THE BLACK CAT

Edgar Allen Poe

FOR the most wild, vet 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

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 badtempered — 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

THE BLACK CAT Edgar Allen Poe

the remembrance of my former deed of cruelty, preventing me from physically abusing it. I did not, for some weeks, strike, or otherwise violently abuse it; but gradually — very gradually — I came to look upon it with unimaginable loathing, and to flee silently from its revolting presence, as from the breath of a plague.

What added, no doubt, to my hatred of the beast, was the discovery, on the morning after I brought it home, that, like Pluto, it also had lost one of its eyes. This circumstance, however, only endeared it to my wife, who possessed that feeling towards animals which had once been my distinguishing trait, and the source of many of my simplest and purest pleasures.

With my hatred for this cat, however, its attraction towards me seemed to increase. It followed my footsteps with an insistence that would be difficult to make the reader comprehend. Whenever I sat, it would crouch beneath my chair, or spring upon my knees, covering me with its loathsome purring. If I arose to walk, it would get between my feet and thus nearly trip me up, or, fastening its long and sharp claws in my clothes, climb, in this manner, to my chest. At such times, although I wanted to destroy it with a single blow, I was still stopped from doing so, partly by a memory of my former crime, but chiefly — let me confess it at once — by my absolute *fright* of the beast.

This dread was not exactly a dread of physical evil — and yet I should be at a loss how otherwise to define it. I am almost ashamed to own — yes, even in my current felon's cell, I am still ashamed to own — that the terror and horror with which the animal inspired me, had been heightened to a level it would be almost impossible to think of.

My wife had called my attention, more than once, to the shape of the mark of white hair and which was the only visible difference between the strange beast and the one I had destroyed. The reader will remember that this mark, although large, had been originally quite indefinite; but, by slow degrees —degrees nearly unnoticeable, and which for a long time my brain struggled to reject as simply imagination — its outline had taken on a more definite shape. It was now the depiction of an object that I shudder to name — and for this, above all, I loathed, and dreaded, and would have rid myself of the monster had I dared — it was now, I say, the image of a hideous — of a ghastly thing — of the GALLOWS! — oh, mournful and terrible engine of Horror and of Crime — of Agony and of Death!

And now was I indeed miserable beyond mere Humanity would allow. Alas! neither by day nor by night knew I the blessing of sleep any more! During the former the creature left me no moment alone: and, in

the latter, I started, hourly, from dreams of unutterable fear, to find the hot breath of *the thing* upon my face, and its vast weight — a living Night-Mare that I had no power to shake off — resting eternally upon my *heart!*

Beneath the pressure of torments such as these, the frail remains of the good that was within me gave way. Evil thoughts became my only comforts — the darkest and most evil of thoughts. The moodiness of my usual attitude increased into hatred of all living things and of all mankind; and, my uncomplaining wife was the most usual and the most patient of sufferers of these outbursts.

One day she accompanied me, upon some household errand, into the basement of the old building which our poverty forced us to live in. The cat followed me down the steep stairs, and, nearly tripping me, infuriated me into madness. Lifting a nearby axe, and forgetting, in my wrath, the childish dread which had so far stopped me, I aimed a blow at the animal which, of course, would have proved instantly fatal had it gone as I wished. But this blow was stopped by the hand of my wife. Aggravated by the interference into a blinding rage, I withdrew my arm from her grasp and buried the axe in her brain. She fell dead upon the spot, without even a groan.

This hideous murder accomplished, I set about the task of concealing the body. I knew that I could not remove it from the house, either by day or by night, without the risk of being seen by the neighbors. Many ideas entered my mind. At one period I thought of cutting the corpse into tiny pieces, and destroying them by fire. At another, I resolved to dig a grave for it in the floor of the basement. Again, I thought about tossing it in the well in the backyard — I even considered packing it in a box, as if it were a present, and getting the postman to take it away from the house. Finally I hit upon what I considered a far better method than either of these. I determined to wall it up in the cellar — as the monks of the middle ages are thought to have walled up their victims.

For a purpose such as this the basement was well tailored. Its walls were loosely constructed, and had lately been plastered throughout with a rough plaster, which the constant dampness of the basement had prevented from hardening. Moreover, in one of the walls was a hollow area, caused by a false chimney, or fireplace, that had been filled up, and made to resemble the rest of the basement. I made no doubt that I could readily remove the bricks in this part, insert her corpse, and wall the hole up as

before, so that no eye could detect anything suspicious.

And in this calculation I was not wrong. With a crowbar I easily dislodged the bricks and, having carefully placed the body against the inner wall, I propped it in that position, while, with little trouble, I re-laid the bricks and wall as it had originally stood. Having bought mortar, sand, and hair, I prepared a new plaster which could not be distinguished from the old, and with this I very carefully went over my fresh brick-work. When I had finished, I felt sure that it was perfect. The wall did not have the slightest appearance of having been broken. The rubbish on the floor was picked up with care. I looked around triumphantly, and said to myself — "Here at least, then, my work has not been in vain."

My next step was to look for the beast which had been the cause of so much misery; for I had, at length, firmly resolved to put it to death. Had I been able to meet with it, at the moment, there could have been no doubt of its fate; but it appeared that the crafty animal had been alarmed at the violence of my previous anger, and had decided to hide because of my present mood. It is impossible to describe the deep and blissful sense of relief which the absence of the detested creature created in me. It did not come out again the night — and thus for one night at least, since its introduction into the house, I soundly and calmly slept; yes, I slept even with the burden of murder upon my soul!

The second and the third day passed, and still my tormentor came not. Once again I breathed as a free man. The monster, in terror, had fled the house forever! I should behold it no more! My happiness was supreme! The guilt of my dark deed disturbed me very little. Some investigation into my wife's disappearance had been made, but these had been readily answered. Even a search for her had occurred — but of course nothing was to be discovered. I looked upon my future freedom as entirely secure.

Upon the fourth day of the assassination, the police came, very unexpectedly, into the house, and again made a thorough investigation of the house. I felt safe, however, in knowing they would never discover my place of concealment. The officers asked me to accompany them in their search. They left no nook or corner unexplored. At length, for the third or fourth time, they descended into the basement. I didn't quiver a muscle. My heart beat as calmly as that of one who sleeps in innocence. I walked the basement from end to end. I folded my

arms upon my chest, and roamed easily to and fro. The police were thoroughly satisfied and prepared to leave. The excitement in my heart was too strong to be restrained. I burned to say but one word, so that I could secretly gloat, and yet also convince them of my guiltlessness.

"Gentlemen," I said at last, as the cops climbed the steps, "I am happy to have dispelled your suspicions. I wish you all good health. By the bye, gentlemen, this — this is a very well constructed house." [In the rabid desire to say something easily, I scarcely knew what I uttered at all.] — "I may say an excellently constructed house. These walls — are you going already, gentlemen? — these walls are solidly put together;" and here, through the mere act of daring, I knocked heavily, with a cane which I held in my hand, upon that very portion of the brick-work behind which stood the corpse of my wife.

But may God shield and deliver me from the fangs of the Evil Beast! No sooner had the echoes of my blows sunk into silence, than I was answered by a voice from within the tomb! — by a cry, at first muffled and broken, like the sobbing of a child, and then quickly swelling into one long, loud, and continuous scream, utterly abnormal and inhuman — a howl — a wailing shriek, half of horror and half of triumph, such as might have arisen only out of a nightmare, conjointly from the throats of the cursed in their agony and of the demons that exult in their eternal torture.

As to my own thoughts it is silly to speak of them. Swooning, I staggered to the opposite wall. For one instant the policemen upon the stairs remained motionless, frozen by their terror and awe. In the next, a dozen strong arms were tearing at the wall. It fell quickly. The corpse, already greatly decayed and clotted with gore, stood erect before the eyes of the crowd. Upon the corpse's head, with its gaping red mouth and solitary eye of fire, sat the hideous beast whose acts had seduced me into murder, and whose powerful voice will send me to the hangman. I had walled the monster up within the tomb!