

Fifty Years Ago in the Fancy

Fifty years ago in the Fancy is researched by Dorothy Mason, from her collection of early out of print literature.

SUPERSTITION AND WITCHCRAFT

A very remarkable peculiarity of the domestic cat, and possibly one that has had much to do with the ill favour with which it has been regarded, especially in the Middle Ages, is the extraordinary property which its fur possesses of yielding electric sparks when hand-rubbed or by other friction, the black in a larger degree than any other colour, even the rapid motion of a fast retreating cat through rough, tangled underwood having been known to produce a luminous effect. In frosty weather it is the more noticeable, the coldness of the weather apparently giving intensity and brilliancy, which to the ignorant would certainly be attributed to the interference of the spiritual or superhuman. To sensitive natures and nervous temperaments the very contact with the fur of a black cat will often produce a startling thrill or absolutely electric shock. That carefully observant naturalist, Gilbert White, speaking of the frost of 1785, notes; "During those two Siberian days my parlour cat was so electric, that had a person stroked her and not been properly insulated, the shock might have been given to a whole circle of people."

Possibly from this lively, fiery, sparkling tendency, combined with its noiseless motion and stealthy habits, our ancestors were led in the happily bygone superstitious days to regard the unconscious animal as a "familiar" of Satan or some other evil spirit, which generally appeared in the form of a black cat; hence witches were said to have a black cat as their "familiar," or could at will change themselves into the form of a black cat with eyes of fire. Shakespeare says, "the cat with eyne of burning coal," and in Middleton's *Witch*, Act III, Hecate says:

I will but 'noint, and then I'll mount.
(A Spirit like a cat descends. Voice above.)

There's one come down to fetch his dues.
(Later on the Voice calls.) Hark! hark! the cat sings a brave treble
in her own language.

(Then MECATE.) Now I go, now I fly,
Malkin, my sweet spirit, and I; etc.

NOTE.—Almost the same words are sung in the music to *Macbeth*.
"One of the frauds of witchcraft," says Timbs, "is the witch pretending to transform herself into a certain animal, the favourite and

most usual transformation being a cat; hence cats were tormented by the ignorant vulgar."

"**Rutterkin** was a famous cat, a cat who was "cater" — cousin to the great-great-great-great-great-great-great-great-great-great-grandmother of Grimalkin, and first cat in the caterie of an old woman who was tried for bewitching a daughter of the Countess of Rutland in the beginning of the sixteenth century. The menedis connects him with cats of great renown in the annals of witchcraft, a science whereto they have been allied as poor old women, one of whom, it appears, on the authority of an old pamphlet entitled 'News from Scotland', etc., printed in the year 1591, 'confessed that she took a cat and christened it, etc., and that in the night following, the said cat was conveyed into the midst of the sea by all these witches sayling in their Riddles, or Cives, and so left the said cat right before the towne of Leith in Scotland. This done, there did arise such a tempest at sea as a greater hath not been seen, etc., Againe, it is confessed that the said christened cat was the cause of the kinges majestie's shippe, at his coming forthe of Denmarke, had a contrarie winde to the rest of the shippes then being in his companie, which thing was most strange and true, as the kinges majestie acknowledged, for when the rest of the shippes had a fair and good winde, then was the winde contrarie, and altogether against his majestie,' etc."

"In some parts black cats are said to bring good luck, and in Searborough (Henderson's 'Folk-lore of the Northern Counties'), a few years ago, sailors' wives were in the habit of keeping one, thinking thereby to ensure the safety of their husbands at sea. This, consequently, gave black cats such a value that no one else could keep them, as they were nearly always stolen. There are various proverbs which attach equal importance to this lucky animal, as, for example:

Whenever the cat o' the house is black,
The lasses o' lovers will have no lack.

"And again:
Kiss the black cat,
An' 'twill make ye fat;
Kiss the white ane,
'Twill make ye lean.



“In Scotland there is a children’s rhyme upon the purring of the cat:

Dirdum drum,
Three threads and a thrum;
Tarun gray, thrum gray!

“In Devonshire and Wiltshire it is believed that a May cat—or, in other words, a cat born in the month of May—will never catch any rats or mice, but contrary to the wont of cats, will bring into the house snakes, and slow-worms, and other disagreeable reptiles. In Huntingdonshire it is a common saying that ‘A May kitten makes a dirty cat. If a cat should leap over a corpse, it is said to portend misfortune.’ Gough, in his ‘Sepulchral Monuments’, says that in Orkney, during the time the corpse remains in the house, all cats are locked up, and the looking-glasses covered over. In Devonshire a superstition prevails that a cat will not remain in a house with an unburied corpse; and stories are often told how, on the death of one of the inmates of a house, the cat has suddenly made its disappearance, and not returned again until after the funeral. The sneezing of a cat, says Brand², appears to have been considered as a lucky omen to a bride who was to be married on the succeeding day.

“‘In Cornwall,’ says Hunt, ‘those little gatherings which come on children’s eyelids, locally called “Whilks,” and also “warts” are cured by passing the tail of a black cat nine times over the place. If a ram cat, the cure is more certain. In Ireland it is considered highly unlucky.’ ”³.

Sailors are very superstitious as regards cats. If a black cat comes on board, it is a presage of disaster; if the ship’s cat is more lively than ordinary, it is a sign of wind: but if the cat is accidentally drowned, then there is consternation, which does not wear off until the vessel is safe in harbour.

Lady Wilde, in her “Irish Legends,” gives a cat story quite of the fairy type, and well in keeping with many of witchcraft and sorcery. “One dark, cold night, as an old woman was spinning, there came three taps at her door and not until after the last did she open it, when a pleading voice said: ‘Let me in, let me in,’ and a handsome black cat, with a white breast, and two white kittens entered. The old woman spun on, and the cats purred loudly, till the mother puss warned her that it was very late that they wanted some milk, and that the fairies wanted her room that night to dance and sup in. The milk was given, the cats thanked her, and said they would not forget her kindness; but, ere they vanished up the chimney they left her a great silver coin, and the fairies had their ball untroubled by the old woman’s presence, for the pussy’s warning was a gentle hint.”

If a kitten comes to a house in the morning, it is lucky; if in the evening, it portends evil of some kind, unless it stays to prevent it.

A cat’s hair is said to be indigestible, and if one is swallowed death will ensue (Northern).

Milton, in his "Astrolegaster," p. 48, tells us: "That when the cat washes her face over her eares we shall have great store of raine."

Lord Westmoreland, in a poem "To a cat bore me company in confinement," says:

Scraten but thine ear,
Then boldly tell what weather's drawing near.

The cat sneezing appears to be a lucky omen to a bride.

It was a vulgar notion that cats, when hungry, would eat coals; and even to this day, in some parts there is a doubt about it. In "The Tamer Tamed, or, Woman's Pride," Izame says to Morose, "I'd learn to eat coals with a hungry cat"; and in Beduca, "the first daughter says, "They are cowards; eat coals like compelled cats." Note another superstition set forth in, "The crying of cats, espreys, ravens, or other birds upon the tops of houses in the night time, are observed by the vulgar to presignify death to the sick."⁴.

There is also a superstition that cats will suck the breath of infants. Nothing could be more ridiculous. The formation of the cats' mouth is not well adapted for such action the under jaw being shorter than the upper, which is one reason why it **laps** fluids insteads of drinking. Cats will creep into cradles, but for no other purpose than that of sleep, the bed and clothes being warm and soft, and of course comfortable; yet instead of doing harm, they help to keep the child's temperature more even in cold weather. Of course, if they lie on the infant, it is a different matter.

Excerpts from "Our Cats and All About Them, their varieties, habits, and management; and for show" by Harrison Weir, FRHS published Tunbridge Wells, 1889 pp 195-199

1. Hene's "Every-day Book," Vol. I
2. **Popular Antiquities**, 1849 Vol. III, p. 187
3. Mr. T. F. Thielton Dyer's, **English Folklore**
4. Brand.

