



The White Cat of Ecija

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Portuguese

Advanced
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From the gates of the palace, situated on a gentle eminence in the vicinity of Ecija, down to the banks of the Genil, the ground was covered with olive-trees; and the wild aloes formed a natural and strong fence around the property of the White Cat of Ecija, whose origin, dating back to the days of Saracenic rule, was unknown to the liberated Spaniard.

There was a great mystery attaching to the palace and its occupants; and although the servants of the White Cat were to all appearances human beings, still, as they were deaf and dumb, and would not, or could not, understand signs, the neighbours had not been able to discover the secret or mystery.

The palace was a noble building, after the style of the alcazar at Toledo, but not so large; and the garden at the rear was laid out with many small lakes, round which, at short distances, stood beautifully sculptured statues of young men and women, who seemed to be looking sorrowfully into the water. Only the brain and hand of an exceptionally gifted artist could have so approached perfection as to make the statues look as if alive. At night strings of small lamps were hung round the lakes, and from the interior of the palace proceeded strains of sweet, but very sad music.

Curiosity had long ceased to trouble the neighbours as to the mysterious White Cat and her household, and, with the exception of crossing themselves when they passed by the grounds, they had given up the affair as incomprehensible.

Those, however, who had seen the White Cat, said that she was a beautiful creature; her coat was like velvet, and her eyes were like pearls.

One day a knight in armour, and mounted on a coal-black charger, arrived at the principal hostelry in Ecija, and on his shield he bore for his coat of arms a white cat rampant, and, underneath, the device, "Invincible."

Having partaken of some slight repast, he put spurs to his horse and galloped in the direction of the palace of the White Cat; but as he was not seen to return through the town, the people supposed that he had left by some other road.

The White Cat was seen next day walking about in the grounds, but she seemed more sorrowful than usual.

In another month's time there came another knight fully equipped, and mounted on a grey charger. On his shield he also displayed a white cat, with the device, "I win or die." He also galloped off to the palace, or alcazar, and was not seen to return; but next day the White Cat was still more sorrowful.

In another month a fresh knight appeared. He was a handsome youth, and his bearing was so manly that a crowd collected. He was fully equipped, but on his shield he displayed a simple red cross. He partook of some food, and then cantered out of the town with his lance at rest. He was seen to approach the palace, and as soon as he thrust open the gate with his lance, a terrific roar was heard, and then a sheet of fire flashed from the palace door, and they saw a horrid dragon, whose long tail, as it lashed the air, produced such a wind that it seemed as if a gale had suddenly sprung up.

But the gallant knight was not daunted, and eagerly scanned the dragon as if to see where he might strike him.

Suddenly it was seen that the dragon held the White Cat under its talons, so that the Knight of the Cross in charging the dragon had to take care not to strike her. Spurring his horse on, he never pulled up till he had transfixed the dragon with his lance, and, jumping off the saddle, he drew his sword and cut off the monster's head.

No sooner had he done this than he was surrounded by ten enormous serpents, who tried to coil round him;

but as fast as they attacked him, he strangled them.

Then the serpents turned into twenty black vultures with fiery beaks, and they tried to pick out his eyes; but with his trusty blade he kept them off, and one by one he killed them all, and then found himself surrounded by forty dark-haired and dark-eyed lovely maidens, who would have thrown their arms around him, but that he, fearing their intentions were evil, kept them off; when, looking on the ground, he saw the White Cat panting, and heard her bid him “strike.”

He waited no longer, but struck at them and cut off their heads, and then saw that the ground was covered with burning coal, which would have scorched the White Cat and killed her, had not the gallant knight raised her in his arms. He then placed her on his shield, and as soon as she touched the cross she was seen to change into a beautiful maiden, and all the statues round the lakes left their positions and approached her.

As soon as she could recover herself sufficiently to speak, she addressed the knight as follows—

“Gallant sir, I am Mizpah, only daughter of Mudi Ben Raschid, who was governor of this province for many years under the Moorish king, Almandazar the Superb. My mother was daughter of Alcharan, governor of Mazagan, and she was a good wife and kind mother. But my father discovering that she had forsaken the faith of her fathers, and had embraced the religion of the Cross, so worried her to return to her childhood’s faith that she died broken-hearted. Then he married again, and his second wife, my stepmother, was a very wicked woman. She knew that I was a Christian at heart, and that my lover was also a Christian; so one day, when my father was holding a banquet, she said to him, ‘Mudi Ben Raschid, the crescent of the Holy Prophet is waning in thy family—thy daughter is a renegade!’

“Then he was very much annoyed, and exclaimed that he would his palace and his riches were made over to the enemy of mankind and I turned into a cat, than that so great a stain should fall on his family. No sooner had he finished speaking than he fell dead and his wicked wife also, and I was turned into a cat; my lover, Haroun, and all my young friends were turned into stone, and my servants were stricken deaf and dumb. Many a brave knight has been here to try and deliver me; but they all failed, because they only trusted in themselves, and were therefore defeated. But thou, gallant knight, didst trust more on the Cross than on thyself, and thou hast freed me. I am, therefore, the prize of thy good sword; deal with me as thou wilt.”

The Knight of the Cross assured her that he came from Compostella, where it was considered a duty to rescue maidens in distress, and that the highest reward coveted was that of doing their duty. He had in various parts

of the world been fortunate enough in freeing others, and he had still more work before him. He trusted that the lovely Mizpah might long be spared to Haroun, and, saluting her, he galloped off.

Then was the wedding held, at which all the people from Ecija attended; and the bridegroom, rising, wished prosperity to the good knight, St. James of Compostella, who had been the means of bringing about so much happiness.

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