

A Kitty Catastrophe

This Cat Had More Than Tuna on His Breath



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Many years ago, I was asked to give a “Stump the Professor” session to doctors and nurses at a small city hospital to the north of Sacramento, well within driving distance for me. I accepted with delight, as the challenge of working through to diagnosis is one I had always much enjoyed, and the colleague who called to ask me to do it was a doctor whom I admired and liked. We settled on a date and time for the event acceptable to us both.

He guided me to a room, full of chairs and tables of food, packed with doctors and nurses. He introduced me, then presented the case as follows:

“A middle-aged unmarried woman, a beloved school teacher in our small town, was brought by ambulance in a coma to this hospital on a Monday morning,” he said. “Her schoolroom that day had been full of elementary school children when the teacher suddenly collapsed on the floor and did not speak, move, or get up. One of the students immediately ran out of the classroom door to call for help. Several other students began to cry, and a few tried to awaken her by shaking her shoulders and hands... but to no avail.”

“There are many reasons for collapse,” I responded. “Had she been ill?” As Sherlock Holmes said long ago, it is a capital error to speculate without data.

“On the Friday before her collapse on Monday,” he said, “the teacher had told her students—who had asked her why she seemed so unusually unhappy—that her beloved old cat had been sick for several days and that she found him lying dead next to her in her bed (where he usually slept) very early that Friday morning.”

She greatly mourned his loss, he said, and with copious tears had buried him that dark day in her garden

before coming to work at the school on Friday. She had stayed there until the school bell rang to go home, which both she and the students did.

“What was her condition when she arrived in our emergency room on Monday morning?” I asked.

“She was in a coma and could not be aroused.”

“Had she mentioned the symptoms and signs of the cat’s sickness to anyone? Might it have been transferred to her by the cat?”

“We had no evidence when she arrived here in our hospital that she had discussed her sick cat with any of the local neighbors,” my friend said, “but she did tell the students on Friday, with tears, that her old cat had gone to heaven.

“On our exam she had a fever, tachycardia, and rales in her lungs, but no palpable findings on her body. Labs were drawn, but she died before the results came back.”

“Was an autopsy done?” I asked.

“Only when the test returned from the lab late in the day was a diagnosis confirmed,” he said. “She was not autopsied.”

He then said that a group of men, after being told what was happening, had gone out to the teacher’s home in the woods to dig up the cat. They called with the news that a dead squirrel was also seen under a bush a short distance away from where the cat had been buried. The presumption was that the cat had killed the squirrel by tearing it apart using teeth and claws and then grew increasingly ill over the next few days until he died on Friday.

“Oh!” I said.

He added that the teacher’s body was cremated, as were those of the cat and the squirrel.

“So it is possible that something went from squirrel to cat to school teacher! Were the children, other teachers, staff and ambulance drivers—as well as those who cared for her in the hospital—all treated, as were also the men who dug up the cat from his grave and put both



the squirrel and the cat together in a tight plastic bag?”

“Yes, they all were,” my friend said, “and I think you’ve got it.”

“Oh! Was the diagnoses septice-mic plague?”

“Right!” my friend said.

As news of the Gold Rush spread, ships started to come to California in 1848 and 1849 and the ships had rats on board with them. Rats and their fleas began to leave the ship at the wharves, and they went on to infect people and rodents. The bacteria, *Yersinia pestis*—a Gram-negative rod—is maintained in nature by wild rodents such as prairie dogs, chipmunks, wood rats, ground squirrels, deer mice and voles.

Public health officers in San Francisco tried to quarantine people and kill the rats, but the then-governor of California, Henry Gage, fearing loss of state money by frightened entrepreneurs, declared in 1900 that no plague existed in California and forbade public health officials from saying it did.

Three years later, a new governor was elected: George Pardee,

MD, Ph.D. and a regent of the University of California. He was told right away of the plague and took immediate steps to end it. But it was a bit too late, as the squirrels and other rodents had taken it to the woods and some (especially in the southwest) to the deserts. Plague still presents a hazard, particularly in national parks where squirrels can pass it on to other squirrels and some other rodents, and then on to wild and domestic animals—and humans—to this very day.

Cats can easily get plague, as can other species including rabbits, coyotes, bobcats, goats, camels and sheep. Cats with primary septice-mia plague have no obvious disease of the lymph nodes (so not bubonic) but may have fever, lethargy and poor appetite. Septic signs may also include diarrhea, vomiting, excessively rapid heart rate, weak pulse and breathing distress.

The teacher was at great risk from having her cat near her face in her bed, breathing on her as she slept. To quote Shakespeare, albeit a bit backwards: “To sleep, to die... ay, there’s the rub!”



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