

The Home Reading Circle

THE WHITE THREAD.

By ALLEN UPWARD.

Author of "Secrets of the Courts of Europe."

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SYNOPSIS.

The story is told to a friend by a French diplomat, erstwhile chargé d'affaires at one of the petty municipalities of the Balkan, which, while scarcely free from Turkish vassalage, is torn asunder by Austrian and Russian jealousy. In this instance Reining Prince George Inlines to Austria, while Princess Catherine is one of the most attractive places in the State of Pennsylvania to spend a few weeks during the heated term. Every facility is afforded for the entertainment of its guests.

PART III.

"The two words uttered by Starovitch before he expired," continued the ambassador, "had been sufficient to reveal to me the frightful plot to which I had narrowly escaped falling a victim. There could be no longer any question that the white thread which I had twice come across on this night first on my own clothes, and then on those of the unfortunate minister, was a signal of the most terrible kind. It was not for nothing that I had followed my path so obstinately blocked by that tripe, till his confederate had time to catch me up from behind. But for the accident of the quarry's having drawn my attention to it, the assassin I could not doubt, would have been on my back the token which he sought, and I should have shared the fate of the man whom I had just seen breathe his last.

PART IV.

Before Frank Shirley had swam a stone's throw from the ledge he felt the strength failing, and knew that he could never cover half the distance between Gull Rock and Compass Island. If only his own life had been at stake he would have ceased to struggle. But for the sake of the girl whom his folly had led into deadly peril, he held on. He fought for his own life only his power to move on hand or foot remained with him.

PART V.

It was true, though by the closest calculation I could make, it lacked an hour and fifty minutes of the time of high water. It may have been ten minutes that we waited thus. Then Alice leaped to her feet. "You may deny God's power, if you will," she said, "but it has saved us all. I tell you that the tide has stopped rising. It will never rise again here, though they ain't on Gull Rock."

It seemed to him that at a single bound he passed through the fringe of spruces, and came upon a house so suddenly that he almost ran against it. In all respects it resembled Sam Rodman's dwelling, but how he had encountered it so soon, unless it had come to meet him, was more than Shirley could understand.

"I believe that for a million years the tide has covered Gull Rock twice every twenty-four hours," said it, answering for him; "and it will not stop for us."

"I spoke earnestly. It seemed to me weak to trust in miracles. It was like giving up the ghost," said Shirley. "I will stop if God tells it to," said the girl.

"I have a watch," said I. "It's a little gold one belonging to my mother. She let me take it. You know mine is being repaired. The watch is going, but I can't see the face of it. Can we tell the time by the course of the waves? I've got matches," said Harry. "They're in a metal case; they're dry. Let's all get together and shut off the light while I light one. Hold your watch, Bert."

"Five minutes of eleven," he cried, and the tide turned at eight. It's only half flood. I give up. Before this I could not believe that I was so lost. It seemed to me that there must be some mistake. But there is not getting out of it now.

"One chance only remains, so far as I can see," said Frank, "and if that's to be tried, I'm glad it's earlier than we thought."

"I shall have the wind and the sea with me," replied Frank. "It is worth trying."

But it was not. The feat was entirely impossible. Frank was bigger and stronger and of greater endurance than most men, but he was only a fair swimmer. Under the most favorable conditions I don't believe he could have swum a mile. Chilled as he was by long exposure, and exhausted by previous efforts, he would do well if he should swim a hundred yards. He would probably drown within the range of our voices.

Yet he could not be prevented from making the attempt. Harry said I said what we could, and Alice brought him such words as I felt I could have given my life for. If I had at that time a life that was not as good as lost already, she could not stay him.

"Listen, Alice; when I missed your boat the first time I did it on purpose. I wanted to fix it with Steve so that I could row you ashore in your boat. We gambled for the privilege and he won. Then, when you insisted on staying in my boat, I missed your boat. I'm yours, though there was no need for it. If I had run alongside of you the first time, there would have been no collision. If I hadn't sent Steve away because I was jealous of him, we should have had the rowboat with us, and even if the squall had upset us we could have got ashore. So it's all my fault, and I don't deserve to come out of it alive. Perhaps after I am out of the way, something will happen to save you, who are not to blame."

"Good-by," he said. "I'll bring you help if I can. At any rate, don't give up till the last possible moment. Rescue may come."

I nearly lost my wits with horror as he went down into the black water beyond the ledge. He seemed to take our courage with him, and for a time we lay huddled together like frightened children in the dark.

"I've swum here from Gull Rock," Shirley answered. "There are some people on the ledge and they will drown if we don't reach them. We were in a boat and she upset. We drifted across the bay."

"You swum here from Gull Rock!" exclaimed the man. "Why it's more'n three hours!"

"No it isn't," cried Shirley; "but never mind that. Come along. We must get back there before high tide. You've got a boat, of course?"

"I hope to heaven I have," rejoined Shirley. "Indeed, I know it's true. This isn't Compass Island."

"Not by a jug full. It's Little Green, and I'm here."

"God knows," was the answer. "Tell me your story again. We'll go along while you talk. We'll take these lanterns along for I guess you've got some kind of a lantern, and they'll be there, though they ain't on Gull Rock."

"Your friends are all right. They're off here on Black Lodge, not a quarter of a mile from this island."

"It can't be," said Shirley. "We couldn't have drifted way down here. The wind was southwest."

"Till the squall struck," interrupted Shirley told his story as they walked down to the cove, where the islander kept his boat. His companion did not interrupt him once. When Shirley had finished, he said:

"The time had come when he, too, looked beyond the visible laws of tide and wave to Him who had made them. Had he fought for his own life only he might not have dared expect mercy from the sea, which is the most cruel of God's creatures. But in an effort which he knew was good, he felt that there should be a power on his side. Even within the ordinary course of things it would be possible that he should find some bit of driftwood that would sustain him while he struggled on. But his hands encountered nothing but the water, and from the top of the succeeding waves his ears caught saw nothing but white crests and jet black billows."

He lost account of time and distance. He knew only that the time seemed to pass in a moment. He felt that whether he had won a hundred yards of a half mile was a mere guess. His course he directed vaguely by the wind and sea, but what did it matter? Still he knew that it was best to work a mile within the ordinary course of the waves, for Compass Island was not quite truly leeward of Gull Rock.

It is wonderful how many strokes a swimmer can take after that one which seems his very last of which he is capable. Shirley swam on and on, though his arms had come to such a degree of weariness and cold that he had no feeling of where they were. The effort of each stroke was made in his brain, and he had no sensation of compliance with the impulses of his own will.

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