

Yellow Eyes: Part One

by Tony Adler

There are fleeting moments in one's life when one is pushed to question reality. As school-boys when new experiences were bright and shiny there was the old riddle, "When is a door not a door? But in the light of history one might ask. "When is a cat not a cat?"

And thereby hangs a tail. In the Middle Ages cats were considered to be the familiars of witches, and were actually banned from England. One must ask one's self, why cats? Why not dogs, monkeys, or rabbits? It had to be cats. Why did the ancient Egyptians deify cats? They even had a goddess of cats, Basset, the mother of all Moggies. (in England cats are called Moggies.)

Black cats are often depicted in horror stories and as appearing on dark Halloween nights. There is obviously something about them that turns toward the supernatural. Mark Twain had Tom Sawyer burying one on a witch's grave at midnight.

The mysterious black cat that appeared in Chelem bears watching closely, for in its case reality was stretched. Was the fear it engendered good or bad? As you read this small history be aware of the cat as it spans the generations and you will solve the riddle yourself.

In the Stetel (village) of Chelem, where the inhabitants were never noted for sagesse or chochma (wisdom) there stood a dilapidated schule on a back street at the farthest end of the marketplace. Behind the schule (school) loomed the ramshackle dwelling of

the Shamus, (sexton) which at its rear boasted a minuscule garden patch bordered by the teich (creek).

In the summer the teich was a sluggish stream wending between scrawny willow trees that bent their yellowed branches to bathe narrow coppery leaves in the brackish water. These, with the tall bulrushes, served to sustain and anchor sodden pallets of floating green scum. After sundown bloated frogs would raise their heads above the bubbling carpet of algae to join their voices in chorus, whilst clouds of swirling, bobbing gnats danced across the steaming surface. These insects provided sustenance for the amphibious singers, and gave the impression of a willow-the-whispish figure, a disembodied spirit, aimlessly floating in the twilight.

Beneath the surface of the teich dwelt minnows, sticklebacks, newts, and fearsome dragonfly larvae, equipped with sharp mandibles capable of injecting potent venom. Empty cases of these creatures could be found clinging dryly to the crisp green reeds which grew in clumps in the shallows. Larger fish such as carp, chub, and dace, kept to the relative safety of the deeper waters away from the tangled growth.

Few of the Chelemers fished in the teich. The several meters of soft mud on each side of its banks made the approach extremely difficult. There was a tale that had long circulated in the stetel. It was the story of the young

son of Rabbi Fischbein, who had disappeared forty years earlier leaving only his stieffell (jackboots) sticking out of the mud.

This was at that time that the black cat had first appeared at the schule. Though cats rarely live to be twenty, the Shamus Motke Schumann, would swear that this particular cat had not changed its appearance nor aged in the last two score years. Of course old Schmattes, as the Chelemers called the threadbare guardian of the light, did not have the greatest reputation for reliability. Still, the cat had taken up residence in a niche in the wall of the rear entry to the Shamus's cottage.

The feline never strayed far from this back entrance. He grew sleek and fat and his slanted yellow eyes seemed to glow with a condescending smugness. The simple people openly fed the complacent animal in the vain hope that the einora (evil eye) would not fall upon them or their families. Respectable burgers (shainer yiden), would surreptitiously toss a piece of sausage in the direction of the entry after having concocted some implausible reason to visit the Shamus.

As time passed, older Chelemers were laid to rest under carved stone markers in the crumbling besoylem (cemetery). The youth, who followed them, filling the benches of the cheder, (school for young boys) then taking their places in the yeshiva (study hall) had ingrained in them from birth the habit of feeding the cat. It became a daily mitzvah (good deed).

There was one single soul in the stetel who did not minister to the wants of the feline, Yankel, the gangster. As a boy, Yankel had shot round pebbles into the dark back entry in an effort to make the old cat move or even run outside. He had never been successful.

As an adult Yankel began carrying a Nagana (Russian automatic pistol) for the boss of the local syndicate, and several killings had been added to his credit. Because of this his visits to Chelem were short and infrequent.

Late one Sunday night, Yankel had taken a few glasses of schnapps too many, and the boisterous conversation in Frankle's knipe (bar) turned to the subject of the black cat. No one, so far, had dared venture into the foreboding back entrance to confront the creature by night. Simon, the Schneider (tailor), also a few drinks over his limit, and obviously schicker (drunk) had made a wager with Nikoli, the postman. He would beat Yankel to the schule and be the first to flush out the cat under the light of the full moon.

A few minutes after midnight a ragged group of Chelmers, well fortified with Dutch courage, staggered out of the knipe. Yankel and Simon led the way as the group noisily stumbled over damp cobblestones, hiccupping and hushing one another with an occasional loud "Sha!" As they meandered past the home of Manny, the Schuster (cobbler), a hefty starushka (old woman) with a determined gleam in her eye, silently pounced upon them. She took her errant husband by the ear and marched him firmly into the house slamming the door meaningfully behind her.

On arriving at the front

of the schule many of the revellers had lost the enthusiasm that had started them on their improbable mission. Yankel and Simon were still intent on winning the wager, so another of the group had to accompany them to verify that the cat had indeed been driven outside. Velvel, the balagole (coachman), had a bottle of bronfn inside his coat pocket with which he kept the cold out of his bones and his courage at full strength. It was he who crept around to the exit of the Shamus's quarters with the two contestants. The moon reflected from the teich, illuminating the tulle fog that crept along the ground shrouding the legs of the three reluctant heroes as they approached the shadowy maw where the beast was known to lurk.

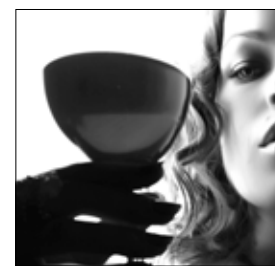
Simon cast a few stones into the darkness, but no sound ensued, growing braver, he approached until he could peer into the gloom. Just inside the entrance two yellow eyes blazed on the same level as his. "Kain ainore" (no evil eye), he cried in fear. He turned and ran to join the others. "I saw its eyes," he panted eagerly, taking the bottle proffered by the balagole and with trembling hands guiding the burning liquid to his lips.

Yankel cocked his Nagana, and then as if he were bent on a simple assassination for his master, crept up to the doorway and slipped inside. Four

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