

Cat Luck

Jeffery Farnol

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Title: Cat Luck

Date of first publication: 1929

Author: Jeffery Farnol (1878-1952)

Date first posted: Oct. 11, 2019

Date last updated: Oct. 11, 2019

Faded Page eBook #20191032

This eBook was produced by: Al Haines

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[Source: Collier's, January 12, 1929]

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By Jeffery Farnol

John Pentreath sat in his great sea-boots, stroking the cat with large, brown hand; and John was like his hand—big and strong and gentle, albeit there were times when that same hand could become a fist, quick in action and terrible.

"Black cats be main lucky, Deborah!" said he, stealing a glance at his comely wife, who sat beside him on the huge, high-backed settle, busied with her needle. "Ay, lass, main lucky be black cats!" he repeated.

Deborah looked at her man beneath level, black brows.

"Jan," said she, a catch in her smooth, soft voice, but holding his glance with hers, "when a sailorman talks o' luck there be somewhat i' the wind, so—what du ee mean, Jan?"

"Nay, now," he answered, shaking his curly head, "I mean no more'n what I says, lass—a black cat be lucky and this

Tib o' yourn be black as ... as a night wi' no moon or blink o' star."

"And there be no moon—tonight. Jan ... oh, Jan!" she whispered, "I du believe ee be turning to 'the trade' again—"

"The trade?" repeated John. "Who—me, lass?" And he opened his blue eyes in stare of such wide innocence that her fears were instantly confirmed.

"Jan," she questioned in the same hushed tone, "where be your lugger, where be the Saucy Lass?"

"Why, she should be layin' in the Cove, for sure."

"Ay, I know she should, but she bean't!" said Deborah, her dark eyes quick with anxiety. "Where is she to, Jan?"

John slipped a long arm about his wife's trim waist and spoke:

"Nay, now, Deborah, why take on—?"

"Where be your lugger, Jan? Oh, my dear, I du believe ee be goin' to make another 'run' ... and after all your promises! And the Preventives so watchful and suspicious of ee! Oh, Jan, be ee agoin' out again? Tell me the truth, lad."

"Well, then ... oh, ay I du be agoin', lass, for one more venter ... just one ... the last, the very last—"

"Oh, Jan, and ee promised—"

"Belay, Deborah lass, an' lemme tell ee," said John, troubled by her reproachful eyes, the nervous tremor of her clasping arms. "Y'see it be like this—it du so 'appen as Israel Trevanion's boat went aground t'other night an' got bilged, can't be seaworthy for a week—so tonight, him being with a cargo to run, I—"

"Be ee goin' in his place, Jan?"

"Why, no, lass, no—Israel be comin' along wi' me aboard my lugger. Ye know as Israel an' me be old shipmates, Debby, an' I couldn't refuse him spite o' the promise I made ee, dear lass—"

"But ... Oh, Jan, if they took an' 'prison ee—"

"Never fear, Debby."

"But there be that Tom Mings as be just made an officer o' the Preventives, he be forever comin' an' goin' hereabouts."

"Ay, dang him! You be a rare handsome creeter, Deborah —"

"Nay, don't be fullish, Jan! 'Tis because he suspicions ee, 'tis this brings him here.... So, Jan dear, doan't ee go tonight, doan't ee go, Jan, for my sake—"

"I be pledged, lass. Sweetheart, I be expected and go I must! Just once more, just this last run and never again, dear

lass, never again!"

"But, Jan, if there be danger ... supposing that Tom Mings should come—?"

"Why then, sweet lass, if ee think there be any danger lift the curtain at the lattice yonder and I'll know."

"Mrs. Pentreath, a fair good evenin', ma'm! Wot, all alone? Why, where be your John, then?"

"Why, Mr. Mings, Jan be over to Marazion."

"Oh, Mrs. Pentreath? Indeed, ma'm? Which then 'ee can't nowise be along o' that smugglin' raskell Israel Trevanion as be runnin' a cargo somewheres hereabouts tonight. Hows'ever, ma'm, me and my man Jarge 'ere—off wi' your castor to the lady, Jarge—me and Jarge, ma'm, will bide 'ere a while an' keep you company."

So saying, Mr. Mings, officer in the Preventive Service, resplendent in his new uniform, placed his fine new, gold-laced hat between the lighted lamp and china bowl of flowers upon the small solid table that stood in the recess before the curtained window and seated himself between Deborah and the window while Deborah went on sewing, her mind busy as her needle, seeking how she might reach and lift that veiling curtain if only for one little moment ...

It was at this moment that Tib, the big black cat, yawned, stretched, rose and, crossing the room sedately, tail in air, leapt upon the officer's knee, expectant of caresses; but Mings, ever mindful of his new uniform, promptly rid himself of the animal, which stared up at him with wide, topaz eyes, and, lashing indignant tail, paced back to his corner of the hearth.

"Now," quoth Mr. Mings, taking out his snuffbox and rapping it loudly, "talkin' o' smugglin', Mrs. Pentreath—"

"I ... I'm not!" said Deborah breathlessly.

"Why, no, ma'm, but I am, for, d'ye see, they're a'goin' to pass a act o' Parliament to make smuggling a capital offense, a matter for Jack Ketch ... the 'angman, ma'm, the noose, Mrs. Pentreath, the gallers an' jibbet, ma'm!" Deborah uttered a stifled gasp.

"Was you speakin', ma'm?"

"No. I ... I pricked my finger with the needle," she answered, stealing another yearning, agonized glance toward that lamp, that curtained window.

"So d'ye see, ma'm, if we should ha' the good fortun' to take any man smugglin'—tonight, say ... well, that man would be took, clapped in jail and dooly 'anged, ma'm—in a noose—on a gallers. And that man being dead, Mrs. Pentreath, they take his body, or as you might say, corpse, ma'm, and 'ang it in chains ... on a jibbet, for a warnin'."

Sick with a creeping horror, Deborah closed her eyes.... That they should work such ghastly doing on her loved John's handsome, stalwart body! Ah, dear God in Heaven, forbid it! ... Somehow she must reach the window.

A large moth was fluttering about the room making small, dreary rustlings against wall and ceiling and Tib, the black cat, cut short a yawn to watch it with unwinking, topaz eyes.

"Wot, Mrs. Pentreath, are ye faint, ma'm?" inquired Mings, closing snuffbox with a snap. "Shall Jarge get ye a drink o' water, ma'm?"

"No," said Deborah faintly. "No!" and, dropping her needlework, she rose, strung with desperate purpose, her burning gaze upon the curtained window ... and then—Tib leapt, reaching the table in a single bound, for the moth was hovering about the lamp ... from lamp it fluttered to the curtain—and again Tib leapt, upsetting the china bowl with a crash and, missing that fluttering insect, clung to the curtain with his every claw, swaying there a moment, and as Mings snatched up the lamp down came Tib and curtain in a writhing tangle.

Deborah sank back upon the settle, and, bowing her head between trembling hands, poured forth her passionate thankfulness in whispered prayer, for the lamplight was beaming through the unshrouded window, her beloved John was saved.

"Frighted ye, eh, ma'm?" growled Mings, setting the lamp in a place of safety. "Frighted ye, ma'm? And no wonder! That cat o' yourn might ha' set the place afire. Ah, and he's broke your fine chaney bowl and—Lord love us, lookee 'ere, ma'm!" And Mr. Mings showed his fine, new, gold-laced hat dripping with water. "Look at it, ma'm!" he growled, "and there be fools as says black cats is lucky!"

[The end of *Cat Luck* by Jeffery Farnol]