

# THE CATS

OF H.P. LOVECRAFT



# *BEWARE THE CAT*

*by William Baldwin and David Haden.*

*Being the first ever English novel (1584), a gothic horror story of cats written by William Baldwin of London – here freely translated, adapted, modernised, and made Lovecraftian in tone and manner by David Haden, for the compleat enjoyment of the modern reader.*

*Originally written in 1552, and first published in London in 1561, then in 1570/1 and again in 1584.*

**F**or my sanity I have penned the tale Mr Gregory Streamer told me last Christmas holiday, and which my physician asks to have reported as if told by Mr Streamer himself. I am unable to pen or speak of it so firmly and learnedly as he did. Yet I have tried to keep both the order and the very words as he spoke them. I have decided to set down his words in several parts, and have used such scribbled notes as my asylum keepers have allowed me to make during the last months. I doubt whether Mr Streamer will be content that other men have set pen to the dreadful things he spoke of -- therefore I will let you learn his mind from this text. In the meanwhile I beseech you to accept my good will, and learn to beware.

1.

It chanced that at Christmas last I was lodged at the New London University with Ferrers, who was helping the masters to prepare a student theatre for the New Year. We spent much time discussing the type of play needed, in anticipation of the return of the bulk of the student body. We were soon busy devising and suggesting lines, among many other theatrical exercises. We returned nightly to our lodgings to talk of sundry things. For the purpose of pursuing the conversation, it pleased Ferrers to make me his bedfellow. I soon found I was not alone. The next night he threw down two old mattresses to lodge Mr. Willot the astronomer, and Mr. Gregory Streamer the casual scholar of ancient literature. Our talks often went on past midnight, and on many nights our conversation wandered toward strange and nebulous realms of lore and speculation.

It happened that on one particular night -- which I think was the twenty-eighth of December 1798 -- Ferrers stamped up the icy wooden steps from the University buildings, and clambered into bed as usual. There then developed a controversy between Streamer -- who with Willot had already slept their first sleep of the night -- and Ferrers. The controversy was: whether cats and certain birds had reason, and the cause of the talk was this. I had heard that the Players were to learn an ancient play of Aesop's "Crow", in which most actors were birds. I said it was not comical to make speechless things speak, or brutish things to communicate reasonably. In a fictional story it might be agreeable, but to bring them on stage to be *seen* to speak, to do, to reason? It was just not seemly. Streamer, being far more

learned in literature than I was then aware of, would not agree. He was sure that that cats and birds such as crows have reason, and as much or more than men do. Ferrers the astronomer was woken up by our heated talk and listened to us, but would take no-one's side. He grunted when Streamer gave for his proof some talk of elephants in the far mountains of India that walked upon hempen vine-mats across rivers, and that hedgehogs always knew what weather would come.

Streamer then said also that foxes and dogs, after they had been all night abroad killing geese and savaging sheep, would come home in the morning and put their necks into their collars. Parrots bewailed their keepers' death. Swallows opened their young ones' eyes with Eglantine flowers, and a hundred things more -- all of which I denied come from reason. I put these actions down to instinctive nature, and as proof used the authorities of grandest and most learned natural philosophers. "Well" said Streamer, "I know what I know, and for once I have proven certain matters to my own satisfaction". I gasped and asked if he had real *proof* of the reason of cats and birds? Yes, he replied. He had heard them once, as well I could hear him then in that bedroom -- and could still, in certain places and under certain moons, understand much of both their speech and reasoning.

At this I was silent, and Ferrers laughed. I almost laughed too. But I remembered what glimpses of marvels I had read of once in the works of an obscure medieval Hebrew philosopher who had laboured in a great library as a slave of the Arabs, and I thought of all the things that I and that our great new works of natural philosophy did not yet know. So I pressed Streamer -- what cats or birds he had heard, and

where and when? At this he paused awhile, and then at last said: "If I thought you could be content to hear me, and without *any* interruption until I have finished: then I will tell you such a story. Just one piece of my own experimenting, such as should make the world wonder and put you out of doubt concerning this matter. But first I promise you this -- as soon as any man's curiosity interrupts me, I will leave this room and never speak to any of you again."

We promised to hear him out. He turned on his bed so that we might best hear him, and he spoke the following account.

2.

I often lodged at a friends' house, which had roomy Chambers within but which was ugly and garish without. It stood at the Saint Martin's Lane end of the city, and hung precariously upon the old crumbling town wall now called Alders Gate -- which the ancient men of the City had built, in the manner they had build Bishops Gate, of never-rotting Alder trees, which then grew plentifully in the marshy gardens round about. Those misty common gardens became bare of trees and well-grazed, but Alder saplings became strangely abundantly around where the gate was built. Alders Gate is of course the most ancient gate of the City of London, and its uses lend a pungent rotten smell to certain crooked streets that far run beyond its dark arches.

I lodged many times at my friend's house, and for sundry reasons. Sometime for lack of other lodging, and sometime while awaiting a printing of certain pamphlets, to quickly see what of my latest tract needed correction or what was new on the public sale table. And to

my shame I was like all young English men -- I had little skill with other tongues or foreign manners. Thus I also took there -- in the decrepit yard beneath that crumbling wall -- lessons in a little Latin, and how to handle a French racket and a pair of six-square bowls, feeling that thus I should more quickly obtain a good living by friendly favours and a semblance of learning, rather than by becoming the most learned scholar in the whole City. What a young fool I was.

There is a pleasant chamber hard by this Printing House, with a fair and bright bay-window that opens onto the garden. Beyond the garden is a pleasant high view over the smoke and steeples of London. But at the other end of the Printing House there is a queer little side-door and a short path running to the Leads of the Gate, a dark and wide mossy place where the quartered bodies of loathsome and abominable villains are left to stink and hang from tall poles for the sport of the crows. I call it abominable because it is against nature -- after the sun goes down, all that were hanged or otherwise put to death should be buried, lest the sun touch their skin the next day. It is a pity that men have not learned this, for in my studies I have read of old demonic old things with half-remembered names such as Misanthropi or Molochitus. They feed upon a man's blood after they have been butchered and left by heathen tyrants. All men should bury or burn all executed bodies, and refrain from making such abominable sacrifices and spectacles.

That was why, every bright moonlit night, many cats of all kinds assembled at the Leads of the Gate. These cats made such a noise that I could not sleep for their wailing.

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