

THE CURSE OF THE WHITE HERON.

In the days when kings and queens were more important than they are now, and wise women were consulted instead of specialists, there reigned a queen named Egretta, in a fair far land. She was beloved of all, and consternation fell on her subjects when it became known that she had fallen ill of the "vapours." Physicians were summoned, but in vain. Alas, there was no local Coue to tell her that "day by day in every way she was getting better and better."

But there was a wise woman, for whom the Lord Chamberlain sent in haste, after he had dealt with a sage who wished to pinch the queen's nose to assist the swallowing of a concoction of crabs' eyes.

She came. And after gazing on the pallid Sovereign, listless amongst her silken cushions, in the centre of a marble hall where countless fountains diffused scents from their perfumed waters, she turned all but the most trustworthy from the room and thus addressed the Queen: "You will die, your gracious Majesty." Then the courtiers, hearing what they secretly feared, turned grey with grief. Until the wise woman continued: "If you continue as you are. You have got too far away from Nature. She alone, most marvellous of mothers, can cure Your Majesty. Nay, with all my wisdom, I cannot give you her prescription, for to none does she reveal her secrets, except those who seek her face to face. Yet I can help you, if you consent. But choose quickly, for even Nature cannot long hold back Death's dagger."

The Queen, weary of drugs and nostrums, motioned to the wise woman to proceed. Then the ancient dame drew forth a pungent powder and sprinkled it liberally over the Queen, saying: "Go forth to Nature as a white heron, and return hither as a queen, a year hence, when thou hast regained what thou hast lost."

The powder acted as pepper on the courtiers' noses, causing them to sneeze. When they had finished wiping their eyes they beheld that the graceful, gifted Egretta had gone, for through the open window a glorious white heron had winged its way afar to Nature who sits on the mountains, with her feet in the valleys; with the forests in her lap and her wise eyes over all.

Things happened as the wise woman had predicted. To Egretta the year passed all too

quickly. Nature taught her to value the rain which purified her feathers, and the sun which dried them; to use her eyes to detect her food; and her ears to warn her of danger; to hear the music in the roar of the river, and to dance the dance the trees love, when they lace their arms together, and sway to the music of the passing winds. She, who had never seen the dawn from her many windowed palace, watched for the footprints of the deer in the dew, and beheld the pigeon leave its roosting-place to sip at some clear stream, noting how it raised its head to allow the water to assuage its thirst.

In the heat of the day, she sought sequestered pools where, still as the tall tree trunks, with one foot curled beneath her feathers, she watched the dance of the dragonflies, or little fish on their way to school being bullied by the eels.

At sunset she stood on a sandy beach, watching Nature put the hills to sleep, wrapping them warmly in soft grey mists, while providing them with coloured pictures when the sun set. With them she would gaze at the ever-changing designs. Then, as the daylight faded, she would bless the wisdom which lit the stars as night-lights to calm the fears of timid creatures.

The day before she was due to return as Queen, Egretta arrived on the shores of a lake, a few miles from her capital city, which she could glimpse like a black silhouette against the setting sun.

Unknown to her, a hunter saw her. Silently he stalked the beautiful rare bird, rejoicing at the chance of obtaining such a prize. Nearer and nearer he drew, until a shot shattered the silence and a startling shriek caused even the hunter to shiver for an instant.

By the dying bird he stood, congratulating himself on his straight aim, and while he was watching the life blood staining its pure white feathers, he decided that its delicate plumage should go to enhance his wife's beauty. Impatiently he wiped his eyes, as a film seemed to cover them, distorting his vision, until it seemed as if at his feet lay a fair woman, wrapped in spotless white, except where her life ebbed in crimson gushes. He tried to shake off this impression as he picked up the lifeless heron and strode rapidly home. But he was very silent that night, for in his ears rang an awful curse: