

The Black Cat

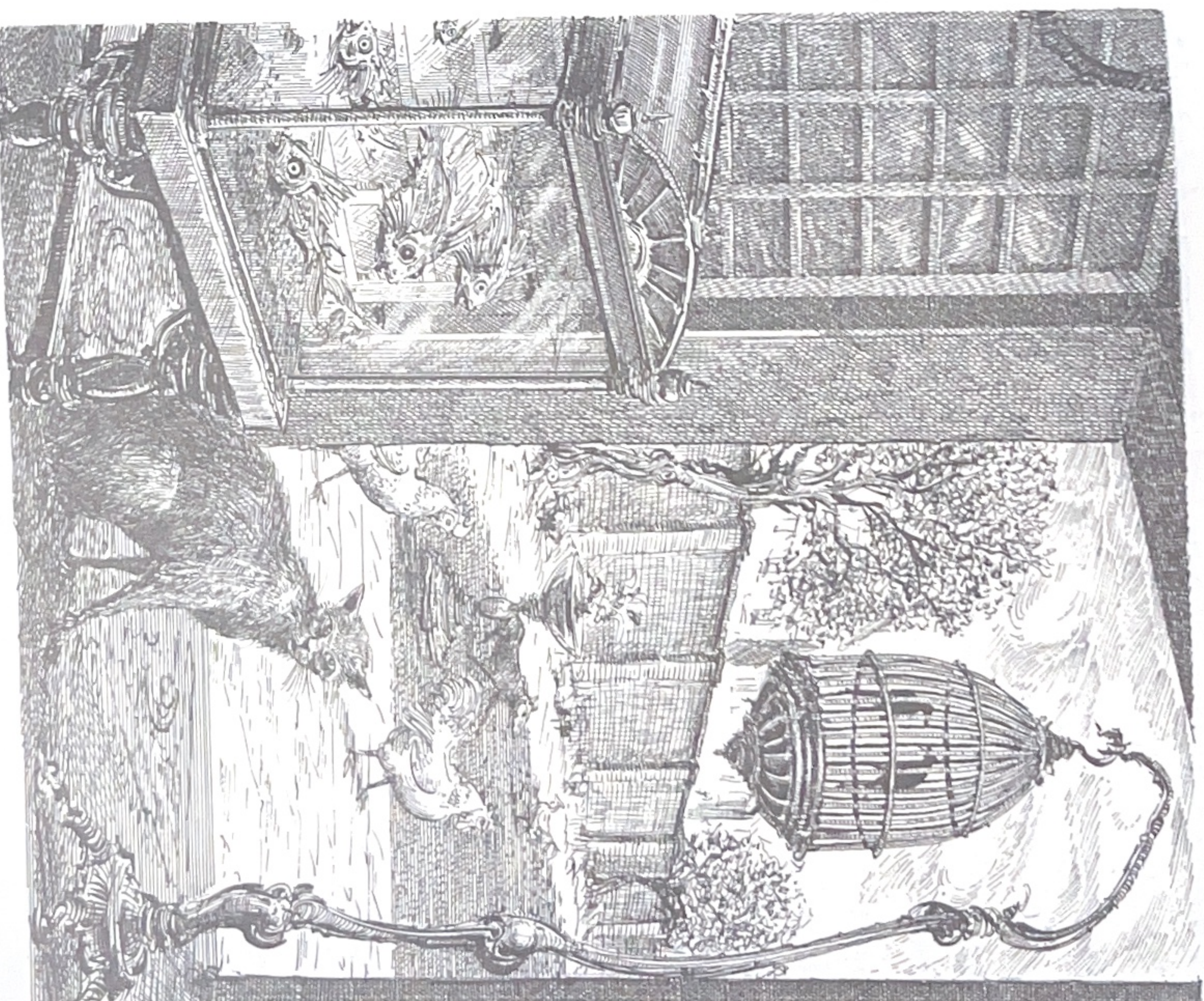
I know you will not believe this story. Only a madman could hope that you would believe it – and I am not mad. But as I am going to die tomorrow, I would like to tell my story to the world today. Perhaps some day, somebody more calm and less excitable than me, will be able to explain it.

I have always loved animals. I loved them deeply, from the very first days of my life. When I was young, we always had many animals in our house, and so I used to spend most of my days playing with them and taking care of them. As the years passed, I grew into a quiet, gentle man, and my love for animals grew too. I found that they were more friendly, more honest than most men. Animals were always my best friends.

I got married when I was quite young. Luckily, my wife loved animals too, and she used to buy me many animals as presents. In fact, our house was always full of animals – we had birds, fish, a dog, chickens, and *a cat*.

This cat, whom we called Pluto, was a large black cat. He was a beautiful animal, and he was also very clever. I loved Pluto more than I loved all my other animals. I wanted to do everything for him myself, so I never let my wife take care of him. I used to play with him and give him his food, and he followed me everywhere I went.

For several years Pluto and I were the best of friends, but during this time my life slowly changed. I became a heavy drinker, and my need for alcohol soon grew into a terrible



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disease. I was often angry and violent. I began to shout at my wife, and I even started to hit her. My animals, too, felt the change in me. I stopped taking care of them and sometimes I was even cruel to them. But I was never cruel to Pluto. As time passed, my disease grew worse, and soon even Pluto was not safe from my violence.

One night I arrived home late. I was very, very drunk. When Pluto saw me, he tried to run away from me, and this made me angry. I caught him by his neck and shook him. He, in his fright, bit me on the hand. At once, a wild, terrible anger filled me, and I could feel nothing except burning hate. Slowly I took a knife from my pocket, opened it, and then carefully cut out one of Pluto's eyes from its socket. I shake today as I write these words down. Every time I remember that day, I still feel sadness and pain.

When I woke up the next morning, I felt ashamed of what I had done. But this feeling was not strong enough to make me change my life. I continued to drink because it was too difficult for me to stop. Soon, I had forgotten what I had done.

As the months passed, Pluto got better. His empty eye socket still looked terrible, but at least he wasn't in pain any more. Not surprisingly, he used to run away from me when he saw me, frightened that I would hurt him again. At first I was sad to see him run away – an animal which had once so loved me. Then I began to feel a little angry. There is something strange about the human heart. We humans seem to like hurting ourselves. Haven't we all, a hundred times, done something stupid or evil just because we know that we should not do it? It was because of this, this need to hurt myself, that I did this next evil thing . . .

One morning I woke, found a rope and calmly tied it round Pluto's neck. Then I hung the poor animal from a tree and left it there to die. I cried as I did this terrible thing. My face was wet with tears and my heart was black and heavy. But I killed it. I killed it *because* I knew it had loved me, *because*

it hadn't hurt me, even *because* I knew that I was doing something terrible and wrong. That same night we had a fire in our house. I was woken from my sleep by loud shouts of 'Fire!' When I opened my eyes, I found that the fire had already reached the bedroom. My wife and I ran out of the house as fast as we could. Luckily



I hung the poor animal from a tree and left it there to die.

we escaped death, but the house and almost everything in it was destroyed.

The next day I went back into the house and saw several people standing in a group, looking at a wall. It was the only wall of the house that was still standing after the fire. It was one of my bedroom walls, the one where the head of my bed had rested. As I came nearer to the wall I heard someone say, 'How strange!' and another person, 'That's impossible!' And then I saw it – a huge cat. Not a real cat, but the shape of a cat outlined in the white bedroom wall. It was as clear as a picture. I could even see a rope around the animal's neck.

I stood there in horror, too frightened to move. Then, slowly, I thought back to the night before. I had left the cat hanging from a tree, in the garden at the back of my house. When a neighbour had first noticed the fire, many people had run into the garden. One of them had probably cut the cat from the tree and thrown it through my open window, in order to wake me up. The cat's body had hit my bedroom wall and left its shape there, because the plaster on that wall was new and still soft.

Although I thought that this was a very reasonable explanation, the strange shape on the wall still worried me. I thought about the cat day and night. I began to feel sorry that I had killed it. I started walking around the streets at night looking at all the cats, to see if I could find another one like Pluto.

One night, I was drinking in my favourite bar when I suddenly noticed a large, black cat. I went up to it and touched it. It was very large – as large as Pluto had been. It also looked

very like Pluto. Except for one thing. Pluto had been black all over, but this cat had a white mark on its front.

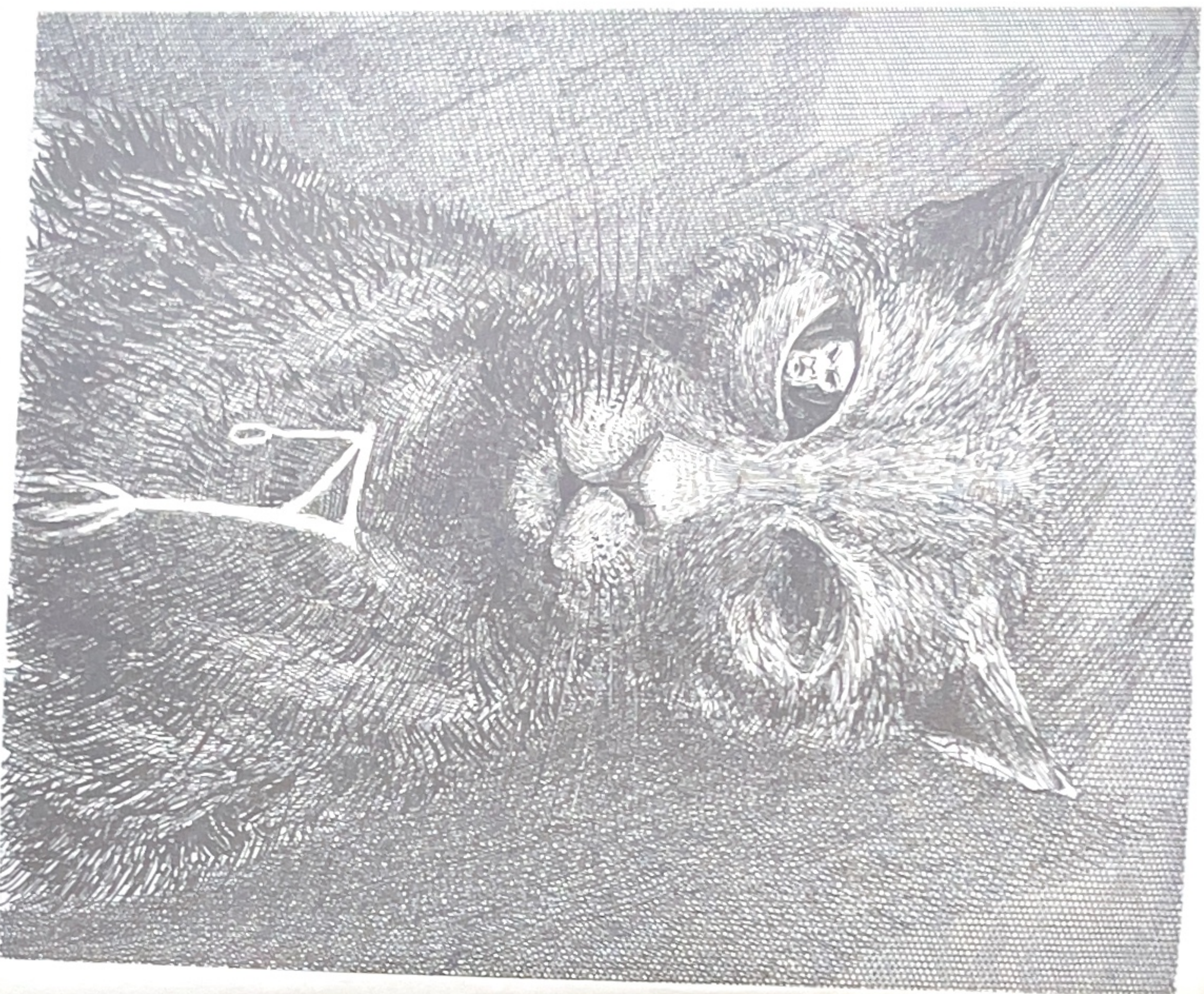
I touched the cat and he immediately lay down against my leg and seemed very friendly towards me. This, I decided, was the cat that I wanted. I offered the barman some money to buy the cat from him, but he said that the cat didn't belong to him. In fact, he had no idea where it had come from.

So I took the cat home. My wife liked it immediately, and it stayed with us from that day. But soon – I do not know why – the cat started to make me angry, and, as time passed, I began to hate it. I did not hurt it in any way, but I always tried to keep as far away from it as possible.

I knew one reason why I hated this cat so much. On the morning after I had brought it home, I saw that, like Pluto, it had lost one of its eyes. My wife, who was the kind, gentle person that I had once been, only loved the cat more because of this. But the cat didn't like my wife. It loved me alone.

Every time I sat down, it used to jump onto my knees. When I went out of a room, it used to run out in front of me and get between my feet, or climb up my legs. At these times, I wanted to kill it. But I didn't, because I was too afraid – afraid of the cat, and even more afraid of the white mark on its chest.

I have already mentioned this mark. At first, there was nothing strange about it. It was just a white mark. But slowly this mark grew and changed until it had the clear shape of a terrible, a horrible thing – I find it difficult, here in my prison, to write the word. It was the shape of the GALLOWS! Yes, those horrible wooden posts from which they hang men by a rope around the neck!



'It was the shape of the GALLOWES!'

As each day passed, my fear grew and grew. I, a man, a strong man, had become afraid of a cat! Why was I so frightened, so worried by a stupid animal? Day and night, I could get no rest. I had the most terrible dreams, and my mind turned to dark, evil thoughts. I hated everything, everybody – and life itself.

One day my wife and I needed to get something from the cellar underneath the house. The cat followed us down the steps and threw itself in front of me. I almost fell on my face and, mad with anger, I took hold of an axe and tried to kill the animal. But my wife caught my arm to stop me, and then anger exploded in my mind. I turned and drove the axe deep into her head. She fell dead on the floor, without a sound.

After this horrible murder, I calmly made plans to hide the body. I knew I couldn't take it out of the house, either by day or night, because the neighbours would see me. So I had to think of other ways... I could cut the body up into very small pieces and then burn them in a fire. I could hide the body under the floor. Or I could put the body in a box and then ask someone to carry the box away... Finally, I thought of a better idea. I decided to hide the body behind the walls of the cellar.

I knew immediately which wall to choose. There was a wall in the cellar round the bottom of an old chimney, which was no longer used. This wall had bricks in the front and back but was empty in the middle. I started work at once. I took out some of the bricks from the front wall and carefully put the body against the back wall. Then I put back the bricks and covered them with plaster. I made sure that the plaster did not look new, and soon the wall looked just the same as all the other walls. When I had finished my work, I looked at the plaster. 'I've never done a better piece of work!' I said to myself happily.

I then looked around for the cat, to kill it. It had brought too much unhappiness into my life, and so it, too, must now



Anger exploded in my mind.

die. I looked for it everywhere, but it had disappeared. I was free at last! That night I had a deep, peaceful sleep—I, who had just killed my wife, slept well!

Three days passed and still the cat did not appear. I was now a happy man, happier than I had been for a long time. I wasn't worried by what I had done. People had asked a

few questions and the police had visited my house, but they had found nothing.

On the fourth day the police visited again and began to search the house. They looked into all the rooms and then went down into the cellar. I went with them, feeling calm and safe. I watched them as they looked everywhere. They seemed quite happy that there was nothing there and they got ready to leave. I was very happy. I was sure that I was safe, but I wanted to say something, just a word or two, to show how unworried I was.

'Gentlemen,' I said, 'I'm pleased that you've found nothing here, and that you are now leaving this house . . . But let me show you something, gentlemen. Do you see how well built this house is? These walls, you will notice, are very strong.' As I said these words, I knocked on the wall with a stick—the wall where I had hidden my wife!

At that moment we heard a sound. It was a strange sound, unlike anything I had ever heard before. The sound was soft at first, almost like a baby crying. Then it grew louder and louder and turned into one long, endless scream. It was like a cry rising from Hell.

The policemen looked at me, then at one another. They ran to the wall and started pulling out the bricks as fast as they could. In minutes the wall was down and there, for all to see, was the body of my dead wife. On top of her head, with a red, open mouth and one burning eye, sat the black cat—the animal which had made me a murderer, and which would now send me to my death.

I had put the horrible thing into the wall, alive, with my wife!