

THE GRAY CAT

I HEARD this story from Archdeacon M——. I should imagine that it would not be very difficult, by trimming it a little and altering the facts here and there, to make it capable of some simple explanation; but I have preferred to tell it as it was told to me.

After all, there is some explanation possible, even if there is not one definite and simple explanation clearly indicated. It must rest with the reader whether he will prefer to believe that some of the so-called uncivilized races may possess occult powers transcending anything of which the so-called civilized are capable, or whether he will consider that a series of coincidences is sufficient to account for the extraordinary incidents which, in a plain brief way, I am about to relate. It does

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not seem to me essential to state which view I hold myself, or if I hold neither, and have reasons for not stating a third possible explanation.

I must add a word or two with regard to Archdeacon M——. At the time of this story he was in his fiftieth year. He was a fine scholar, a man of considerable learning. His religious views were remarkably broad ; his enemies said remarkably thin. In his younger days he had been something of an athlete, but owing to age, sedentary habits, and some amount of self-indulgence, he had grown stout, and no longer took exercise in any form. He had no nervous trouble of any kind. His death, from heart disease, took place about three years ago. He told me the story twice, at my request ; there was an interval of about six weeks between the two narrations ; some of the details were elicited by questions of my own. With this preliminary note, we may proceed to the story.

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In January, 1881, Archdeacon M——, who was a great admirer of Tennyson's poetry, came up to London for a few days, chiefly in order to witness the performance of 'The Cup,' at the Lyceum. He was not present on the first night (Monday, January 3), but on a later night in the same week. At that time, of course, the poet had not received his peerage, nor the actor his knighthood.

On leaving the theatre, less satisfied with the play than with the magnificence of the setting, the Archdeacon found some slight difficulty in getting a cab. He walked a little way down the Strand to find one, when he encountered unexpectedly his old friend, Guy Breddon.

Breddon (that was not his real name) was a man of considerable fortune, a member of the learned societies, and devoted to Central African exploration. He was two or three years younger than the

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Archdeacon, and a man of tremendous physique.

Breddon was surprised to find the Archdeacon in London, and the Archdeacon was equally surprised to find Breddon in England at all. Breddon carried off the Archdeacon with him to his rooms, and sent a servant in a cab to the Langham to pay the Archdeacon's bill and fetch his luggage. The Archdeacon protested, but faintly, and Breddon would not hear of his hospitality being refused.

Breddon's rooms were an expensive suite immediately over a ruinous upholsterer's in a street off Berkeley Square. There was a private street-door, and from it a private staircase to the first and second floors.

The suite of rooms on the first floor, occupied by Breddon, was entirely shut off from the staircase by a door. The second floor suite, tenanted by an Irish M.P., was similarly shut off, and at that time was unoccupied.

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Breddon and the Archdeacon passed through the street-door and up the stairs to the first landing, from whence, by the staircase-door, they entered the flat. Breddon had only recently taken the flat, and the Archdeacon had never been there before. It consisted of a broad L-shaped passage with rooms opening into it. There were many trophies on the walls. Horned heads glared at them ; stealthy but stuffed beasts watched them furtively from under tables. There was a perfect arsenal of murderous weapons gleaming brightly under the shaded gaslights.

Breddon's servant prepared supper for them before leaving for the Langham, and soon the two men were discussing Mr. Tennyson, Mr. Irving, and a parody of the 'Queen of the May' which had recently appeared in *Punch*, and doing justice to some oysters, a cold pheasant with an excellent salad, and a bottle of '74 Pommery. It was character-

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istic of the Archdeacon that he remembered exactly the items of the supper, and that Breddon rather neglected the wine.

After supper they passed into the library, where a bright fire was burning. The Archdeacon walked towards the fire, rubbing his plump hands together. As he did so, a portion of the great rug of gray fur on which he was standing seemed to rise up. It was a gray cat of enormous size, larger than any that the Archdeacon had ever seen before, and of the same colour as the rug on which it had been sleeping. It rubbed itself affectionately against the Archdeacon's leg, and purred as he bent down to stroke it.

‘What an extraordinary animal !’ said the Archdeacon. ‘I had no idea cats could grow to this size. Its head’s queer, too—so much too small for the body.’

‘Yes,’ said Breddon, ‘and his feet are just as much too big.’

The gray cat stretched himself

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voluptuously under the Archdeacon's caressing hand, and the feet could be seen plainly. They were very broad, and the claws, which shot out, seemed unusually powerful and well developed. The beast's coat was short, thick, and wiry.

‘Most extraordinary!’ the Archdeacon repeated.

He lowered himself into a comfortable chair by the fire. He was still bending over the cat and playing with it when a slight chink made him look up. Breddon was putting something down on the table behind the liquor decanters.

‘Any particular breed?’ the Archdeacon asked.

‘Not that I know of. Freakish, I should say. We found him on board the boat when I left for home —may have come there after mice. He’d have been thrown overboard but for me. I got rather interested in him. Smoke?’

‘Oh, thank you.’

Outside a cold north wind

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screamed in quick gusts. Within came the sharp scratch of the match on the ribbed glass as the Archdeacon lit his cigar, the bubble of the rose-water in Breddon's hookah, the soft step of Breddon's man carrying the Archdeacon's luggage into the bedroom at the end of the L-shaped passage, and the constant purring of the big gray cat.

‘And what’s the cat’s name?’ the Archdeacon asked.

Breddon laughed.

‘Well, if you must have the plain truth, he’s called Gray Devil—or, more frequently, Devil *tout court*.’

‘Really, now, really, you can’t expect an Archdeacon to use such abominable language. I shall call him Gray—or perhaps Mr. Gray would be more respectful, seeing the shortness of our acquaintance. Do you object to the smell of smoke, Mr. Gray? The intelligent beast does not object. Probably you’ve accustomed him to it.’

‘Well, seeing what his name is,

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he could hardly object to smoke, could he?’

Breddon’s servant entered. As the door opened and shut, one heard for a moment the crackle of the newly-lit fire in the room that awaited the Archdeacon. The servant swept up the hearth, and, under Archidiaconal direction, mixed a lengthy brandy - and - soda. He retired with the information that he would not be wanted again that night.

‘Did you notice,’ asked the Archdeacon, ‘the way Mr. Gray followed your man about? I never saw a more affectionate cat.’

‘Think so?’ said Breddon. ‘Watch this time.’

For the first time he approached the gray cat, and stretched out his hand as if to pet him. In an instant the cat seemed to have gone mad. Its claws shot out, its back hooped, its coat bristled, its tail stood erect; it cursed and spat, and its small green eyes glared. But a close observer

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would have noticed that all the time it watched not only Breddon, but also that object which had chinked as Breddon had put it down behind the decanters.

The Archdeacon lay back in his chair and laughed heartily.

‘What funny creatures they are, and never so funny as when they lose their tempers! Really, Mr. Gray, out of respect to my cloth, you might have refrained from swearing like that. Poor Mr. Gray! Poor puss!’

Breddon resumed his seat with a grim smile. The gray cat slowly subsided, and then thrust its head, as though demanding sympathy, into the fat palm of the Archdeacon’s dependent hand.

Suddenly the Archdeacon’s eye lighted on the object which the cat had been watching, visible now that the servant had displaced the decanters.

‘Goodness me!’ he exclaimed, ‘you’ve got a revolver there.’

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‘That is so,’ said Breddon.
‘Not loaded, I trust?’
‘Oh yes, fully loaded.’
‘But isn’t that very dangerous?’
‘Well, no; I’m used to these things, and I’m not careless with them. I should have thought it more dangerous to have introduced Gray Devil to you without it. He’s much more powerful than an ordinary cat, and I fancy there’s something beside cat in his pedigree. When I bring a stranger to see him I keep the cat covered with the revolver until I see how the land lies. To do the brute justice, he has always been most friendly with everybody except myself. I’m his only antipathy. He’d have gone for me just now but that he’s smart enough to be afraid of this.’

He tapped the revolver.

‘I see,’ said the Archdeacon seriously, ‘and can guess how it happened. You scared him one day by firing the revolver for joke; the report frightened him, and he’s

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never forgiven you or forgotten the revolver. Wonderful memory some of these animals have !

‘Yes,’ said Breddon, ‘but that guess won’t do. I have never, intentionally or by chance, given the “Devil” any reason for his enmity. So far as I know he has never heard a firearm, and certainly he has never heard one since I made his acquaintance. Somebody may have scared him before, and I’m inclined to think that somebody did, for there can be no doubt that the brute knows all that a cat need know about a revolver, and that he’s scared of it.

‘The first time we met was almost in darkness. I’d got some cases that I was particular about, and the captain had said I could go down to look after them. Well, this beast suddenly came out of a lump of black and flew at me. I didn’t even recognise that it was a cat, because he’s so mighty big. I fetched him a clip on the side of the head that

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knocked him off, and whipped out my iron. He was away in a streak. He knew. And I've had plenty of proof since that he knows. He'd bite me now if he had the chance, but he understands that he hasn't got the chance. I'm often half inclined to take him on plain—shooting barred—and to feel my own hands breaking his damned neck !'

‘Really, old man, really !’ said the Archdeacon in perfunctory protest, as he rose and mixed himself another drink.

‘Sorry to use strong language, but I don't love that cat, you know.’

The Archdeacon expressed his surprise that in that case Breddon did not get rid of the brute.

‘You come across him on board ship and he flies at you. You save his life, give him board and lodging, and he still hates you so much that he won't let you touch him, and you are no fonder of him than he is of you. Why don't you part company ?’

‘As for his board, I've rarely

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known him to eat anything except his own kill. He goes out hunting every night. I keep him simply and solely because I'm afraid of him. As long as I can keep him I know my nerves are all right. If I let my funk of him make any difference—well, I shouldn't be much good in a Central African forest. At first I had some idea of taming him—and, besides, there was a queer coincidence.'

He rose and opened the window, and Gray Devil slowly slunk up to it. He paused a few moments on the window-sill and then suddenly sprang and vanished.

‘What was the coincidence?’

‘What do you think of that?’

Breddon handed the Archdeacon a figure of a cat which he had taken from the mantelpiece. It was a little thing about three inches high. In colour, in the small head, enormous feet, and curiously human eyes, it seemed an exact reproduction of Gray Devil.

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‘A perfect likeness. How did you get it made?’

‘I got the likeness before I got the original. A little Jew dealer sold it me the night before I left for England. He thought it was Egyptian, and described it as an idol. Anyhow, it was a niceish piece of jade.’

‘I always thought jade was bright green.’

‘It may be—or white—or brown. It varies. I don’t think there can be any doubt that this little figure is old, though I doubt if it’s Egyptian.’

Breddon put it back in its place.

‘By the way, that same night the little Jew came to try and buy it back again. He offered me twice what I had given for it. I said he must have found somebody who was pretty keen on it. I asked if it was a collector. The Jew thought not; said it was a coloured gentleman. Well, that finished it. I wasn’t going to do anything to

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oblige a nigger. The Jew pleaded that it was a particularly fine buck-nigger, with mountains of money, who'd been tracking the thing for years, and hinted at all manner of mumbo-jumbo business—to scare me, I suppose. However, I wouldn't listen, and kicked him out. Then came the coincidence. Having bought the likeness, next day I found the living original. Rum, wasn't it?

At this moment the clock struck, and the Archdeacon recognised with horror that it was very, very much past the time when respectable Archdeacons should be in bed and asleep. He rose and said good-night, observing that he'd like to hear more about it on the morrow.

This was extremely unfortunate, for it will be seen it is just at this part of the story that one wants full details, and on the morrow it became impossible to elicit them.

Before leaving the library Bredon closed the window, and the

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Archdeacon asked how 'Mr. Gray,' as he called him, would get back.

'Very likely he's back already. He's got a special window in the kitchen, made on purpose, just big enough to let him get in and out as he likes.'

'But don't other cats get in, too?'

'No,' said Breddon. 'Other cats avoid Gray Devil.'

The Archdeacon found himself unaccountably nervous when he got to his room. He owned to me that he had to satisfy himself that there was no one concealed under the bed or in the wardrobe. However, he got into bed, and after a little while fell into a deep sleep; his fire was burning brightly, and the room was quite light.

Shortly after four he was awakened by a loud scream. Still sleepy, he did not for the moment locate the sound, thinking that it must have come from the street outside. But almost immediately afterwards he heard the report of a revolver fired

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twice in quick succession, and then, after a short pause, a third time.

The Archdeacon was terribly frightened. He did not know what had happened, and thought of armed burglars. For a time—he did not think it could have been more than a minute—fear held him motionless. Then with an effort he rose, lit the gas, and hurried on his clothes. As he was dressing, he heard a step down the passage and a knock at his door.

He opened it, and found Breddon's servant. The man had put on a blue overcoat over his night-things, and wore slippers. He was shivering with cold and terror.

‘Oh, my God, sir !’ he exclaimed, ‘Mr. Breddon's shot himself. Would you come, sir ?’

The Archdeacon followed the man to Breddon's bedroom. The smoke still hung thickly in the room. A mirror had been smashed, and lay in fragments on the floor. On the bed, with his back to the

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Archdeacon, lay Breddon, dead. His right hand still grasped the revolver, and there was a blackened wound behind the right ear.

When the Archdeacon came round to look at the face he turned faint, and the servant took him out into the library and gave him brandy, the glasses and decanters still standing there. Breddon's face certainly had looked very ghastly ; it had been scratched, torn and bitten ; one eye was gone, and the whole face was covered with blood.

‘ Do you think it was that brute did it ? ’

‘ Sure of it, sir ; sprang on his face while he was asleep. I knew it would happen one of these nights. He knew it too ; always slept with the revolver by his side. He fired twice at the brute, but couldn't see for the blood. Then he killed himself.’

It seemed likely enough, with his eyesight gone, horribly mauled, in an agony of pain, possibly believing

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that he was saving himself from a death still more horrible, Breddon might very well have turned the weapon on himself.

‘What do we do now?’ the man asked.

‘We must get a doctor and fetch the police at once. Come on.’

As they turned the corner of the passage, they saw that the door communicating with the staircase was open.

‘Did you open that door?’ asked the Archdeacon.

‘No,’ said the man, aghast.

‘Then who did?’

‘Don’t know, sir. Looks as if we weren’t at the end of this yet.’

They passed down the stairs together, and found the street-door also ajar. On the pavement outside lay a policeman slowly recovering consciousness. Breddon’s man took the policeman’s whistle and blew it. A passing hansom, going back to the mews, slowed up; the cab was sent to fetch a doctor, and commu-

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nication with the police-station rapidly followed.

The injured policeman told a curious story. He was passing the house when he heard shots fired. Almost immediately afterwards he heard the bolts of the front-door being drawn, and stepped back into the neighbouring doorway. The front-door opened, and a negro emerged clad in a gray tweed suit with a gray overcoat. The policeman jumped out, and without a second's hesitation the black man felled him. 'It was all done before you could think,' was the policeman's phrase.

'What kind of negro?' asked the Archdeacon.

'A big man—stood over six foot, and black as coal. He never waited to be challenged ; the moment he knew that he was seen he hit out.'

The policeman was not a very intelligent fellow, and there was little more to be got out of him. He had heard the shots, seen the street-door open and the man in

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gray appear, and had been felled by a lightning blow before he had time to do anything.

The doctor, a plain, matter-of-fact little man, had no hesitation in saying that Breddon was dead, and must have died almost immediately. After the injuries received, respiration and heart-action must have ceased at once. He was explaining something which oozed from the dead man's ear, when the Arch-deacon could stand it no longer, and staggered out into the library. There he found Breddon's servant, still in the blue overcoat, explaining to a policeman with a notebook that as far as he knew nothing was missing except a jade image or idol of a cat which formerly stood on the mantelpiece.

The cat known as 'Gray Devil' was also missing, and, although a description of it was circulated in the public press, nothing was ever heard of it again. But gray fur was found in the clenched left hand of the dead man.

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The inquest resulted in the customary verdict, and brought to light no new facts. But it may be as well to give what the police theory of the case was. According to the police the suicide took place much as Breddon's servant had supposed. Mad with pain and unable to bear the thought of his awful mutilation, Breddon had shot himself.

The story of the jade image, as far as it was known, was told at the inquest. The police held that this image was an idol, that some uncivilized tribe was much perturbed by the theft of it, and was ready to pay an enormously high price for its recovery. The negro was assumed to be aware of this, and to have determined to obtain possession of the idol by fair means or foul. Fair means failing, it was suggested that the negro followed Breddon to England, tracked him out, and on the night in question found some means to conceal himself in Breddon's flat. There it was assumed that he fell asleep, was awakened

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by the screams and the sound of the firing, and, being scared, caught up the jade image and made off. Realizing that the shots would have been heard outside, and that his departure at that moment would be considered extremely suspicious, he was ready as he opened the street-door to fell the first man that he saw. The temporary unconsciousness of the policeman gave him time to get away.

The theory sounds at first sight like the only possible theory. When the Archdeacon first told me the story I tried to find out indirectly whether he accepted it. Finding him rather disposed to fence with my hints and suggestions, I put the question to him plainly and bluntly :

‘ Do you believe in the police theory ? ’

He hesitated, and then answered with complete frankness :

‘ No, most emphatically not.’

‘ Why ? ’ I asked ; and he went over the evidence with me.

‘ In the first place, I do not believe

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that Breddon, in the ordinary sense, committed suicide. No amount of physical pain would have made him even think of it. He had unending pluck. He would have taken the facial disfigurement and loss of sight as the chances of war, and would have done the best that could be done by a man with such awful disabilities. One must admit that he fired the fatal shot—the medical evidence on that point is too strong to be gainsaid—but he fired it under circumstances of supernatural horror of which we, thank God ! know nothing.'

‘I’m naturally slow to admit supernatural explanation.’

‘Well, let’s go on. What’s this mysterious tribe the police talk about? I want to know where it lives and what its name is. It’s wealthy enough to offer a huge reward; it must be of some importance. The negro managed to get in and secrete himself. How? Where? I know the flat, and that theory won’t do. We don’t even

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know that it was the negro who took that little image, though I believe it was. Anyhow, how did the negro get away at that hour of the morning absolutely unobserved? Negroes are not so common in London that they can walk about without being noticed ; yet not one trace of him was ever found, and equally mysterious is the disappearance of the Gray Cat. It was such an extraordinary brute, and the description of it was so widely circulated that it would have seemed almost certain we should hear of it again. Well, we've not heard.'

We discussed the police theory for some little time, and something which he happened to say led me to exclaim :

‘Really! Do you mean to say that the Gray Cat actually was the negro?’

‘No,’ he replied, ‘not exactly that, but something near it. Cats are strange animals, anyhow. needn’t remind you of their connection with certain old religions

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or with that witchcraft in which even in England to-day some still believe, and not so long ago almost all believed. I have never, by the way, seen a good explanation of the fact that there are people who cannot bear to be in a room with a cat, and are aware of its presence as if by some mysterious extra sense. Let me remind you of the belief which undoubtedly exists both in China and Japan, that evil spirits may enter into certain of the lower animals, the fox and badger especially. Every student of demonology knows about these things.

‘But that idea of evil spirits taking possession of cats or foxes is surely a heathen superstition which you cannot hold.’

‘Well, I have read of the evil spirits that entered into the swine. Think it over, and keep an open mind.’

THE END