

# *Johnny Reed's Cat*

Folk-Lore And Legends: English

English

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*Intermediate*  
*7 min read*

“Yes, cats are queer folk, sure enough, and often know more than a simple beast ought to by knowledge that’s rightly come by. There’s that cat there, you’ve been looking at, will stand at a door on its hind legs with its front paws on the handle trying like a Christian to open the door, and mewling in a manner that’s almost like talking. He’s a London cat, he is, being brought me by a cousin who lives there, and is called Gilpin, after, I’m told, a mayor who was christened the same. He’s a knowing cat, sure enough; but it’s not the London cats that are cleverer than the country ones. Who knows, he may be a relative of Johnny Reed’s own tom-cat himself.”

“And who was Johnny Reed? and what was there remarkable about his cat?”

“Have you never heard tell of Johnny Reed’s cat? It’s an old tale they have in the north country, and it’s true enough, though folk may not believe it in these days when the Bible’s not gospel enough for some of them. I’ve heard my father often tell the story, and he came from Newcastle way, which is the very part where Johnny Reed used to live, being a parish sexton in a village not far away.

“Well, Johnny Reed was the sexton, as I’ve already said, and he and his wife kept a cat, a well enough behaved creature, sure enough, and a beast as he had no fault to set on, saving a few of the tricks which all cats play at times, and which seem born in the blood of the creatures. It was all black except one white paw, and seemed as honest and decent a beast as could be, and Tom would as soon have suspected it of being any more than it

really seemed to be as he would one of his own children themselves, like many other folk, perhaps, who, may be, have cats of the same kind, little thinking it.

“Well, the cat had been with him some years when a strange thing occurred.

“One night Johnny was going home late from the churchyard, where he had been digging a grave for a person who had died on a sudden, throwing the grave on Johnny’s hands unexpectedly, so that he had to stop working at it by the light of a lantern to have it ready for the next day’s burying. Well, having finished his work, and having put his tools in the shed in a corner of the yard, and having locked them up safe, he began to walk home pretty brisk, thinking would his wife be up and have a bit of fire for him, for the night was cold, a keen wind blowing over the fields.

“He hadn’t gone far before he comes to a gate at the roadside, and there seemed to be a strange shadow about it, in which Johnny saw, as it might be, a lot of little gleaming fires dancing about, while some stood steady, just like flashes of light from little windows in buildings all on fire inside. Says Johnny to himself, for he was not a man to be easily frightened, being accustomed by his calling to face things which might upset other folk—

“Hullo! What’s here? Here’s a thing I never saw before,’ and with that he walks straight up to the gate, while the shadow got deeper and the fires brighter the nearer he came to it.

“Well, when he came right up to the gate he finds that the shadow was just none at all, but nine black cats, some sitting and some dancing about, and the lights were the flashes from their eyes. When he came nearer he thought to scare them off, and he calls out—

“Sh—sh—sh,’ but never a cat stirs for all of it.

“I’ll soon scatter you, you ugly varmin,’ says Johnny, looking about him for a stone, which was not to be found, the night being dark and preventing him seeing one. Just then he hears a voice calling—

“Johnny Reed!

“Hullo!’ says he, ‘who’s that wants me?’

“Johnny Reed,’ says the voice again.

“Well,’ says Johnny, ‘I’m here,’ and looking round and seeing no one, for no one was about ’tis true. ‘Was it one of you,’ says he, joking like, to the cats, ‘as was calling me?’

“Yes, of course,’ answers one of them, as plain as ever Christian spoke. ‘It’s me as has called you these three times.’

“Well, with that, you may be sure, Johnny begins to feel curious, for ’twas the first time he had ever been spoken to by a cat, and he didn’t know what it might lead to exactly. So he takes off his hat to the cat, thinking that it was, perhaps, best to show it respect, and, seeing that he was unable to guess with whom he was dealing, hoping to come off all the better for a little civility.

“Well, sir,’ says he, ‘what can I do for you?’

“It’s not much as I want with you,’ says the cat, ‘but it’s better it’ll be with you if you do what I tell you. Tell Dan Ratcliffe that Peggy Poyson’s dead.’

“I will, sir,’ says Johnny, wondering at the same time how he was to do it, for who Dan Ratcliffe was he knew no more than the dead. Well, with that all the cats vanished, and Johnny, running the rest of the way home, rushes into his house, smoking hot from the fright and the distance he had to go over.

“Nan,’ says he to his wife, the first words he spoke, ‘who’s Dan Ratcliffe?’

“Dan Ratcliffe,’ says she. ‘I never heard of him, and don’t know there’s any one such living about here.’

“No more do I,’ says he, ‘but I must find him wherever he is.’

“Then he tells his wife all about how he had met the cats, and how they had stopped him and given him the message. Well, his cat sits there in front of the fire looking as snug and comfortable as a cat could be, and nearly half-asleep, but when Johnny comes to telling his wife the message the cats had given him, then it jumped up on its feet, and looks at Johnny, and says—

“What! is Peggy Poyson dead? Then it’s no time for me to be here;’ and with that it springs through the door

and vanishes, nor was ever seen again from that day to this.”

“And did the sexton ever find Dan Ratcliffe,” I asked.

“Never. He searched high and low for him about, but no one could tell him of such a person, though Johnny looked long enough, thinking it might be the worse for him if he didn’t do his best to please the cats. At last, however, he gave the matter up.”

“Then, what was the meaning of the cat’s message?”

“It’s hard to tell; but many folk thought, and I’m inclined to agree with them, that Dan Ratcliffe was Johnny’s own cat, and no one else, looking at the way he acted, and no other of the name being known. Who Peggy Poyson was no one could tell, but likely enough it was some relative of the cat, or may be some one it was interested in, for it’s little we know concerning the creatures and their ways, and with whom and what they’re mixed up.”

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