

# The Owl and the Pussy-Cat

By Edward Lear  
(annotated by Laurie R. King)



Edward Lear, born in 1812, was the twentieth of twenty-one children, an epileptic with respiratory and vision problems, whose mother handed him over to his elder sister to be raised. He was a talented draughtsman whose eyes failed him, a dedicated traveler who was often ill, a melancholic who delighted in nonsensical verse and word play, and a man known for children's verse who never had children (he was probably gay.)

As often happens, his art is forgotten while his eccentric limericks and nonsense poems have given him a place in the pantheon of wordsmiths.

Because of their delight in sound and rhythm, Lear's poems are a joy to read aloud, whether to small children or aged adults. The stretched-out *beautiful* and *charmingly*, followed by the sharp monosyllables *pea* and *sweet*. The see-saw, teeth-and-lips phrase of *sailed away/ for a year and a day/* that opens up into the round, mouth-filling *bong*. The delicious contrast between the jolts of *mince* and *quince* followed by the elongated tumble of a *runcible spoon...*

Words matter—but even more than the words themselves, sharing them matters. Nonsense, in a life (or a time) of turmoil, may be the most sensible choice a person can make.

Laurie R. King

All Fools' Day, *Anno Coronavirum*

# The Owl and the Pussy-cat<sup>1</sup>

By Edward Lear

The Owl and the Pussy-cat went to sea  
In a beautiful pea-green boat<sup>2</sup>,  
They took some honey<sup>3</sup>, and plenty of money<sup>4</sup>,  
Wrapped up in a five-pound note<sup>5</sup>.  
The Owl looked up to the stars above<sup>6</sup>,  
And sang to a small guitar,  
"O lovely Pussy! O Pussy, my love,  
What a beautiful Pussy you are,  
You are,  
You are!  
What a beautiful Pussy you are!"

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<sup>1</sup> This poem was first published in 1871, in Lear's collection *Nonsense Songs, Stories, Botany, and Alphabets*, originally written a few years earlier for a friend's three year-old daughter. Its three brief stanzas were voted Britain's favourite childhood poem in 2014, and have inspired countless illustrated books, songs and instrumental pieces, film and print adaptations, and homages of all sorts over the years. Portions of Lear's sad sequel, published in 1938, concern the couple's children ("The brothers of our family have feathers and they hoot/While all the sisters dress in fur and have long tails to boot"—although all share an appreciation of mice) who are brought up by their mourning father after the mother falls from a high tree and is seen no more.

<sup>2</sup> A "boat" (pea-green or otherwise) would be an uncomfortable place for an affianced couple to spend an entire year, were they human sized. Two smaller creatures, a bird of prey and a feline mammal, would require less space, although considering the dietary needs of both, they would nonetheless wish for something large enough to host a colony of small rodents. Thus, larger than the row-boat sized vessel often depicted in illustrated versions, but small enough that two creatures could keep it sailing by themselves, lack of opposable thumbs notwithstanding.

<sup>3</sup> There is no indication that either owls or cats care for honey.

<sup>4</sup> Or for that matter, money, although clearly one of the characters in this tale has a practical side, with sufficient preparation to survive in their boat for a year at sea.

<sup>5</sup> A five-pound note was a considerable piece of paper in 1870, plenty big enough to hold a store of coins.

<sup>6</sup> An owl cannot move its eyes up or to the side, and instead needs to move its entire head. Since looking overhead involves the owl tipping the head to the side until its eyes are on a vertical line to the ground, in this situation the cat was no doubt much entertained. We may imagine that the cat, in turn, kept her partner amused by twisting over mid-fall, casually tucking a back foot over her ear, and cleaning her entire face with her tongue.

Pussy said to the Owl, "You elegant fowl!<sup>7</sup>  
How charmingly sweet you sing!  
O let us be married! too long we have tarried:  
But what shall we do for a ring?"  
They sailed away, for a year and a day,  
To the land where the Bong-Tree<sup>8</sup> grows  
And there in a wood a Piggy-wig stood  
With a ring at the end of his nose<sup>9</sup>,  
His nose,  
His nose,  
With a ring at the end of his nose.



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<sup>7</sup> "Fowl" is a pleasing rhyme, but hardly complimentary to one's intended, since it indicates a bird raised specifically for food.

<sup>8</sup> "Bong tree" may be a Learian neologism (from the Greek *neo-* [new] and *logos* [word or speech]), although a tropical tree by that name had been discovered in the Dutch East Indies some twenty years earlier. Dictionaries suggest that the word is onomatopoeic from the Thai word *baung*, a wooden tube that both a) gives a bonging noise when struck and b) provides a vessel useful for smoking various substances.

<sup>9</sup> Rings have been used the days of the ancient Sumerians to help control domesticated animals. Not only does a pull on the ring help steer the creature's forward direction, but its placement in such a sensitive part of the body reminds the creature that resistance hurts. Cattle (especially bulls) generally have a 4-5" semi-permanent ring (rather too large to be comfortably worn by a cat) that is inserted through the nasal septum. Pigs are more commonly ringed to discourage their rooting through the soil as they forage, a habit destructive to woodland soil. Pig rings are clips with sharp ends, clamped with the points against tender skin rather than inserted through it. This may explain why the pig is so willing to part with his.

Dear Pig, are you willing to sell for one shilling<sup>10</sup>  
Your ring?" Said the Piggy, "I will."<sup>11</sup>  
So they took it away, and were married next day<sup>12</sup>  
By the Turkey<sup>13</sup> who lives on the hill.  
They dined on mince<sup>14</sup>, and slices of quince<sup>15</sup>,  
Which they ate with a runcible spoon<sup>16</sup>;

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<sup>10</sup> A shilling is old British money, used before the English discovered the usefulness of the number 100, in 1971. There were 20 shillings in a Pound sterling (although 21 in a gold Guinea), 5 shillings in a crown, 2 shillings sixpence in a half crown, and 2 shillings in a florin (or two-bob bit). Working in the other direction, a shilling (1s) had 12 pence; 6 pence made a sixpence or tanner, 3 pence was thruppence, while one penny (1d) could be further divided into 2 halfpence (ha'pennies), each of which held 2 farthings. A quartern loaf of bread in 1870 London, closely regulated by the government, cost around a tanner. The quartern loaf was made from flour weighing exactly 3.5 pounds or a quarter of a stone, a stone being fourteen pounds. Is this now clear?

<sup>11</sup> This troublesome bit of grammar is the very model of "poetic license," since the correct reply—"I am"—fails to rhyme within the context of the poem. By the turkey who lives all on ham? By the turkey who married the ram?

<sup>12</sup> The apparently problematic timetable introduced by this statement—since the Church of England required that banns be read on three successive Sundays—suggests that either the wedding took place under special license (cf: "The Marriage of Mary Russell," Laurie R. King) or was conducted by some idiosyncratic clergy outside of Britain entirely. The turkey being native to North America, this suggests US or Mexican civil law may have predominated, and that this turkey was either a Justice of the Peace, or ordained in some non-CofE denomination.

<sup>13</sup> The turkey is a large bird native to North America, domesticated by Aztecs and others, and introduced into England in 1550. The male is a creature sufficiently bizarre for the imagination of an Edward Lear, with warty caruncles on the top of its head, an orange snood that dangles over its beak, red wattles or dewlaps that dangle over its chest, and a tangle of hair-like feathers dangling from its breast toward the ground. The male's normally sleek feathers are puffed up in the grandiose display known to schoolchildren and Pilgrim stories, which he uses to attract the attention of bored females and to impress his rivals in the shiny hub-caps of parked cars.

<sup>14</sup> "Mince" in England refers to ground meat, not the sweet dried-fruit tart filling found on Christmas tea-trays. Clearly, Mr. Owl and Ms. Pussycat had spent most of their wedding funds on travel and the ring, with little left for steaks and lobster in their wedding breakfast.

<sup>15</sup> "Quince" is a fruit, the sole member of its family although with many distant relatives in the apple and pear branches, which has a lovely, musky aroma when ripe. Raw, it is white and hard, and most varieties are inedibly, mouth-puckeringly sour. The seeds in quantity can be toxic. But cooked and sweetened, the flesh turns a deep red-brown with a kitchen-filling perfume. No special spoon is required for its eating.

<sup>16</sup> "Runcible" is one of the many hapax legomena (Greek again: *hapax* [once] *legomenon* [said]) employed by Lear, who was not a man to let the dictionary stand in his way when he required a word with a certain sound and rhythm. He later used the word to describe things other than

And hand in hand<sup>17</sup>, on the edge of the sand<sup>18</sup>,  
They danced by the light of the moon<sup>19</sup>,  
The moon,  
The moon,  
They danced by the light of the moon.

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spoons, adding to the confusion. Modern accretions to the meaning include a kind of serrated grapefruit spoon and, more recently, the spork. A word that Lear would have seized upon with glee.

<sup>17</sup> Leaving aside the question of how a bird and a cat might grasp hands, it is difficult to picture precisely what step our two protagonists may have been dancing. “Hand in hand” suggests something other than the traditional (though once scandalous) waltz. A chain dance, perhaps (like a line dance, but with hands touching) or merengue. Although perhaps not the sorts of folk dances in which the two partners clasp hands and lean back against each other, since a cat, as noted above, lacks opposable thumbs and an owl’s primary feathers would pull out under stress.

<sup>18</sup> “The edge of the sand” here probably means *the sand at the edge of the water*, rather than *terra firma above a sandy beach*, since the relative size of the partners would make it difficult to dance amidst the scrubby growth that tends to grow above the high-water mark.

<sup>19</sup> The combination of full moon and a tide sufficiently low to provide firm dancing space provide internal evidence by which a diligent researcher might determine the time and place of this wedding. Any curious researcher who wishes to propose an answer to this burning question is welcome to send in their hypothesis, with footnotes.

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Illustrations by Edward Lear