

— ABRIDGED FROM THE CLASSIC HORROR STORY

Is there
a reason
why
they say
black cats
bring
bad luck?

I once was a man who loved my wife and my pets — particularly my black cat Pluto. But I became a drunkard and, day by day, my character grew worse. I fell easily into rages — and worse. One night in drunken anger, I blinded my cat in one eye. Later, just for perversity, I killed him. Then, strangely, I started to miss him and began to look for a cat to replace him.

One night as I sat, half-drunk, in a den of infamy, my attention was drawn to some black object, reposing on a gin barrel. I approached it, and touched it with my hand. It was a black cat, as large as Pluto, and closely resembling him in every respect but one. Pluto had not a white hair on his body; but this cat had a large, although indefinite splotch of white, covering nearly the whole breast.

Upon my touching him, he arose, purred loudly, rubbed against my hand, and appeared delighted. This, then, was the very creature of which I was in search. I at once offered to purchase it; but the landlord made no claim to it, had never seen it before.

I continued my caresses, and when I prepared to go home, the animal accompanied me. I permitted it to do so, stooping and patting it. When it reached the house, it became a great favorite with my wife.

For my own part, I soon found a dislike to it arising within me. Its evident fondness for myself rather disgusted and

annoyed me. By slow degrees these feelings of disgust and annoyance rose into the bitterness of hatred. I avoided the creature.

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 had been deprived of one of its eyes.

With my aversion to this cat, however, its partiality for myself seemed to increase. Whenever I sat, it would crouch beneath my chair, or spring upon my knees, covering me with its loathsome caresses. If I arose to walk, it would be between my feet and thus nearly throw me down. At such times, although I longed to destroy it with a blow, I was yet withheld from so doing, partly by a memory of my former crime, but chiefly by absolute *dread* of the beast.

This dread was not exactly a dread of physical evil. Rather, my wife had called my attention, more than once, to the mark of white hair which was the sole visible difference between the strange beast and the one I had destroyed. This mark, although large, had been originally very indefinite; but, by slow degrees, it had assumed a distinct outline. It now resembled an object that I shudder to name — the GALLOWS! — oh, mournful and terrible engine of agony and death!

by Edgar Allan Poe

Alas! neither by day nor by night knew I the blessing of rest any more. The creature left me no moment alone. In the night I started hourly from dreams of fear to find the hot breath of *the thing* upon my face and its vast weight — a nightmare that I had no power to shake off — eternally upon my heart.

Beneath the pressure of these torments, the feeble remnant of good within me succumbed. The moodiness of my usual temper increased to hatred of all things. My uncomplaining wife, alas, was the most usual and the most patient of sufferers.

One day she accompanied me to the cellar. The cat followed me down the steep stairs, and, nearly throwing me headlong, exasperated me to madness. Uplifting an axe, I aimed a blow at the animal, which would have proved instantly fatal had it descended as I wished. But this blow was arrested by the hand of my

wife. Goaded by her interference into my rage, I withdrew my arm from her grasp and buried the axe in her brain. She fell dead upon the spot without a groan.

This hideous murder accomplished, I set myself to the task of concealing the body. I determined to wall it up in the cellar.

For a purpose such as this, the cellar was well adapted. Its walls were loosely constructed, and had lately been plastered with a rough plaster, which dampness had prevented from hardening. Moreover, in one of the walls was a projection, caused by a false chimney, that had been filled up and made to resemble the rest of the cellar. I made no doubt that I could displace the bricks at this point, insert the corpse, and wall the whole up as before, so that no eye could detect anything suspicious.

When I had finished, I felt that all was right. The wall did not present the slightest appearance of having been disturbed.

My next step was to look for the beast which had been the cause of so much wretchedness; I had firmly resolved to put it to death. But it



*the black
cat*

HIT LIST

If you liked this story, try reading some other stories or poems by Edgar Allan Poe:

The Complete Tales and Poems of Edgar Allan Poe. Read some favorites, such as "The Tell-Tale Heart" and "The Pit and the Pendulum."

Life and Poems of Edgar Allan Poe. Learn more about Poe's life and his unique brand of poetry.

appeared that the crafty animal had been alarmed at the violence of my previous anger and did not present itself in my present mood. It did not make its appearance during the night; and thus for one night, at least, I soundly slept.

The second and the third day passed, and still my tormentor came not. The monster, in terror, had fled for ever! My happiness was supreme. The guilt of my dark deed disturbed me but little. Some few inquiries had been made, but these had been answered. Even a search had been made — but of course nothing was discovered.

Upon the fourth day, the police came, very unexpectedly, into the house, and proceeded again to make rigorous investigation. The officers bade me accompany them in their search. They left no nook or corner unexplored. At length, they descended into the cellar. My heart beat calmly as that of one who slumbers in innocence. I walked the cellar from end to end. The police were satisfied and prepared to depart. My glee was too strong to be restrained. I burned to say if but one word, by way of triumph, and to doubly assure them of my guiltlessness.

"Gentlemen," I said at last, as they ascended the steps. "I delight to have allayed your suspicions. I wish you all health. By

express yourself

Horror Show

In this story, Poe takes an ordinary cat and turns it into an object of horror. Pick something in your own life — a pet, a piece of clothing, a CD player, anything! — and write a paragraph about it that makes it seem terrifying.

the bye, gentlemen, this is a very well-constructed house." (In the desire to say something, I scarcely knew what I uttered at all.) "I may say an *excellently* constructed house. These walls — you are going, gentlemen? — these walls are solidly put together." And here, through the frenzy of bravado, I rapped with a cane which I held in my hand, upon that very portion of the brickwork behind which stood the corpse of my wife.

But may God deliver me! No sooner had my blows sunk into silence, then 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 scream, a howl, a wailing shriek, half of horror and half of triumph.

Of my own thoughts it is folly to speak. I staggered to the opposite wall. For one instant the party on the stairs remained motionless. In the next, a dozen stout arms were toiling at the wall. It fell. The corpse, already greatly decayed and clotted with gore, stood erect before the eyes of the spectators. Upon its head, with red extended mouth, and solitary eye of fire, sat the hideous beast whose craft had seduced me into murder, and whose informing voice had consigned me to the hangman. I had walled the monster up within the tomb. □

Why does the man hate the cat? In what ways does it contribute to his downfall? What things does the man himself do to ruin his life?



POE'S PLIGHT

Edgar Allan Poe (1809-1849) was born in Boston. He was orphaned at the age of 2 and went to school in England. His creepy stories and poems made him one of the first American writers ever to gain international fame. He is considered the inventor of the modern detective story. But in spite of his success, Poe led a sad and coursed life. His young wife died of tuberculosis when Poe was 33, and Poe died two years later — of alcoholism. "The Black Cat" is one of his most terrifying tales.