

King o' the Cats

Told by Aaron Shepard

Reader's Theater Edition # 36

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PREVIEW: Peter is notorious for telling wild stories—so who will believe him now, with his crazy claims about cats?

GENRE: Folktales, tall tales, ghost stories

READERS: 10 to 14 or more

CULTURE: British (English)

READER AGES: 10–12

THEME: Credibility

LENGTH: 10 minutes

ROLES: Narrators 1 & 2, Peter, Bishop, King, Father Allen, Tom, Cats (2 to 6), Dog, (Altar Kitten)

NOTES: This is a much expanded retelling of the original folktale. For best effect, place NARRATOR 1 at far left, and 2 at far right, as seen from the audience. With more than two CATS, one or two can double as DOG and ALTAR KITTEN. Readers making background sounds must make sure that other readers can be heard and understood! Stage directions can be ignored if too demanding. For special features, visit www.aaronshp.com/extras.

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NARRATOR 1: Young Peter Black was a good man, but everyone said he had one big fault.

PETER: *(silently to audience, tells wild story with big gestures)*

NARRATOR 1: He loved to tell wild stories.

PETER: *(keeps telling)*

NARRATOR 2: Peter was the sexton at the Church of St. Thomas the Believer, there in the little town of Tabby-on-Thames. He stayed in the cottage behind the church, right next to Father Allen's house.

NARRATOR 1: Many were the jobs he'd held before that, but with his wild stories, he'd managed to lose every one.

FATHER ALLEN: *(clears his throat to get Peter's attention)*

PETER: *(stops telling, looking startled)*

NARRATOR 2: Father Allen had warned him.

FATHER ALLEN: *(sternly)* Peter, this is the last job you're likely to get in this town. If you want to keep it, your wild stories must stop!

PETER: *(looks abashed)*

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NARRATOR 1: One night Peter couldn't sleep. He tossed and he turned and at last got up to make himself some tea. But when he glanced out his window, he saw the windows of the church ablaze with light.

PETER: *(muttering)* What in the world . . . ? There shouldn't be anyone there, this time of night. And how'd they get in, anyway?

NARRATOR 2: Peter pulled on a coat, crossed the yard, and quietly unlocked the back door. As he crept through the vestry, he heard a sound from the church.

BISHOP: *(as if performing ceremony)* Meow, meow *(keeps meowing)*

PETER: Sounds like a cat! But I never knew a cat to light a candle.

NARRATOR 1: He peered around the curtain hung at the church entrance, and what he saw made him gasp.

PETER: *(gasps)*

NARRATOR 2: There was not *one* cat, but *hundreds* of cats, of every size and coloring. They filled the pews, and all of them sat upright just like people.

NARRATOR 1: On the steps to the altar, a big black cat—the biggest cat Peter had ever seen—was kneeling with his head bowed. Standing above him with paws upraised was a black cat in bishop's robes, intoning,

BISHOP: *Meow, meow (keeps meowing till he places crown, below)*

NARRATOR 2: An altar kitten approached with a velvet pillow on which lay a small golden crown. The bishop solemnly placed the crown on the head of the kneeling cat, who received it with a single soft

KING: *(softly, solemnly) Meow.*

NARRATOR 1: The church exploded with cries of

NARRATOR 1, CATS, & TOM: *(not in unison, as if cheering, as CATS and TOM stand) Meow, meow! (CATS and TOM keep meowing, but quickly fade in distance and stop as PETER runs home, below)*

NARRATOR 2: Peter didn't wait to see more. He raced through the vestry and back to his cottage, where he jumped into bed and stayed trembling under the covers till morning.

PETER: *(moans in terror)*

NARRATOR 1: Bright and early, Peter was over to see Father Allen. The priest was reading in the conservatory, his black cat Tom curled up on his lap.

FATHER ALLEN: *(pleasantly)* Good morning, Peter. What brings you here so early?

PETER: *(urgently, wide-eyed and gesturing)* Father Allen, I came to tell you about something terribly weird in the church last night. I saw these lights and I went over to check, and I heard a *meow*

TOM: *(like normal cat) Meow.*

NARRATOR 2: . . . said the priest's cat, Tom.

PETER: *(looking and pointing at Tom)* Yes, just like that. *(looks back at Father Allen)* And when I looked, there were hundreds of cats in the church. And there was this one big black cat, and he was kneeling in front, and their bishop was crowning him

FATHER ALLEN: *(looking at him sternly and interrupting)* Peter Do you remember what I told you about wild stories?

PETER: Of course I do, Father.

FATHER ALLEN: Then let's have no more of this, all right?

PETER: But, Father

FATHER ALLEN: (*changing subject*) Listen, Peter, I have an errand for you. Will you walk over to Brambleton today and deliver a message to Father Rowan?

NARRATOR 1: Peter would and Peter did. But he didn't get to it till late afternoon, and by the time he started home, it was already dusk. He decided to take a shortcut cross-country.

PETER: (*whistles English folksong, and keeps whistling, but slows it down and looks around nervously when he hears meowing, below*)

DOG: (*barks softly in distance, and keeps barking, getting closer and louder*)

CATS & KING: (*meow as if shouting, softly in distance, and keep meowing, getting closer and louder*)

NARRATOR 2: He was halfway through a meadow and up to a stand of trees when he heard a commotion.

PETER: (*stops whistling and listens anxiously*)

NARRATOR 2: From beyond the meadow came the barking of a dog and a chorus of

NARRATOR 2, CATS, & KING: (*not in unison*) Meow, meow. (CATS and KING keep meowing, still getting closer)

PETER: (*in alarm*) Is it those cats again?

NARRATOR 2: . . . said Peter in alarm, ducking behind a tree.

DOG: (*still barking, now loudly*)

CATS & KING: (*still meowing, now loudly*)

NARRATOR 1: An Irish setter raced into the meadow, barking for all it was worth. Right behind were half a dozen cats with bows and arrows, riding yes, *riding* on the backs of bridled foxes. The big black cat at their head was wearing a golden crown.

NARRATOR 2: At first Peter thought the setter was leading the cats on the trail of their quarry. Then he realized,

PETER: *(in shocked surprise, to himself)* No, they re hunting the dog!

NARRATOR 1: As the cat with the crown rode by a large rock, his fox tripped and stumbled and the cat went flying.

KING: *(in frightened scream)* MEOW!

NARRATOR 1: He struck his head on the rock and lay still.

CATS: *(stop meowing, gasp)*

DOG: *(keeps barking, but fades in distance, and stops as CATS meow again, below)*

NARRATOR 2: The other cats gave up the chase and crowded anxiously around him. Then with loud, mournful cries of

NARRATOR 2 & CATS: *(not in unison, loudly, mournfully)* Meow, meow. *(CATS keep meowing, but fade in distance)*

NARRATOR 2: . . . they laid him over the back of his fox and returned the way they had come.

CATS: *(keep meowing and fading, but stop as PETER runs home, below)*

NARRATOR 1: Peter stood shaking till they were out of sight, then nipped off home as fast as his wobbly legs would bear him.

PETER: *(moans in terror)*

NARRATOR 1: He found Father Allen at supper, with his cat, Tom, nibbling from a dish by the table.

PETER: *(urgently, breathlessly)* Father, it s about those cats. I was crossing a meadow, and I heard a dog barking and all these cats crying *meow*

TOM: *(like normal cat)* Meow.

NARRATOR 2: . . . said Tom.

PETER: *(looking and pointing at Tom)* Yes, just like that. *(looks back at Father Allen)* And then the cats came riding into the meadow on foxes, all of them chasing this dog, but then the cat with the crown fell

off and hit his head and . . . and . . . and *(looking at Tom, perplexed)* Father, why s Tom staring at me like that?

NARRATOR 2: Father Allen put down his fork.

FATHER ALLEN: *(sternly)* Peter, I ve warned you often enough about your wild stories. Now, if you come to me talking like this again, I m going to have to let you go. Do you understand?

PETER: *(desperately)* But, Father, it s no story. I swear it!

FATHER ALLEN: *(vehemently)* That s enough, Peter! *(takes deep, calming breath and lets it out)* Now, I m sorry to ask you so late, but I have another chore for you. Mrs. Pennyweather has passed on suddenly, and tomorrow s the funeral. I need you to dig her grave *(pointedly, almost ominously)* tonight.

NARRATOR 1: So it was that Peter was digging in the graveyard by the light of the full moon.

NARRATOR 2: It was hard work, and he had to keep resting, and it wasn t till right around midnight that he finished.

PETER: *(breathes hard)* Whew! *(wipes forehead with back of hand)*

NARRATOR 1: Just as he was about to climb out, he heard a distant

NARRATOR 1, BISHOP, & CATS: *(in unison, plaintively, softly in distance)* Meow. *(BISHOP and CATS keep meowing regularly at every third step that is, with two slow beats or counts between meows)*

PETER: *(freezes in dread at first meow, above, then listens hard with widening eyes)*

NARRATOR 1: . . . then again,

NARRATOR 1, BISHOP, & CATS: *(in unison, at third step)* Meow.

NARRATOR 1: . . . and again,

NARRATOR 1, BISHOP, & CATS: *(in unison, at third step)* Meow. *(BISHOP and CATS keep meowing regularly, getting closer and louder, but never very loud)*

PETER: *(in terror)* It s the cats!

NARRATOR 2: He scrunched down in the grave, then carefully peered over the edge.

NARRATOR 1: Coming across the graveyard was the black bishop cat, and behind him were six more black cats, carrying on their shoulders a small coffin. The box was covered with a pall of black velvet, and sitting on top was the golden crown that Peter had seen twice before.

NARRATOR 2: The cats walked slowly and solemnly, and at every third step cried,

NARRATOR 2, BISHOP, & CATS: *(in unison, at third step, now close)* Meow. *(BISHOP and CATS keep meowing regularly till they halt, below)*

NARRATOR 1: Their path went right by the grave where Peter hid, and when they were but a few feet away, the bishop held up a paw for a halt. Then he turned and stared straight at Peter and *spoke*.

BISHOP: *(loudly, slowly, imperiously)* Tell Tom Tildrum . . . that Tim Toldrum s . . . *dead*.

NARRATOR 2: Then he lowered his paw, and the cats walked on, and at every third step cried,

NARRATOR 2, BISHOP, & CATS: *(in unison, at third step from walking on, above)* Meow.

NARRATOR 1: Well, Peter scrambled out of that grave and bolted for Father Allen s.

PETER: *(moans in terror)*

NARRATOR 1: He pounded on the door, shouting,

PETER: Father! Father! Let me in!

NARRATOR 2: At last the door opened and Father Allen stood there sleepily in his nightshirt.

FATHER ALLEN: *(befuddled)* Peter, what s going on?

PETER: *(urgently)* Let me in, Father, please, and I ll tell you.

NARRATOR 1: Father Allen led him into the library, where Tom yawned and stretched on his cat bed. The priest lit a lamp.

FATHER ALLEN: (*wearily*) Now, what s this all about, Peter?

PETER: (*more urgently than ever*) Father, you ve got to believe me. I was out digging Mrs. Pennyweather s grave when I heard a *meow*

TOM: (*like normal cat*) *Meow.*

NARRATOR 2: . . . said Tom.

PETER: (*looking and pointing at Tom*) Yes, just like that. (*looks back at Father Allen*) And I looked and saw seven black cats, and one was the bishop, and the others were carrying a coffin with a crown, and they came right up next to me, and the bishop stopped them and stared at me just like Tom there and . . . and . . . and (*looking at Tom, perplexed*) Father, why s Tom staring at me like that?

FATHER ALLEN: (*starting to lose patience*) Peter

PETER: But, Father, I tell you, he *spoke* to me! And he gave me a message. I m to tell Tom Tildrum that Tim Toldrum s dead. (*desperately*) But how can I tell Tom Tildrum that Tim Toldrum s dead when I don t know who Tom Tildrum *is*?

FATHER ALLEN: (*furiously*) Peter, this is the last straw. I ve warned you again and again

PETER: (*staring and pointing at Tom in terror*) Father! Look at Tom! Look at Tom!

NARRATOR 1: Tom was swaying,

NARRATOR 2: and Tom was swelling,

NARRATOR 1: and Tom was standing on his two hind legs,

NARRATOR 2: and then Tom *spoke*.

TOM: (*loudly, slowly, with rhythm*) *What? Tim Toldrum dead? Then I m the King o the Cats!*

NARRATOR 1: Tom leaped toward the fireplace, and with a single

TOM: *(loudly) Meow.*

NARRATOR 1: . . . he bounded up the chimney and was gone.

NARRATOR 2: *(gravely)* Never to be seen again.

PETER & FATHER ALLEN: *(stare open-mouthed, in stunned silence)*

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NARRATOR 1: Of course, after that, there was no more talk of Peter losing his job. But as for Father Allen

NARRATOR 2: Well, Father Allen was a good man, but everyone said he had one big fault.

FATHER ALLEN: *(silently to audience, tells wild story with big gestures, and keeps telling till he speaks, below)*

NARRATOR 2: He loved to tell wild stories.

PETER: *(to audience, with smile)* About Tom. *(freezes)*

FATHER ALLEN: *(to audience, loudly, slowly, wide-eyed and gesturing, as if reaching his story's climax)* THE KING O THE CATS! *(freezes)*

TOM: *(to audience, sounding like normal cat, but with sly, amused look)* Meow. *(freezes)*