A Black Affair

W. W. Jacobs

I didn't want to bring it," said Captain Gubson, regarding somewhat unfavourably a grey parrot whose cage was hanging against the mainmast, "but my old uncle was so set on it I had to. He said a sea-voyage would set its 'elth up."

"It seems to be all right at present," said the mate, who was tenderly sucking his forefinger; "best of spirits, I should say."

"It's playful," assented the skipper. "The old man thinks a rare lot of it. I think I shall have a little bit in that quarter, so keep your eye on the beggar."

"Scratch Poll!" said the parrot, giving its bill a preliminary strop on its perch. "Scratch poor Polly!"

It bent its head against the bars, and waited patiently to play off what it had always regarded as the most consummate practical joke in existence. The first doubt it had ever had about it occurred when the mate came forward and obligingly scratched it with the stem of his pipe. It was a wholly unforeseen development, and the parrot, ruffling its feathers, edged along its perch and brooded darkly at the other end of it.

Opinion before the mast was also against the new arrival, the general view being that the wild jealousy which raged in the bosom of the ship's cat would sooner or later lead to mischief.

"Old Satan don't like it," said the cook, shaking his head. "The blessed bird hadn't been aboard ten minutes before Satan was prowling around. The blooming image waited till he was about a foot off the cage, and then he did the perlite and asked him whether he'd like a glass o' beer. *I* never see a cat so took aback in all my life. Never."

"There'll be trouble between 'em," said old Sam, who was the cat's special protector, "mark my words."

"I'd put my money on the parrot," said one of the men confidently. "It's 'ad a crool bit out of the mate's finger. Where 'ud the cat be agin that beak?"

"Well, you'd lose your money," said Sam. "If you want to do the cat a kindness, every time you see him near that cage cuff his 'ed."

The crew being much attached to the cat, which had been presented to them when a kitten by

the mate's wife, acted upon the advice with so much zest that for the next two days the indignant animal was like to have been killed with kindness. On the third day, however, the parrot's cage being on the cabin table, the cat stole furtively down, and, at the pressing request of the occupant itself, scratched its head for it.

The skipper was the first to discover the mischief, and he came on deck and published the news in a voice which struck a chill to all hearts.

"Where's that black devil got to?" he yelled.

"Anything wrong, sir?" asked Sam anxiously.

"Come and look here," said the skipper. He led the way to the cabin, where the mate and one of the crew were already standing, shaking their heads over the parrot.

"What do you make of that?" demanded the skipper fiercely.

"Too much dry food, sir," said Sam, after due deliberation.

"Too much what?" bellowed the skipper.

"Too much dry food," repeated Sam firmly. "A parrot—a grey parrot—wants plenty o' sop. If it don't get it, it moults."

"It's had too much *cat*," said the skipper fiercely, "and you know it, and overboard it goes."

"I don't believe it was the cat, sir," interposed the other man; "it's too soft-hearted to do a thing like that."

"You can shut your jaw," said the skipper, reddening. "Who asked you to come down here at all?"

"Nobody saw the cat do it," urged the mate.

The skipper said nothing, but, stooping down, picked up a tail feather from the floor, and laid it on the table. He then went on deck, followed by the others, and began calling, in seductive tones, for the cat. No reply forth coming from the sagacious animal, which had gone into hiding, he turned to Sam, and bade him call it.

"No, sir, I won't 'ave no 'and in it," said the old man. "Putting aside my liking for the animal, *I'm* not going to 'ave anything to do with the killing of a black cat."

“Rubbish!” said the skipper.

“Very good, sir,” said Sam, shrugging his shoulders, “you know best, o’ course. You’re eddicated and I’m not, an’ p’raps you can afford to make a laugh o’ such things. I knew one man who killed a black cat an’ he went mad. There’s something very pecooliar about that cat o’ ours.”

“It knows more than we do,” said one of the crew, shaking his head. “That time you—I mean we—ran the smack down, that cat was expecting of it ’ours before. It was like a wild thing.”

“Look at the weather we’ve ’ad—look at the trips we’ve made since he’s been aboard,” said the old man. “Tell me it’s chance if you like, but I *know* better.”

The skipper hesitated. He was a superstitious man even for a sailor, and his weakness was so well known that he had become a sympathetic receptacle for every ghost story which, by reason of its crudeness or lack of corroboration, had been rejected by other experts. He was a perfect reference library for omens, and his interpretations of dreams had gained for him a widespread reputation.

“That’s all nonsense,” he said, pausing uneasily; “still, I only want to be just. There’s nothing vindictive about me, and I’ll have no hand in it myself. Joe, just tie a lump of coal to that cat and heave it overboard.”

“Not me,” said the cook, following Sam’s lead, and working up a shudder. “Not for fifty pun in gold. I don’t want to be haunted.”

“The parrot’s a little better now, sir,” said one of the men, taking advantage of his hesitation, “he’s opened one eye.”

“Well, I only want to be just,” repeated the skipper. “I won’t do anything in a hurry, but, mark my words, if the parrot dies that cat goes overboard.”

Contrary to expectations, the bird was still alive when London was reached, though the cook, who from his connection with the cabin had suddenly reached a position of unusual importance, reported great loss of strength and irritability of temper. It was still alive, but failing fast on the day they were to put to sea again; and the fo’c’sle, in preparation for the worst, stowed their pet away in the paint-locker, and discussed the situation.

Their council was interrupted by the mysterious behaviour of the cook, who, having gone out to lay in a stock of bread, suddenly broke in upon them more in the manner of a member of a secret society than a humble but useful unit of a ship’s company.

“Where’s the cap’n?” he asked in a hoarse whisper, as he took a seat on the locker with the sack of bread between his knees.

“In the cabin,” said Sam, regarding his antics with some disfavour. “What’s wrong, cookie?”

“What d’ yer think I’ve got in here?” asked the cook, patting the bag.

The obvious reply to this question was, of course, bread; but as it was known that the cook had departed specially to buy some, and that he could hardly ask a question involving such a simple answer, nobody gave it.

“It come to me all of a sudden,” said the cook, in a thrilling whisper. “I’d just bought the bread and left the shop, when I see a big black cat, the very image of ours, sitting on a doorstep. I just stooped down to stroke its ’ed, when it come to me.”

“They will sometimes,” said one of the seamen.

“I don’t mean that,” said the cook, with the contempt of genius. “I mean the idea did. Ses I to myself, ‘You might be old Satan’s brother by the look of you; an’ if the cap’n wants to kill a cat, let it be you,’ I ses. And with that, before it could say Jack Robinson, I picked it up by the scruff o’ the neck and shoved it in the bag.”

“What, all in along of our bread?” said the previous interrupter, in a pained voice.

“Some of yer are ’ard ter please,” said the cook, deeply offended.

“Don’t mind him, cook,” said the admiring Sam. “You’re a masterpiece, that’s what you are.”

“Of course, if any of you’ve got a better plan”—said the cook generously.

“Don’t talk rubbish, cook,” said Sam; “fetch the two cats out and put ’em together.”

“Don’t mix ’em,” said the cook warningly; “for you’ll never know which is which agin if you do.”

He cautiously opened the top of the sack and produced his captive, and Satan, having been relieved from his prison, the two animals were carefully compared.

“They’re as like as two lumps o’ coal,” said Sam slowly. “Lord, what a joke on the old man. I must tell the mate o’ this; he’ll enjoy it.”

“It’ll be all right if the parrot don’t die,” said the dainty pessimist, still harping on his pet theme. “All that bread spoilt, and two cats aboard.”

“Don’t mind what he ses,” said Sam; “you’re a brick, that’s what you are. I’ll just make a few holes in the lid o’ the boy’s chest, and pop old Satan in. You don’t mind, do you, Billy?”

“Of course he don’t,” said the other men indignantly.

Matters being thus agreeably arranged, Sam got a gimlet, and prepared the chest for the reception of its tenant, who, convinced that he was being put out of the way to make room for a rival, made a frantic fight for freedom.

“Now get something ’eavy and put on the top of it,” said Sam, having convinced himself that the lock was broken; “and, Billy, put the noo cat in the paint-locker till we start; it’s home-sick.”

The boy obeyed, and the understudy was kept in durance vile until they were off Limehouse, when he came on deck and nearly ended his career there and then by attempting to jump over the bulwark into the next garden. For some time he paced the deck in a perturbed fashion, and then, leaping on the stern, mewed plaintively as his native city receded farther and farther from his view.

“What’s the matter with old Satan?” said the mate, who had been let into the secret. “He seems to have something on his mind.”

“He’ll have something round his neck presently,” said the skipper grimly.

The prophecy was fulfilled some three hours later, when he came up on deck ruefully regarding the remains of a bird whose vocabulary had once been the pride of its native town. He threw it overboard without a word, and then, seizing the innocent cat, who had followed him under the impression that it was about to lunch, produced half a brick attached to a string, and tied it round his neck. The crew, who were enjoying the joke immensely, raised a howl of protest.

“The *Skylark*’ll never have another like it, sir,” said Sam solemnly. “That cat was the luck of the ship.”

“I don’t want any of your old woman’s yarns,” said the skipper brutally. “If you want the cat, go and fetch it.”

He stepped aft as he spoke, and sent the gentle stranger hurtling through the air. There was

a “plomp” as it reached the water, a bubble or two came to the surface, and all was over.

“That’s the last o’ that,” he said, turning away.

The old man shook his head. “You can’t kill a black cat for nothing,” said he, “mark my words!”

The skipper, who was in a temper at the time, thought little of them, but they recurred to him vividly the next day. The wind had freshened during the night, and rain was falling heavily. On deck the crew stood about in oilskins, while below, the boy, in his new capacity of gaoler, was ministering to the wants of an ungrateful prisoner, when the cook, happening to glance that way, was horrified to see the animal emerge from the fo’c’sle. It eluded easily the frantic clutch of the boy as he sprang up the ladder after it, and walked leisurely along the deck in the direction of the cabin. Just as the crew had given it up for lost it encountered Sam, and the next moment, despite its cries, was caught up and huddled away beneath his stiff clammy oilskins. At the noise the skipper, who was talking to the mate, turned as though he had been shot, and gazed wildly round him.

“Dick,” said he, “can you hear a cat?”

“Cat!” said the mate, in accents of great astonishment.

“I thought I heard it,” said the puzzled skipper.

“Fancy, sir,” said Dick firmly, as a mewing, appalling in its wrath, came from beneath Sam’s coat.

“Did you hear it, Sam?” called the skipper, as the old man was moving off.

“Hear what, sir?” inquired Sam respectfully, without turning round.

“Nothing,” said the skipper, collecting himself. “Nothing. All right.”

The old man, hardly able to believe in his good fortune, made his way forward, and, seizing a favourable opportunity, handed his ungrateful burden back to the boy.

“Fancy you heard a cat just now?” inquired the mate casually.

“Well, between you an’ me, Dick,” said the skipper, in a mysterious voice, “I did, and it wasn’t fancy neither. I heard that cat as plain as if it was alive.”

“Well, I’ve heard of such things,” said the other, “but I don’t believe ’em. What a lark if the

old cat comes back climbing up over the side out of the sea to-night, with the brick hanging round its neck."

The skipper stared at him for some time without speaking. "If that's your idea of a lark," he said at length, in a voice which betrayed traces of some emotion, "it ain't mine."

"Well, if you hear it again," said the mate cordially, "you might let me know. I'm rather interested in such things."

The skipper, hearing no more of it that day, tried hard to persuade himself that he was the victim of imagination, but, in spite of this, he was pleased at night, as he stood at the wheel, to reflect on the sense of companionship afforded by the look-out in the bows. On his part the look-out was quite charmed with the unwonted affability of the skipper, as he yelled out to him two or three times on matters only faintly connected with the progress of the schooner.

The night, which had been dirty, cleared somewhat, and the bright crescent of the moon appeared above a heavy bank of clouds, as the cat, which had by dint of using its back as a lever at length got free from that cursed chest, licked its shapely limbs, and came up on deck. After its stifling prison, the air was simply delicious.

"Bob!" yelled the skipper suddenly.

"Ay, ay, sir!" said the look-out, in a startled voice.

"Did you mew?" inquired the skipper.

"Did I *wot*, sir?" cried the astonished Bob.

"Mew," said the skipper sharply, "like a cat?"

"No, sir," said the offended seaman. "What 'ud I want to do that for?"

"I don't know what you want to for," said the skipper, looking round him uneasily. "There's some more rain coming, Bob."

"Ay, ay, sir," said Bob.

"Lot o' rain we've had this summer," said the skipper, in a meditative bawl.

"Ay, ay, sir," said Bob. "Sailing-ship on the port bow, sir."

The conversation dropped, the skipper, anxious to divert his thoughts, watching the dark mass of sail as it came plunging out of the darkness into the moonlight until it was abreast of his own craft. His eyes followed it as it passed his quarter, so that he saw not the stealthy approach of the cat which came from behind the companion, and sat down close by him. For over thirty hours the animal had been subjected to the grossest indignities at the hands of every man on board the ship except one. That one was the skipper, and there is no doubt but that its subsequent behaviour was a direct recognition of that fact. It rose to its feet, and crossing over to the unconscious skipper, rubbed its head affectionately and vigorously against his leg.

From simple causes great events do spring. The skipper sprang four yards, and let off a screech which was the subject of much comment on the barque which had just passed. When Bob, who came shuffling up at the double, reached him he was leaning against the side, incapable of speech, and shaking all over.

“Anything wrong, sir?” inquired the seaman anxiously, as he ran to the wheel.

The skipper pulled himself together a bit, and got closer to his companion.

“Believe me or not, Bob,” he said at length, in trembling accents, “just as you please, but the ghost of that—cat, I mean the ghost of that poor affectionate animal which I drowned, and which I wish I hadn’t, came and rubbed itself up against my leg.”

“Which leg?” inquired Bob, who was ever careful about details.

“What the blazes does it matter which leg?” demanded the skipper, whose nerves were in a terrible state. “Ah, look—look there!”

The seaman followed his outstretched finger, and his heart failed him as he saw the cat, with its back arched, gingerly picking its way along the side of the vessel.

“I can’t see nothing,” he said doggedly.

“I don’t suppose you can, Bob,” said the skipper in a melancholy voice, as the cat vanished in the bows; “it’s evidently only meant for me to see. What it means I don’t know. I’m going down to turn in. I ain’t fit for duty. You don’t mind being left alone till the mate comes up, do you?”

“I ain’t afraid,” said Bob.

His superior officer disappeared below, and, shaking the sleepy mate, who protested strongly against the proceedings, narrated in trembling tones his horrible experiences.

“If I were you “—said the mate.

“Yes?” said the skipper, waiting a bit. Then he shook him again, roughly.

“What were you going to say?” he inquired.

“Say?” said the mate, rubbing his eyes. “Nothing.”

“About the cat?” suggested the skipper.

“Cat?” said the mate, nestling lovingly down in the blankets again. “Wha’ ca’—goo’ ni’”—

Then the skipper drew the blankets from the mate’s sleepy clutches, and, rolling him backwards and forwards in the bunk, patiently explained to him that he was very unwell, that he was going to have a drop of whiskey neat, and turn in, and that he, the mate, was to take the watch. From this moment the joke lost much of its savour for the mate.

“You can have a nip too, Dick,” said the skipper, proffering him the whiskey, as the other sullenly dressed himself.

“It’s all rot,” said the mate, tossing the spirits down his throat, “and it’s no use either; you can’t run away from a ghost; it’s just as likely to be in your bed as anywhere else. Good-night.”

He left the skipper pondering over his last words, and dubiously eyeing the piece of furniture in question. Nor did he retire until he had subjected it to an analysis of the most searching description, and then, leaving the lamp burning, he sprang hastily in, and forgot his troubles in sleep.

It was day when he awoke, and went on deck to find a heavy sea running, and just sufficient sail set to keep the schooner’s head before the wind as she bobbed about on the waters. An exclamation from the skipper, as a wave broke against the side and flung a cloud of spray over him, brought the mate’s head round.

“Why, you ain’t going to get up?” he said, in tones of insincere surprise.

“Why not?” inquired the other gruffly.

“You go and lay down agin,” said the mate, “and have a cup o’ nice hot tea an’ some toast.”

“Clear out,” said the skipper, making a dash for the wheel, and reaching it as the wet deck

suddenly changed its angle. “I know you didn’t like being woke up, Dick; but I got the horrors last night. Go below and turn in.”

“All right,” said the mollified mate.

“You didn’t see anything?” inquired the skipper, as he took the wheel from him.

“Nothing at all,” said the other.

The skipper shook his head thoughtfully, then shook it again vigorously, as another shower-bath put its head over the side and saluted him.

“I wish I hadn’t drowned that cat, Dick,” he said.

“You won’t see it again,” said Dick, with the confidence of a man who had taken every possible precaution to render the prophecy a safe one.

He went below, leaving the skipper at the wheel idly watching the cook as he performed marvellous feats of jugglery, between the galley and the fo’c’sle, with the men’s breakfast.

A little while later, leaving the wheel to Sam, he went below himself and had his own, talking freely, to the discomfort of the conscious-stricken cook, about his weird experiences of the night before.

“You won’t see it no more, sir, I don’t expect,” he said faintly; “I b’leeve it come and rubbed itself up agin your leg to show it forgave you.”

“Well, I hope it knows it’s understood,” said the other. “I don’t want it to take any more trouble.”

He finished the breakfast in silence, and then went on deck again. It was still blowing hard, and he went over to superintend the men who were attempting to lash together some empties which were rolling about in all directions amidships. A violent roll set them free again, and at the same time separated two chests in the fo’c’sle, which were standing one on top of the other. This enabled Satan, who was crouching in the lower one, half crazed with terror, to come flying madly up on deck and give his feelings full vent. Three times in full view of the horrified skipper he circled the deck at racing speed, and had just started on the fourth when a heavy packing-case, which had been temporarily set on end and abandoned by the men at his sudden appearance, fell over and caught him by the tail. Sam rushed to the rescue.

“Stop!” yelled the skipper.

“Won’t I put it up, sir?” inquired Sam.

“Do you see what’s beneath it?” said the skipper, in a husky voice.

“Beneath it, sir?” said Sam, whose ideas were in a whirl.

“The cat, can’t you see the cat?” said the skipper, whose eyes had been riveted on the animal since its first appearance on deck.

Sam hesitated a moment, and then shook his head.

“The case has fallen on the cat,” said the skipper. “I can see it distinctly.”

He might have said heard it, too, for Satan was making frenzied appeals to his sympathetic friends for assistance.

“Let me put the case back, sir,” said one of the men, “then p’raps the vision ’ll disappear.”

“No, stop where you are,” said the skipper. “I can stand it better by daylight. It’s the most wonderful and extraordinary thing I’ve ever seen. Do you mean to say you can’t see anything, Sam?”

“I can see a case, sir,” said Sam, speaking slowly and carefully, “with a bit of rusty iron band sticking out from it. That’s what you’re mistaking for the cat, p’raps, sir.”

“Can’t you see anything, cook?” demanded the skipper.

“It may be fancy, sir,” faltered the cook, lowering his eyes, “but it does seem to me as though I can see a little misty sort o’ thing there. Ah, now it’s gone.”

“No, it ain’t,” said the skipper. “The ghost of Satan’s sitting there. The case seems to have fallen on its tail. It appears to be howling something dreadful.”

The men made a desperate effort to display the astonishment suitable to such a marvel, whilst Satan, who was trying all he knew to get his tail out, cursed freely. How long the superstitious captain of the *Skylark* would have let him remain there will never be known, for just then the mate came on deck and caught sight of it before he was quite aware of the part he was expected to play.

“Why the devil don’t you lift the thing off the poor brute,” he yelled, hurrying up towards the case.

“What, can *you* see it, Dick?” said the skipper impressively, laying his hand on his arm.

“*See* it?” retorted the mate. “D’ye think I’m blind. Listen to the poor brute. I should—Oh!”

He became conscious of the concentrated significant gaze of the crew. Five pairs of eyes speaking as one, all saying “idiot” plainly, the boy’s eyes conveying an expression too great to be translated.

Turning, the skipper saw the bye-play, and a light slowly dawned upon him. But he wanted more, and he wheeled suddenly to the cook for the required illumination.

The cook said it was a lark. Then he corrected himself and said it wasn’t a lark, then he corrected himself again and became incoherent. Meantime the skipper eyed him stonily, while the mate released the cat and good-naturedly helped to straighten its tail.

It took fully five minutes of unwilling explanation before the skipper could grasp the situation. He did not appear to fairly understand it until he was shown the chest with the ventilated lid; then his countenance cleared, and, taking the unhappy Billy by the collar, he called sternly for a piece of rope.

By this statesmanlike handling of the subject a question of much delicacy and difficulty was solved, discipline was preserved, and a practical illustration of the perils of deceit afforded to a youngster who was at an age best suited to receive such impressions. That he should exhaust the resources of a youthful but powerful vocabulary upon the crew in general, and Sam in particular, was only to be expected. They bore him no malice for it, but, when he showed signs of going beyond his years, held a hasty consultation, and then stopped his mouth with sixpence-halfpenny and a broken jack-knife.