

THE BLACK CAT

Edgar Allen Poe

FOR the most wild, yet most unpleasant story which I am about to write, I neither expect nor ask for belief. Crazy indeed would I be to expect it, in a case where my very senses reject their own evidence. Yet, insane I am not — and very surely did I not dream it. But tomorrow I die, and today I would unburden my soul. My immediate purpose is to place before the world, plainly, concisely, and without comment, a series of mere household events. In their consequences, these events have terrified — have tortured — have destroyed me. Yet I will not attempt to explain them. To me, they have presented little but Horror — to many they will seem less terrible than *elaborate*. Hereafter, perhaps, someone who's intelligent may be found which will reduce my unbelievable experience into a more common-place one — some person more calm, more logical, and far less excitable than I am, which will identify, in the circumstances I detail with awe, nothing more than an ordinary series of very natural causes and effects.

Since I was a baby, I was noted for the happiness and humanity of my personality. My tenderness of heart was even so obvious as to make me the butt of my friends' jokes. I was especially fond of animals, and was indulged by my parents with a great variety of pets. With these I spent most of my time, and never was so happy as when feeding and petting them. This oddity of character grew with my growth, and, in my adulthood, I derived from it one of my major sources of pleasure. To those who have cherished affection for a faithful and friendly dog, I need hardly be at the trouble of explaining the nature or the intensity of the satisfaction I had. There is something in the unselfish and self-sacrificing love of a canine, which goes directly to the heart of him who has had frequent occasion to test the measly friendship and delicate loyalty of a mere *Human*.

I married early in my life, and was happy to find in my wife an attitude not unlike my own. Observing my soft spot for domestic pets, she lost no opportunity of purchasing those of the most agreeable kind. We had birds, gold-fish, a fine dog, rabbits, a small monkey, and a *cat*.

The cat was a remarkably large and beautiful animal, entirely black, and friendly to an astonishing degree. In speaking of his intelligence, my wife, who at heart was not a little touched with superstition, made frequent references to the ancient popular notion, which regarded all black cats as witches in disguise. Not that she was ever *serious* upon this point — and I mention the matter at all for no better reason than that it happens, just now, to be remembered.

Pluto — this was the cat's name — was my favorite pet and playmate. I alone fed him, and he followed me wherever I went about the house. It was even with difficulty that I could prevent him from following me through the streets.

Our friendship lasted, in this manner, for several years, during which my general attitude and character — through the effects of alcohol — had (I blush to confess it) experienced a radical alteration for the worse. I grew, day by day, more moody, more irritable, more regardless of the feelings of others. I suffered myself to use harsh language to my wife. At length, I even attacked her with personal violence.

My pets, of course, were made to feel the change in my personality. I not only neglected, but abused them. For Pluto, however, I still retained enough thought to restrain me from mistreating him, as I made no hesitation of mistreating the rabbits, the monkey, or even the dog, when by accident, or through their affection, they got in my way. But my disease grew upon me — for what disease is like Alcohol! — and at length even Pluto, who was now becoming old, and consequently somewhat bad-tempered — even Pluto began to experience the effects of my bad temper.

One night, returning home, quite intoxicated, from one of my haunts about town, I thought that the cat avoided my presence. I seized him; when, in his fright at my sudden attack, he inflicted a small wound upon my hand with his teeth. The fury of a demon instantly possessed me. I knew myself no longer. My original soul seemed, at once, to take its flight from my body; and a more than cruel wickedness, alcohol-nurtured, filled every fiber of my body. I took from my waistcoat-pocket a small knife, opened it, grasped the poor beast by the throat, and deliberately cut one of its eyes from the socket! I blush, I burn, and I shudder while I pen this horrific crime.

When my reason returned with the morning — when I had slept off the effects of the night's sins — I experienced an emotion half of horror, half of remorse, for the crime of which I had been guilty; but it was, at best, a weak and vague feeling, and my soul remained untouched. I again plunged into excessive drinking, and soon drowned in wine all memory of the frightening deed.

In the meantime, the cat slowly recovered. The socket of the lost eye presented a frightful appearance, but he no longer appeared to suffer any pain. He went about the house as usual, but, as might be expected, fled in extreme terror at my approach. I had so much of my old heart left, as to be at first grieved by this evident dislike on the part of a creature which had once so loved me. But this feeling soon gave place to irritation. And then came the spirit of unreasonableness.

I am not any more sure that my soul lives, than I am that unreasonableness is one of the basic impulses of the human heart. Who has not, a hundred times, found himself committing an evil or a silly action, for no other reason than because he knows he should *not do it*? Have we not an unconscious need, despite our best judgment, to violate that which is "the *Law*", merely because we know it to be wrong? This spirit of unreasonableness, I say, came to my final overthrow. It was this deep longing of the soul *to anger itself* — to offer violence against itself — to do wrong for the wrong's sake only — that urged me to continue and finally to complete the injury I had inflicted upon the innocent beast. One morning, in cold blood, I slipped a noose around its neck and hung it from the limb of a tree; — hung it with the tears streaming from my eyes, and with remorse in my heart; — hung it *because* I knew that it had loved me, and *because* I felt it had given me no reason or wrongdoing; — hung it *because* I knew that in so doing I was committing a sin — a deadly sin that would so jeopardize my immortal soul as to place it — if such a thing were possible — even beyond the reach of the infinite mercy of the Most Merciful and Most Terrible God.

On the night of the day on which this cruel deed was done, I was aroused from sleep by the cry of fire. The curtains of my bed were in flames. The whole house was blazing. It was with great difficulty that my wife, a servant, and myself, made our escape from the inferno. The destruction was complete. My entire worldly wealth was swallowed up, and I resigned myself from then on to despair.

I am above the weakness of seeking to establish a sequence of cause and effect, between the disaster and the crime. But I am detailing a chain of facts — and wish not to leave even a possible link imperfect. On the day after the fire, I visited the ruins of my house. The walls, with one exception, had fallen in. This exception was found with a closet wall, not very thick, which stood about the middle of the house, and against which had rested the head of my bed. The plaster had resisted the destruction of the fire — a fact which I attributed to its having been recently spread. About this wall a dense crowd of people was collected, and many of them seemed to be examining a particular portion of it with very eager attention. The words "strange," "extraordinary," and other similar expressions, grabbed my curiosity. I approached and saw, as if imprinted upon the white surface, the figure of a gigantic *cat*. The impression was done with an accuracy that was truly marvelous. There was even a rope about the animal's neck.

When I first beheld this ghostly sign — for I could scarcely regard it as less — my wonder and my terror were extreme. The cat, I finally remembered, had

been hung in a garden adjacent to the house. Upon the alarm of fire, this garden had been immediately filled by the crowd of people— and someone must have cut the animal from the tree and thrown it through an open window into my bedroom. This had probably been done with the idea of waking me from sleep. The falling of other walls had smashed the victim of my cruelty into the substance of the freshly-spread plaster; the chemicals of which, with the flames, and the *ammonia* from the carcass, had then accomplished the image as I saw it.

Although I had found a logical explanation for what I had seen, it did not fail to make a deep impression upon my imagination. For months I could not rid myself of the specter of the cat; and, during this period, there came back into my soul a half-feeling that seemed close to, but was not quite, remorse. I went so far as to regret the loss of the animal, and to look about me, among the dreadful places which I now frequently visited, for another pet of the same species, and of somewhat similar appearance, with which to replace it.

One night as I sat, half stupefied, in a local bar, my attention was suddenly drawn to some black object, resting upon the head of one of the immense barrels of Gin, or of Rum, which was the main furniture of the place. I had been looking steadily at the top of this barrel for some time, and what now surprised me was the fact that I had not sooner noticed the object there. I approached it, and touched it with my hand. It was a black cat — a very large one — nearly as large as Pluto, and closely resembling him in every aspect but one. Pluto had not a white hair upon any part of his body; but this cat had a large splotch of white, covering nearly the whole region of its chest.

Upon my touching him, he immediately arose, purred loudly, rubbed against my hand, and appeared delighted with my attention. This, then, was the very creature of which I was in search. I at once offered to purchase it off the bartender; but he made no claim to it — knew nothing of it — had never even seen it before.

I continued to pet it, and when I prepared to go home, the animal seemed to want to follow me. I allowed it to do so; occasionally stooping and patting it as I went. When it reached the house it made itself quite comfortable at once, and immediately became a great favorite with my wife.

For my own part, I soon found a dislike to it arising within me. This was just the opposite of what I had anticipated; but — I know not how or why it was — I became disgusted by its evident fondness of me. By slow degrees, these feelings of disgust and annoyance rose into the bitterness of hatred. I avoided the creature; a certain sense of shame, and

