

It is said that in Ulthar, which lies beyond the river Skai, no man may kill a cat; and this I can verily believe as I gaze upon him who sitteth purring before the fire. For the cat is cryptic, and close to strange things which men cannot see. He is the soul of antique Ægyptus, and bearer of tales from forgotten cities in Meroë and Ophir. He is the kin of the jungle's lords, and heir to the secrets of hoary and sinister Africa.

The sages of the sand and jungle have all testified to the authentic marvel of the cat; and many the theologians have agreed as to his unique position in creation. It was the law of Ulthar that no man might kill a cat; and this law had been framed by the people because of the sins of those who had once slew.

In Ulthar, before the law was made, there dwelt an old cotter and his wife who delighted to trap and slay the cats of their neighbours. Why they did this I know not; save that many hate the voice of the cat in the night, and take it ill that cats should run stealthily about yards and gardens at twilight. But whatever the reason, this old man and woman took pleasure in trapping and slaying every cat which came near to their hovel; and from some of the sounds heard after dark, many villagers fancied that the manner of slaying was exceedingly peculiar. But the villagers did not discuss such things with the old man and his wife, because of the habitual expression on the withered faces of the two; and because their cottage was so small, and so darkly hidden under spreading oaks at the back of a neglected yard.

In truth, much as the owners of cats hated these folk, they feared them more; and instead of berating them as brutal assassins, merely took care that no cherished pet or mouser should stray toward the remote hovel under the dark trees.

When, through some unavoidable oversight, a cat was missed and sounds heard after dark, the loser would lament impotently, or console himself by thanking Fate that it was not one of his children who had thus vanished. For the people of Ulthar were simple, and knew not whence it is all cats first came.

One day a caravan of strange wanderers from the south entered the narrow, cobbled streets of Ulthar. Dark wanderers they were, and unlike the other roving folk who passed through the village

twice every year. In the market-place they told fortunes for silver, and bought gay beads from the merchants. What was the land of these wanderers none could tell; but it was seen that they were given to strange prayers, and that they worshipped some unknown god of cats, whom they danced before in a festive way when the moon was gibbous.

To these wanderers the villagers spoke freely of the ill deeds of the old man and woman, and were told that these dark folk would visit the cotter's hovel that night.

That evening the wanderers left Ulthar, and were never seen again. And the householders were troubled when they noticed that in all the village there was not a cat to be found. Felines large and small, black, gray, striped, yellow, and white, all were missing. And in the homes was much sorrow; for the owners feared that the old man and his wife had taken advantage of the absence of watchers to slay and bury their victims.

But the people of Ulthar did not speak of the thing to the old cotter and his wife; because of the habitual expression on the withered faces of the two, and because their cottage was so small, and so darkly hidden under spreading oaks at the back of a neglected yard.

On the third night after the wanderers' departure, the villagers were aroused by a cry of anguish from the direction of the dark cottage; and when they gathered at the scene they beheld the old cotter and his wife in death. Some dreadful thing had torn them asunder and left them hideously mangled. And the people questioned the witnesses and debated about the event.

Shortly afterward there appeared in Ulthar a new law, that no man might kill a cat; and the peasants marvelled at how the law had come into being.