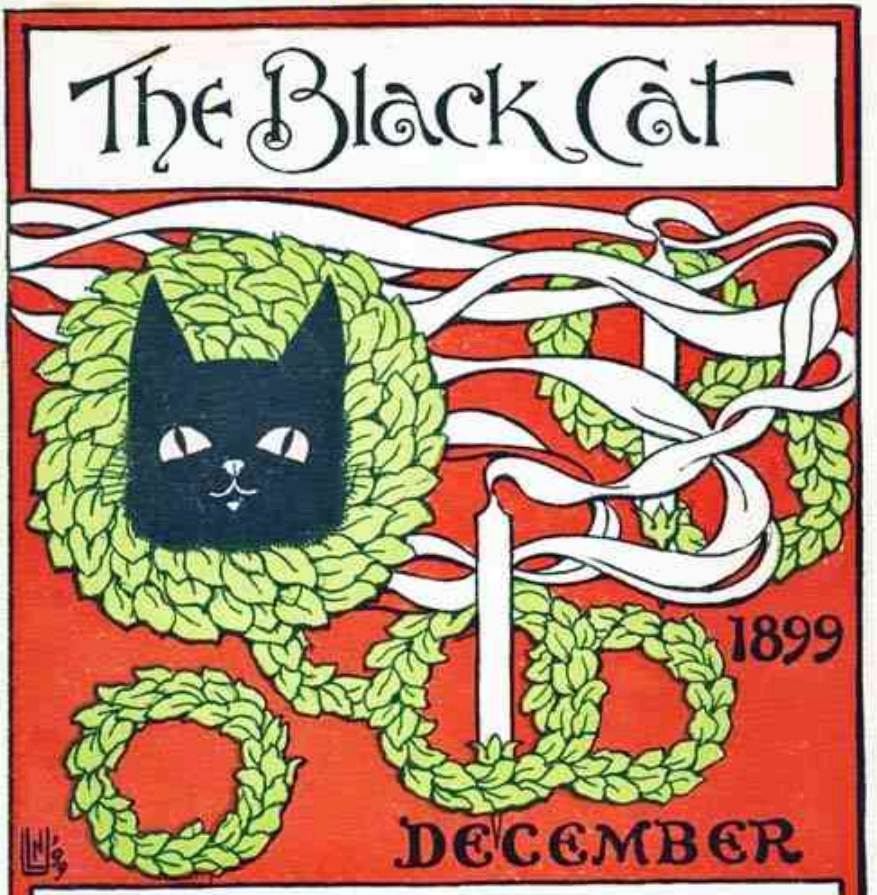
5—Complete Stories—5

The Black Cat



1899

DECEMBER

A Postal Card Tragedy.
E. F. Bishop.

The Gratitude of Mrs. Hatch.
G. B. Dunham.

Ely's Automatic Housemaid.
Elizabeth W. Bellamy.

The Curse of Zulma Rebeya.
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*** START OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK ELY'S AUTOMATIC HOUSEMAID ***

Ely’s Automatic Housemaid.[A]

BY ELIZABETH W. BELLAMY.

IN order for a man to have faith in such an invention, he would have to know Harrison Ely. For Harrison Ely was a genius. I had known him in college, a man amazingly dull in Latin and Greek and even in English, but with ideas of his own that could not be expressed in language. His bent was purely mechanical, and found expression in innumerable ingenious contrivances to facilitate the study to which he had no inclination. His self-acting lexicon-holder was a matter of admiring wonder to his classmates, but it did not serve to increase the tenacity of his mental grasp upon the contents of the volume, and so did little to recommend him to the faculty. And his self-feeding safety student-lamp admirably illuminated everything for him save the true and only path to an honorable degree.

It had been years since I had seen him or thought of him, but the memory is tenacious of small things, and the big yellow envelope which I found one morning awaiting me upon my breakfast-table brought his eccentric personality back to me with a rush. It was addressed to me in the Archimedean script always so characteristic of him, combining, as it seemed to do, the principles of the screw and of the inclined plane, and in its superscription Harrison Ely stood unmistakably revealed.

It was the first morning of a new cook, the latest potentate of a dynasty of ten who had briefly ruled in turn over our kitchen and ourselves during the preceding three months, and successively abdicated in favor of one another under the compelling influences of popular clamor, and in the face of such a political crisis my classmate's letter failed to receive immediate attention. Unfortunately but not unexpectedly the latest occupant of our culinary throne began her reign with no conspicuous reforms, and we received in gloomy silence her preliminary enactments in the way of greasy omelette and turbid and flavorless coffee, the yellow screed of Harrison Ely looking on the while with bilious sympathy as it leaned unopened against the water-bottle beside me.

As I drained the last medicinal drop of coffee my eye fell upon it, and needing a vicarious outlet for my feelings toward the cook, I seized it and tore it viciously open. It contained a letter from my classmate and half a dozen printed circulars. I spread open the former, and my eye fastened at once upon this sympathetic exordium:

“Doubtless, my dear friend, you have known what discomfort it is to be at the mercy of incompetent domestics—”

But my attention was distracted at this point by one of the circulars, which displayed an array of startling, cheering, alluring words, followed by plentiful exclamation points, that, like a bunch of keys, opened to my enraptured vision the gates of a terrestrial Paradise, where Bridgets should be no more, and where ill-cooked meals should become a mechanical impossibility. The boon we had been sighing for now presented itself for my acceptance, an accomplished fact. Harrison Ely had invented “An Automatic Household Beneficent Genius.—A Practical Realization of the Fabled Familiar of the Middle Ages.” So the circular set forth.

Returning to the letter, I read that Harrison Ely, having exhausted his means in working out his invention, was unable to manufacture his “machine” in quantity as yet; but that he had just two on hand which he would sell in order to raise some ready money. He hoped that I would buy one of his automatons, and aid him to sell the other.

Never did a request come at a more propitious moment. I had always entertained a kindness for Harrison Ely, and now such was my disgust at the incompetence of Bridget and Juliana and their predecessors that I was eager to stake the price of a “Household Beneficent Genius” on the success of my friend’s invention.

So, having grasped the purport of the circulars and letter, I broke forth to my wife:

“My dear, you’ve heard me speak of Harrison Ely—”

“That man who is always so near doing something great, and never *has* done anything?” said she.

“He has done it at last!” I declared. “Harrison Ely is one of the greatest geniuses the world has ever seen. He has invented an ‘Automatic-Electric Machine-Servant.’”

My wife said, “Oh!”

There was not an atom of enthusiasm in that “Oh!” but I was not to be daunted.

“I am ready,” I resumed, “to invest my bottom dollar in *two* of Harrison Ely’s machine-servants.”

Her eyes were fixed upon me as if they would read my very soul. “What do they cost?” she mildly asked.

“In comparison with the benefits to be derived, little enough. Listen!” I seized a circular at random, and began to read:

“The Automatic Household Genius, a veritable Domestic Fairy, swift, silent, sure; a Permanent, Inalienable, First-class Servant, warranted to give Satisfaction.”

“Ah!” said my wife; and the enthusiasm that was lacking in the “Oh!” made itself eloquent in that “Ah!” “What is the price?” she asked again.

“The price is all right, and we are going to try the experiment.”

“Are we though?” said she, between doubt and desire.

“Most assuredly; it will be a saving in the end. I shall write to Harrison Ely this very night.”

The return mail brought me a reply stating that two Electric-Automatic Household Beneficent Geniuses had been shipped me by express. The letter enclosed a pamphlet that gave a more particular account of the E. A. H. B. G. than the circulars contained. My friend’s invention was shaped in the likeness of the human figure, with body, head, arms, legs, hands and feet. It was clad in waterproof cloth, with a hood of the same to protect the head, and was shod with felt. The trunk contained the

wheels and springs, and in the head was fixed the electric battery. The face, of bisque, was described as possessing “a very natural and pleasing expression.”

Just at dusk an oblong box arrived by express and was duly delivered in our hall, but at my wife’s urgent entreaty I consented not to unpack the machines until next day.

“If we should not get the knack of managing them, they might give us trouble,” said this wise wife of mine.

I agreed to this, and having sent away Bridget with a week’s wages, to the satisfaction of all parties, we went to bed in high hopes.

Early next morning we were astir.

“My dear,” I said, “do not give yourself the least concern about breakfast; I am determined that Harrison’s invention shall have fair play.”

“Very well,” my wife assented; but she prudently administered bread and butter to her offspring.

I opened the oblong box, where lay the automatons side by side, their hands placidly folded upon their waterproof breasts, and their eyes looking placidly expectant from under their waterproof hoods.

I confess the sight gave me a shock. Anna Maria turned pale; the children hid their faces in her skirts.

“Once out of the box,” I said to myself, “and the horror will be over.”

The machines stood on their feet admirably, but the horror was not materially lessened by this change of position. However, I assumed a bold front, and said, jocosely:

“Now, which is Bridget, and which is Juliana—which the cook, and which the housemaid?”

This distinction was made clear by dial-plates and indicators, set conspicuously between the shoulders, an opening being cut in the waterproof for that purpose. The housemaid’s dial-plate was stamped around the circumference with the words: Bed, Broom, Duster, Door-

bell, Dining-room Service, Parlor Service, etc. In like manner, the cook's dial-plate bore the words that pertained to her department. I gave myself first to "setting" the housemaid, as being the simpler of the two.

"Now, my dear," said I, confidently, "we shall see how *this* Juliana can make the beds."

I proceeded, according to the pamphlet's directions, to point the indicator to the word "Bed." Next, as there were three beds to be made, I pushed in three of the five little red points surrounding the word. Then I set the "clock" connected with the indicator, for a thirty minutes' job, thinking it might take about ten minutes to a bed. I did not consult my wife, for women do not understand machinery, and any suggestion of hesitancy on my part would have demoralized her.

The last thing to be done was to connect the indicator with the battery, a simple enough performance in itself, but the pamphlet of directions gave a repeated and red-lettered "CAUTION," never to interfere with the machine while it was at work! I therefore issued the command, "Non-combatants to the rear!" and was promptly obeyed.

What happened next I do not pretend to account for. By what subtle and mysterious action of electricity, by what unerring affinity, working through a marvellous mechanism, that Electric-Automatic Household Beneficent Genius, whom—or which, for short—we called Juliana, sought its appropriate task, is the inventor's secret. I don't undertake to explain, I merely narrate. With a "click" the connection was made, and the new Juliana *went up-stairs* at a brisk and business-like pace.

We followed in breathless amazement. In less than five minutes, bed number one was made, and in a twinkling the second was taken in hand, and number three also was fairly accomplished, long before the allotted thirty minutes had expired. By this time, familiarity had somewhat dulled that awe and wonder with which we had gaped upon the first performance, and I beheld a smile of hopeful satisfaction on my wife's anxious countenance.

Our youngest, a boy aged three, was quick to feel the genial influence of this smile, and encouraged thereby, he bounced into the middle of the first bed. Hardly had he alighted there, when our automaton, having finished making the third bed, returned to her first job, and, before we could imagine mischief, the mattresses were jerked about, and the child was tumbled, headforemost on the floor!

Had the flesh-and-blood Juliana been guilty of such an act, she should have been dismissed on the spot; but, as it was, no one of us ventured so much as a remonstrance. My wife lifted the screaming child, and the imperturbable machine went on to re-adjust the bed with mechanical exactitude.

At this point a wild shout of mingled exultation, amazement and terror arose from below, and we hastened down-stairs to find our son John hugging his elbows and capering frantically in front of the kitchen-door, where the electric cook was stirring empty nothing in a pan, with a zeal worthy a dozen eggs.

My eldest hopeful, impelled by that spirit of enterprise and audacity characteristic of nine-year-old boys, had ventured to experiment with the kitchen automaton, and by sheer accident had effected a working connection between the battery and the indicator, and the machine, in "going off," had given the boy a blow that made him feel, as he expressed it, "like a funny-bone all over."

"And served you right!" cried I. The thing was set for an hour and a half of work, according to the showing of the dial-plate, and no chance to stop it before I must leave for my office. Had the materials been supplied, we might have had breakfast; but, remembering the red-lettered "CAUTION," we dared not supply materials while that indefatigable spoon was gyrating in the empty pan. For my distraction, Kitty, my daughter of seven years, now called to me from up-stairs:

"Papa, you *better* come, quick! *It's* a-tearin' up these beds!"

“My dear,” I sighed, “there’s no way to stop it. We’ll have to wait for the works to run down. I must call Harrison’s attention to this defect. He ought to provide some sort of brake.”

We went up-stairs again. The B. G. Juliana stood beside the bed which she had just torn up for the sixth or seventh time, when suddenly she became, so to speak, paralyzed; her arms, in the act of spreading the sheets, dropped by her sides, her back stiffened, and she stood absolutely motionless, leaving her job unfinished—the B. G. would move no more until duly “set” again.

I now discovered that I was hungry. “If that Fiend in the kitchen were only at work about something substantial, instead of whipping the air into imaginary omelettes!” I groaned.

“Never mind,” said my wife; “I’ve a pot of coffee on the kerosene stove.”

Bless her! She was worth a thousand Beneficent Geniuses, and so I told her.

I did not return until late, but I was in good spirits, and I greeted my wife gayly:

“Well, how do they work?”

“*Like fiends!*” my usually placid helpmeet replied, so vehemently that I was alarmed. “They flagged at first,” she proceeded, excitedly, “and I oiled them, which *I* am not going to do, ever again. According to the directions, I poured the oil down their throats. It was horrible! They seemed to me to *drink it greedily*.”

“Nonsense! That’s your imagination.”

“Very well,” said Anna Maria. “You can do the oiling in future. They took a good deal this morning; it wasn’t easy to stop pouring it down. And they worked—*obstreperously*. That Fiend in the kitchen has cooked all the provisions I am going to supply *this* day, but still she goes on, and it’s no use to say a word.”

“Don’t be absurd,” I remonstrated. “The thing is only a machine.”

“I’m not so sure about that!” she retorted. “As for the other one—I set it sweeping, and it is sweeping still!”

We ate the dinner prepared by the kitchen Fiend, and really, I was tempted to compliment the cook in a set speech, but recollected myself in time to spare Anna Maria the triumph of saying, “I told you so!”

Now, that John of mine, still in pursuit of knowledge, had spent the day studying Harrison Ely’s pamphlet, and he learned that the machines could be set, like an alarm-clock, for any given hour. Therefore, as soon as the Juliana had collapsed over a pile of dust in the middle of the hall, John, unknown to us, set her indicator to the broom-handle for seven o’clock the following morning. When the Fiend in the kitchen ran down, leaving everything in confusion, my much-tried wife persuaded me to give my exclusive attention to that machine, and the Juliana was put safely in a corner. Thus it happened that John’s interference escaped detection. I set Bridget’s indicator for kitchen-cleaning at seven-thirty the next morning.

“When we understand them better,” I said to my wife, “we will set their morning tasks for an earlier hour, but we won’t put it too early now, since we must first learn their ways.”

“That’s the trouble with all new servants,” said Anna Maria.

The next morning at seven-thirty, precisely, we were awakened by a commotion in the kitchen.

“By George Washington!” I exclaimed. “The Thing’s on time!”

I needed no urging to make me forsake my pillow, but Anna Maria was ahead of me.

“Now, my dear, don’t get excited,” I exhorted, but in vain.

“Don’t you hear?” she whispered, in terror. “*The other one!*—swe—eep—ing!” And she darted from the room.

I paused to listen, and heard the patter of three pairs of little bare feet across the hall up-stairs. The children were following their mother. The next sound I heard was like the dragging of a rug along the floor. I recognized this peculiar sound as the footsteps of the B. G. Then came a dull thud, mingled with a shout from Johnnie, a scream from my wife, and the terrified cries of the two younger children. I rushed out just in time to see John, in his night-clothes, with his hair on end, tear down-stairs like a streak of lightning. My little Kitty and the three-year-old baby stood clasped in each other's arms at the head of the stairs, sobbing in terror, and, half-way down, was my wife, leaning over the railing, with ashen face and rigid body, her fascinated gaze fixed upon a dark and struggling mass in the hall below.

John, when he reached the bottom of the stairs, began capering like a goat gone mad, digging the floor with his bare heels, clapping his hands with an awful glee, and shouting:

"Bet your bottom dollar on the one that whips!"

The Juliana and the Bridget were fighting for the broom!

I comprehended the situation intuitively. The kitchen-cleaning, for which the Fiend had been "set," had reached a point that demanded the broom, and that subtle, attractive affinity, which my friend's genius had known how to produce, but had not learned to regulate, impelled the unerring automaton towards the only broom in the house, which was now in the hands of its fellow-automaton, and a struggle was inevitable. What I could not understand—Johnnie having kept his own counsel—was this uncontrollable sweeping impulse that possessed the Juliana.

However, this was no time for investigating the exact cause of the terrific row now going on in our front hall. The Beneficent Geniuses had each a firm grip of the broom-handle, and they might have performed the sweeping very amicably together, could they but have agreed as to the field of labor, but their conflicting tendencies on this point brought about a rotary motion that sent them spinning around the hall, and kept them alternately cracking each other's head with a violence that ought to

have drawn blood. Considering their life-likeness, we should hardly have thought it strange if blood *had* flowed, and it would have been a relief had the combatants but called each other names, so much did their dumbness intensify the horror of a struggle, in the midst of which the waterproof hoods fell off, revealing their startlingly human countenances, not distorted by angry passions, but resolute, inexorable, calm, as though each was sustained in the contest by a lofty sense of duty.

"They're alive! Kill 'em! Kill 'em, quick!" shrieked my wife, as the gyrating couple moved towards the stair-case.

"Let 'em alone," said Johnnie—his sporting blood, which he inherits from his father, thoroughly roused—dancing about the automatic pugilists in delight, and alternately encouraging the one or the other to increased efforts.

Thus the fight went on with appalling energy and reckless courage on both sides, my wife wringing her hands upon the stair-case, our infants wailing in terror upon the landing above, and I wavering between an honest desire to see fair play and an apprehensive dread of consequences which was not unjustified.

In one of their frantic gyrations the figures struck the hat-rack and promptly converted it into a mass of splinters. In a minute more they became involved with a rubber plant—the pride of my wife's heart—and distributed it impartially all over the premises. From this they caromed against the front door, wrecking both its stained-glass panes, and then down the length of the hall they sped again, fighting fiercely and dealing one another's imperturbable countenances ringing blows with the disputed broom.

We became aware through Johnnie's excited comments, that Juliana had lost an ear in the fray, and presently it was discernible that a fractured nose had somewhat modified the set geniality of expression that had distinguished Bridget's face in its prime.

How this fierce and equal combat would have culminated if further prolonged no one but Harrison Ely can conjecture, but it came to an abrupt termination as the parlor clock chimed eight, the hour when the two automatons should have completed their appointed tasks.

Though quite late at my office that morning, I wired Ely before attending to business. Long-haired, gaunt and haggard, but cheerful as ever, he arrived next day, on fire with enthusiasm. He could hardly be persuaded to refresh himself with a cup of coffee before he took his two recalcitrant Geniuses in hand. It was curious to see him examine each machine, much as a physician would examine a patient. Finally his brow cleared, he gave a little puff of satisfaction, and exclaimed:

"Why, man alive, there's nothing the matter—not a thing! What you consider a defect is really a merit—merely a surplus of mental energy. They've had too big a dose of oil. Few housekeepers have any idea about proper lubrication," and he emitted another little snort, at which my wife colored guiltily.

"I see just what's wanted," he resumed. "The will-power generated and not immediately expended becomes cumulative and gets beyond control. I'll introduce a little compensator, to take up the excess and regulate the flow. Then a child can operate them."

It was now Johnnie's turn to blush.

"Ship 'em right back to the factory, and we'll have 'em all right in a few days. I see where the mechanism can be greatly improved, and when you get 'em again I know you'll never consent to part with 'em!"

That was four months ago. The "Domestic Fairies" have not yet been returned from Harrison's laboratory, but I am confidently looking for the familiar oblong packing case, and expect any day to see in the papers the prospectus of the syndicate which Ely informs me is being "promoted" to manufacture his automatic housemaid.

FOOTNOTE:

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