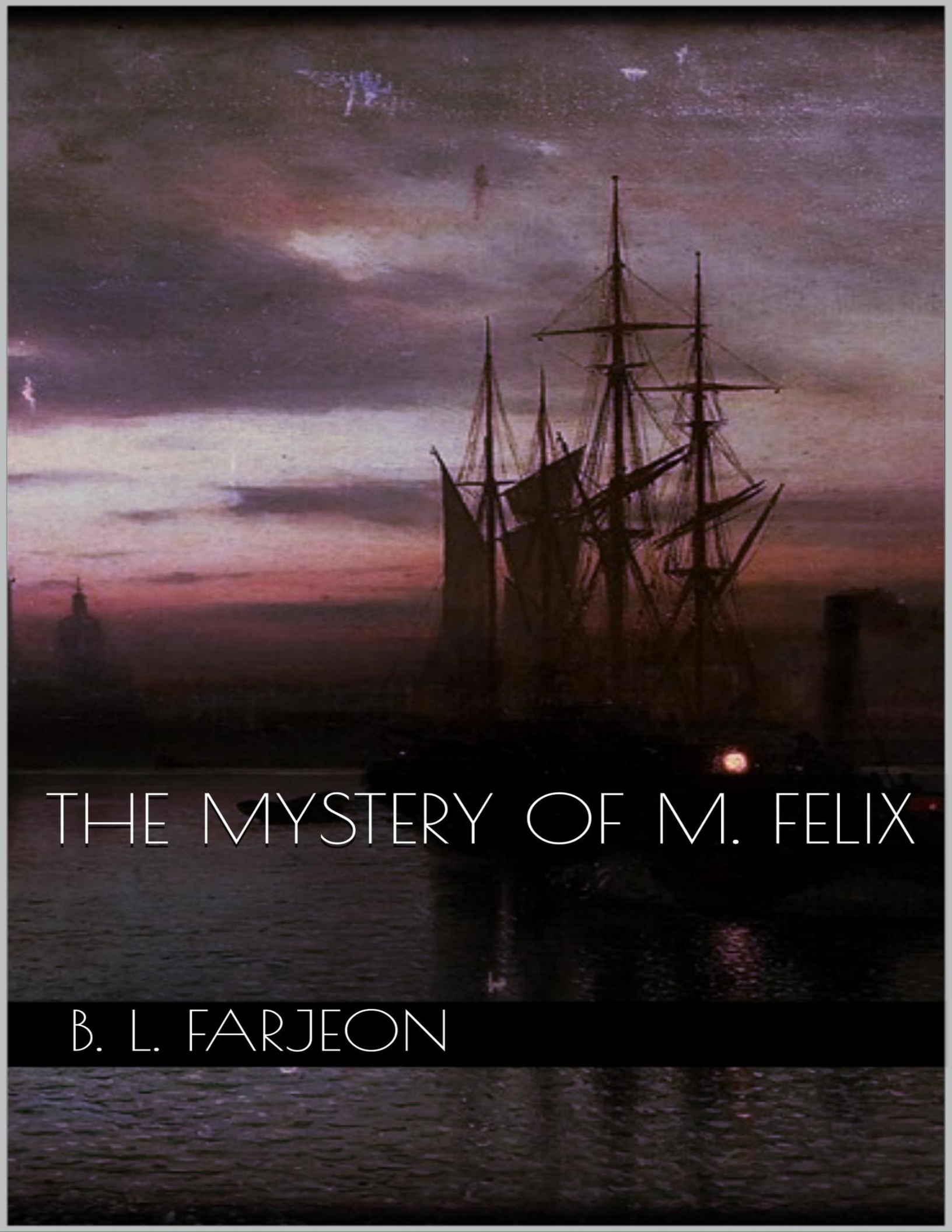
THE MYSTERY OF M. FELIX
B. L. FARJEON

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CHAPTER I.

A CRY FOR HELP FLOATS THROUGH THE NIGHT.

"Help!"
Through the whole of the night, chopping, shifting winds had been tearing through the streets of London, now from the north, now from the south, now from the east, now from the west, now from all points of the compass at once; which last caprice--taking place for at least the twentieth time in the course of the hour which the bells of Big Ben were striking--was enough in itself to make the policeman on the beat doubtful of his senses.
"What a chap hears in weather like this," he muttered, "and what he fancies he hears, is enough to drive him mad."
He had sufficient justification for the remark, for there were not only the wild pranks of Boreas to torment and distract him, but there was the snow which, blown in fine particles from roofs and gables, and torn from nooks where it lay huddled up in little heaps against stone walls (for the reason that being blown there by previous winds it could get no further), seemed to take a spiteful pleasure in whirling into his face, which was tingling and smarting with cold, and as a matter of course into his eyes, which it caused to run over with tears. With a vague idea that some appeal had been made officially to him as a representative of law and order, he steadied himself and stood still for a few moments, with a spiritual cold freezing his heart, even as the temporal cold was freezing his marrow.
"Help!"
The bells of Big Ben were still proclaiming the hour of

midnight. If a man at such a time might have reasonably been forgiven the fancy that old Westminster's tower had been invaded by an army of malicious witches, how much more readily might he have been forgiven for not being able to fix the direction from which this cry for help proceeded? Nay, he could scarcely have been blamed for doubting that the cry was human.

For the third time--

"Help!"

Then, so far as that appeal was concerned, silence. The cry was heard no more.

The policeman still labored under a vague impression that his duty lay somewhere in an undefined direction, and his attitude was one of strained yet bewildered attention. Suddenly he received a terrible shock. Something touched his foot. He started back, all his nerves thrilling with an unreasonable spasm of horror. Instinctively looking down, he discovered that he had been ridiculously alarmed by a miserable, half-starved, and nearly whole-frozen cat, which, with the scanty hairs on its back sticking up in sharp points, was creeping timorously along in quest of an open door. Recovering from his alarm, the policeman stamped his feet and clapped his hands vigorously to keep the circulation in them.

His beat was in the heart of Soho, and he was at that moment in Gerard Street, in which locality human life is represented in perhaps stranger variety than can be found in any other part of this gigantic city of darkness and light. As a protection against the fierce wind he had taken refuge within the portal of the closed door of an old house which lay a little back from the regular line of buildings in the street. Little did he dream that the cry for help had proceeded from that very house, the upper portion of which was inhabited by a gentleman known as M. Felix by some, as Mr. Felix by others. Well named, apparently, for although he was not young, M. Felix was distinguished by a certain

happy, light-hearted air, which marked him as one who held enjoyment of the pleasures of life as a kind of religion to be devoutly observed. The lower portion of the house was occupied by the landlady, Mrs. Middlemore, who acted as housekeeper to M. Felix. It was the nightly habit of this estimable woman to go for her supper beer at half-past eleven, and return, beaming, at a few minutes after twelve. These late hours did not interfere with the performance of her duties, because M. Felix was by no means an early riser, seldom breakfasting, indeed, before noon. Despite the inclemency of the weather, Mrs. Middlemore had not deviated on this night from her usual custom. She was a widow, without responsibilities, and no person had a right to meddle with her affairs. Besides, as she frequently remarked, she was quite able to take care of herself.

A welcome diversion occurred to the constable who was stamping his feet within the portal of Mrs. Middlemore's street door. A brother constable sauntered up, and accosted him.

"Is that you, Wigg?"

"As much as there's left of me," replied Constable Wigg.

"You may well say that," observed the new-comer, who rejoiced in the name of Nightingale. "It's all a job to keep one's self together. What a night!"

"Bitter. I've been regularly blown off my feet."

"My case. I'm froze to a stone. The North Pole ain't in it with this, and whether I've got a nose on my face is more than I'd swear to. Anything up?"

"Nothing, except----"

"Except what?" asked Constable Nightingale, as his comrade paused. He put his hand to his nose as he asked the question, his reference to it having inspired doubts as to his being still in possession of the feature.

"A minute or two ago," said Constable Wigg, "I had half a fancy that I heard somebody cry out 'Help!'"

"Ah! Did you go?"

"How could I? I wasn't sure, you know."
"Who could be sure of anything," remarked Constable Nightingale, charitably, "on such a night?"
"Nobody. It must have been the wind."
"Not a doubt of it. If anybody told me he saw Polar bears about I shouldn't dispute with him." Then Constable Nightingale took a step forward, and glanced up at the windows of the front rooms occupied by M. Felix, in which shone a perfect blaze of light. "He must be jolly warm up there."
"Who?" inquired Constable Wigg, his eyes following his comrade's glance.
"Mr. Felix."
"And who's Mr. Felix when he's at home?"
"Why, you don't mean to say you don't know him!"
"Never heard of him. I've only been on the beat two nights."
"I forgot. He's a trump, a regular A-one-er. You're in for a good tip or two. I was on night duty here this time last year, and he behaved handsome. Tipped me at Christmas, and tipped me at New Year's. Half a sov. each time. And at other times, too. Altogether he was as good as between four and five pounds to me while I was here."
"That's something like," said Constable Wigg, with something of eager hope in his voice; "not many like him knocking around. But"--with sudden suspicion--"why should he be so free? Anything wrong about him?"
"Not a bit of it," replied Constable Nightingale, blowing on his ice-cold fingers. "He's a diamond of the first water--a tip-top swell, rolling in money. That's what's the matter with Mr. Felix. Don't you wish you had the same complaint? 'Constable,' said he to me, when I came on this beat last year, 'you're on night duty here, eh?' 'Yes, sir,' I answers. 'Very good,' he says, acting like a gentleman; 'I live in this house'--we were standing at this very door--'and I always make it a point to look after them as looks after me.'"

"And a very good point it is," remarked Constable Wigg, with growing interest, "for a gentleman to make."
"I thought so myself, and I found it so. 'And I always make it a point,' says he, of 'looking after them as looks after me.' Fact is, Wigg, he comes home late sometimes, with a glass of wine to much in him, and he knows the usefulness of us. Carries a lump of money about him, and likes to feel himself safe. Never what you call drunk, you know. Just a bit sprung, as a real gentleman should be, and always with a pleasant word ready. So, whenever I met him coming home late, I'd walk behind him to his door here, and give him good-night; which he appreciated."
"Much obliged to you for the information, Nightingale."
"Ought to do these little turns for one another, Wigg. The man who was on the beat before me gave me the office, and it's only friendly for me to give it to you." Constable Nightingale looked pensively over the shoulder of his brother constable, and added, "I behaved liberal to him."
"I'll do likewise to you," said Constable Wigg, "if anything happens."
"Was sure you would, Wigg," responded Constable Nightingale, briskly. "What would the force be worth if we didn't stick together? When I see Mr. Felix I'll put in a good word for you. He took a regular fancy to me, and told me if I got the beat again to come to him immediate. Once you see him, you can't miss knowing him. Tall and slim, with hair getting gray. No whiskers; only a mustache, curled. Speaks with a foreign accent--parleyvooish. His clothes fit like a glove. Patent leather boots always, except when he wears shoes; white tie generally. I remember Mrs. Middlemore----"
"Who's she?"
"His landlady. A most respectable woman--made of the right stuff. Ah, a real good sort she is! Goes out every night for her supper beer between eleven and twelve."
"I must have seen her half an hour ago."

"Of course you did. If it was to rain cats and dogs or snowed for a month, she wouldn't miss going. Has she come back?"
"No."
"She stops out as a rule till about this time; fond of a gossip, you know. Most of us are. She'll be here soon, if she can keep her feet. The snow's getting thicker--and listen to the wind! Let's get close to the door. Well, I remember Mrs. Middlemore coming out to me one night, and saying, 'You're wanted up there,' meaning in Mr. Felix's rooms----"
Constable Wigg interposed. "Just now you said parleyvooish."
"So I did, and so I meant."
"Speaks with a foreign accent, you said."
"I don't deny it."
"And you keep on saying Mr. Felix."
"Well?"
"Shouldn't it be Monseer?"
"Well, perhaps; but not Monseer--Monshure."
"I give in to you, Nightingale; I'm not a French scholar."
"Let's call him Mr., for all that. Monshure twists the tongue unless you're born there."
"I'm agreeable. Call him Mr. if you like. Hallo!"
The exclamation was caused by Mrs. Middlemore's street door being suddenly opened without any preliminary warning from within, and with such swiftness and violence that the policemen almost fell through it into the passage. As they were recovering their equilibrium a man stepped out of the house, or rather stumbled out of it, in a state of great excitement. He had a crimson scarf round his neck; it was loosely tied, and the ends floated in the wind. The little bit of color shone bright in the glare of white snow. Its wearer pulled the door after him and hurried along the street, looking neither to the right nor to the left, and taking no notice of the policemen, who strained their eyes after him. He walked very unsteadily, and was soon out of

sight.

CHAPTER II.

THE SPECTRE CAT.

"That's a rum start," said Constable Wigg. "Was it Mr. Felix?"
"No," replied Constable Nightingale, "Mr. Felix is altogether a different kind of man. Takes things more coolly. Walks slow, talks slow, thinks slow, looks at you slow. This fellow was like a flash of lightning. Did you catch sight of his face?"
"He was in such a devil of a hurry that there was no catching sight of anything except the red handkerchief round his neck. There was no mistaking that. Seemed a youngish man."
"Yes. Been on a visit to Mr. Felix, most likely."
"Or to some other lodger in the house," suggested Constable Wigg.
"There ain't no other," said Constable Nightingale. "Every room in it except the basement is let to Mr. Felix."
"A married man, then' with a large family?"
"No," said Constable Nightingale, with a little cough. "Single. Or, perhaps, a widower. No business of ours, Wigg."
"Certainly not. Go on with your story, Nightingale. 'You're wanted up there' says Mrs. Middlemore."
"Yes. 'You're wanted up there,' she says, meaning Mr. Felix's rooms. 'Did Mr. Felix send for me?' I ask. 'He did,' she answers. 'He rings his bell and says, "Go for a policeman." And he'll not be sorry it's you, Mr. Nightingale, because you're a man as can be trusted,' Mrs. Middlemore's precise words. You see, Wigg, me and her

ain't exactly strangers. I'm a single man, and I'm mistook if she ain't got a bit of money put by."
"You're a knowing one, Nightingale,' said Constable Wigg, somewhat enviously, and it is not to the credit of human nature to state that there flashed into his mind the base idea of endeavoring to supplant his brother constable in Mrs. Middlemore's good graces. What should hinder him? He was a single man, many years younger than Constable Nightingale, and much better looking. All was fair in love and war. The "bit of money put by" was a temptation from Lucifer.
"That's what brings me round here now and then," continued Constable Nightingale, complacently. "A man might go a good deal further than Mrs. Middlemore, and fare a good deal worse. 'I suppose,' says I to her, 'there's somebody with Mr. Felix as he wants to get rid of, and as won't go?' 'I ain't at liberty to say,' she answers, 'but you're pretty near the mark. Come and see for yourself, and don't forget that Mr. Felix has got a liberal heart, and hates fuss.' Upon that, Wigg, I holds my tongue, because I'm a man as knows how to, and I follows Mrs. Middlemore into the house. I'd been inside before, of course, but never upstairs, always down and Mrs. Middlemore had told me such a lot about Mr. Felix's rooms that I was curious to see them. 'Furnished like a palace,' Mrs. Middlemore used to say; so up the stairs I steps, Mrs. Middlemore showing the way, and I don't mind confessing that before we got to the first landing I put my arm round Mrs. Middlemore's waist--but that's neither here nor there. She stops on the landing, and knocks at the door----"
But here Constable Nightingale was compelled to pause, and to hold on tight to his comrade. The storm quite suddenly reached such a pitch of fury that the men could scarcely keep their feet, and it would have been impossible to hear a word that was spoken. It was not a fitful display of temper; so fierce grew the wind that it blew the street door

open with a crash, and as the policemen were leaning against it, the consequence was that they were precipitated into the passage, and fell flat upon their backs. The reason of the door being blown open so readily was probably, as Constable Nightingale afterward remarked, because the man who had recently left the house so hastily had not pulled it tight behind him, but the tempest was raging so furiously that it might well have made light of such an obstacle as an old street door. It was with difficulty the policemen recovered their feet, and the strength of the wind as it rushed through the passage was so great that the idea that they would be safer inside the house than out occurred to both of them at once. To expose themselves to the fury of the elements in the open would undoubtedly have been attended with danger. Instinctively they advanced to the door, and after a struggle succeeded in shutting it. That being accomplished, they stood in the dark passage, mentally debating what they should do next.

"There's something moving," whispered Constable Wigg, trembling. He was not remarkable for courage, and had a horror of darkness.

Constable Nightingale was made of sterner stuff. He promptly pulled out his dark lantern, and cast its circle of light upon the floor; and there, creeping timidly along close to the wall, they saw the miserable half-starved cat which had shaken Constable Wigg's nerves earlier in the night. It had taken advantage of the open street door to obtain the shelter for which it had long been seeking.

"It ain't the first time," said Constable Wigg, in a vicious tone, "that this little beast has given me a turn. Just before you come up it run across me and almost sent my heart into my mouth."

But for a mournful, fear-stricken look in its yellow eyes, the light of the dark lantern seemed to deprive the wretched cat of the power of motion. It remained perfectly still, cowering to the ground. Even when Constable Wigg gave it

a spiteful kick it did not move of its own volition, and it was only when the attention of the policeman was no longer directed toward it that it slunk slowly and stealthily away.

Meanwhile the tempest raged more furiously than ever outside. The shrieking wind tore through the streets, carrying devastation in its train, and the air was thick with whirling, blinding snow.

"Did you ever hear anything like it?" said Constable Nightingale.

"Never," said Constable Wigg.

"It would be madness to go out," said Constable Nightingale. "We should be dashed to pieces. Besides, what good could we do? Besides, who would be likely to want us? Besides, who's to know?"

* * * * * *

There was a world of philosophy in these reflections, which Constable Wigg was only too ready to acknowledge.

"What do you propose, Nightingale?" he asked.

"That we go down to Mrs. Middlemore's kitchen," replied Constable Nightingale, "and make ourselves comfortable. I know the way."

He led it, and Constable Wigg very cheerfully accompanied him. The kitchen was the coziest of apartments, and their hearts warmed within them as they entered it. Mrs. Middlemore, like a sensible woman, had taken the precaution to bank up the fire before she left the house, and it needed but one touch from the poker to cause it to spring into a bright glowing blaze. This touch was applied by Constable Nightingale, and the shadows upon walls and ceiling leapt into ruddy life.

"This is something like," said Constable Wigg, stooping and warming himself.

Having no further need for his dark lantern, Constable Nightingale tucked it snugly away, and then proceeded to light a candle which, in its flat tin candlestick and a box of matches handy, stood on the kitchen table. They were not

the only articles on the table. There was no table-cloth, it is true, but what mattered that? The whitest of table-cloths would have made but a sorry supper, and in the present instance could not have added to the attractions which the lighted candle revealed. There was bread, there was butter, there was cheese, there were pickles, there was a plate of sausages, there was half a roast fowl, and there was a fine piece of cold pork. Constable Wigg's eyes wandered to the table, and became, so to speak, glued there. He was now standing with his back to the fire, and was being comfortably warmed through. Even a kitchen may become a veritable Aladdin's cave, and this was the case with Mrs. Middlemore's kitchen, in the estimation of Constable Wigg.

"If there's one thing I like better than another for supper," he said, meditatively, and with pathos in his voice, "it is cold pork and pickles. And there's enough for three, Nightingale, there's enough for three."

Constable Nightingale nodded genially, and, with the air of a man familiar with his surroundings, took up a piece of butter on a knife, and put it to his mouth.

"The best fresh," he observed.

"You don't say so?" exclaimed Constable Wigg, not contentiously, but in amiable wonder.

"Taste it," said Constable Nightingale, handing his comrade the knife with a new knob of butter on it.

"It*is* the best fresh," said Constable Wigg. "She lives on the fat of the land." This evidence of good living and the cheerful homeliness of the kitchen strengthened his notion of supplanting Constable Nightingale in the affections of Mrs. Middlemore, but he was careful not to betray himself. "You know your way about, Nightingale. It ain't the first time you've been in this here snuggery."

Constable Nightingale smiled knowingly, and said, "Cold pork and pickles ain't half a bad supper, to say nothing of sausages, roast fowl, and----and----." He sniffed intelligently

and inquired, "Ain't there a baked tatery smell somewheres near?"
"Now you mention it," replied Constable Wigg, also sniffing, "I believe there is."
"And here they are, Wigg," said Constable Nightingale, opening the door of the oven, and exposing four large, flowery potatoes baking in their skins. "Not yet quite done, not yet quite ready to burst, and all a-growing and a-blowing, and waiting for butter and pepper. They're relishy enough without butter and pepper, but with butter and pepper they're a feast for a emperor."
"Ah," sighed Constable Wigg, "it's better to be born lucky than rich. Now just cast your eye at the door, Nightingale. I'm blessed if that beastly cat ain't poking its nose in again." And as though there was within him a superabundance of vicious energy which required immediate working off, Constable Wigg threw his truncheon at the cat, which, without uttering a sound, fled from the kitchen. "What riles me about that cat is that it moves about like a ghost, without as much as a whine. It takes you all of a sudden, like a stab in the back. It'll be up to some mischief before the night is out."
"Why, Wigg," said Constable Nightingale, with a laugh, "you talk of it as if it wasn't a cat at all."
"I don't believe it is. In my opinion it's a spectre cat, a spirit without a solid body. I lifted it with my foot in the street, and not a sound came from it. I kicked it in the passage, and it crept away like a ghost. I let fly my truncheon at it and hit it on the head, and off it went like a shadder, without a whine. It ain't natural. If it comes across me again I advise it to say its prayers."
Which, to say the least of it, was an absurd recommendation to offer to a cat. But Constable Wigg was in an unreasonable and spiteful temper, and he became morose and melancholy when he saw how thoroughly Constable Nightingale was making himself at home in Mrs.

Middlemore's kitchen; or perhaps it was the sight of the tempting food on the table which, without lawful invitation, he dared not touch. However it was, he was not allowed much time for gloomy reflection, his thoughts being diverted by the violent slamming of the street door, and by the further sound of a person breathing heavily in her course downstairs.

"It's Mrs. Middlemore," said Constable Nightingale, in a low tone. "I never thought she'd be able to open the door alone with such a wind blowing. We'll give her a surprise."

They heard Mrs. Middlemore stop outside the kitchen, and exclaim, "Well! To think I should 'ave been so foolish as to leave the candle alight! I could 'ave swore I blowed it out before I left the room!" Then she opened the door, and it was well that Constable Nightingale darted forward to her support, for if he had not she would have fallen to the ground in affright, and the supper beer would have been lost to taste, if not to sight. It was as well, too, that he put his face close enough to her lips to partially stifle a kind of a hysterical gurgle which was escaping therefrom. It was, however, a proceeding of which Constable Wigg did not inwardly approve.

"Pluck up, Mrs. Middlemore," said Constable Nightingale, cheerily, "there's nothing wrong. It's only me and my mate, Wigg, who's on night duty here. Everything's as right as a fiddle. Take a pull at the beer--a long pull. Now you feel better, don't you?"

Mrs. Middlemore--her movements being enviously watched by Constable Wigg, whose thirst was growing almost unbearable--removed her lips from the jug, and said:

"Ever so much. But how did you get in?"

"Didn't get in at all," said Constable Nightingale, jocosely; "we were blown in."

"Blown in!"

"Yes, my dear. We was standing outside, Wigg and me, leaning against the door, when the wind come like a clap of

thunder, and blew it clean open, and of course we went with it, flat on our backs the pair of us. When we got on our feet again the wind was tearing so, and the snow was pelting down that fierce, that I thought we might venture to take a liberty, and we come down here to warm ourselves. And that's the long and the short of it, my dear."

He still had his arm round Mrs. Middlemore's waist, and now he gave her a hug. She was a pleasant-faced, round-bodied woman, some forty years of age, and she looked up smilingly as the constable--her favorite constable--hugged her, and said,

"Well, now, I declare you did startle me. When I opened the door, and sor two men a-standing in my kitchen, I thought of burglars, and you might 'ave knocked me down with a feather.

"And now we're here," said Constable Nightingale, "I don't suppose you'd have the heart to turn us out."

"Turn you out!" exclaimed Mrs. Middlemore, "I wouldn't turn a cat out on such a night as this!"

"More cats," thought Constable Wigg, with his eyes on the cold pork and pickles.

CHAPTER III.

A THRILLING INCIDENT.

"The wonder is," said Constable Nightingale, while Mrs. Middlemore shook the snow out of her clothes, "how you had the courage to venture out in such weather."
"It's 'abit, Mr. Nightingale, that's what it is. Once I get to doing a thing regular, done it must be if I want to keep my peace of mind. There wouldn't be a wink of sleep for me if I didn't go and fetch my supper beer myself every night. I don't keep a gal, Mr. Winks----"
"Wigg," said that gentleman in correction, with a dreamy look at the beer-jug.
"I beg you a thousand pardons, Mr. Wigg, I'm sure. I don't keep a gal, and that's why my place is always nice and clean, as you see it now. If you want your work done, do it yourself--that's my motter. Not that I can't afford to keep a gal, but Mr. Felix he ses when he come to me about the rooms when I didn't 'ave a blessed lodger in the 'ouse, 'I'll take 'em,' he ses, 'conditionally. You mustn't let a room in the place to anybody but me.' 'But I make my living out of the rooms, sir,' ses I, 'and I can't afford to let 'em remain empty.' 'You*can* afford,' ses Mr. Felix, 'if I pay for 'em remaining empty. What rent do you arks for the whole 'ouse with the exception of the basement?' I opened my mouth wide, I don't mind telling you that, Mr. Wigg, when I put a price upon the 'ouse. All he ses is, 'Agreed.' 'Then there's attendance, sir,' I ses. 'How much for that?' he arks. I opens my mouth wide agin, and all he ses is, 'Agreed.' You see, Mr. Wigg, seeing as' ow you're a friend of Mr. Nightingale's, and as no friend of his'n can be anything but

a gentleman, there's no 'arm in my telling you a thing or two about Mr. Felix, more especially as you're on night duty 'ere."

"Here's to our better acquaintance," said Constable Wigg, laying hands on the beer-jug in an absent kind of way, and raising it to his mouth. When, after a long interval, he put it down again with a sigh of intense satisfaction, he met the reproachful gaze of Constable Nightingale, who gasped:

"Well, of all the cheek! Without ever being asked!"

"Love your heart," said Mrs. Middlemore, "what does that matter? He's as welcome as the flowers in May, being a friend of your'n." She handed the jug to Constable Nightingale, asking, as she did so, "Did you ever 'ave a inspiration, Mr. Nightingale?"

Constable Nightingale did not immediately reply, his face being buried in the jug. When it was free, and he had wiped his mouth, he said, in a mild tone--any harsh judgment he may have harbored against Constable Wigg being softened by the refreshing draught--

"I must have had one to-night when I come this way, out of my beat, to have a talk with Wigg, and to see that you was all right. The taters in the oven'll be burnt to a cinder if they're not took out immediate."

"You've got a nose for baked taters, you 'ave," said Mrs. Middlemore, admiringly. "Trust you for finding out things without eyes! But you always can smell what I've got in the oven."

Constable Wigg rubbed his hands joyously when he saw Mrs. Middlemore lay three plates and draw three chairs up to the table. Then she whipped the baked potatoes out of the oven, saying,

"Done to a turn. Now we can talk and 'ave supper at the same time. Make yourself at 'ome, Mr. Wigg, and 'elp yourself to what you like. I'll 'ave a bit of fowl, Mr. Nightingale, and jest a thin slice of the cold pork, if you please Mr. Wigg. It's a favorite dish of yours, I can see. Mr.

Nightingale, *you*won't make compliments, I'm sure. You're the last man as ought to in this 'ouse." Constable Nightingale pressed her foot under the table, and she smiled at him, and continued, "I was going to tell you about my inspiration when I got the supper beer. A pint and a half won't be enough,' ses I to myself; a pint and a half's my regular allowance, Mr. Wigg, and I don't find it too much, because I don't drink sperrits. 'A pint and a half won't be enough,' ses I to myself; 'I shouldn't be surprised if a friend dropped in, so I'll double it.' And I did."

"That's something like an inspiration," said Constable Nightingale, looking amorously at Mrs. Middlemore, who smiled amorously at him in return.

Constable Wigg cut these amorous inclinings short by remarking, "We was talking of Mr. Felix. Nightingale commenced twice to-night telling a story about him, and it's not told yet."

"Not my fault, Wigg," Constable Nightingale managed to say, with his mouth full.

"I'll tell my story first," said Mrs. Middlemore, "and he can tell his afterward. Try them sausages, Mr. Wigg. Mr. Felix always 'as the best of everythink. I buy 'em at Wall's. So when he ses 'Agreed' to the rent and attendance, he ses, 'And about servants?' 'I can't afford to keep more than one, sir,' I ses. 'You can, ses he; 'you can afford to keep none. You'll find me the best tenant you ever 'ad, and what you've got to do is to foller my instructions. 'I'll do my best, sir,' ses I. 'It'll pay you,' ses he, 'to let me do exactly as I please, and never to cross me.' And I'm bound to say, Mr. Wigg, that it 'as paid me never to cross 'im and never to arks questions. 'We shall git along capitally together,' ses he, 'without servants. They're a prying, idle lot, and I won't 'ave 'em creeping up the stairs on welwet toes to find out what I'm doing. So keep none, Mrs. Middlemore,' he ses, 'not the ghost of one. You can wait on me without assistance. If I want to entertain a visitor or two I'll 'ave the

meals brought in ready cooked, and if we want hextra attendance I'll git Gunter to send in a man as knows 'is business and can 'old 'is tongue.' Of course I was agreeable to that, and he pays me down a month in advance, like the gentleman he is. Though I don't drink sperrits, Mr. Nightingale, that's no reason why you should deny yourself. You know where the bottle is, and per'aps Mr. Wigg will jine you."

"Mrs. Middlemore," said Constable Wigg, "you're a lady after my own heart, and I'm glad I'm alive. Here's looking toward you."

"Thank you, Mr. Wigg," said Mrs. Middlemore, "and what I say is it's a shame that men like you and Mr. Nightingale should be trapesing the streets with the snow coming down and the wind a-blowing as it is now. Jest listen to it; it's going on worse than ever. Might I take the liberty of inquiring--you being on the beat, Mr. Wigg--whether you sor a lady come out of the house while I was gone for the supper beer?"

"No lady came out of the house," replied Constable Wigg. "A man did."

"A man!" cried Mrs. Middlemore. "Not Mr. Felix, surely!"

"No, not him," said Constable Nightingale. "A strange-looking man with a red handkercher round his neck."

"A strange-looking man, with a red 'andkercher round 'is neck?" exclaimed Mrs. Middlemore. "'Ow did he git in?"

"That's not for us to say," said Constable Nightingale. "Perhaps Mr. Felix let him in when you was away."

"Yes, most likely," said Mrs. Middlemore, with an air of confusion which she strove vainly to conceal from the observation of her visitors; "of course, that must be. Mr. Felix often lets people in 'isself. 'Mrs. Middlemore,' he ses sometimes, 'if there's a ring or a knock at the door, I'll attend to it. You needn't trouble yourself.' And I don't--knowing 'im, and knowing it'll pay me better to foller 'is instructions. For there's never a time that sech a thing

'appens that Mr. Felix doesn't say to me afterward, 'Here's a half-sovering for you, Mrs. Middlemore.'"
"You're in for one to-morrow morning, then," observed Constable Wigg, "because it was a man we saw and not a woman."
"He won't forgit it," said Mrs. Middlemore, "not 'im. He's too free and generous with 'is money, so long as he's let alone, and not pry'd upon. What he does is no business of mine, and I'm not going to make it mine."
"Ah," Mrs. Middlemore, said Constable Wigg, emptying his second glass of whiskey, "you know which side your bread is buttered."
"I wasn't born yesterday," said Mrs. Middlemore, with a shrewd smile, "and I've seed things that I keep to myself. Why not? You'd do the same if you was in my shoes, wouldn't you?"
"That we would," replied both the policeman in one breath; and Constable Wigg added, "You're a lucky woman to have such a lodger."
"Well," said Mrs. Middlemore, "I don't deny it. I never met with such a man as Mr. Felix, and I don't believe there is another. Why, when he took possession, he ses, 'Clear out every bit of furniture there is in the rooms. Send it to auction if you like and sell it, and pocket the money. When I leave you shall either 'ave all my furniture, or I'll furnish the rooms over agin according to your fancy, and it shan't cost you a penny.' I was agreeable. Because why? Because he give me forty pound on account, to show that he was in earnest. Then he begins to furnish, and if you was to see 'is rooms, Mr. Wigg, you'd be that took aback that you wouldn't know what to say. All sorts of wonderful woods, satings, picters, swords and daggers, strange rugs and carpets, painted plates and dishes, 'angings, old lamps, and goodness only knows what I don't understand 'arf of 'em. There! I've talked enough about Mr. Felix for once. Let's talk of something else."

"Do you keep cats, Mrs. Middlemore?" asked Constable Nightingale, brewing another grog for himself and Constable Wigg.
"I don't," replied Mrs. Middlemore. "Mr. Felix won't 'ave one in the 'ouse."
"There's one in the house now, though," said Constable Nightingale. "It come in when the wind burst open the street door, and Wigg and me fell into the passage. He says it's not a cat, but a spectre, a ghost."
"Lord save us!" ejaculated Mrs. Middlemore. "If Mr. Felix sees it he'll never forgive me. He 'as a 'atred of 'em. And the ghost of a cat, too!" She was so impressed that she edged closer to Constable Nightingale.
"It was a spectre cat," said Constable Wigg, desirous to do something to divert Mrs. Middlemore's thoughts from Mr. Felix, and also from her leaning toward his comrade. "And then there was that cry for 'Help' I fancied I heard."
"What cry for help?" asked Mrs. Middlemore.
"I thought I heard it three times," said Constable Wigg--but he was prevented from going further by an incident which was followed by a startling picture. Constable Nightingale, rather thrown off his balance by the drink he had imbibed, and desirous to meet the advances of Mrs. Middlemore, slyly put his arm round her waist, and to hide the movement from the observation of his brother constable, made a clumsy movement over the table, and overturned the candle, the effect of which was to put out the light and to leave them in darkness. He was not sorry for it, for the reason that he was hugging Mrs. Middlemore close. But Constable Wigg started up in fear, and cried:
"Somebody has pushed open the door!"
In point of fact the kitchen-door had been quietly pushed open, and the other two observed it when their attention was directed toward it.
"What is it?" whispered Mrs. Middlemore, shaking like a jelly, "Oh, what is it?"

Constable Nightingale, for the second time that night pulled out his dark lantern, and cast its light upon the door. And there, imbedded in the circle of light, was the cat which had already twice before alarmed Constable Wigg. They uttered a cry of horror, and indeed they were justified by the picture which presented itself. The cat was*red*. Every bristle, sticking up on its skin, was luminous with horrible color. It was a perfect ball of blood.

CHAPTER IV.

A DISCUSSION ABOUT RED CATS AND WHITE SNOW.

In a fit of terror the constable dropped the lantern, and the cat, unseen by the occupants of the kitchen, scuttled away.
"If you don't light the candle," gasped Mrs. Middlemore, "I shall go off." And she forthwith proceeded to demonstrate by screaming, "Oh, oh, oh!"
"She's done it, Wigg," said Constable Nightingale. "Strike a light, there's a good fellow, and pick up the lantern. I can't do it myself; I've got my arms full."
Constable Wigg had now recovered his courage, and inspired by jealousy, quickly struck a match and lit the candle. Mrs. Middlemore lay comfortably in the arms of Constable Nightingale, who did not seem anxious to rid himself of his burden. Stirred to emulative sympathy, Constable Wigg took possession of one of Mrs. Middlemore's hands, and pressed and patted it with a soothing, "There, there, there! What has made you come over like this? There's nothing to be frightened of, is there, Nightingale?"
"Nothing at all," replied Constable Nightingale, irascibly, for he by no means relished his comrade's insidious attempt to slide into Mrs. Middlemore's affections. "You're better now, ain't you?"
"A little," murmured Mrs. Middlemore, "a very little."
"Take a sip of this," said Constable Wigg, holding a glass to her lips, "it'll bring you round."
Ignoring her previous declaration that she did not "drink sperrits," Mrs. Middlemore sipped the glass of whiskey, and

continued to sip, with intermittent shudders, till she had drained the last drop. Then she summoned sufficient strength to raise herself languidly from Constable Nightingale's arms, and look toward the door.
"Where's it gone to?" she asked, in a trembling voice. "What's become of the 'orrid creature?"
"What horrid creature, my dear?" inquired Constable Nightingale, winking at his comrade.
"The cat! The red cat!"
"A red cat!" exclaimed Constable Nightingale, in a jocular voice; "who ever heard of such a thing? Who ever saw such a thing?"
"Why, I did--and you did, too."
"Not me," said Constable Nightingale, with another wink at Constable Wigg.
"Nor me," said that officer, following the lead.
"Do you mean to tell me you didn't see a cat, and that the cat you sor wasn't red?"
"I saw a cat, yes," said Constable Nightingale, "but not a red 'un--no, not a red un'. What do you say, Wigg?"
"I say as you says, Nightingale."
"There's lobsters, now," said Constable Nightingale; "we know what color they are when they're boiled, but we don't boil cats, that I know of, and if we did they wouldn't turn red. You learned natural history when you was at school, Wigg. What did they say about red cats?"
"It's against nature," said Constable Wigg, adding, with an unconscious imitation of Macbeth, "there's no such thing."
"I must take your word for it," said Mrs. Middlemore, only half convinced, "but if ever my eyes deceived me they deceived me jest now. If you two gentlemen wasn't here, I'd be ready to take my oath the cat was red. And now I come to think of it, what made the pair of you cry out as you did?"
"What made us cry out?" repeated Constable Nightingale, who, in this discussion, proved himself much superior to his

brother officer in the matter of invention. "It was natural, that's what it was, natural. I'm free to confess I was a bit startled. First, there's the night--listen to it; it's going on worse than ever--ain't that enough to startle one? I've been out in bad nights, but I never remember such a one-er as this. Did you, Wigg?"

"Never. If it goes on much longer, it'll beat that American blizzard they talked so much of."

"That's enough to startle a chap," continued Constable Nightingale, "letting alone anything else. But then, there was that talk about a spectre cat. I ain't frightened of much that I know of. Put a man before me, or a dog, or a horse, and I'm ready to tackle 'em, one down and the other come up, or altogether if they like; but when you come to spectres, I ain't ashamed to say I'm not up to 'em. Its constitootional, Mrs. Middlemore; I was that way when I was little. There was a cupboard at home, and my mother used to say, 'Don't you ever open it, Jimmy; there's a ghost hiding behind the door.' I wouldn't have put my hand on the knob for untold gold. It's the same now. Anything that's alive I don't give way to; but when it comes to ghosts and spectres I take a back seat, and I don't care who knows it. Then there was that cry for 'Help,' that Wigg was speaking of. Then there was the candle going out"--he gave Mrs. Middlemore a nudge as he referred to this incident--"and the sudden opening of the door there. It was all them things together that made me cry out; and if brother Wigg's got any other explanation to give I shall be glad to hear it."

"No, Nightingale," said the prudent and unimaginative Wigg, "I couldn't improve on you. You've spoke like a man, and I hope our good-looking, good-natured landlady is satisfied."

This complimentary allusion served to dispel Mrs. Middlemore's fears, and in a more contented frame of mind she resumed her seat at the table, the constables following her example.

"May the present moment," said Constable Nightingale, lifting his glass and looking affectionately at Mrs. Middlemore, "be the worst of our lives; and here's my regards to you."
"And mine, my good creature," said Constable Wigg.
"Gents both," said Mrs. Middlemore, now thoroughly restored, "I looks toward yer."
Whereupon they all drank, and settled themselves comfortably in their chairs.
"What was in that cupboard," asked Mrs. Middlemore, "that your mother told you there was a ghost in?"
"What was in it? Now, that shows how a body may be frightened at nothing. I didn't find it out till I was a man, and it was as much a ghost as I am. But there's a lady present, and I'd better not go on."
"Yes, you must," said Mrs. Middlemore, positively. "You've made me that curious that I'll never speak another word to you if you don't tell me."
"Rather than that should happen, I must let you into the secret, I suppose. But you won't mind me mentioning it?"
"Not a bit, Mr. Nightingale. Speak free."
"Well, if you must know, it was where she kept a spare bustle, and a bit or two of hair, and some other little vanities that she didn't want us young 'uns to pull about. There, the murder's out, and I wouldn't have mentioned the things if you hadn't been so curious; but it's a privilege of your sex, Mrs. Middlemore, one of your amiable weaknesses that we're bound to respect."
Mrs. Middlemore laughed, and asked Constable Wigg what he was thinking of. That worthy had, indeed, put on his considering cap, as the saying is; he felt that Constable Nightingale was making the running too fast, and that he should be left hopelessly in the rear unless he made an attempt to assert himself, and to show that he knew a thing or two.
"I was thinking of the red cat," he said.