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CONCERNING CATS.

THE cat, "the harmless necessary cat," as Shakespeare calls her, while I regret to say, adding directly afterwards, "though some there be cannot abide her," is the subject of my present theme.

"Necessary," she assuredly deserves to be called, for in our home-life of every day she has her part assigned to her. She is the pet and playfellow of our children, the friend of the friendless old maid, and often even shares with his dog the otherwise solitary fireside of the old bachelor; in the old bygone days of cruel superstition she was the familiar of the poor, despised, much-maligned old witch.

The cat must have been recognised as a type of affection by our early ancestors, for did not a team of cats draw the chariot of Freya, the Norse Venus!

Nevertheless, with the single exception of the cat of Dick Whittington, "thrice Lord Mayor of London," whose splendid rat-catching achievements in distant lands brought fortune and success in life to her master (according to the well-known legend), providing the young adventurer with the first step that led ultimately to his distinguished civic career; with this one important exception, I do not think that puss has anywhere played an important part in English annals, and to do justice to her history we shall be obliged to trace her back through many centuries to her native place, the site where, in the youth of the world, she was held in high, I may say, indeed, in superstitious honour.

Wild cats still exist in the northern parts of these islands, outcasts from society, fierce and savage as wolves, and as untamable; but in his standard work on Natural History, Mr. Wood distinctly repudiates the idea that the pet of our fireside ever owned those lawless and uncivilised creatures as ancestors. "It is proved," he says, "that certain distinctions between the wild and the domestic



"WE LAY THEE IN THE MOULD, PUSSY,
WE LAY THEE IN THE MOULD."

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cat (*Felis catus*, and *Felis domestica*) are found in full force, even though the domestic cat may have taken to a wild life for many a year and for several generations. There remain several marked points of difference between them.* One of these being the very different shape and comparative length of the tail.

The cat was certainly known to both the ancient Greeks and Romans. There is no mention of her in Greek poetry, but on the paintings of domestic scenes on some of the vases of a late date she is occasionally represented; and Theocritus, the poet of the home-life of the peasants of Sicily* makes one of his characters in "The Syracusan Women" rally her idle servant with the words, "Why, she is snoozing before the fire like the idle cat that she is," while her mistress is calling out for her services.

In Imperial Rome, she was also a sojourner, barely tolerated, ill-treated or totally ignored. By the Roman poets I doubt if the cat is ever once mentioned in any way.

Amongst the numerous decorations, mosaic and pictorial, of the disinterred cities of Pompeii and Herculaneum, which tell us so much of the domestic ways and customs of the Roman folk of the first century of the Christian era and earlier, the cat of that date is only twice represented; and then I regret to say it is in the act of stealing food.

Poor puss! Her condition in those luxurious little cities must have been but a sad one! She was evidently insufficiently fed, or she would not be represented with fierce, hungry eyes and rapacious gestures. Even the rats and mice did not fall to her share in a Roman house, for they were probably already appropriated by the creature who took the place in the Roman family affections which pussy does with us; I mean the domestic snake. Poor puss was left to catch wild birds for her sustenance, or to thieve; or, perhaps, to make an occasional meal of the family pet himself, gorged with the mice of which she was deprived, and whom in modern times she has quite supplanted.

So much for pussy's life as a denizen of classic lands!

In the Museum of Antiquities in Bordeaux a tomb is shown of somewhat rude workmanship belonging to the times of the later Empire, when Gaul had long been under Roman sway, on which is represented the effigy of a young girl of about twelve years of age, with the pets who were, doubtless, dear to her in her lifetime, namely—a cock and a cat, the latter huddled up in her arms in the manner so uncomfortable to the cat in which children delight to hug their much-suffering pets.

If neither in Greece or Rome, nor to the wild cat, still indigenous in these islands, where then, we must inquire, are we to seek for the real ancestors of our pets. Whence came even those few, stray, neglected specimens whose misdemeanours are depicted in the mosaics of Pompeii and Herculaneum?

For answer, we must turn to that most ancient country, ancient even to the Greeks and Romans—the country watered and fertilised by the Nile, the country of the Pharaohs—Egypt.

Egypt, great and civilised long before Greece had even learned her letters, long, long before Romulus and Remus struggled to the death with each other for supremacy on the Aventine Hill.

In Ancient Egypt the cat was not only treated as a domestic pet, she was also actually worshipped as a goddess in the early idolatrous times. Amongst the many creatures to whom in that country divine honours were paid, like the sphinx for example, which was represented with the body of a lion and the head of a man (symbolising strength united with intelligence),

we find that the cat-headed lady was held in especial esteem. This goddess is represented in the Egyptian sculptures sometimes as a cat, sometimes as a woman with the head of a cat; in either case, whether as cat or woman, she wears heavy gold ear-rings, and her neck is adorned with row upon row of chains and necklets. She was probably considered as similar, in a minor degree, to the male sphinx-type of strength united with intelligence by her idolatrous worshippers.

That delightful old traveller and historian, Herodotus, who lived in the 5th century B.C.,* and went about in the different countries bordering on the Mediterranean Sea, writing down his observations and experiences in his own gossiping and garrulous, yet observant fashion, records some curious facts about the cats in Ancient Egypt. They seem to have appeared to him, a Greek, almost as curious as they do to us English now.

He tells us that the cats of that country, when dead, are all carried to the sacred buildings, and "after being properly salted" (i.e. preserved as mummies), they are buried in the city of Bubastis. He mentions, also, that in token of mourning, "in whatever family a cat happens to die by accident, every individual of the family shaves off his eye-brows." Though with regard to this custom, I may add, that the mourning for the death of a dog was deeper, as the whole head and body had to be shaved in honour of a dog's decease.

The number of festivals which the Egyptians celebrated annually, to commemorate their various deities, was very great, of which that of Pasht, or Bast, held a first rank, and was performed with the greatest pomp. This was celebrated at the city of Bubastis (so named after Bast, the cat-goddess), on the River Nile. Large parties of men and women went in procession in boats gaily decorated, accompanied by professional musicians, the men playing the flute, the women the cymbals. When arrived at the city, animals were sacrificed, and a great amount of eating and drinking, festivities, and merriment were indulged in.

Sir Gardner Wilkinson observes,† that anyone who has witnessed the modern Arab *fiâtes* at Tanta and Dessook in the Delta (places not very far from the site of the ancient Bubastis), in honour of the Arab saints, Sayd el Beddawe, and Sheik Ibrahim e Dessooke, has witnessed scenes greatly resembling those old pagan ceremonies. So completely do we often meet with the spirit of superstition lingering on, and reappearing under changed names, where no light has penetrated through the dark cloud of ignorance.

Pliny, the Roman naturalist, who lived about 500 years later than the Greek writer, Herodotus (he who fell a victim to his intrepid conduct during the great eruption of Mount Vesuvius, A.D. 79), makes occasional mention of the cat. He records that a golden cat was worshipped as a god at a place called Rhadata, in Ethiopia.

And here, I may remark, that in the Bible the domestic cat is never once mentioned. Among the creatures that nightly cried amid the ruins of Babylon, the wild cat, or jackal is named; but as the Hebrew word is the same for both creatures, it seems most likely that the jackal is the one intended.

It is conjectured that there was more than one species of cat in Ancient Egypt. The wall-paintings from Egyptian temples, many of which are now placed in the Egyptian room at the British Museum, afford subjects for infinite study and amusement. We may there see cats trained to act as our retriever dogs do, plunging in among the reeds and rushes of a

stream to catch the struggling wild-fowl, not to eat, but to bring to the master's feet for his game-bag. One of these clever animals, she must have had a wonderful training, actually holds captive two struggling wild ducks at once, one with her mouth, the other between her paws. Other cats are represented as pets.

Mr. Wood tells us,* and his evidence on this subject is conclusive, under the heading *Felis*, the generic name for the whole cat tribe, that, "In the long past times, when the Egyptian nation was at the head of the civilised world, the *Felis maniculata* was universally domesticated in their homes, while at the comparatively later days of English history, the domestic cat was so scarce in England that royal edicts were issued for its preservation, A.D. 943; yet in those days, the wild cat (*Felis catus*) was rife throughout the British Islands, and was reckoned as a noxious animal to be destroyed, and not a useful one which must be protected. It is conjectured that the domestic cat was imported from Egypt into Greece and Rome, and from thence into England."

The Egyptian cat was not only honoured and protected during its lifetime, but even after death it received funeral honours—such as only fall to the lot of distinguished or wealthy persons—as we have already mentioned.

There are several methods of embalming in use among the Egyptians, by which the bodies of the dead were, for a time, withheld from the natural process of decay. But it was the privilege of kings and rulers alone to have their bodies imbued with costly drugs and sweet spices, and to lie unchanged in their tombs for thousands of years, until their mummied remains were removed from their long repose and exhibited to the public gaze of a people, who, in their own royal time, were but a race of naked savages. The privilege which was denied to the Egyptian workman, was granted to his cat. We have in our museums many specimens of mummied cats; their bodies swathed, bandaged, and spiced in the most careful manner, partaking of this temporary immortality with a Rameses or a Pharaoh.

But, alas, for the changes which may overtake all things, even deified cats! I read not long since a paragraph in a daily newspaper, stating that a ship-load of 400 cat-mummies had been imported from Egypt to Liverpool; the bodies to be used as field-manure by the farmers. Others again have been imported to be ground down into bitumen, for the sake of extracting that pigment valued by painters, with which the bodies were soaked in the process of embalming.

To turn from ancient to more modern times, with a very appropriate remark made by Mr. Wood. He observes that, "When engaged in the study of an illustrated work on ethnology, with its portraits of the various forms which are assumed by the human race, a certain feeling of relief and repose takes possession of the mind when the reader turns from the savage races of mankind, with their selfish, restless, eager, bestialised expression, to the mild and intellectual countenances of the civilised nations. A similar expression of repose is felt when we turn from the savage, hungry-looking wild cat to the placid face and tranquil expression of our favourite, the domestic cat."

History records the names of many famous men who have attached themselves to *Felis domesticata* in modern times. The earliest cat that we know of, recorded by name, is *Muezza*, who belonged to the Arab prophet Mahomet, sixth century A.D.† A pretty legend exists, showing his kindness for animals, and his affection for this creature in particular. Mahomet was sitting one day

* About 450 B.C.

† *The Ancient Egyptians*, by Sir Gardner Wilkinson.

* About 250 B.C.

* See *Illustrated Natural History*, vol. "Mammalia," by the Rev. J. G. Wood, F.L.S.

† 570 to 632 A.D.

in prolonged meditation, Muezza lay sleeping peacefully at his elbow. The time wore on; the hour for public prayer summoned the prophet to his devotions, but pussy still slept. Sooner than disturb the slumbers of his pet, he cut off his sleeve on which she lay, leaving her in undisturbed repose.

France and Italy in the Middle Ages give us a few names of lovers of cats.

First among these must be named the two famous Italian poets, Petrarch and Tasso. Tasso addressed one of his most charming sonnets to his cat; and it is said that Petrarch loved his cat almost as much as he did his Laura, his lady-love; and that he is said to have actually had the cat embalmed in the Egyptian manner after its death, but I will not vouch for this as a fact.

Many famous Frenchmen have taken especial interest in cats. A notable instance was Cardinal Richelieu, the powerful minister of Louis XIII., who delighted in nothing so much as watching the gambols and elegant movements of kittens; not from any feeling of affection, like that which Mahomet displayed towards Muezza, but simply as a relaxation from the anxieties of state. Richelieu made no pets, however, but had a fresh supply of kittens every three months to amuse him, and divert his thoughts.

The eminent French writer Chateaubriand was known to be excessively fond of cats. When he was acting as ambassador from France to the Papal Court at Rome, the Pope, to please him, having heard of his weakness, presented him with a large handsome tortoiseshell-coloured cat, which he called Micetto. Chateaubriand has immortalised this creature in one of his famous essays, that one beginning "*Fai pour compagnon un gros chat, gris-roux.*"

Chateaubriand even used to say that he fancied he could perceive a growing likeness in his own features to those of a cat, from long familiarity with the pretty ways of the tribe, and would call on his friends to observe and admire this fancied resemblance.

A French writer of the eighteenth century, M. Dupont de Nemours, an eminent naturalist, occupied himself much with studying the sounds made by the brute creation, and at last declared that it would be possible to learn their language, and thus to realise the meaning to them of the various sounds which they emit. He writes: "They have very few wants and passions. These they express in a very decided manner; but their ideas are few, and their dictionary but a limited one; their grammar would be extremely simple: for instance, very few nouns, about double the number of adjectives, and the verb left to be understood rather than expressed, while their interjections imply whole phrases in one utterance.

"Yet it is extraordinary," he adds, "with their very limited means of expression, how well they evidently understand, and are able to translate into their own simple tongue the more elaborately-expressed observations, or commands, which we address to them."

This M. Dupont de Nemours actually succeeded in making a dictionary of the language of crows, which he reduced to twenty-five different and distinct sounds, capable of being identified with so many separate meanings.

The cat, he says, can produce several vowel

sounds, as well as six consonants; the consonants he gives, being *m, n, g, h, v, f*. But I do not find that the French naturalist ever carried out more fully his researches in the cat tongue; and I fear that his "*Dictionnaire des Corbeaux*" met with some ridicule, though it was the result of two years' careful observation in a remote rural district where he went to reside for the time, purposely to carry on these investigations.

An Italian writer, one Marco Bettini of Parma, had, two centuries previously, in 1614, written down the song of the nightingale, which M. Dupont de Nemours translated into words: but no one has felt tempted to transcribe the love songs of the cat, though they may be heard intoned, nightly, on the roofs of many a London house, and opportunities are thus plentiful.

Nevertheless, though the cat's language has not as yet tempted any of our modern scientific men to approach its study, yet many a poet, since Tasso, has been inspired by their misfortunes.

The beauty and untimely death of the unfortunate Selima, the cat of the famous Horace Walpole, drew forth a pretty poem from the

(Malignant Fate sate by, and smiled),
The slippery verge her feet beguiled,
She tumbled headlong in."

Her pitiful mews, her cries for help were unheard; no one came to her rescue, and poor puss met with a watery grave.

In a paper so largely read by young ladies as "*The Girl's Own*," it seems appropriate to record poems by our own sex on the subject in hand.

I dare say many of the mothers and aunts of my readers may remember having learned, when still in the nursery, the pretty lines by Miss Emily Taylor, descriptive of "*The truly Well-bred Cat*," beginning,

"Long have I sought the world around,
And asked this friend and that,
Where shall that paragon be found,
A truly well-bred cat?"

I remember distinctly the picture of the demure-looking pussy seated cosily in a big basket which headed the poem, and the final picture of the ill-favoured thief contrasting with the first.

I might devote a whole article to a history of the long line of cats, all, I may say, more or less well-bred, who have succeeded each other at my own fireside. One especially handsome cat I will mention, for he too, like poor Selima, was honoured after death with a commemorative poem. He was a large-limbed dark tabby, very handsomely marked, the very prototype of the big Egyptian cat, as it may be seen in bronze or stone, sitting, tall and stately, in the long Egyptian gallery at the British Museum; or alive, roaming restlessly to and fro in his cage at the Zoological Gardens amongst the other *Felida*: he was called Kangarooka. His early and untimely death followed shortly after that of a pet black-bird named Jetty. Both were buried in the garden with many childish tears; and Mrs. Adams, the charming poetess, wrote the following lines on the sad occasion—

"We lay thee in the mould, pussy,
We lay thee in the mould;
With benisons of earliest flowers,
With memories of thy playful hours,
With dews that are not cold,
We lay thee in the mould, pussy,
We lay thee in the mould.

Anear within the mould, pussy,
Anear within the mould,
Sweet Jetty lies awaiting thee,
And thou'lt begin an amity,
And leave the grudges old,
To mingle in the mould, pussy
To mingle in the mould.

Thou'rt now beneath the mould, pussy,
Thou'rt now beneath the mould,
There's ne'er another like to thee,
Though many a frolic kit there be,
Who'll grow to cat that's old,
So farewell in the mould, pussy,
So farewell! in the mould."

With this farewell to a dead pussy I feel I cannot do better than take leave of my readers, after they have kindly accompanied me in my search after cats through so many long ages of the past, and into so many and such far-away countries.
E. F. BRIDELL FOX.



Poet Gray, namely, the well-known "*Ode on the death of a favourite cat drowned in a tub of gold fishes.*"

The poet describes how,

"'Twas on a lofty vase's side,
Where China's gayest art had dyed
The azure flowers that blow;
Demurest of the tabby kind,
The pensive Selima reclin'd,
Gazed on the lake below."

Contemplating her own reflexion in the water below her, and charmed with her own beauty,

"Her conscious tail her joy declar'd,
The fair round face, the snowy beard,
The velvet of her paws.
Her coat, that with the tortoise vies,
Her ears of jet, and emerald eyes,
She saw; and purred applause."

Then the gold fish swimming about in the tub attract her attention. Vainly she tries to reach them with outstretched paws: they still elude her grasp.

"With looks intent,
Again she stretched, again she bent,
Nor knew the gulf between.