

I made the Death Cat's acquaintance in a large Children's Hospital in America, and his eerie conduct on the occasion of our introduction was not calculated to make me wish for his friendship. I remember it was late in the evening of the 13th October, 1887, and the House Physician had just sat down in my room to speak to me about a bad case, when one of the night Nurses came down with more trouble and excitement written on her face than Hospital discipline and training allows. She apologised for her nervous condition, and begged the Doctor to go up into her Ward at once, as she feared that little Georgie was sinking fast. And then she added, half deprecatingly, "And that horrible cat has been sitting at the child's bedside for the last hour, so there's no chance for him, and I can't drive it away, and it makes us all so nervous."

The Doctor laughed, and made a remark that Nurse A. had been too long on night duty, and was getting shaky, and that, though he didn't "take much stock" in this cat business, he would like me to go up with him to the Ward on a visit to the little patient, and to see the creature of whom I had heard before in a vague way, but who had not, as yet, been brought to my official notice.

As we walked along the winding corridors, dim and dreary at that late hour, on our way to Ward No. 3, I mentally resolved that we would hear no more of this nonsense, and that the cat and the superstition should be together removed from the building; and, consequently, was in a very prosaic and practical frame of mind when we entered, but I must confess that I was almost startled out of my self-possession when I first beheld the "Death Cat" in all his native hideousness, crouching at the foot of the bed on which the child lay—poor little fellow—with his sands of life ebbing slowly away.

The cat had a wide-awake, unblinking, eager look in his eye, as if he had work to do from which he had no right to shrink; and, indeed, it proved impossible to move him. The Doctor tried blows and kicks, from which the wretched creature recoiled in a perfectly natural way. He would retire for a time, but somehow it always happened that he was back again in his post, at the foot of the cot, before we could congratulate ourselves on his defeat.

At last, Dr. H., who can, with me, vouch for the full truth of my story, a little ashamed of his violence and his superstition, remarked, half apologetically—

"Well! Anyhow the poor brute can't hurt the child. I guess we'd better let him stop."

And there he stayed, with that curious, far-away look in his great yellow eyes; and the morning broke and came and found him there, sleepless,

watchful, and alert; and it was not until our "bad case, in No. 3," had passed away and beyond, that the relentless "Death Cat" left his post.

Again and again attempts were made to remove him, but with no result. There he was, and there he would be, until his ghastly watch was ended.

How he left the Ward, and where he went, none knew.

CHAPTER II.

WE had a wonderful collection of pets in our Hospital—canaries, parrots, dogs, and other creatures in profusion. But the cats out-numbered them all. The Hospital seemed to be their happy hunting-ground; and, on the whole, they were an amiable, grandmotherly set, who only asked to be well fed and to be kept warm.

They were great favourites with the children; but the affection was not appreciated, and it was very rare to see one in the Wards.

The "Death Cat" had never been known to show an interest in any but the most extreme cases, and generally made his appearance at the bedside a few hours only before the death of a child; but I remember one little fellow to whom, from the first, he seemed to be much attracted—a jolly, chubby, rosy-faced little Scotch boy, whose parents had just come out from "the old country," and had brought him to be treated for a sprained ankle, obtained during some mischievous frolic on board ship. At first we very much resented the friendship between "our Donald" and this ill-fated cat; but felt so confident that the hardy little Caledonian was proof against any "uncanny" influence this strange and ghastly creature might possess, that we used to let them play together—at least, "Donny" used to play while the cat watched him, with a mystic intelligence in those large eerie eyes that seemed to penetrate into the secrets of the future.

It is no longer fashionable to make remarks in parentheses to the "gentle reader," but I would like to say a few words on the subject of the story I am writing. And I would say, first of all, that it is absolutely true; and, next, that we never believed that the cat could influence in any way the passing away of our little patients. But we certainly knew that this creature had a keen sense and prescience of death, and that in some mysterious way it was a source of attraction. For, with one exception, which will be touched upon in the course of my tale, every child at whose cot this creature crouched was sure to die.

And poor little Donald was no exception. Despite his chubby face and his sturdy northern limbs—in spite of all our efforts and our faith in his healthy constitution to pull him through—he only went to prove the unerring instinct of our rightly-named death herald. A few days' illness

[previous page](#)

[next page](#)