

THE DISAPPEARANCE OF MRS. MACRECHAM.

THE AMAZING STORY OF A STRANGE CAT.

BY RICHARD MARSH.

With Illustrations by H. Brock.

DIRECTLY I entered the room I perceived that there was something the matter. He greeted me with a degree of effusion which, in Hereward Waller, was really quite unnatural.

"You had my note?"

I told him that I had, and that its peremptory, and even mysterious, tone had brought me off to him at once.

He regarded me, when I said this, with curious intentness. With his left hand he softly smoothed his shaven chin. Opening the door, he looked outside, as if to learn if anyone was listening. Then, returning into the apartment, he began to fidget about the room in a manner which was so foreign to his usual habits that I became more and more amazed.

"Have you—have you heard the news?"

"To what news do you refer?"

He gave what seemed to me to be a sigh of relief. I wondered more and more.

"I see you haven't. I thought you might have done. I suppose a great many people have. I believe advertisements have appeared in the newspapers. I know the police have been communicated with, and I have reason to think that notices have been posted up outside the various station houses."

"My dear Waller, I have not the most remote idea what you are talking about."

He lowered his voice. He even glanced furtively about the room.

"Mrs. Macrecham has disappeared."

"Mrs.—who?"

"Mrs. Macrecham—my landlady."

"Do you mean that cantankerous, narrow-minded old Scotchwoman who made such a fuss about your having a game of chess in her house on Sundays?"

To my amazement, Waller seemed to be positively agitated.

"S-sh! I would rather you did not talk like that, under the—the peculiar circumstances."

I stared.

"You don't mean to say that you contemplate going into mourning for the old cat?"

Unless I am mistaken, Waller actually jumped.

"Durrant, don't! I beg you won't! You—you don't understand. I am about to explain. Indeed, I sent for you here for the especial purpose of making to you an explanation. With your permission, I will take a chair."

I did not see that he required my permission to take a chair in his own rooms, but I did not say so. He sat down. He took out his handkerchief and wiped his brow. I had never seen him do such a thing before; he had always prided himself on his constitutional Arctic coolness.

"This is Tuesday. Last Thursday afternoon I was left alone in the house with Mrs. Macrecham." Again he glanced furtively about the room. "Polly Macrecham, Mrs. Macrecham's niece, had gone on an errand to a tradesman. When she returned she could not find her aunt anywhere about the house. She came up to ask if I had seen her. I—I said"—his voice distinctly trembled—"I said that I had not.

"About—about midnight"—Waller's voice again distinctly trembled—"Miss Macrecham came up to me again, and told me that not only had her aunt not yet returned, but that she had run in to all the neighbours of whom she could think, and that none of them had seen her; and that, moreover, Mrs. Smithers, who lives across the road, had been sitting at one of her front windows, had seen Miss Macrecham depart upon her errand to the tradesman, and had not moved from the window until Miss Macrecham returned, and was positive that the aunt had not left the house during the niece's absence. Yet nothing has been seen of her unto this hour. She—she has disappeared."

"Well?" I asked.

For I failed to perceive what the fact of Mrs. Macrecham's disappearance had to do with Hereward Waller's evident and momentarily increasing agitation.

"Well, you see, I—I am placed in rather an unpleasant situation."

"What on earth do you mean? You

don't mean to say that you are suspected of having taken advantage of the fact of having been left alone in the house with her to murder her—though, if you had done so, for my part I should have held you justified. Cross-grained old witch!"

"Hush! I would rather you did not speak of her like that. Under the—under the peculiar circumstances I really would." Again he wiped his brow. "I won't say that I am suspected of actual murder. But, by certain people, I am certainly suspected of something. And that the police have their eyes upon me, I'm assured."

"Hereward!"

"It's—it's in this way: When Miss Macrecham asked me if I had seen her aunt during her absence, I said that I had not. When, later, she asked me, more than once, again I still said that I had not. But it appears that the observant Mrs. Smithers, sitting at her window across the road, had seen Mrs. Macrecham open the door to a boy who brought a parcel. She had gone so far as to recognise the boy as being in the employ of Thorpe, the stationer.

"Inquiry at Thorpe's elicited the fact that his boy had brought a parcel, that the parcel was for me, that it contained half a dozen packs of playing cards, and that the boy had given it to Mrs. Macrecham, who had told him that she would take it up to Mr. Waller. Now, unknown to me, when Miss Macrecham had come to my room to ask if I had seen her aunt, she had noticed this identical parcel lying on my table. When, later, I was asked who had brought this parcel to my room if Mrs. Macrecham hadn't, I—I am afraid that I exhibited confusion."

"Had the old woman been to your room while the niece was out?"

"She had; and, what's more, she's in it now."

"In it now?"

As I echoed his words, I stared. I had not the faintest notion of his meaning.

"Yes, Durrant, it's an incredible and—an appalling fact, that while her niece is torn with doubts, and the police are searching for her, dead or alive, in all directions, Mrs. Macrecham is, at this present moment, in this room. She has not quitted it, even for a single second, since she entered it on Thursday afternoon."

Beads of perspiration were standing on Hereward Waller's brow. I began myself to be conscious of a sense of vague discomfort. What did he mean?

"Allow me to explain." As he rose I perceived that he was positively trembling. "She's in this sideboard." He pointed to a piece of furniture which occupied a corner of the room. "Just come—just come and see."

I followed him across the room with feelings which I experience some difficulty in describing. As he produced a key from his waistcoat pocket, and, with shaking fingers, fitted it into the lock of the side-



"LOOK!" HE SAID, REFERRING TO THE CAT, "THAT IS MRS. MACRECHAM."

board, I regarded him with a sort of shuddering aversion. Was it possible that I was about to gaze upon the evidences of some hideous tragedy?

I was about to explain to him that anything which he revealed to me he revealed at his own risk, and that I should allow no ties of friendship to stand between me and the police, when—he opened the sideboard door.

"Look!" he said. I looked, with half unwilling, half fearful eyes. I saw nothing unusual, except that he seemed to have cleared the bottles upon one side, in order to make room for a large tabby cat, which was lying asleep on the top of a heap of what appeared to be Waller's underclothing. "That is Mrs. Macreham."

I supposed that there was something at the back of the cupboard which I could not see. So I stooped still lower down. There proved, however, to be nothing there. I felt a trifle nettled.

"I don't know, Waller, if you are trying to play off on me some idiotic little joke of yours."

"Joke! I wish it were a joke!"

I looked at him. I had never supposed it possible that a man could show such signs of physical and mental agitation. The sweat was gathered in great drops upon his forehead. He pointed to the open sideboard. "I tell you that that is Mrs. Macreham."

"Which is Mrs. Macreham? There's nothing but a cat, you ass!"

Never shall I forget the tone of voice in which he uttered his next words—as though they were wrung from him in his agony.

"The cat is Mrs. Macreham!"

"The cat!—Waller!"

As he said that, I gazed at him in horrified amazement. In an instant it flashed across my brain that the cause of his unusual agitation was now made plain—to plain. My boyhood's friend had lost his mental equilibrium.

He immediately detected what was passing through my mind.

"You think that I am mad. Sometimes I think so too; I think that I must be mad. But reflection shows that such is not the case. The circumstantial evidence which goes to prove my sanity is overwhelming. At times I am almost tempted to wish that I, in truth, was mad."

I made a strategic movement in the direction of the door—a madman's logic is proverbial.

"Excuse me one moment, I just——"

He perceived my intention. He sprang between the door and me.

"Durrant, what are you going to do? You won't desert me! For God's sake, man, don't do that! There never was, in the whole history of the world, a human creature in such frightful need of the guidance of a faithful friend as I am now. I give you my word of honour, I'm not mad. If—if you'll allow me, I'll explain."

He explained.

"Durrant, I—I have been the victim of an unparalleled experience. Of so unparalleled an experience that, were it not for the undeniable evidence of a hundred various details, I should be persuaded that I have been the nightmare-haunted dreamer of some amazing dream."

He wiped his forehead with his pocket handkerchief.

"Last Thursday morning I had business in the neighbourhood of Fleet Street. I strolled homewards by way of Bookseller's Row. I glanced at the bookstalls. In one of the fourpenny boxes I saw a moth-eaten, tattered, marble-covered duodecimo. I picked it up. I found that it was a work which was entirely strange to me, even as regards its title. It was entitled 'The Art and Theory of Magic.' I bought it—I really don't know why. I wish to heaven a thousand times I hadn't."

Again he paused to wipe his brow. His manner certainly was most singular, especially for a madman. I found myself staring at him with renewed perplexity.

"When I returned home I threw the book aside. I forgot all about it till after I had lunched, when I chanced to light upon the thing as it lay upon the sideboard, half hidden among a heap of newspapers. I—I opened it."

Waller was speaking now as a man might speak whose mouth was parched and dry.

"I—I began to read it. It was full of some of the most—most amazing rubbish I ever remember to have seen. It was arranged like a cookery book, only, instead of containing recipes for cookery, it contained what purported to be recipes for the performance of feats of magic. I—I never read anything so absurd. It was headed, 'To Transform a Woman into a Cat.—A Simple Method.'"

When Waller said that, I started. I instinctively glanced towards the open sideboard. I saw that Waller started too, even more than I had done, and that his glance followed mine. My doubts as to his sanity returned.

I said, to humour him, "I see—a simple method. It is as well, when one has to do a thing like that, that the way to do it should be made as simple as possible."

"This—this was simplicity itself. In its simplicity lay its acute absurdity. One had only to go through certain elementary formulæ, and to utter rubbish, and, according to the book, the thing was done. I read it, and re-read it, and was still re-reading it, when the door opened, and Mrs. Macreham entered."

Again Waller paused to wipe his brow. "She had in her hand the parcel of playing cards which had just come from Thorpe the stationer. She had either guessed at the contents, or inquired what they were from the boy who had brought the parcel. 'More devil's pictures, Mr. Waller,' she said. And then she started off in the style which, as you are aware, has caused me more than once to wonder why I suffered such a woman to be my landlady. She—she had her good qualities, and even her bad ones had sometimes been to me a source of amusement, but—but I suppose that—that just then I—I was in—a very peculiar frame of mind. I know that what she said stung me to an unusual degree of anger."

His voice sank to a whisper—a whisper, however, which was of a singular, penetrating kind.

"I had that—that wretched little book in my hand. The words of that—that preposterous recipe were dancing before my eyes. Mrs. Macreham stood in front of me. Almost before I knew what I was doing, in the midst of one of Mrs. Macreham's diatribes, I began to repeat the formulæ as they were set down in the book. The effect upon Mrs. Macreham was extraordinary. She instantly ceased speaking, and—she looked at me! How she looked at me! Something urged me to go on. I went on. I repeated the gibberish as the book directed. Durrant—"

Waller sank into a chair. His head fell forward on to his chest. His attitude was of a man who had been overwhelmed by some sudden, overpowering shock.

"Durrant, hardly had the last syllable escaped my tongue, than Mrs. Macreham disappeared, and on the floor where she had just been standing was a tabby cat. I never saw such a thing before in all my life—never! The change was so instantaneous that you could scarcely follow it

with the eye, and yet I saw her change into a cat. A monstrous tabby cat! You know that I have a constitutional dislike to cats. When I saw this creature, purring, wagging its tail, and looking up at me, I gazed at it with unspeakable disgust. As I did so I heard someone running up the stairs. I guessed that it was Miss Polly, coming to inquire for her aunt. I kicked the cat into the cupboard, I turned the key, and I—lied to Miss Macreham."

He paused—it was about time he did! I stared at him, scarcely knowing whether to deem him mad or sane. He sat staring, as it seemed to me, into vacancy.

"Granting that this amazing legend of yours is at least founded upon fact, did that fourpenny treasure contain no directions for re-transforming a cat into a woman?"

"I saw none."

"Where is this wonderful volume?"

"Durrant, when I lied to Miss Macreham, in the first horror of that dreadful moment, tearing the book into a dozen fragments, I threw them, one by one, into the fire."



"HE SPRANG BETWEEN THE DOOR AND ME."

"That was scarcely a wise thing to do."

"All but the last half of the cover. I was about to throw it after the other portions of the book, when I saw, written on the inner side of it, some words which caught my eye."

"What were the words?"

"Here is the piece of the cover to which I refer. I have kept it. You shall see what is written on it for yourself. It may, or it may not, contain the secret of the retransformation. After what I have seen, I cannot, I dare not, say. You will yourself perceive that the suggestion it conveys is of an extremely hazardous kind—a veritable case of kill or cure."

From an inner pocket of his coat he produced what purported to be the only remaining portion of that "fourpenny treasure." It was, as he said, half the cover. The book had apparently been a cheaply got up duodecimo, and had been bound in the days when "marble backs" were all the rage. The cover had seemingly been lined with coarse whity-brown paper. On this whity-brown paper were written the words to which Waller had alluded.

They were written in a bad hand, with a bad pen, by a person whose education, on the face of it, had distinctly been deficient.

"To tern a cat bak into a woman, cut her throte."

That was what was written on the cover of Hereward's "fourpenny treasure."

"You see," he said, "the hazardous nature of the suggestion."

"I don't quite understand the thing. Whose throat are you to cut—the cat's or the woman's?"

"I presume the cat's. You see, to cut a cat's throat would be to kill it—at least, such would be the ordinary inference."

As he seemed to pause for me to speak, I spoke.

"Just so," I murmured.

"To kill the cat would be to kill Mrs. Macreham. Although, under the circumstances, it would be a moot point as to whether that was or was not murder, still, you understand, I should not care to run the risk, the more especially as I should always be haunted by a doubt as to whether I had or had not the brand of Cain upon my brow."

As he seemed to pause for me to speak again, I spoke again.

"I see," I muttered.

Rising from his seat he began to pace

about the room. He spoke as if he were torn and racked by a thousand dreadful doubts.

"You plainly perceive, then, what is the truly incredible nature of the position in which you find me placed. Mrs. Macreham has disappeared. Her niece is tortured with anxiety. Her creditors are dubious. Her neighbours are filled with a morbid curiosity. The police are moving heaven and earth to find her, dead or living. Already a whisper of crime is in the air. Wagging fingers point my way. Searching eyes see guilt upon my brow. If I move abroad, my steps are dogged. To all intents and purposes, the avengers of blood are already upon my heels—I am a marked man! Nor is it strange, for all this time Mrs. Macreham is hidden in the cupboard of my room. And—and, Durrant—"

Waller came closer to me. He laid his trembling hand upon my arm. He looked at me with fevered eyes.

"There's another thing. I—I am afraid that Mrs. Macreham's ill. I—I am not an authority on cats, but I fear that either the food which I have given her has disagreed with her digestion, or else the close confinement has proved trying to her constitution. I dare not let her loose; think—think of the long chain of possibilities if Mrs. Macreham should go philandering on the tiles! Certainly she appears unwell. She refuses all food, and appears to be possessed by a constant lassitude."

He tightened his grasp upon my arm. His eyes seemed to scorch me.

"If she should die! Durrant, what shall I do? You see that there never was a man in more pressing need of the faithful advice of a faithful friend. Give me, I implore you, your advice."

I hesitated—it was a case in which a good deal of hesitation appeared to me to be required. When I spoke, I do not think he derived much comfort from my words.

"Waller, I don't know whether you're mad, or whether you aren't; I don't know whether you are having a little joke with me, or whether you aren't; I don't know whether you are telling the truth, or whether you aren't. But, in any case, the situation is more than I can manage. I am an authority on neither cats nor women. You have got into the muddle by yourself. I am afraid, so far as I am concerned, that you

will have to get out of the muddle by yourself, my friend."

Possibly he took my words to convey an intimation of immediate retreat. He grasped me still tighter by the arm.

"You won't desert me!—Durrant!—Hush!—There's someone coming up the stairs."

His hearing must have been unusually acute; possibly recent circumstances had made it so. I heard nothing. But, after some moments of the intensest listening, he proved to be right.

Someone tapped at the panel of the door. And, without waiting for an invitation to enter, someone came into the room.

This someone was a man. A tall, loose-limbed, beefy-looking man, with sandy whiskers, sandy hair, and, if I may be allowed to write it so, a sandy nose. He closed the door behind him, and, with a billycock hat in one hand and a stick in the other, he stood looking at us, in what seemed to me to be rather an impertinent manner. I do not know why it should have been so, because, although large and bulky, he was not a formidable-looking individual, and he was a complete stranger to me; but something about the man—his looks or his manner, or something—made me wish that he had postponed his call on Hereward until after I had gone away. I felt an inward conviction, as he stood there eyeing us, that our demeanour, both Hereward's and mine, struck him as curious. He looked at Hereward, and then he looked at me, and then he said to me, "Mr. Waller?"

"No." I motioned towards Hereward. "This is Mr. Waller."

"Ah!"

The man's tone was peculiarly significant, though significant of what is more

than I can say. He took a good long stare at Hereward, then he observed, "I am William Brooker."

"Indeed!" stammered Hereward.

"Perhaps you have heard that name before?"

Hereward stammeringly doubted if he had ever had the pleasure.

"It's a name that's been before the public a good many times, and in some good big cases too. I'm a private detective."

When he said that, I know that I turned right-about-face, so that I am not able to say exactly what Hereward did; but I feel sure that he did not look happy. When I again looked round, Mr. Brooker had laid his hat and stick upon a chair. He held an open pocket-book and a lead pencil in his hand.

"I've come to ask you a few questions, Mr. Waller, about the disappearance of Mrs. Macrecham."

As he said this, he regarded Hereward with what struck me as being a disagreeably inquisitorial stare. Possibly Hereward himself felt it to be so. He repeated Mr. Brooker's words in a sort of acid echo—

"The disappearance of Mrs. Macrecham."

Mr. Brooker continued, "Now, I'm a second cousin of Mrs. Macrecham's, and, although I differed from her on about eleven subjects out of every ten, it is not therefore to be supposed that I'm going to allow anybody, no matter who it is, to play hanky-panky tricks with her and never say a word."

"Just so," stammered Hereward. "Quite—quite natural. Will you—"



"'MORE DEVIL'S PICTURES, MR. WALLER,' SHE SAID."

"One moment, Mr. Waller. Now, with regard to the disappearance of Mrs. Macreham, it is felt by certain persons—and, among others, I tell you frankly, it is felt by me—that you know more about the matter than, up to the present, you have chosen to say."

When Mr. Brooker said that, Hereward did as I had done—he turned right-about-face. It was a foolish thing to do, with that man's inquisitive eyes fixed intently on him; but he did it. I could see that his face had become of a sickly pallor, and that the muscles of his countenance were working, as it seemed, convulsively.

"Will you," he stammered, "will you—will you have something to drink?"

Mr. Brooker's gaze was still intently riveted on the back view which he presented. Perhaps, to Mr. Brooker, that back view was eloquent.

"Thank you. It's all the same to me. I don't mind if I do."

Hereward moved to the sideboard. Although it appears incredible, it really almost seemed as if he had temporarily forgotten the existence of the tabby cat. For, when he reached the cupboard, and, stooping down, perceived the creature lying there asleep, starting back, he stared in what seemed to be speechless amazement. Just at that moment the cat awoke, and, after the manner of cats, began to stretch itself and arch its back.

Mr. Brooker's attention, hitherto centred upon Hereward, was now divided with the cat.

"That's a fine cat you have there, Mr. Waller."

Hereward seemed to experience some difficulty in inducing his voice to perform its office.

"Ye-es," he stammered.

"I suppose that you are fond of cats, or you would not make a bed for one inside your wine cupboard?"

Hereward gave painful utterance to another faintly stammered affirmative. Mr. Brooker was regarding him with evidently increasing interest. His bearing was not by any means that of an enthusiastic lover of the feline race. He stood glaring at the tabby cat as though the creature exercised on him some hideous fascination. Apparently he had forgotten his offer of refreshment. Mr. Brooker ventured to recall it to his mind. He drew his hand across his mouth.

"I've come some distance, and I think you were kind enough, Mr. Waller, to say something about a drink."

Mr. Brooker's, unless his nose belied him, was a thirsty soul.

Hereward, thus gently reminded of his proffered hospitality, stretched out his hand to take a bottle from the shelf. As he did so, the cat, as cats will do when they are disagreeably inclined, spat, and struck at him with its paw. The effect upon Hereward of the animal's unfriendly behaviour was absolutely ludicrous. He sprang back with what was unmistakably a cry of terror, and stood actually trembling with agitation.

Mr. Brooker seemed to be both amazed and amused.

"If you are fond of cats, Mr. Waller, cats don't seem to be fond of you."

Hereward said nothing. He stared at the cat. In return, the tabby stared at him. It not only stared, but, coming out of the cupboard, it advanced towards Hereward. As it advanced, Hereward retreated. The animal went forward. Hereward went back. It was a ridiculous and yet painful scene. Waller's distress was so wholly undisguised. There was nothing unfriendly about the animal's demeanour so far as I could judge. And yet, as the cat came on, Hereward shrank back with a degree of shuddering aversion which it almost gave one the "creepy crawlers" merely to look upon. When he had backed against the wall, so that he could get no further, Hereward turned his face away, and, raising his arm as if to screen his eyes, he actually called to me for help.

"Durrant! Durrant! Take her away!"

Mr. Brooker and I looked on with what, I have no doubt, were mingled feelings. The man crouching against the wall, and the cat looking up at him with what seemed very natural surprise, was a sight not often witnessed. Mr. Brooker turned to me, and asked—

"Has he"—he made a significant gesture with his hand—"been drinking?"

The fellow was suggesting that Hereward was suffering from delirium tremens. I indignantly repudiated the suggestion.

"What do you mean, sir? My friend is almost a teetotaler."

The detective smiled. I believe he was incredulous.

"He doesn't look as though he were very fond of cats, at any rate," he said. "Pussy! Pussy!"

He called the cat. Without a moment's hesitation, the creature came running towards him. Mr. Brooker took it in his arms. Seating himself, he placed the cat upon his knee.

"There doesn't seem to be much the matter with the cat, Mr. Waller. It seems to be rather an affectionate sort of beast."

It did seem to be so just then. Mr. Brooker made a fuss with the cat, and the cat made a fuss with Mr. Brooker. The detective stroked and tickled the tabby. The tabby purred, and rubbed itself against the detective's waistcoat. Moving away from the wall, Hereward stood silently looking on. Mr. Brooker eyed him with a curious smile.

"Do you know, Mr. Waller, that you remind me of a story which I was reading some little time ago. It was written by a man who seemed to fancy himself as an authority upon detectives. I think the story was called 'The Black Cat.'"

Hereward started. I believe I started too. Mr. Brooker went on, apparently taking it for granted that we neither of us were students of Poe.

"It wasn't a pretty story, but it was a strange one. It was about a man who murdered his wife. The only witness of his crime was a cat. Not a witness, one would think, greatly to be feared. And yet, ever afterwards, that man, victimised by his guilty conscience, regarded that cat with, among other things, an unspeakable horror—almost as you seem to regard this cat, Mr. Waller."

Hereward still said nothing. He continued to look at Mr. Brooker and the cat, like a man who, though wide awake, mentally struggles with some dreadful dream.

Perceiving him to be still silent, the detective went on.

"Since there seems to be no prospect of that little refresher, I think, Mr. Waller, if you have no objection, we will return to the subject of Mrs. Macreham. There are one or two questions which I wish to ask you."

With what seemed to be an effort, Hereward managed to find his voice. His words came out with a rush. He was as voluble, all at once, as he had been taciturn before.

"Excuse me for one single instant, Mr.



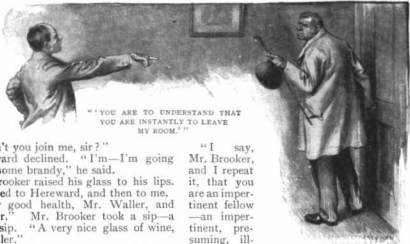
"HEREWARD TURNED HIS FACE AWAY, AND, RAISING HIS ARM AS IF TO SCREEN HIS EYES, HE ACTUALLY CALLED FOR HELP."

Brooker. You must really forgive my unpardonable remissness, but I—I have been very far from well just lately. What can I offer you to drink—brandy? whiskey? rum? Or can I tempt you with a glass of champagne?"

He moved rapidly across the room. But, as he neared Mr. Brooker, and the cat, he hesitated, and he glanced at the cat. Unless I greatly err, at the mention of those various liquids, Mr. Brooker's eyes grew dim. Like the proverbial sailor, he seemed to be divided in his mind.

"Well, I—I think I'll have a glass of champagne; it isn't often that champagne does come my way—thank you."

When the bottle was opened, Mr. Brooker observed that there was but a single glass.



"Won't you join me, sir?"
Hereward declined. "I'm—I'm going to have some brandy," he said.

Mr. Brooker raised his glass to his lips. He nodded to Hereward, and then to me.

"Your good health, Mr. Waller, and yours, sir." Mr. Brooker took a sip—a copious sip. "A very nice glass of wine, Mr. Waller."

Hereward had returned to the sideboard. He took out a decanter of brandy, and a tumbler. He filled the tumbler with the raw spirit, and drank it, at a gulp, neat. Mr. Brooker winked at me.

"Almost a teetotaler," he whispered.

Having re-filled, and re-emptied, his own glass, Mr. Brooker returned to the subject which was supposed to be in hand.

"Now, with reference to this disappearance of Mrs. Macreham. I understand from Polly Macreham that you did not see her aunt during her absence from the house on Thursday afternoon. May I ask you, Mr. Waller, confidentially, as between man and man, if that really is the case?"

Hereward, in the centre of the hearth-rug, was looking more like his usual self—dogged and cold. I could see that the brandy had had its effect, but I was not prepared to find that it had done its work quite so completely as it really had done.

"Mr. Brooker, there is one remark which I wish to make to you."

"I shall be very happy to listen to anything you have to say, Mr. Waller. Indeed, it is for that especial purpose I am here."

Mr. Brooker affably refilled his glass.

"The remark which I have to make, Mr. Brooker, is to the effect that you are an impertinent fellow."

I scarcely imagine that that was the kind of thing to which Mr. Brooker had come to listen. He glanced up, in apparent surprise.

"Sir?"

"I say, Mr. Brooker, and I repeat it, that you are an impertinent fellow—an impertinent, presuming, ill-mannered, ill-conditioned fellow. I am prepared to say more, if you wish to hear it. I shall say more, if you do not take care. Uninvited, you have intruded yourself into my apartments, with the ignorantly avowed purpose of asking me insolent questions about a subject in which I take not the slightest interest. Such being the case, you will be so good, upon my invitation, as to take yourself, instantly, outside my rooms."

Mr. Brooker's glass had paused half way to his lips. There could be no doubt that he was surprised. There had been nothing, till then, in Hereward's manner to lead him to suppose that this was the kind of man he was.

"Am I to understand that you decline to give me any information about Mrs. Macreham?"

"You are to understand that you are instantly to leave my room. You are a bigger man than I am, Mr. Brooker, but there have been instances of the bigger man being thrown by the smaller man down two flights of stairs."

Hereward advanced to Mr. Brooker.

"Are you going, sir?"

Mr. Brooker still hesitated, for one second, not for more. When he saw the look that was on Hereward's face, and perceived the sort of mood he was in, he deemed discretion to be the better part of valour.

"I am going, sir—oh, yes, I'm going." He took his hat and stick from a chair.

Being, as he deemed, at a safe distance, he had a parting shot at Hereward.

"You will hear from me again, sir, make no mistake about that. I believe that that poor dumb cat, if she could only speak, could reveal a tale of horror which would make the blood run cold. And it shall be revealed to the world, sir, and by me!" Mr. Brooker put his hat upon his head. "I will not say good-bye, Mr. Waller, but—*au revoir*."

And Mr. Brooker went.

Hereward stood still for a moment or two after the detective's departure. It struck me that he was listening, to make sure that he was descending the stairs. Then he turned to me. He spoke with a peculiar intensity of passion.

"You hear what he says? He suspects me—even that dull-witted fool! He perceives—even that dullard!—that the secret of the mystery is hidden in the bosom of the cat—that mottled beast!"

Hereward went on.

"I have made up my mind. The other recipe was successful—too successful! Why should this one not be successful too? I will do it!"

"You will do what?" I ventured, mildly, to inquire.

"I will slit Mrs. Macrecham's throat from ear to ear! If I don't, Durrant, I shall go raving mad! There's a butcher in the street!"

I did not see the inevitable connection which existed between his mental condition and a butcher, but, as he looked out of the window, I looked too. A butcher boy was on the opposite side of the road, whistling, and swinging an empty tray. Hereward threw up the window. He hailed the butcher boy.

"Butcher! Butcher!" The butcher boy looked up. "Come here, I want you!" The butcher boy crossed the road. Hereward turned to me. "Wait—I shan't be a moment! I'm going to let him in. See—see that Mrs. Macrecham doesn't leave the room."

It scarcely was more than a moment before he reappeared in the room with the wondering butcher boy. He came at once to the point

"Butcher, would you like to earn half a sovereign?"

The butcher boy grinned.

"I wouldn't mind, sir."

"Cut that cat's throat and I will give you half a sovereign."

Hereward pointed to the unconscious tabby, who still was quietly licking her paws in a corner of the room.

"If I was to take her home I'd do for her in a better way than that, sir."

Hereward did not relish the butcher boy's suggestion.

"You will either cut her throat, or you will do nothing at all."

The butcher boy did not seem to quite know what to make of Hereward's manner.

"Is it your cat, sir?"

"Of course it's my cat. What do you mean?"

"Well, sir, the other day a party gave me a cat, and half a crown to do for it; and when I'd done for it, I found that it was the party's cat what lived next door to this here first party—an old lady's cat it was. And didn't she go on when she



"THAT PERFDIOUS BUTCHER BOY ALLURED THE TRUSTFUL TABBY."

found out I'd done for it! She come round to my master—she's a customer of his—and he almost give me the sack, though it wasn't no fault of mine. I didn't know whose cat it was."

"This cat is mine all right. Take it into my back yard, and cut its throat at once, and I'll give you a sovereign."

"A sovereign!" The butcher boy's eyes glistened. "I'll do it. I've got a sharp knife in my pocket."

He produced the knife. It was a knife, a murderous-looking weapon.



"THE BUTCHER BOY RAN DOWN THE STREET AS IF SATAN WERE AT HIS HEELS."

of her! The butcher boy took her up into his arms.

"If you go downstairs you will easily find your way to the yard. When you've done it, come back to me for the sovereign."

The butcher boy left the room with his unconscious burden in his arms. Directly he had gone, Hereward turned again to the decanter and the tumbler. This time I did interpose.

"If I were you, Hereward, I would leave that brandy alone. It strikes me that you have had more than enough of it already."

The only notice he took of what I said was to gulp down another half-tumblerful.

"I must! I must!" he declared. "Durrant, if—if he were to kill her!"

It struck me as extremely probable that he would kill her—if "he" meant the butcher's boy, and "her" meant the cat. I did not see what else could reasonably be expected. To cut a cat's throat is not generally supposed to be the best means of prolonging the animal's life. However, I said nothing; it was a matter between the butcher boy and Hereward.

Waller's sitting-room and bedroom adjoin each other. They communicate by means of folding doors. The bedroom window overlooks the yard which was to be the scene of the approaching tragedy. Opening the folding doors, Hereward entered the bedroom with the evident intention of being a spectator of the coming drama. I preferred to remain where I was.

However, Hereward, at the bedroom window, managed to give me, at the sitting-room window, a sufficiently lively idea of what was going on.

"Here he is! He's got her! He's opening his knife! He's—he's going to cut her throat!" Hereward's voice, coming to me in quick, eager, almost frenzied tones, made me feel as though I were witnessing—and aiding and abetting in—a murder. "He's cut her throat. Oh-h! oh-h! oh-h!" Hereward began screaming in a manner the like of which I never heard before or since. "Mrs. Macrecham! —Mrs. Macrecham!"

I had not at the moment the faintest notion of what it was he meant, but I knew that, whatever it was, I wished he wouldn't. There was a sound below as of someone making a tumultuous entry from the rear of the house. I heard the area door thrown frantically open. I saw the butcher boy come tearing up the area steps. When he reached the top he went rushing down the street, hatless, trayless, sovereignless, as if Satan was at his heels.

And, a moment afterwards, I heard, downstairs, a voice—a well-known voice.

It was the voice of Mrs. Macrecham. She was addressing herself to Mr. Brooker, who had apparently delayed his departure from the house for the sake of pursuing his inquiries. Judging from her tone, she was addressing him on one of those eleven subjects out of every ten on which, as he himself allowed, they were wont to differ.