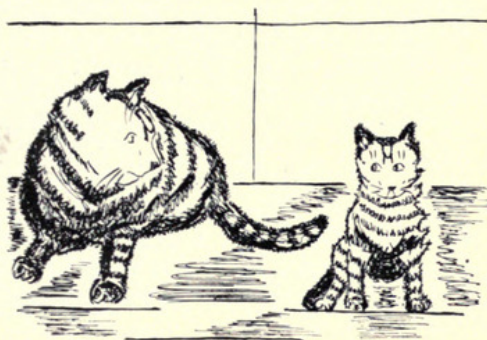


A CAT STILL MOURNS FOR THE GLORY THAT WAS EGYPT

By JANE ROCKWELL

"OF COURSE, to man we've always been a source of fascination and even, at times, of reverence," the broad-banded tabby cat said as she stretched luxuriously and strode to the window, leaving her two-month old replica staring, puzzled, after her.

"I usually wait until my kittens are at least three months old before telling them of their proud history, but your questions about your ancestry seem to indicate, as I suspected, that you are the most precocious of all fifteen before you."



The kitten, whose name was Daniel, cast his eyes down but was unable to conceal the pride that made his whiskers quiver just perceptibly.

"Come over here and sit by the window and I'll tell you of your glorious history and why it is so splendid to be a cat—especially a tabby." With a great effort, chubby little Daniel managed to lift himself onto the window sill. Seeing his mother had already assumed her most pedagogical mien, he settled down quietly, his ears standing upright to avoid missing anything.

'WE WERE THE FIRST . . .'

"Our exact origin is unknown, but don't let that disturb you," said his mother. "There is good reason to believe that we cats were domesticated even before man began to make a record of history. The first recorded reference to us is found in Egypt where felines were venerated as sacred to the cat goddess, Bastet, or Lady of Love. Incidentally, all these sacred cats were tabbies, which means, of course, that we were the first known cats. This bit of information might come in handy, Daniel, when one of those white angoras in the next block begins showing her tiresome conceit.

"Where was I? Oh yes, Egypt. Cat worship, according to some historians, can be traced to a prehistoric Cat Clan dating as far back as 4000 to 10,000 B.C. that inhabited the city of Bubastis, or Pasht, the most important center of cat worship in all Egypt. Bastet, the cat-goddess, may have come from the totem of the clan that

represented the sun and moon as the goddess did later. Fashioned most frequently in bronze, Bastet was shown in human form, but with the head of a cat. At times she was represented with short garments, revealing human limbs and a cat's feet and tail. And sometimes she was depicted in long garments, most often carrying a sistrum, which was a musical rattle used in worship, and a shield or basket. Figurines of cats, highly adorned with jewelry and other finery, have been discovered in Egypt's tombs as well as paintings of cats hunting with their masters. So you see, Daniel, although we were idolized, we weren't idle by any means—we put ourselves to good, practical uses."

Purring and stroking her whiskers, Daniel's mother made no attempt to suppress her satisfaction at the pun she had made—even though she had made it to each of Daniel's fifteen brothers and sisters before him.

"The penalty was heavy for Egyptians caught killing cats (man in the 20th century could take a few hints from the Egyptians, Daniel), and at the death of a cat, human members of its household cut off their eyebrows to show their grief. Cats were mummified, and gold, gems, and mummified mice, the latter intended for food in the afterlife, were buried along with them."

"How considerate those Egyptians were," remarked Daniel softly.

"It was more than that, son. We were held in reverence by the entire population. Although the Egyptians worshipped many animals, none were worshipped by their millions as consistently and for as long a period as we were."

'CAT FUNERALS WERE SECOND GRADE . . .'

"But back to my story. While first-grade human funerals cost about \$1,500, cat funerals were second grade and set the bereaved household back about \$500. Our ancestors, from rich and poor homes alike, were buried in cemeteries all over Egypt. Cats from temple palaces were buried in bronze caskets with bronze statues of themselves on top, or they were placed in bronze boxes shaped like themselves. I've never been there—I think they have a rule about live cats—but I've heard the human members of our household talking about these same statues and others that they've seen at Chicago Natural History Museum in its Hall of Egypt. But man hasn't always been good to our ancestors and their memories. In 1895 the remains of 180,000 cats were unearthed from Egyptian tombs and sold for fertilizer at \$18.43 a ton, and, what's more, the auctioneer used the body of an embalmed cat as a gavel!"

Daniel shuddered at this disturbing picture, and his mother paused, peering intently at him to make sure he had grasped

the significance of her words, before she went on.

"In China, during the Hsia, Shang, and Chou dynasties, which were from 2205 to 225 B.C., sacrificial rites and theatrical ceremonies were held in honor of the cat, and heavy fines were imposed for destroying us, as in Egypt. All through history, we've played a significant role in relation to man. Cat clans in the Teutonic and Celtic countries proudly used the cat as an emblem for their banners. Roman soldiers in 100 B.C. displayed cat figures on shields and flags, as did the Hessians, Cattani of north Britain, and the ancient Burgundians. The last known cat clan is still in operation in the Highlands of Scotland, and since its origin in the middle of the 12th century, it has maintained its motto: 'Touch not the cat bot [without] a glove.'"

"A good piece of advice," said Daniel, who had not yet mastered the art of retracting his claws—much to the dismay of human beings.

'GODDESS OF LOVE'

"Cat worship was prevalent, too, in Norse mythology," continued Daniel's mother. "Freyja, the Norse cat goddess of love, is shown on special occasions being drawn in her chariot by two cats, symbolizing enjoyment of the senses. Norse maidens were married on Freyja's day (Friday) if possible, and if the sun shone during the ceremony it was said that the maidens had taken good care of the cat and fed her well.

"Cats spread to other parts of the world when soldiers and sailors adopted them as mascots to serve as rat-killers aboard ship. We left our mark on the sea-going world too, as you can see in nautical terminology such as 'cat walk,' meaning narrow passage-way; 'cat head,' where the anchor is hoisted; 'catted,' while at sea; and 'cat-o'-nine-tails,' a whip with which sailors were flogged before the mast."

Daniel, who had the youngster's usual enthusiasm for sea-life, began to daydream after his mother's words, but a stern switch



BASTET,
the Cat Goddess.
Ancient bronze
sculpture in
Hall of Egypt.

of her tail bought him tumbling down from the ship's mast onto his windowsill perch.

"We've had our crosses to bear, of course—times when man, unable to understand us, has invested us with supernatural qualities or connected us with some of his outlandish superstitions. During the witchcraft days in Europe and America, cats were considered a companion to the witch, and witches' cats were said to have spoken the same language as their mistresses. A common belief at that time was that if an old woman was injured shortly after a cat was injured, the woman was a witch.

"Superstitions about witch cats still persist among the European peasantry, and the old belief that a black cat entering a home endangered the lives of its occupants has been modified to the cat's crossing a human being's path as a symbol either of good luck or bad luck, depending on the section of the world. In this country, unfortunately it's bad luck, and I've seen human guests shudder and recoil upon seeing my late husband enter the living room.

"As to supernatural qualities attributed to the cat, there are some redeeming factors. In ancient Egypt and Japan, spiritualists believed that cats protected them from inimical supernatural forces. Orientals, mainly, credited the cat with occult vision and an ability to see into the past, forecast the future, and perceive objects and beings invisible to man. Even today, our habit of looking steadily into a person's eyes or sitting with half-closed eyes has gained us the reputation of being 'knowing' and meditative. A logical supposition, of course," Daniel's mother added. Daniel nodded.

"During the 17th century we were considered excellent weather predictors. A cat whose foot extended beyond the crown of its head when it was washing itself, a 'bawling' cat, and one with its 'brains to the ground' were harbingers of rain. A cat washing its face toward the wind or an old cat frisking about was taken as an omen of a brewing storm, and a cat sitting with its back to the fire denoted that a frost was coming. At second glance, this folklore isn't as nonsensical as it seems, Daniel. It has been reported that our supersensitive hearing power has enabled us to pick up the ground vibrations that precede an earthquake.

"The superstitions about us that man has created in the past are causes of many false impressions about us today." The mother tabby leaned eagerly toward Daniel because to her this was a most serious subject.



"Although many human beings believe we can see in the dark, we can't, but you may have discovered, Daniel, our eyes are so constructed that a maximum amount of vision is possible with a minimum amount of light. Our eye-surface is exceptionally large in proportion to our bodies and our pupils are highly sensitive. Our pupils shrink to slits in strong light and expand in poor light until they cover almost the entire surface of our eyes."

Seeing that Daniel was preoccupied in rapidly opening and closing his eyes, his mother cleared her throat ominously and continued: "Contrary to popular opinion, cats are among the most intelligent of mammals. Their brains roughly resemble the human brain. And it comes as no surprise, I'm sure, for you to hear that cats have surpassed dogs, raccoons, and rats in intelligence tests, although in all fairness I must say that individual differences exist here as they do in all mammals.

"Although the old ridiculous saying that a cat has nine lives is now treated lightly, many human beings think that a cat can fall many stories without being killed or even injured. Our feline grace and sinewy muscles can save us from harm in a short tumble, but many of us die every year in falls from high places.

"Another common fallacy is the belief that cats and dogs are necessarily incompatible. Personally I would never choose a dog for a close friend, but many cats and dogs get along very amicably after they have become accustomed to one another's idiosyncrasies. I've known several dogs quite well, but I've found it the best policy not to exhibit our superiority, unless absolutely necessary, and to tolerate as best we can their bad manners.

'THEY SELDOM TRANSMIT DISEASES'

"Cats don't carry diseases to any greater extent than does Man, and they seldom transmit diseases to human beings as do dogs and rats. The saliva of a healthy cat is free from bacteria, and if one of us is bitten by another cat the wound is usually clean, while a wound given us by a dog is likely to abscess if not tended properly. Incidentally, when we draw our claws along the bark of a tree or, to human beings' displeasure, along a rug or sofa, we aren't sharpening our claws as many people think. Our claws are shed, as you'll discover, Daniel, throughout the year, and we merely work off loose bits of dead skin from our front claws by scratching them on wood or something similar. We care for our hind claws by removing the bits with our teeth.

"Many human beings think that we're stoic and incapable of showing any degree or variety of emotion. While the great mobility of our eyes and mouths conveys most of our emotions, our ears, too, serve as a valuable barometer of our state of mind. As you may know, Daniel, forward

reflects joy; backward, disapproval."

Daniel began to wiggle his ears violently, hoping this action would cause sudden changes of mood but, unfortunately, it didn't.

"Cats have the most delicate sense of touch in the animal kingdom," his mother continued. "While our sense of taste is not as acute as that of the monkey, it is highly developed, and our hearing powers are so extraordinary as to reach far beyond the human range—even to half-tones to which other animals are deaf. The human ear can detect tones as high as 20,000 cycles per second while our hearing reaches cycles as high as 60,000 per second. We have very powerful sight, too, and an ability to distinguish, to some extent, form and color. Though our sense of smell is less acute than that of dogs it tends toward more delicate odors such as perfume, while the dog, as you might expect, prefers carrion smells.

'FELIX CATUS IS CORRECT'

"Although *Felis domestica* is more commonly used, *Felis catus* is the correct zoological term for us. All cats belong to this genus and species. There are no subspecies (varieties) because of our unknown origin. So-called 'domestic' cats are divided into short-haired and long-haired breeds. Short-hairs in the United States include tabbies (that's us) and solid-color and tortoise-shell cats and their derivatives, spotted, smoke, and bobtail. Foreign short-hairs include the Abyssinian ticked, Burmese, Manx, and Siamese. Among the long-hairs are the Persian, Angora, Russian, Burmese, tabby, tortoise-shell, chinchilla or silver, smoke, and peke-faced.

"I'm sorry to say that there is a certain type of human being, existing even today, Daniel, that is called an aelurophobe, which means a person with a morbid fear of cats. And there are (and I know this to be true from personal experience) some souls who simply do not like us—possibly because they believe some of the fallacies that have come down through the ages and haven't taken the trouble to know us. Of course, we're entitled to our personal prejudices too. We can only hope that these unenlightened human beings appreciate the fact that if it weren't for us, mice and rats would be rampant upon the earth. For the many other two- and four-footed mammals that are our admirers, there's a saying by Montaigne I've never forgotten because it reveals such a sharp insight into our personalities: 'When I play with my cat who knows whether I do not make her more sport than she makes me?'"

And so saying, Daniel's mother, after a dramatic pause, looked down expectantly at her son, who, she discovered, was sound asleep.

"Well, maybe I should have waited another month, she thought as she began to give Daniel his afternoon bath.



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