

She perfectly understood what was going on in my mind. Taking a chair at the foot of the bed, she told me simply and unreservedly the sad secret of the darkened room.

"If you wish to see much of me, Mr. Germaine," she began, "you must accustom yourself to the world of shadows in which it is my lot to live. Some time since, a dreadful illness raged among the people in our part of this island; and I was so unfortunate as to catch the infection. When I recovered--no! 'Recovery' is not the right word to use--let me say, when I escaped death, I found myself afflicted by a nervous malady which has defied medical help from that time to this. I am suffering (as the doctors explain it to me) from a morbidly sensitive condition of the nerves near the surface to the action of light. If I were to draw the curtains, and look out of that window, I should feel the acutest pain all over my face. If I covered my face, and drew the curtains with my bare hands, I should feel the same pain in my hands. You can just see, perhaps, that I have a very large and very thick veil on my head. I let it fall over my face and neck and hands, when I have occasion to pass along the corridors or to enter my father's study--and I find it protection enough. Don't be too ready to deplore my sad condition, sir! I have got so used to living in the dark that I can see quite well enough for all the purposes of _my_ poor existence. I can read and write in these shadows--I can see you, and be of use to you in many little ways, if you will let me. There is really nothing to be distressed about. My life will not be a long one--I know and feel that. But I hope to be spared long enough to be my father's companion through the closing years of his life. Beyond that, I have no prospect. In the meanwhile, I have my pleasures; and I mean to add to my scanty little stack the pleasure of attending on you. You are quite an event in my life. I look forward to reading to you and writing for you, as some girls look forward to a new dress, or a first ball. Do you think it very strange of me to tell you so openly just what I have in my mind? I can't help it! I say what I think to my father and to our poor neighbors hereabouts--and I can't alter my ways at a moment's notice. I own it when I like people; and I own it when I don't. I have been looking at you while you were asleep; and I have read your face as I might read a book. There are signs of sorrow on your forehead and your lips which it is strange to see in so young a face as yours. I am afraid I shall trouble you with many questions about yourself when we become better acquainted with each other. Let me begin with a question, in my capacity as nurse. Are your pillows comfortable? I can see they want shaking up. Shall I send for Peter to raise you? I am unhappily not strong enough to be able to help you in that way. No? You are able to raise yourself? Wait a little. There! Now lie back--and tell me if I know how to establish the right sort of sympathy between a tumbled pillow and a weary head."

She had so indescribably touched and interested me, stranger as I was, that the sudden cessation of her faint, sweet tones affected me almost with a sense of pain. In trying (clumsily enough) to help her with the pillows, I accidentally touched her hand. It felt so cold and so thin, that even the momentary contact with it startled me. I tried vainly to see her face, now that it was more within reach of my range of view. The merciless darkness kept it as complete a mystery as ever. Had my curiosity escaped her notice? Nothing escaped her notice. Her next words told me plainly that I had been discovered.

"You have been trying to see me," she said. "Has my hand warned you not to try again? I felt that it startled you when you touched it just now."

Such quickness of perception as this was not to be deceived; such fearless candor demanded as a right a similar frankness on my side. I owned the truth, and left it to her indulgence to forgive me.

She returned slowly to her chair at the foot of the bed.

"If we are to be friends," she said, "we must begin by understanding one another. Don't associate any romantic ideas of invisible beauty with _me_, Mr. Germaine. I had but one beauty to boast of before I fell ill--my complexion--and that has gone forever. There is nothing to see in me now but the poor reflection of my former self; the ruin of what was once a woman. I don't say this to distress you--I say it to reconcile you to the darkness as a perpetual obstacle, so far as your eyes are concerned, between you and me. Make the best instead of the worst of your strange position here. It offers you a new sensation to amuse you while you are ill. You have a nurse who is an impersonal creature--a shadow among shadows; a voice to speak to you, and a hand to help you, and nothing more. Enough of myself!" she exclaimed, rising and changing her tone. "What can I do to amuse you?" She considered a little. "I have some odd tastes," she resumed; "and I think I may entertain you if I make you acquainted with one of them. Are you like most other men, Mr. Germaine? Do you hate cats?"

The question startled me. However, I could honestly answer that, in this respect at least, I was not like other men.

"To my thinking," I added, "the cat is a cruelly misunderstood creature--especially in England. Women, no doubt, generally do justice to the affectionate nature of cats. But the men treat them as if they were the natural enemies of the human race. The men drive a cat out of their presence if it ventures upstairs, and set their dogs at it if it shows itself in the street--and then they turn round and accuse the poor creature (whose genial nature must attach itself to something) of being only fond of the kitchen!"

The expression of these unpopular sentiments appeared to raise me greatly in the estimation of Miss Dunross.

"We have one sympathy in common, at any rate," she said. "Now I can amuse you! Prepare for a surprise."

She drew her veil over her face as she spoke, and, partially opening the door, rang my handbell. Peter appeared, and received his instructions.

"Move the screen," said Miss Dunross. Peter obeyed; the ruddy firelight streamed over the floor. Miss Dunross proceeded with her directions. "Open the door of the cats room, Peter; and bring me my harp. Don't suppose that you are going to listen to a great player, Mr. Germaine," she went on, when Peter had departed on his singular errand, "or that you are likely to see the sort of harp to which you are accustomed, as a man of the modern time. I can only play some old Scotch airs; and my harp is an ancient instrument (with new strings)--an heirloom in our family, some centuries old. When you see my harp, you will think of pictures of St. Cecilia--and you will be treating my performance kindly if you will remember, at the same time, that I am no saint!"

She drew her chair into the firelight, and sounded a whistle which she took from the pocket of her dress. In another moment the lithe and shadowy figures of the cats appeared noiselessly in the red light, answering their mistress's call. I could just count six of them, as the creatures seated themselves demurely in a circle round the chair. Peter followed with the harp, and closed the door after him as he went out. The streak of daylight being now excluded from the room, Miss Dunross threw back her veil, and took the harp on her knee; seating herself, I observed, with her face turned away from the fire.

"You will have light enough to see the cats by," she said, "without having too much light for _me_. Firelight does not give me the acute pain which I suffer when daylight falls on my face--I feel a certain inconvenience from it, and nothing more."

She touched the strings of her instrument--the ancient harp, as she had said, of the pictured St. Cecilia; or, rather, as I thought, the ancient harp of the Welsh bards. The sound was at first unpleasantly high in pitch, to my untutored ear. At the opening notes of the melody--a slow, wailing, dirgelike air--the cats rose, and circled round their mistress, marching to the tune. Now they followed each other singly; now, at a change in the melody, they walked two and two; and, now again, they separated into divisions of three each, and circled round the chair in opposite directions. The music quickened, and the cats quickened their pace with it. Faster and faster the notes rang out, and faster and faster in the ruddy firelight, the cats, like living shadows, whirled round the still black figure in the chair, with the ancient harp on its knee. Anything so weird, wild, and ghostlike I never imagined before even in a dream! The music changed, and the whirling cats began to leap. One perched itself at a bound on the pedestal of the harp. Four sprung up together, and assumed their places, two on each of her shoulders. The last and smallest of the cats took the last leap, and lighted on her head! There the six creatures kept their positions, motionless as statues! Nothing moved but the wan, white hands over the harp-strings; no sound but the sound of the music stirred in the room. Once more the melody changed. In an instant the six cats were on the floor again, seated round the chair as I had seen them on their first entrance; the harp was laid aside; and the faint, sweet voice said quietly, "I am soon tired--I must leave my cats to conclude their performances tomorrow."

She rose, and approached the bedside.

"I leave you to see the sunset through your window," she said. "From the coming of the darkness to the coming of breakfast-time, you must not count on my services--I am taking my rest. I have no choice but to remain in bed (sleeping when I can) for twelve hours or more. The long repose seems to keep my life in me. Have I and my cats surprised you very much? Am I a witch; and are they my familiar spirits? Remember how few amusements I have, and you will not wonder why I devote myself to teaching these pretty creatures their tricks, and attaching them to me like dogs! They were slow at first, and they taught me excellent lessons of patience. Now they understand what I want of them, and they learn wonderfully well. How you will amuse your friend, when he comes back from fishing, with the story of the young lady who lives in the dark, and keeps a company of performing cats! I shall expect _you_ to amuse _me_ to-morrow--I want you to tell me all about yourself, and how you came to visit these wild islands of ours. Perhaps, as the days go on, and we get better acquainted, you will take me a little more into your confidence, and tell me the true meaning of that story of sorrow which I read on your face while you were asleep? I have just enough of the woman left in me to be the victim of curiosity, when I meet with a person who interests me. Good-by till to-morrow! I wish you a tranquil night, and a pleasant waking. - Come, my familiar spirits! Come, my cat children! it's time we went back to our own side of the house."

She dropped the veil over her face--and, followed by her train of cats, glided out of the room.

Immediately on her departure, Peter appeared and drew back the curtains. The light of the setting sun streamed in at the window. At the same moment my traveling companion returned in high spirits, eager to tell me about his fishing in the lake. The contrast between what I saw and heard now, and what I had seen and heard only a few minutes since, was so extraordinary and so startling that I almost doubted whether the veiled figure with the harp, and the dance of cats, were not the fantastic creations of a dream. I actually asked my friend whether he had found me awake or asleep when he came into the room!

Evening merged into night. The Master of Books made his appearance, to receive the latest news of my health. He spoke and listened absently as if his mind were still pre-occupied by his studies--except when I referred gratefully to his daughter's kindness to me. At her name his faded blue eyes brightened; his drooping head became erect; his sad, subdued voice strengthened in tone.

"Do not hesitate to let her attend on you," he said. "Whatever interests or amuses her, lengthens her life. In _her_ life is the breath of mine. She is more than my daughter; she is the guardian-angel of the house. Go where she may, she carries the air of heaven with her. When you say your prayers, sir, pray God to leave my daughter here a little longer."

He sighed heavily; his head dropped again on his breast--he left me.

The hour advanced; the evening meal was set by my bedside. Silent Peter, taking his leave for the night, developed into speech. "I sleep next door," he said. "Ring when you want me." My traveling companion, taking the second bed in the room, reposed in the happy sleep of youth. In the house there was dead silence. Out of the house, the low song of the night-wind, rising and falling over the lake and the moor, was the one sound to be heard. So the first day ended in the hospitable Shetland house.