

## MAINLY IN MOONLIGHT

By Nicholas Stuart Gray

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ONCE, not so long ago, there was a young man names Colin who was very fond of cats. He has countless friends among them, in farms and villages, all about his father's estates. Yet he had no cats to call his own. This was odd, but it was because he could never make up his mind what sort of cat he liked best. They were all so enchanting.

But one morning, Colin woke smiling, saying as he opened his eyes, "I want a white one. I've dreamed of a white one."

The old lady who once had been his nurse, and still insisted on the right to wake him each day, gave a superior sort of chuckle.

"You'll be lucky!" said she. "There's never been a white cat yet in this part of the world."

"There will be," said Colin.

He went out into the spring morning and visited various cats of his acquaintance. He found them all over the place—in barns, haylofts, sheds, pantries, baskets by firesides, linen cupboards, dovecotes, chicken runs—some legitimate, and some highly dubious situations. He stoked them or rebuked them or rescued them, and he congratulated those who had small kittens dozing or wobbling around them. And each cat he visited was a lady cat. It was springtime. Yet not one of them had a white baby.

One of his favorites was sitting in a tubby heap on some hay in his own stable, with her golden eyes slitted in the sunshine. She arched her back for Colin when he stroked her soft gray fur. There were no kittens actually in site, though there was more than a hint of several present.

"When they arrive, Merry, do make sure that one is white, said Colin.

But her purr gave away nothing, and her expression was enigmatic as always.

A groom, feeding the horses, shifted a straw in his mouth and grinned. He said, “You’ll need a bit of magic, sir. Or something of that nature. For there’s never been a white cat seen in this part of the world.”

“There will be,” said Colin.

He saddled a horse that had finished its breakfast and rode down to a tiny village and came to the house of a certain old woman who had a curious reputation. He called, and she came to her gate, and Colin bowed to her over the neck of his steed.

He said:

“Wise woman, do you know any spell or charm that will ensure a white kitten in the coming litter of the cat Merry?”

She put her head on one side; then she put it on the other; she peered shortsightedly between the lilac bushes at the gate. She pursed her lips. After a while, she said regretfully, “I know many things but nothing concerning the cat Merry. It would take real true magic to—”

She broke off abruptly and looked annoyed with herself. Colin grinned.

“Then real true magic I will find,” said he. “It will be simple enough.”

“Will it?” said she doubtfully.

“Why, yes, ma’am. For I know just where to look. And when. It will be full moon tonight,” said Colin, “and sorcery happens mainly in moonlight. Thank you for your advice, and good day.”

He doffed his cap to her and rode off, whistling merrily.

“Oh dear,” said the old lady. “Oh, good gracious. Oh, I wish I hadn’t said—”

She went into her cottage and put on the kettle for a soothing cup of tea.

And that night Colin went out into the light of a great white moon, saddled a horse which was not yet asleep, and rode through the sleeping countryside and into the forest that sprawled over a vast area and was generally avoided by people.

He was many things under the dark trees, but nothing that halted him. He knew where he was going, and he got there. He came to a dead and ancient oak tree.

It stretched blunt splintered arms above a clearing, and the moon cast a ghost-oak shadow at its feet. There had been noises in the rest of the forest—owls calling, bats shrilling, rabbits rustling in the undergrowth, and other creatures going about their

business on padded feet—yet here there was nothing but silence. There was a sense of waiting, of expectancy, all about the dead oak.

Colin slid from his horse and tied its reins to a sapling at the edge of the clearing. He peered all around him with curiosity. He did not seem overawed by the haunted appearance of the place.

“Well, now,” he said to himself, under his breath, “it’s reputed to be a magic tree, and it certainly has an odd atmosphere about it. I always believed, if one came here at midnight, by moonlight, almost anything might happen. And midnight is just about due.”

A voice spoke out of the darkness at the roots of the tree; a soft voice that drawled through the waiting night. It said, “I am here.”

Colin nearly remarked that he was too. But another voice forestalled him. It said, in the same languid tones as the first, “I also.”

Out of shadow came two darker shadows, stepping delicately, black agents the moonlit grass. They looked up into the dead branches of the great tree that loomed above them, and two pairs of eyes reflected the flutter of the moon.

“Master,” cried the first cat, “we come to you!”

“Master,” echoed the second, “let us in!”

“Bring us where you are,” they said together.

Colin stared at the empty clearing and moved toward his horse. Then he started and halted and laughed softly at himself. He had, after all, come here in search of magic. He had hoped to find this a simple matter, and it was even simpler than he had hoped.

He went forward and stood under the great tree. He looked at the branches, and the moon that seemed to be sailing through them, and he said firmly:

“Master, I come to you.”

He had spoken a bit too loudly, and he stopped, and lowered his voice as he went on:

“Master, let me in. Bring me where you are.”

Then he gazed about him at the clearing, the oak tree, the moon—and there was nothing. He turned back the other way and looked into the face of the sorcerer.

“Oh—” said Colin.

He smiled nervously. But the sorcerer merely gazed at him with fathomless eyes.

“I hope you don’t mind that I used your magic,” said Cohn rather uneasily.

There was no reply. Colin gulped and glanced about him.

He was in a round room, made of polished marble that reflected the light of a fire—but the flames of the fire were green, and the smoke was gold, and the sorcerer sat in a high-backed chair of ivory and stared at him. Colin began to lose a good deal of confidence. He said:

“I was standing in that clearing and I heard two cats, and they vanished. I wanted a sorcerer, and I thought the best thing . . .” His voice trailed into a silence that lasted quite a long time.

At last the sorcerer spoke, in a voice so cold and aloof that it sent a chill down the hearer’s spine:

“What gave you the idea that you could use the magic used by cats and get away with it? Did you think it possible to speak with a sorcerer and be unharmed?”

Colin opened his mouth to say that he hadn’t given the matter much thought. Then he reconsidered this and closed his mouth again.

The sorcerer said, “One wonders if you are entirely in your right mind.”

He got to his feet, and Colin looked at him. He wished it were possible to wake up, yet knew he was not asleep. Suddenly he felt very small insignificant and utterly helpless. Perhaps the height of the sorcerer engendered these doubts. He towered up until his head almost touched the high corbals of the vaulted ceiling; or perhaps it was the read eyes, flecked with green sparks where the flames lighted them, that were so quelling; or the long robe covered with the shining insignia of magic.

“I began to wish I hadn’t come here,” said Colin.

“But since you have done so, what do you want with me?”

There was a short pause. Coilin had strong foreboding that his reason for seeking a spell would not be well received. Yet this was no person to trifle with. He said, avoiding the fluttering eyes as best as he could, “I wanted a charm—a small and simple charm—to give a white kitten to the cat called Merry.”

Several thoughts flashed through his mind during the ensuing silence, and none was encouraging.

“You seem to me,” said the sorcerer after reflection, “to combine extreme impudence with a rashness I have seldom encountered.”

Colin blinked nervously. The sorcerer sat down and leaned his elbow on the arm of the chair and his chin on his hand. He stared across the golden coils of smoke. At last he smiled. Even his smile was not reassuring.

“You have risked your reason, if not your life, in coming here,” said he without heat. “Yet I will spare you. I will even consider granting your petty wish.”

Colin began to thank him, but he lifted a hand that enforced silence.

“I have not finished,” said the sorcerer coldly. “First, you must serve me for a year. I will arrange that your absence from home is accounted for, so that none will be anxious regarding your welfare or whereabouts. Colin—which I perceive to be your name—your life is mine for a year, starting exactly now.”

“Help yourself,” said Colin.

There was nothing else to say.

By trial and by error Colin found that nothing in the sorcerer’s castle was ever quite what it seemed to be. Fetching water from the well, even without a bucket, was easy once he became used to it, though occasionally the well had turned into a rose bush that barked at him fiercely. To light a fire, using no fuel, was just a matter of habit and custom—except when the fire put on a face of fury and reached for him with hooked and angry hands. Colin learned to make bread with leaves and soap bubbles and ashes, to groom an invisible horse, that whickered amusedly at him, and to explain to a cold-eyed master his reasons for clumsiness and failure.

He thought constantly of escape. By then, he was quite willing to forgo the promised spell if he might regain freedom.

He was talking one day to the horse, whose smooth hide he could feel twitching under his hands, while he brushed it. He had shut his eyes, which made the task seem calmer because he could imagine the animal quite clearly if he couldn’t see that it wasn’t there.

“It’s all very well for you to laugh,” he said, as it blew down his neck with its silky nostrils. “You must be used to this kind of life. I mean, look at you! And there you have it. but I am accustomed to ordinary horses, and it may be dull of me, but I find them less unnerving.”

The horse leaned against him, and he pushed it away with one hand and went on brushing energetically, eyes tightly closed.

“I *must* get away,” he told it. “Sometimes my mind feels quite shaken with the things that happen to me now. Last night, for example, something came and lay on the end of my bed. It was heavy and hot and enormous but there was nothing to be seen there. I slept on the floor. And there it lay, snorting and snorting—”

“That was me,” said the horse.

“Naturally,” said Colin.

There was nothing else to say.

There was a time when Colin straightened from stooping among the plants in the garden, and he went to the low parapet that surrounded it and looked into swirling mists. Now and then a rift would appear, and he could see down into an appalling gulf, for the castle stood on a mountain peak, and there was no way down the sheer cliffs of it. No path. No gate in the wall. Nothing but the precipices and the pale mists that filled them.

Colin sighed. He turned and scowled at the badger that stood nearby. It was like no common badger. It was as large as a deerhound, and its rough pelt was striped with black and purple. It has arrived unexpectedly to help him with the weeding.

“I wish I would get away,” he told it.

Its little eyes glittered at him, and he sighed abruptly. He stooped again to his work, and it dug rather lazily with one paw at a stinging nettle. Collin said crossly:

“You’re not really being much use, you know. You just stand and watch me and grin! And if I pull up the wrong thing, you’ll go ambling off to tell the sorcerer and get me into trouble again. You’re horrible!” he said crossly, for he was hot and dispirited. “And I don’t like you.”

The badger ate a nettle with every indication of boredom.

“I don’t like the sorcerer, either,” added Colin rashly. “I think he’s fairly horrible, too. In fact, I am beginning to dislike everything to do with magic.”

It started to rain, and the badger shook a small clot of mud from its paw and turned away and padded off toward the castle. It glanced back once to say across its striped shoulder, “Do you suppose that magic things are all that crazy about you?”

“Probably not,” said Colin.

There was nothing else to say.

Some weeks later, while bringing endless water to fill the tank in the kitchen, Colin noticed his own reflection in the distant circle of water down within the well. But he was too busy to give it much attention.

“In a proper well,” he said aloud, “there would be a bucket—a rope!”

And he went on with his water-carrying, in the very peculiar way that was necessary. Water ran from his hands and splashed coldly on his bare feet. He was almost in rags by now. To and from the kitchen he went, until he was quite worn out and the tank was nearly full. He sat down for a moment’s rest on the coping of the well and looked deep into the water and saw again the mirrored face.

“How ugly I’m getting,” he thought. “It’s all this work—or maybe the magic of the place acting against me. My hair used to be brown, but now it’s green. My eyes never slanted like that or stuck out so! I thought I was passably good looking, but that face is repulsive.”

“It’s because I live in the well,” said the face.

Colin nearly fell in.

“Oh,” he said feebly. “Do you now?”

“It’s cold down here”—the face splashed about in the water— “and its lonely. But quiet—nice and quiet, as a rule.”

“Are you one of the sorcerer’s creatures?”

The thing in the well considered the question for a moment. Then its protruding yellow eyes gleamed as it stared up the rough stone gunnel at the circle of daylight above the human face looking in.

“No,” it said, “I don’t actually belong to him. Do you?”

Colin gave a deprecating cough.

“In a manner of speaking,” said he. “And quite temporarily.”

“Well,” said the creature, “if you don’t like being where you are, you’d best come down here.”

“But—”

“It’s a fair offer. This is my home, and you’re very welcome to visit it.”

“The thing is,” said Colin, “that I want to go back to my own home. It’s most kind of you, but—”

“I might be able to help you,” said the face, splashing rather excitedly. “But there’s nothing I can do while you sit up there. Come on down. Can you be any worse off than you re already?”

Colin thought this over. He was not attracted to the face in the well, nor to its cold, dark home. Yet it was the first offer of help he had been given. His prospective benefactor spoke again.

“I promise you shall go to your father’s house,” it said. “I promise no harm shall come to you if you trust yourself to me.”

The young man looked at the circle of water so far below, in the stone hollow of the well that still echoed to the creature’s words.

“Jump,” said the face and added hastily, “but wait till I’m out of the way!”

It paddled across to the side and flattened itself there until its green hair stuck clammy against the stones. Colin looked back at the towering gray walls of the sorcerer’s castle and the garden so full of hateful weeds and poison plants; he looked at the parapet all around and the mists that hid the gulfs beyond. And he jumped into the well.

It was certainly cold down there—but not lonely. Colin found himself being supported on the water by four webbed hands, and the face was peering into his. It had not been a pretty face before, but it was far worse at close quarters. It was covered with scales, and its mouth was huge and filled with thin, pointed teeth.

“Now, how do I get from here to my father’s house? You did promise,” said Colin, shaking with cold and fright.

The dreadful mouth opened and laughed. It said, “Certainly—but first you must serve me for a year.”

And it pointed, with one of its hands, to an opening that showed jaggedly in the side of the well. It started to pull Colin toward it, across the swirling water.

“This is where I live,” it said, and bubbles splashed into its open mouth.

“You would!” said Colin.

There was nothing else to say.



In the course of the labor to which he was now set, Colin often passed a grating, set near the ground in the slimy wall of the place where he was held prisoner. He thought nothing of it, for his mind was fully occupied with the unpleasantness of his present life. He preferred, on the whole, the castle of the sorcerer to the home of the face.

One day, with his arms full of wet fungus, slipping and sliding on the mud, he heard a voice from behind the grating. He stopped. It spoke again.

“Colin.”

Then he bent to the bars and saw two little eyes looking through at him.

“Who is it?” he said in a whisper.

“A thing you dislike. A horrible thing.”

It was the badger. Colin dropped the face’s dinner and tick beside the grating.

“I like you better than I did,” said he. “Oh, help me to escape from here and I’ll adore you!”

He thought he saw the badger grin in the dimness. And then he heard it digging, grunting and snuffling with the effort. In the distance, down the damp passages that were the home of the face, Colin heard something else—the voice of his master, calling him. He clenched his hands and begged the badger to make haste.

The grating fell at his knees, and a huge striped paw came through.

Colin gave a cry of relief and crawled through the opening to a place that was as dark but drier than the passage. The badger had turned its back on him and started to lumber away.

“Follow me,” it grunted. “My home is under the foundations of the castle. You shall live there and serve me for a year. That’s the condition for getting you away from the well-thing. Now don’t start arguing. You have no choice in the matter.”

“I never have,” said Colin.

There was nothing else to say.

But one day—or night—he saw a glimmer of light among the stone roots of the castle. It was very small and distant, but he gave a gasp of delight. He had seen nothing but darkness for so long.

He stumbled toward it and found himself among the roots of a tree. Above him was an opening, with dry earth trickling down its sides as though it had only just been made. Colin forced his way up through it, until he was gulping cool, fresh air, dazed and half-blinded with sunlight. There was a smell of hawthorn all around, and the tree that leaned above him was white with blossom.

“Whose home have I come to now?” said Colin aloud. “For I don’t believe I’ve really escaped.”

From empty air a voice confirmed this guess.

“You are still within the boundaries of sorcery.”

Colin sighed. Close beside him there was a stir and a sound of breathing, and a heavy body leaned against him. In the empty sunlight he heard a whicker.

“Get on my back,” said the invisible horse. “I’ll take you to my stable in the mist.”

“Where I must serve you for a year,” said Colin, and he said it as a statement, not a question.

“Of course,” said the empty air.

“Of course,” sighed Colin.

There was nothing else to say.

The horse was a difficult master. It was impossible to know when he was there. He would keep still and silent for a long time, and then neigh at Colin when he least expected it. The young man went about quietly, with bent head, and he was quite resigned. Magic had defeated him. He groomed the great and splendid body of the horse and combed its long mane and tail. He learned to make silver horseshoes, without heat or hammer, and to fix them on his master’s hooves without recourse to nails. He made a harness, using neither knife nor needle, from a handful of poppies and a mouthful of rain. He learned many things, and none of them was easy.

There came a day when he stood listing to the thud of hooves fading into the distance, and he stopped to weave some fresh hay from strands of cobweb. But suddenly the growing pile shifted under his hands, and as he recoiled, the shadow of a cat lifted its head and looked at him from the hay. And a second shadow joined the first, and they gazed at him with slitted eyes.

“I—I didn’t know you were there,” said Colin stupidly.

“We weren’t.”

“But we are now.”

“Come with us,” they said together.

Colin went, without comment.

He never knew just where he lived while he served the cats. It was a place of shifting shadows, half-heard murmurs, thin shrieks in the darkness, and glinting lights that suddenly became the eyes of the cats; the whisper of their voices in the wind. A world that was half a dream, a trance of moonlight, shot through by savagery and the purring of his masters. It seemed to last for centuries.

But there came a night when they sent him through a maze of mist, and rock, and forest trees. He walked as though he were walking in his sleep. It scarcely roused him when his outstretched hands touched the rough bark of an oak tree. Without the slightest feeling of surprise or alarm, he saw words forming there—shining dully.

“Stand back, Colin. Look up, Colin,” ran the lettering.

He blinked. He read the words four times, and the last time he said them aloud. Then they began to make a vague sort of meaning to him.

“Stand back,” he said.

And he did so.

“Look up,” he said.

And he did so.

Broken branches loomed overhead, with a midnight moon as round as a penny sailing through them. On one dead branch sat a black silhouette with eyes that looked down at him. And on another branch was another shadow—another pair of eyes.

Colin tried to speak, but he said nothing. He just stood waiting. The shadows of the cats moved together, and they blurred into one. The one shadow drifted to the ground and shook and expanded. And the moon lighted new contours, the shape of a great white horse. A cloud went over. When it had passed, there stood in the place of the horse a gigantic badger, curiously striped. And it blurred into a thing with wet green hair and far too many webbed hands. Then there was only the figure of the sorcerer.

“Do you still think magic so simple?” said he.

There was a long silence.

“Your servitude to me is ended,” said the cold voice. “Now go home.”

“Thank you,” said Colin. There was nothing else to say.

Somehow, it was no surprise to him to find his horse still tethered at the edge of the clearing.

He came back, in the dawn, to his father’s house, and went around to the stables. Here he was met by the yawning groom, who grinned at him.

“Where have you been all night long, sir? You look no better for it!”

“I know much better,” said Colin.

He was looking thoughtfully at a disused manger, where the cat, Merry, lay on a bed of straw. He was remembering, with a sort of wry amusement, the spell he had gone seeking was only the pervious night? He gave a small weary laugh. How could he have been so stupid! He said:

“There is only one simple truth about magic. You get a lot that you didn’t ask for and absolutely nothing that you wanted!”

Merry rolled over, purring, to show him her three white kittens.