

Ka, the Foreign Black, always a popular story teller, began her tale.

‘My story goes back many hundreds of years to the twelfth century long before Man began to pollute and spoil the earth but he was, as always, a savage beast, fancying himself as intelligent and cultured, superior to all other creatures, and using his god as an excuse for plunder and murder. At that time, there were places called monasteries, where strange men lived in solitude in order to worship their god. They lived without females in the strange belief that their god would love them better for suppressing their basic need to procreate; however, they were for the most part decent men, living quietly and pursuing knowledge and a gentle life. In one of these monasteries, there lived a number of monks, for that is what they were called, and they spent their days quietly tending their few sheep and goats, growing food in their garden and praying frequently to their strange god who demanded much silence and many fastings, and forbade them children.

‘One day, they rose early, as was their custom, and after many prayers and a frugal meal, they began their tasks for the day, some of them in silence. But what started out as a routine day proved to be very different from usual, for travellers arrived at the monastery seeking rest and shelter. The monks were not at all displeased to receive visitors for it made a welcome change from their usual quiet ways and they looked forward to receiving news from the world from which they were cut off most of the time. These were strange travellers who were on their way back from foreign lands where great wars were being waged in the name of their god. With them they had brought a native of one of these lands, captured in battle and now enslaved to them for the rest of his life. He was a man of dark skin and brown eyes who spoke little for he did not speak their language. The travellers made their way into the monastery and set down their bundles.

‘The man with dark skin, whose name was Abdullah, had with him a small basket and to the surprise of the monks, it contained a cat. Now it was not unusual to see cats, although there were not very many at that time, but this was an extraordinary looking cat. She was slim and long-legged with a dainty triangle for a head; her eyes were green and her coat was pure black, sleek and shiny. She was very beautiful and, of course, you have guessed, she was a Foreign Black like me. Not only captivated by her appearance, but delighted by her gentle affection and intelligent behaviour, the monks at once fell in love with this exquisite creature. The travellers explained that the cat, called Muezza, belonged to their slave, Abdullah, and that the two were inseparable. As they liked the cat, they had permitted their slave to keep her; indeed it was rather a novelty to have such a strange cat with them from a foreign place and they were prepared to tolerate Abdullah’s odd devotion.

‘The travellers stayed at the monastery for a week, recovering from the ordeals of their journey but as the end of the week approached, they indicated to their hosts that they would soon be leaving. By this time the initial novelty of the cat had worn off and most of the monks thought nothing of her presence any more but one of them, Brother Francis, continued to be entranced by

the cat. Muezza liked him too, for Brother Francis was good to her; he gave her scraps of chicken and the cream off the milk; he brushed her coat till it shone and, when the mornings were cold, tucked her in his habit for warmth. Although she was grateful for this attention, she would not stay with him all the time but would eventually return to Abdullah and purr contentedly as he crooned to her with his strange voice in his strange language. When the time came for the travellers to leave, Abdullah gathered up his beloved companion and put her in his basket.

‘Brother Francis grieved. In desperation, for he loved the cat as he loved no other living creature, he begged that they leave Muezza behind and vowed he would look after her. At first Abdullah was adamant in his refusal; as the travellers conveyed the monk’s wishes, he grew agitated and clutched the basket to his chest. The travellers explained that it would be reasonable reward for the monastery’s hospitality but still Abdullah would not hear of it. The Abbott, who was a kind man, intervened when he saw the sadness in Brother Francis’ face. After much discussion and the offer of enough gold for Abdullah to buy his freedom, agreement was reached; Muezza would stay and Brother Francis would look after her. As Abdullah parted with the basket reluctantly, he stared at the monks and spoke loudly and agitatedly in his strange foreign voice.

‘One of the travellers translated; “He says that if ever you neglect Muezza, then a curse shall fall upon the monastery; for he says Muezza is beloved of Mohammed and cursed be him who does not love her.”

‘For a moment the monks looked concerned but dismissing these words as the idle mutterings of a heathen, they soon forgot them. As they parted company with the travellers, Abdullah bent low to the basket with tears filling his eyes. Whispering quietly, he spoke in his strange tongue to Muezza in words that none could understand. Then rapidly he turned away and made to depart.

‘For several years all was well within the monastery. Although Muezza missed her former companion at first, she soon grew to love Brother Francis; she loved his gentle nature and quiet devotion; she grew to like some of the other monks and she enjoyed the quiet unhurried world in which she found herself. But as Muezza grew older so too did Brother Francis along with the other inhabitants of the monastery. One sad day, deep in the middle of a cold winter, Brother Francis took to his bed, never to rise from it again and within three days he was dead. Muezza grieved for him, for while some of the other monks took care to feed her, none gave her the love she was used to receiving. She grew thin and sad and took to wandering in the woods all night as though there she might find once again the love she missed so much.

‘But the worst had not yet happened for within the year the kindly old Abbott died. With his death, life in the monastery began to change. A new Abbott arrived. This new Abbott was a callous and cold-hearted man. He ruled the monastery with a rod of iron and forbade the monks any pleasures in life. Fasting and silence became more frequent; it was considered a crime to enjoy the sunshine or sit quietly contemplating by the fire. It was considered a sin to take pleasure in one’s work or hum a tune whilst working in the fields or the kitchen. To the new

Abbott, Muezza was an abomination, a foreign idolatrous monster, a useless animal, a means of wasting valuable time. In consequence, it was forbidden for any monk to feed Muezza; to be caught stroking or showing her affection in any way was an offence for which the guilty would be made to sit alone in a cell for weeks.

'Muezza grieved on. She would sit for hours remembering the kindnesses of Abdullah and Brother Francis, the loving kindnesses of many of the monks over the years, and she could not understand why she was now chased from the monastery, and even kicked if she was not quick enough to get out of the way. For food she did not fare too badly; she was an adept hunter and from time to time an unseen and daring hand put down food in the bushes near the kitchen door. But she missed affection and the warmth of a fire on cold nights and as she grieved she grew thinner and thinner until she was like a bag of bones.

'When the new Abbott had been in residence for about a year, the affairs of the monastery began to slide into misfortune. The flock of sheep became sick and died; the chickens did not lay their eggs; a burning hot summer caused the crops to shrivel and die. A fire in the kitchen caused the death of three monks and with the advent of winter many of the monks died from a strange new disease. Only one monk, Brother Thomas, remembered the words of Abdullah, for he had been a young novice at the time and very impressionable. He shuddered as he beheld the thin form of Muezza skulking in the woods, for she rarely came near the monastery now. But he said nothing. Instead, when quite sure he was not observed, he carried on putting food in the bushes for her.

'The worse the calamity that befell the monastery, the worse became the Abbott; he believed that all misfortune was a mark of the Devil and so he punished the monks. They were often shut up in their cells; they were beaten, often deprived of food for days on end in an attempt to rid the monastery of its demons. As time went on and more disasters befell the monastery, the Abbott grew so convinced of the Devil's presence that he slowly began to go mad, sometimes screaming and foaming at the mouth, until those around him feared him even more than ever. He took to drinking spirits to numb his mind against the demons that he thought he saw and the monks were terrified of him. One day when the madness was fully upon him he saw Muezza running across the woodland; she looked thin and wild and strange. As he saw her, it came into his mind that here was the evil that had invaded his monastery; a foreign devil whose presence was a curse. There would be no peace or prosperity within the Abbey until the devil was dealt with. He returned to the Abbey and issued the order. The next day the cat must be caught; the last bricks of the new kitchen wall were being put in place and Muezza should be interred alive, behind that wall. The monks were aghast but they knew they had no choice in the matter. Early the next morning, they found the choicest scraps and eventually coaxed the now shy Muezza to enter the kitchen. Grasping her firmly, they shut her in a cupboard until the wall was ready and only a few bricks were needed to complete it. As she struggled desperately to escape the arms of her captors, they thrust her into the space behind the bricks. Her screams, terrible and long, started as

the last brick was put in place and the Abbott, on hearing them, rubbed his hands with glee; did not those terrible sounds prove she was a devil? Of course they did. Congratulating himself on his great wisdom, he drank deeply from the glass at his side. He drank again and again, until Muezza's cries became fainter and he believed that he had at last conquered the Devil.

'That night when the monastery was quiet and all were sleeping, Brother Thomas crept from his cell. He stole into the kitchen, and his heart beating rapidly from fear of being caught in what he was about to do, he carefully moved some of the bricks, loosening them delicately so that he neither made a sound nor any damage. Carefully, he removed the ailing Muezza and cradled her in his arms. Silently, he took a dead rabbit from the larder, placed it carefully behind the wall and replaced the missing bricks. Then, calmly and quietly, he stole from the kitchen and out into the woods beyond. Stroking Muezza and whispering quietly to her, he released her into woods, leaving her a little chicken and some milk to aid her recovery. Bidding her farewell, he returned quietly to the monastery and to his lonely cell, where he prayed as he had never prayed before.

'His prayers were answered, for Muezza never came near the monastery again. She stayed deep within the woods, her heart filled with sadness, and the mere sight of the familiar brown habit sent her running as far as her ageing legs could take her.

'The monastery never recovered its good fortune; the Abbott, believing the black cat dead and interred within the very walls of the monastery, thought, when he caught sight of her fleeting form out in the woods, that the devil lived on and he grew madder with every sighting. Believing they were all doomed and about to be possessed, he crept out into the woods one night and tried to set fire to them in an attempt to rid himself of his demon. But in his drunken madness he failed and instead caught his own clothing on fire. In agony, he rushed towards the barn and attempted to douse the flames in the water trough but he slipped and fell upon a bundle of hay. As his dying screams aroused the sleeping monks, the flames took hold and the monastery burnt to the ground.

Only Brother Thomas survived. He gave up Holy Orders and became a mendicant in search of Truth and Peace. And as he travelled far and wide, so did his companion, Muezza, until she died of old age.

'And that is not quite the end of the story. The travails of the monastery were recounted far and wide and, like all stories, this one became greatly exaggerated and altered until it bore little relation to what had really happened. As time went by, people began to fear the sight of a black cat as a curse. For hundreds of years a black cat was likely to be the cruel victim of many a ridiculous superstition and even at the beginning of the twenty-first century, many people believed that to have a black cat cross their path augured badly.'