

*Thomas Gray,
Philosopher Cat*

Philip J. Davis

Illustrated by
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Any similarity between the people depicted here and real people is entirely fortuitous, except in the case of historical characters such as Sir Kenelm Digby, Whitley Stokes, P.A.M. Dirac, et al.

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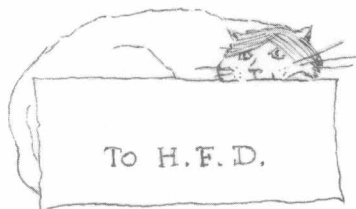
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Thomas Gray, Philosopher Cat



Lumen semitis meis

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As Coelius was wont to say, that being
free from his Studies and more urgent
waighty affaires, he was not ashamed to
play and sport himselfe with his Cat,
and verily it may be called an idle mans
pastime.

—EDWARD TOPSELL,
*Historie of Foure-Footed
Beastes*, 1607.

*I*ntroducing *Thomas Gray*, a cat,
and *Lucas Fysst*, a slightly eccentric

Fellow of Pembroke College. Their
collaboration leads them both to high honours
in the intellectual world, and, as an aftermath,
raises a number of metaphysial questions.

*P*laced in Cambridge, England, this fantasy
contains an introduction to the English
University scene, an old Irish poem,
a still older problem in mathematics, and six
meals, together with some speculations
on the human condition.

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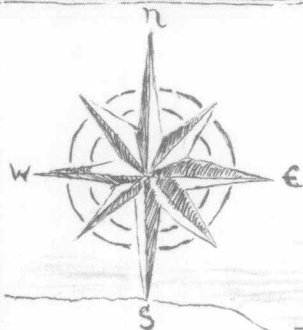
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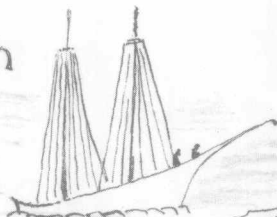
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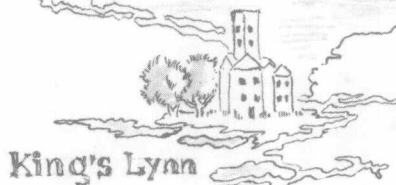
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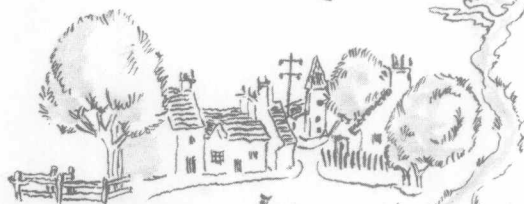
Wisbech



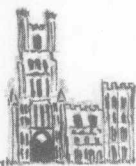
King's Lynn



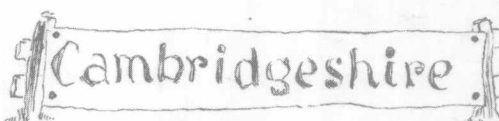
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Waterfen St. Willow



Ely

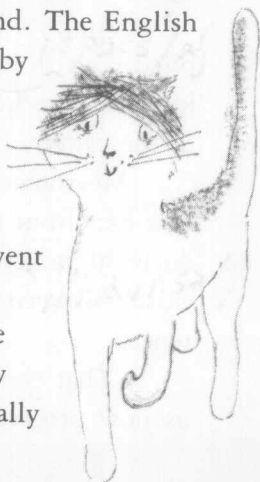


II

How Thomas Gray Came to Cambridge

Thomas Gray, the Pembroke College Cat, was not descended from a long line of Cambridge cats as was the Huxleys' cat or the Thomsons' cat. She was born (yes, *she*; and that's a part of the story) in a litter of five in the small East Anglian village of Waterfen St. Willow in the fenland of England. The English fens are a low, swampy, peaty land, crisscrossed by many small rivers and canals, sparsely populated by people, and not entirely ideal for cats whose negative attitude toward water is well known.

After Thomas Gray was weaned and had achieved a certain measure of independence, she went for an interview with the local jobs counsellor, a fat but somewhat Machiavellian grimalkin by the name of Mevrouw. Mevrouw was called Mevrouw not because that was the sound she characteristically



made (which it was), but because she was descended from a Dutch cat who had come to the area in the Seventeenth Century when her owners were hired to drain the fens and construct canals and sluices. Gastarbeiter, in today's parlance.

Mevrouw roused herself from her goosefeather bed and administered a battery of tests designed to discover vocational strengths and weaknesses.

"What is the largest number you know?" she asked Thomas Gray. At the time, Thomas Gray was not called by that name, but for the sake of simplicity, let it go at that. (The name was acquired later in a manner that will be explained.)

Now Thomas Gray knew the number four, and she knew that she knew the number four. After all, four was the number of souls she observed in her litter. The word 'souls' is used metaphorically, of course. (Do cats have souls? This was a deep question of Mediaeval Theology, and still comes up from time to time.) She knew that two plus two made four and knew it in a deep way. She also knew that this knowledge was commonplace among her contemporaries and that she had better come up with something with more snap. So she answered Mevrouw, "The largest number I know is one more than the largest number you know."

"An excellent answer, if a bit paradoxical," Mevrouw replied. But in her heart she said something rather different: This kid is a wise guy. I'd better get rid of her. For peace and quiet in the community, naturally.

Mevrouw also realized, not logically, but intuitively, that this brat from the fens had put her paws on the notion of mathematical variables and had stuck her claws into the tension that exists between mathematical definition and mathematical existence.

"That completes the intelligence test," Mevrouw said. "Let us now proceed to the personal interview. What are your life-

aspirations?" she asked, making sure that she got the hyphenation across by an appropriate voice stress.

Thomas Gray answered:

"I do not mean to belittle the Village of Waterfen St. Willow, nor the population thereof. They are the salt of the earth and all that, but I perceive that if I remain here, my life will be one of rats, eels, ducks, and the occasional gull; marriage, of course, a litter or two or three or four.

"For excitement, there would always be the possibility of hiring out as a familiar to one of the queer fen humans or as an acolyte in one of their strange rituals. In the real old days and in remote lands, say in the land of the Sabaeans, when a spirit entered a cat's body, the body would go rigid as an indication. Its head would be chopped off and then it would speak and prophesy. But these days, of course, heads are no longer severed and prophecy is respectable only when it is clad in mathematical rhetoric.

"I don't mind the odd mousing job. As they say, if you have a skill, you must use it or lose it. But as far as the traditional feline professions are concerned, I think 'Ich bin für etwas bessers geboren'. Which I gather is Dutch for 'Smart cats deserve high paying jobs'."

"You've been misinformed as to the language," said Mevrouw, "but no matter. I think you've got a fair grip on the possibilities of feline life in Waterfen St. Willow.

"On the basis of your intelligence test and your interview, I should like to suggest that you hightail it immediately out of this community and go to Cambridge. Your test shows great aptitude for mathematics and in Cambridge you will find mathematicians of superb skill.

"You will find that in Cambridge some believe the mathematical Key to the Universe has just been or is about to be found.





You will also find that in Cambridge the spirit of Wittgenstein hovers over Almost Everything. And if, by luck, his Spirit should possess you, you should then be able to take hold of any number of metaphysical issues that are quite clear and make them rather complicated."

So Mevrouw put Thomas Gray on the next barge going up the Cam, and after several transfers, easily executed, Thomas found her way into Cambridge, entering regally in a punt, like Cleopatra. She leaped out on Silver Street and walked down Trumpington Street and into the great quadrangle of Pembroke College.



How Thomas Gray Got Her Name

The University of Cambridge is one of the oldest and most distinguished in the world. Pembroke College, which is part of it, one college among many, was established in 1347. Within the precincts of Pembroke are to be found undergraduates, Fellows, porters, cooks, waiters, secretaries, bedmakers, handymen, ducks, gardeners, an extraordinary library of ancient books now read by no one, and a wine cellar containing, at the very least, forty thousand bottles of wine and twenty thousand bottles of port. There is also a chapel by Christopher Wren, the first of his designs to be executed, and a Victorian clock tower, quite handsome and reminiscent of Big Ben, but unfortunately neglected on picture post cards in favor (sorry, favour) of be-mossed bricks with archaeological aspirations.

At the time of our story, this small kingdom was ruled firmly and wisely by the Master of Pembroke College, Lord Eftsoons