

# The Black Cat

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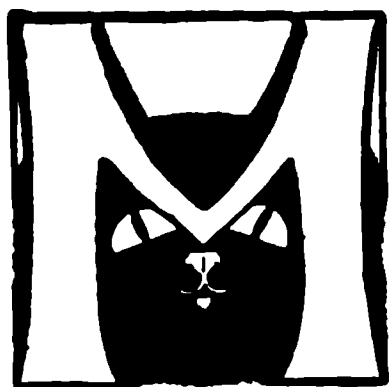


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## The Strayed Finger.\*

BY JOHN WALCOTT.



**M**R. WILKINSON was not only a very susceptible young man, but his sense of propriety was so keen that when, on an important occasion, he presented his betrothed with a jewel-case which he supposed to contain a pearl necklace, and it turned out to enclose a woman's finger, his horror was hardly greater than his sense of the indecorum of the circumstance. The lady shared his feelings. After the cold water had brought her to, she informed him, with even more firmness than sorrow, that she would never see him again until she had received from him in writing a proper explanation of the deplorable incident. Mr. Wilkinson was grieved at her decision. Nevertheless, he could but admire her for it. Having ascertained that she did not suspect him of direct complicity in the unpleasant occurrence, he went away without remonstrance, carrying with him the uncanny object still in its delicate silk-lined receptacle. The name on the case was that of the prominent jeweller from whom the necklace had been ordered.

Mr. Wilkinson was not a man to be carried away by passion, but he was determined to bring to justice the perpetrator of the trick — for he had no doubt that a cruel and ghastly jest had been played upon him and his fiancée — and he knew that blind anger would not help him to this end. So he immediately took a cab and gave the address of a private detective whom he had met professionally and felt he could trust. To put the matter into the hands of the police would be to court instant publicity. The press would take hold of it, and a swarm of reporters would gather, like flies upon carrion, to his own annoyance and, what was much more important, to the great discomfort of his Mary. The detective was out, and after a few moments' hesitation Mr. Wilkinson went home, where he passed a sleepless night.

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The more he thought of the thing, the less possible it seemed to him that it could have happened. Thrice within the first hour or two he rose from his bed, turned up the light and examined the gruesome contents of the case. The first time he half expected to find that the necklace was there; the second that there was nothing there; the third, that the finger was some clever imitation — and thrice he was disappointed. The finger was there, and it was a finger — the ring finger of the left hand, he decided. It was a small, delicate member, with something curious in its formation, and yet offering a shadowy suggestion of youth and prettiness which grated horribly upon the young man's nerves. It might have been one of Mary's fingers.

The incident was unwelcome and incomprehensible, but none the less real. It had actually happened, and, of all persons, happened to him! To have come a respectable road to within gunshot of forty and wedlock only to be wound, as it were, around an unknown woman's detached finger was hard — very hard. Mr. Wilkinson began to entertain a grudge against this strange and fragmentary intruder. It had taken an unfair advantage of an unoffending person. He rose once more and placed it under a table in the farthest corner of the room. This act left his mind free for the moment to consider in a less prejudiced way that it was the sender of the object, rather than the object itself, that called for rigorous treatment. He prepared him a table in the presence of his enemies, and for the time ate with gusto from the dish of their imagined discomfiture. Only he did not know who they were. He could think of no enemy who would be likely to sacrifice a charming portion of wife or sister to cause him temporary chagrin. The sudden suspicion that this might be a memento of some less reputable person filled him with disquiet. If it should be — if Mary should find. . . . He became again dissatisfied with the present situation of the offending member. From its remote obscurity it appeared to his imagination to be pointing at him ironically, like some disagreeably incarnated finger of fate. A feeling of shame, such as he had never known before, began to creep and curdle in his blood.

Morning came at last, and breakfast, which still lay untasted before the pondering Wilkinson when the detective was shown in.

He listened with much interest to his client's story, looked at the finger and its case, and passed judgment on the whole affair in a word of one syllable. Further, he recommended that the business be turned over to him, including the package in which the finger had come — the case, which he unpleasantly referred to as the casket — and the wrapper, which Wilkinson had had the presence of mind to save. Armed with these he set out, promising to report in the evening.

Mr. Wilkinson was not mistaken in his man. Night had hardly fallen when the detective reappeared and offered the following satisfactory explanation of the curious incident :

“At 4.30 yesterday afternoon, Mr. Wilkinson,” he began, “a man called upon you at your office. He looked seedy, but on the whole respectable, and you found it impossible not to listen to him on account of his melting eye and rich, sympathetic voice.”

Mr. Wilkinson nodded. He was not so simple as to wonder how the detective knew this, but he did wonder what it had to do with the case.

“He said,” proceeded the detective, “that he was poor but — and-so-forth, a stranger in town, looking for a job, anything honest.” The detective paused here and smiled pleasantly. “Had found a chance as waiter at Royce's, but must provide his own waiter's coat, price three dollars. Could you — and-so-forth? You couldn't; you weren't quite so easy. But you did the next best thing — gave him an order on your haberdasher for a waiter's coat. Wrote it on the face of one of your envelopes, and gave him one of your visiting cards. He got the coat on your order and then went to his uncle's and cashed in the coat. It only fetched a dollar, but every little helps.”

The detective paused again and looked attentively at Mr. Wilkinson, who did not quite like his expression.

“Very well, sir,” he said, somewhat testily, “what of it?”

“This. When uncle came to examine the coat at his leisure, he found two rather unaccountable articles in it — your card and a woman's finger. He felt surprised, naturally, and a little grieved.”

“I can understand that,” said Mr. Wilkinson, appreciatively.

“In fact,” resumed the detective, “the thing upset him considerably. A poco deals, sooner or later, in a great many shady arti-

cles, but he has to draw the line somewhere. Uncle had never had any call for odd fingers — worried him to have the thing in his place. So what does he do but stow the article in a jewel-case he had handy, and send it off to the address on your card?"

"I see," said Mr. Wilkinson, with a sigh of relief. The thing appeared to be straightening itself out admirably. "You have proof of these statements?"

The detective nodded.

"Then there is little more to be said, I should think. I am greatly obliged for your services. What do I owe you?"

The detective rubbed his chin. He looked somewhat disappointed.

"Of course," he said, thoughtfully, "if that is all you want to know it is no affair of mine. Twenty-five dollars."

Mr. Wilkinson did not like to feel that he had said or done less than might be required of a man in his position. He hastened to inquire what the detective meant.

"Well, Mr. Wilkinson," he said, "there are three questions which, I should have said, would suggest themselves to a man of your inquiring turn of mind. First, what became of the necklace, which was sent from your jeweller's by one of their uniformed employés yesterday afternoon, and which should have reached you, as you expected, about the time you received the little souvenir from uncle? Second, how did the finger get into the excellent company of your visiting card, in a pocket of the waiter's coat? Third, to whom did the finger originally belong?"

"Very true," said Mr. Wilkinson, beginning to be a little ashamed of his premature satisfaction. The fact was, he had been thinking of Mary, and the explanation he had already received seemed ample for his purpose. "Do you know the answers to these questions?"

"I do," the detective replied, "but I should prefer to have you hear the story from another person. He is due here now." Almost as he spoke the bell rang and a young man was shown in, whom the detective introduced as Mr. Blackall. The visitor appeared somewhat ill at ease at first, but presently his manner grew more easy, and at Mr. Wilkinson's request he proceeded to tell his story, in a manly, straightforward manner.

“I am an utter stranger to you, Mr. Wilkinson,” he began, “but if you were to ask any one who knows me, you would be told that I have always borne a reputation for honesty. Yesterday, nevertheless, I was guilty of a forgery and two thefts. One of these offences was deliberate, the other two being forced upon me, as it seemed, by the urgency of circumstances.”

He paused and shook his head in a melancholy way, but Mr. Wilkinson, who felt much attracted by his manner, urged him to go on.

“Yes, I am a robber, Mr. Wilkinson. Last evening, at half-past six, I stationed myself on your front steps and stole from the messenger’s hand a package addressed to you and containing in a jewel-case a pearl necklace.”

Mr. Wilkinson was startled. He felt somewhat less strongly attracted toward his visitor, but still encouraged him to continue.

“You will wonder why I did this,” he went on, “when I tell you that I am a man of good family and independent fortune. I had no possible use for your necklace, which is now in this gentleman’s hands and at your disposal.”

“What were you after, then?” cried Mr. Wilkinson, much puzzled.

“A woman’s finger,” replied Mr. Blackall. Mr. Wilkinson’s astonishment increased. “I had lost it and was very anxious to recover it, for a particular reason. You will think it a trifle to make so much trouble about, but it happened to be very important to me at the moment. I had carelessly dropped it in the street, in taking out my handkerchief. When I discovered my loss some moments later, and retraced my steps to look for the finger, I came upon a shabby person in the act of picking it up. He seemed embarrassed when he discovered what it was, but instead of dropping it, he hastily secreted it in the pocket of a coat which he carried upon his arm. I naturally followed him to see where he was going with my property, which, for obvious reasons, I could not openly claim.

“When he entered the shop of Mr. Isaacson, I applied my face to the window and saw the wretch exchange the coat he carried — which I had no doubt he had stolen — for a few paltry coins. I would rather have given twenty times the sum than lose the valu-

able article he had disposed of so carelessly, and I had much ado to keep my hands off of him when he came out. Prudence prevailed, however; I let him pass and turned to watch the pawnbroker, who had carelessly thrown the coat upon his counter. In a few minutes, his other customers having left the shop, he proceeded to make a systematic examination of the garment, turning the pockets inside out. I saw him start when he touched my finger, which fell upon the counter with a scrap of paper or card. A sudden impulse urged me to act, and with a half-defined purpose of recovering my property on the spot I entered the shop.

“At the sound of the opening door I saw him sweep the finger behind the counter and, as I supposed, into a drawer. As I approached him it occurred to me that it would be even more foolish and unsafe to connect myself in his mind with the article I sought than it would have been to make a confidant of the tramp, and so, on the impulse of the moment, I merely took out my watch and laid it before him, saying, ‘How much?’

“The pawnbroker took the watch nearer the window for better examination, and I instinctively seized the opportunity to inspect the card that had fallen from the coat with the finger and remained upon the counter. It was yours, Mr. Wilkinson, and I impressed the address on my memory.

“Then Isaacson turned toward me and offered a loan on my watch which, fortunately, was so absurdly small that I could consistently refuse it, and I left the shop, feeling very foolish and at a loss just what to do. I was loth to relinquish my finger, and when outside paused and took another look at its chance possessor. He was staring steadfastly at the card I had just read, now and then shaking his head in an undecided way. In a moment, however, he seemed to reach a decision. From a shelf he took a small oblong morocco-covered box — a jewel-case, apparently — and into it put some object which he slipped from under the counter. I could not see what it was, but had very little doubt about it. He wrapped and sealed the box, and it was his action in addressing the parcel that interested me most, for he obviously copied the address from the card that had dropped with the finger from the coat.

“Presently he came out, package in hand, and made his way,

with me in his wake, to a District Messenger office in the next block. I only stopped to make sure that he left the parcel there for delivery, and then started for your house. I determined to be here before the package and to recover my property by making a direct appeal to your magnanimity. While one could not think of putting himself, even in a small way, into the hands of a pawnbroker, with a gentleman there could be no question of the result. And yet, when I had ascended your steps and was about to ring, I was seized with a qualm of diffidence and confusion. What excuse could I make for intruding upon a gentleman on such an errand. Could I say, 'Mr. Wilkinson, my name is Blackall. There is a finger coming to you by special messenger which belongs to me!' Clearly not.

"I thought of several elaborate and roundabout ways of introducing the subject, but none of them appealed to me as quite adequate. I had arrived at no conclusion when a uniformed messenger appeared at the foot of the steps, evidently looking for the number on the transom. Instinctively, I drew back into the shade. I was standing in the vestibule between the outer and inner doors, and the cross-light from the gas in your hall and the electric light outside made a triangle of shadow in which I was invisible to the boy, while his every motion was plain to me. He took from beneath his coat a small oblong package. That decided me upon an instant plan of action. My soft hat I doubled and thrust into a pocket. The lad came leisurely up the steps, his attention fixed upon the address on the parcel, making sure that he had the right house. Calmly I stepped forth, bareheaded, partially closing the outer door. The boy looked up and said: 'Mr. Wilkinson?'

"'Correct,' I answered, eagerly extending my hand for the coveted parcel. With it I was handed a receipt book and asked to sign. Of course, there was no help for it, and forgery was added to my offences.

"In a short half-hour I was safe in my lodgings, free to unwrap the article that had caused me so much anxiety and effort. Imagine my consternation when, on opening the case, I found, instead of the object of my search, a pearl necklace. For some time I sat and stared at it, as ridiculously confused as a clown in a



Christmas pantomime. The case was, apparently, the one I had seen Isaacson use, but the contents! Surely pawnbrokers did not keep pearl necklaces lying loose under their counters. And, if they did, they would scarcely send them off at random to addresses accidentally found in pledged articles of clothing! The more I thought of it the more unaccountable it seemed. Certainly there was but one thing to do. I had got into deep waters and needed an experienced hand and head to get me out. I went at once to a private detective whom I knew and made a clean breast of the matter. I assured him that it was hardly less important that the necklace should be restored, with some reasonable excuse, to the rightful owner than that my lost finger should be recovered. He agreed to attend promptly to both matters. And he has." Mr. Blackall bowed in the direction of the detective, who returned the compliment and said:

"Fact is, Mr. Wilkinson, I was looking up the case from Mr. Blackall's end when you called on me last night, and when you told me your story this morning I, of course, made my own deductions. The two mysteries just dovetailed into each other, you see, so that I had an easy job for my money. And now let me restore to you gentlemen the missing articles, which, I dare say, you would neither of you care to exchange again."

The detective smiled, and produced from nowhere in particular two jewel-cases. They were much alike and were marked with the name of the same jeweller.

"Well, Mr. Wilkinson," said Mr. Blackall, "glad to have met you, but sorry to have caused you so much inconvenience. I trust you appreciate my delicate position and the overpowering considerations which prevailed upon me to do a dishonorable thing." He offered his hand, which Mr. Wilkinson did not appear to see.

"You will excuse me, Mr. Blackall," he said, with dignity, "if, before I commit myself to complete acquiescence, I request some explanation of the manner in which this strange — er — article — came into your possession."

Mr. Blackall smiled.

"Certainly, my dear sir — but I thought I had made myself plain in the matter. Have I not?" He addressed the detective, who shook his head.

“Then I shall be glad to do so. You will recall that I pleaded guilty to two thefts yesterday. The first article stolen was the finger. I had long coveted such a finger, and when the chance came to acquire one I was not strong enough to resist the temptation. So I stole it.”

Mr. Wilkinson shuddered. He had a momentary vision of a young girl going about in search of the third finger of her left hand.

“Whose was it?” he asked, involuntarily.

Mr. Blackall shook his head.

“I don’t know, I’m sure,” he said. “Bad lot, I dare say, but as pretty a subject for dissection as I ever saw.”

Dissection! Mr. Wilkinson breathed more freely. An incubus of horror was lifted from his brain, and he was relieved to feel nothing more than a mild disgust.

“Ah,” he said, “you are —”

“A student of surgery — didn’t I say?” replied Mr. Blackall. “Recently I have been making a special study of the structure of the hand. Yesterday, in the dissecting room, I happened upon this finger — a very remarkable specimen. You will readily notice the peculiar form of the tendon; it is double.” He drew the finger from the jewel-case and by means of his thumb and forefinger manipulated the tendon so that the member moved unpleasantly. “There are,” he continued, complacently, “so far as I know, extremely few cases of this kind on record. I can hardly tell you what an attraction it had for me. I resolved, before communicating my discovery to the demonstrator, to take it home with me, and spend the night with it. Instead of which, Mr. Wilkinson,” he concluded — and here he and the detective both smiled — “it was you who —”

“Yes,” said Mr. Wilkinson, “I certainly did.”

