In a north German seaport, in a street popularly known as Gloomy Street, there stands an old, dilapidated house. Although it is narrow, it has three storeys; the outside wall juts out in the middle, forming an oriel or bay-window effect which reaches up from the ground almost to the point of the gable. There are windows at the front and at both sides on all three storeys, so that on clear nights the moon can shine right through from one side to the other.

In living memory no-one has entered or left this house; the heavy brass knocker on the front door is almost black with verdigris, and between the cracks in the steps leading up to the door the grass grows, year in, year out. If someone new to the city asks: 'What 's that house there?' he will surely receive the reply: 'Bulemann’s house'; but if he goes on to ask: 'So who lives in it?' he will just as surely be told: 'No-one really lives in it.' Children playing in the streets and wet-nurses rocking their cradles sing:

In Bulemann’s house
In Bulemann’s house
No-one peeps out
Unless it’s a mouse.

And indeed merry revellers coming past the house after some late-night drinking-bout say they have heard squeaking sounds coming from behind the dark windows, as of innumerable mice. One such young man, who in an access of high spirits beat at the knocker, wanting to hear the sound reverberate through the deserted rooms, even claims he could make out, quite distinctly, the sound of animals leaping around on the staircases inside. And whenever he tells this story he is accustomed to add, 'It almost sounded as if there were large beasts of prey jumping about, like those animals they show off in the travelling zoo at City Hall fair.'

The house opposite is one storey lower, which means that on moonlit nights the light can fall unimpeded into the top windows of the old house. It was a night like that which gave rise to another tale, this time told by the night-watchman; not that there is much to it. He declares he saw, behind one of the oriel windows on the top storey of the house, a shrivelled old face topped off by a brightly-coloured nightcap. But the neighbours take the view that the watchman had had too much to drink as usual; they say they have never seen anything resembling a human being through the windows across the way.

The richest source of information appears to be an elderly man, now living in a remote quarter of the city, who years ago was the organist at the church of St Mary Magdalen. 'I very well recall', he related when someone once asked him about it, 'the haggard man who lived in that house when I was a child, with only an elderly woman for company. For some years he had frequent dealings with my father, who kept a second-hand shop, and as a young boy I was dispatched to him on several occasions with commissions. I also well remember that I did not relish these errands and often tried on

all kinds of excuses to get out of them; for even in daylight I was afraid to climb up the dark and narrow stairs to Herr Bulemann's room on the third floor. He was popularly referred to as 'the slave-trader' and this name alone was enough to make me frightened, especially given all the mysterious gossip that circulated about him. Before he moved into the old house on the death of his father Herr Bulemann had spent many years travelling to and from the West Indies, working on a ship as a supercargo. He was reputed to have married a blackamoor out in the Indies, but after he returned home people waited in vain for the day when this wife of his would heave in sight, together with a few dusky children. And soon a rumour was going the rounds that on his journey home he had encountered a slave-ship and made over his own flesh and blood, along with their mother, to the captain of the ship for filthy lucre. – What truth there may have been in such tales, I am not able to say', the old man was wont to add, 'for I have no wish to speak ill of the dead. But what is certain is that he was a tight-fisted and misanthropic old fogey, and his eyes had that kind of look in them, as though they had witnessed evil deeds. No unfortunates or needy persons were allowed to cross his threshold, and no matter what time of day it was when I called on him, the iron chain was always fastened across the door. Having had to beat several times on the door with the heavy knocker, I would then hear from the head of the topmost staircase the scolding voice of the master of the house: "Frau Anken! Frau Anken! Are you deaf? Can't you hear there's someone knocking?" Presently the old woman's shuffling footsteps could be heard coming out of the back part of the house, through the parlour and across the hall. But before she opened the door she would ask in her wheezing voice: "Who is it, then?", and only when I answered: "It's me, Leberecht!"was the heavy chain unhooked. Thereupon I clambered hastily up the seventy-seven stairs – I once counted them – and always found Herr Bulemann waiting for me on the little, badly-lit landing in front of his room; he never admitted me to the room itself. I can still see him in his dressing-gown with the yellow flowers and his pointed night-cap; as he stood there in front of me, he would keep one hand behind his back, gripping the latch of the door to his room. While I stated my business, he would watch me impatiently with his glaring round eyes, and when I had finished speaking he would attend to it in a harsh and brusque manner. The thing that most aroused my attention was a pair of gigantic cats, one yellow and one black, which sometimes pushed their way out of the room behind him and rubbed their thick heads against his knees. After a few years his commerce with my father ceased, and I never went back to his house again. All this happened over seventy years ago, and Herr Bulemann must long since have been carried off to the country from which no traveller returns.' – – As far as this last comment is concerned, the man was mistaken. Herr Bulemann was never carried out of his house at all; he still lives in it.

This is how it came about.

Before Bulemann, its most recent owner, there was a crooked little old fellow living in that house, a pawnbroker; that was in the days when men still wore bag-wigs and pigtails. Since he had carried on his trade with due circumspection for more than five decades, and lived in the most parsimonious fashion with a woman who looked after the household for him after his wife died, he ended up becoming a wealthy man. However, his wealth consisted largely of an almost immeasurable quantity of valuables and effects

and the oddest collection of knick-knacks - all the things that had been given to him in the course of the years as surety by spendthrift or destitute people, and which, when repayment of the loans was not forthcoming, remained in the pawnbroker's possession. Had these pledges been sold, something which could only legally be done by the courts, any profit resulting would have had to be paid over to the original owners of the objects; hence he preferred to let them pile up in the big walnut cupboards with which little by little all the rooms on the first floor, and eventually those on the second floor as well, came to be filled. But at night, when Frau Anken was snoring in her lonely little bedroom at the back of the house, and the heavy chain had been secured on the front door, he would often climb up and down the stairs with quiet tread. Buttoned up in his pike-grey roquelaure, lamp in one hand, his bunch of keys in the other, he would go round opening the doors and the cupboards, now on the first, now on the second storey. He would take here a gold repeater, there an enamelled snuffbox from its hiding-place and would work out for himself how many years they had been in his possession and whether their original owners must by now be well and truly lost and gone forever, or whether they might still come back, money in hand, to demand the return of their pledges.

The pawnbroker finally died at a very advanced old age, and left his treasures behind him. The house and its bursting cupboards passed to his only son: the old man had no choice in this, even though in his lifetime he had successfully done everything he could to keep his son away from them.

This son was that same supercargo who instilled such fear into little Leberecht. He had just returned to his native city from an overseas voyage. After his father's funeral he abandoned his former business interests and moved into his father's rooms on the third storey of the old oriel building. Instead of the crooked little fellow in a pike-grey roquelaure, there was now a tall gaunt figure in a dressing-gown with yellow flowers and a bright nightcap roaming up and down the house or standing at the little desk which had been his father's, doing his calculations. However, gloating over piled-up valuables was not a habit the younger Herr Bulemann inherited from the old pawnbroker. After locking and barring the doors, he investigated the contents of the huge walnut cupboards, mulling over whether to risk the clandestine sale of these things, which were still the property of other people, and upon which he had only so much claim as the sums loaned upon them – sums which, as the account-books revealed, were generally very petty. But Herr Bulemann was not one of your indecisive fellows. Within a few days he had established contact with a junk-shop dealer who lived right out in the furthest suburbs of the city, and after a few of the pledges from the most recent years had been set on one side, the entire variegated contents of the big walnut cupboards was, surreptitiously and cautiously, transformed into the purity of silver coins. That was the period in which the boy Leberecht came into the house. The money Herr Bulemann raised in this way was secreted in large iron-bound chests, which he had installed one beside the other in his bedroom. For, given his lack of legal title to this property, he could not risk putting it into mortgages or investing it publicly in any other way.

When everything had been sold off, he set to and worked out all the possible expenses he might incur in the course of his life, calculated on a reasonable expectation

of the latter. That is to say, he allowed for himself reaching the age of ninety. Then he divided the money into small packets, one for each week, and added a little roll of coins for each quarter, to provide for unforeseen outgoings; then he put this money aside in a separate chest which stood in the next room, the living room. Every Saturday morning the old housekeeper, Frau Anken – he had taken her over along with the rest of his father's possessions – came to see him, so that she could take receipt of a fresh packet of money and give an account of her stewardship of the last one.

As has already been noted, Herr Bulemann had brought no wife or children with him; instead, on the day after the old pawnbroker was buried, a sailor came to the house straight from his ship, carrying a tightly-fastened sack, in which were two cats of unusual size, one yellow and one black. These creatures soon became their master's only companions. At lunchtime they had their own bowl of food, which Frau Anken, suppressing her fury as she did so, had to prepare for them, day in, day out. After the meal, while Herr Bulemann took his short afternoon nap, they sat, replete, beside him on the couch, let a little tip of their tongues hang out, and blinked sleepily at him with their green eyes. If they had been hunting the mice in the lower storeys of the house – something that regularly earned them a furtive kick from the old woman – they would be sure to bring the captured mice first of all to their master, dragging them along in their mouths to show him before they crept under the couch and devoured them. When night fell and Herr Bulemann exchanged his brightly-coloured nightcap for a white one, he betook himself to the big four-poster in his little bedchamber, accompanied by his two cats, and allowed the rhythmic purring of the beasts, once they had dug themselves in at his feet, to lull him to sleep.

This peaceful way of life was not, however, entirely devoid of disturbances. In the course of the first few years the odd one or two of the owners of the now sold-off pledges would turn up, demanding the return of their valuables against repayment of the small sums once lent to them. Herr Bulemann, fearing lawsuits in which his dealings might be brought to the light of public scrutiny, dug into his big chests and purchased the silence of those involved with larger or smaller settlements. That rendered him all the more misanthropic, all the more embittered. Any contact with the junk-shop dealer had long since ceased; he sat by himself in his oriel room bending his brain to try and solve that well-known conundrum, namely how to work out an infallible system for winning the lottery, in order, one fine day, to multiply his treasures to a sum beyond computation. Even Grab and Cadger, the two big cats, became the victims of his changing moods. One moment he might cosset them with his long fingers, the next, if for example the calculations on his slates did not come out right, they could expect a blow from a sandbox or a pair of scissors which would send them howling and limping off into the corner.

Herr Bulemann had a relative named Christine, a daughter of his mother by her first marriage, who had, however, been paid off after their mother's death as far as any testamentary interest was concerned, and so had no claims at all to the treasures he had now inherited. Despite this he did not bother about his half-sister in the least, although she was living out in one of the suburbs in the most destitute circumstances; for if there

was one thing Herr Bulemann liked less than the company of other people, it was the company of impoverished relatives. Only once had she come to him, begging his aid, when just after her husband's death she gave birth, at a rather advanced age, to a sickly baby. Frau Anken, who admitted her, stayed sitting on the steps downstairs so as to listen, and soon she heard the sharp voice of her master from the top of the house; eventually the door was flung open and the woman came down the stairs in tears. That same evening Frau Anken received a precise instruction not to undo the chain on the front door in future, in the unlikely event of Christine putting in a further appearance.

The old woman began to be increasingly frightened of her master's hooked nose and his glaring, owl-like eyes. When he stood on the top landing shouting her name, or simply – a custom he had picked up on shipboard – giving a shrill whistle through his fingers, she would invariably and at once creep out from whichever remote corner she might have been crouching in, and would set off up the narrow stairs, moaning and muttering imprecations and lamentations to herself.

Now just as Herr Bulemann kept his ill-gotten treasures on the third floor, so Frau Anken kept hers in the downstairs rooms. In the very early years of their life together she was overcome by a kind of childish panic lest her master should one day take over the spending of the household money himself, which would have meant, given his avarice, that she would have been bound to suffer shortages in her declining years. To avoid that, she had told him a lie about rises in the price of corn, and shortly after had demanded a similar increase in the housekeeping money in order to cover their bread requirements. The supercargo, who had just begun work on the projections of his future finances, tore up his calculations, grumbled to himself and began to do them all over again from the beginning, adding the necessary sum to the weekly ration of money. Frau Anken, however, having fulfilled her objective, found that she could only salve her conscience - in line with the old saying: 'It isn't really stealing if you only take a smidgen' - by purloining, not the superfluous shillings themselves, but only the extra white bread rolls she regularly bought with them. And since Herr Bulemann never set foot in the lower rooms, she was able bit by bit to fill up the big walnut cupboards which had now been denuded of their valuable contents.

In this way some ten years went by. Herr Bulemann grew leaner and greyer, his dressing-gown with the yellow flowers became more and more threadbare. Often the whole day would go by without his opening his mouth to speak, for he saw no living creatures apart from the two cats and his old, now rather simple-minded housekeeper. Just occasionally, if he heard the neighbourhood children playing horses on the bollards in front of his house, he would poke his head a little way out of the window and in sour tones would shower down scoldings into the street. The children would scatter, screeching: 'The slave-trader! The slave-trader!' But Herr Bulemann would then curse and swear more furiously before shutting the window with a bang and taking his anger out indoors on Grab and Cadger.

Some time before, in order to preclude her having any association with the immediate neighbourhood, he had instructed Frau Anken to do the household shopping in

streets a fair distance away from the house. She was not allowed to set off on these errands until dusk, and she had to lock the front door behind her on every occasion.

One evening about a week before Christmas the old woman left the house to do her shopping as usual. Despite her accustomed carefulness, she must on this occasion have been guilty of a lapse of memory, for when Herr Bulemann had just finished lighting his tallow candle with a match, he heard, to his surprise, someone clattering up his stairs. When he went out on to the landing, holding the candle above his head, he saw his half-sister standing there, accompanied by a pale boy.

'How did you get into the house?' he snapped at her, after staring at her for a moment in a mixture of astonishment and rage.

'The door downstairs was open', replied the woman timidly.

He muttered curses at his housekeeper under his breath. 'What do you want?' he said.

'Don’t be so stern, brother', the woman begged, 'or I shan’t find the courage to speak to you.'

'I can’t imagine what you could have to speak to me about. You received your fair share, we have nothing more to say to each other.'

The woman stood in silence, vainly searching for the right thing to say. From inside the room a constant scratching at the door could be heard. When Herr Bulemann reached behind him and opened the door, the two big cats leaped on to the landing and prowled round the pale boy, purring as they did so; the boy, terrified of them, pressed his back against the wall. Their master impatiently watched the woman, who continued to stand there in silence. 'Well, get on with it', he said.

'I wanted to ask you for something, Daniel', she began at last. 'A few years before your father’s death, when I was in extreme need, he took a little silver cup of mine as a pledge.'

'My father took something of yours?' asked Herr Bulemann.

'Yes, Daniel, your father, the husband of the mother of both of us. Here is the pawn-ticket. He did not give me very much for it.'

'Go on', said Herr Bulemann, after casting a rapid glance over the empty hands of his half-sister.

'Some time ago', she continued hesitantly, 'I dreamed that I was walking in the churchyard with my sick child. When we reached our mother’s grave, she was sitting there on her headstone beneath a bush full of white roses in bloom. In her hand she was

holding that little cup which she had given me as a present when I was a child; but as we came up to her, she put it to her lips and as she nodded and smiled at the boy, I heard her say quite distinctly: "Your health!" It was her gentle voice, Daniel, the same as it had been in her life; and now I have had that dream three nights in a row.'

'What’s that supposed to mean?' asked Herr Bulemann.

'Give me back the cup, brother! Christmas is nearly here. Why don’t you put that cup into the empty stocking of my sick child?'

The gaunt man in his dressing-gown with the yellow flowers stood without moving and looked at her with his glaring round eyes. 'Have you brought the money with you?' he asked. 'You can’t redeem pledges with dreams.'

'Oh, Daniel!' she cried. 'Have faith in what our mother said! The boy will get well again if he drinks out of that little cup! Be merciful - he’s your flesh and blood, after all.'

She had stretched her hands out towards him, but he took a pace back. 'Keep away from me', he said. Then he called up his cats. 'Grab, you old brute! Cadger, my son!' And the big yellow cat jumped with a single bound on to his master’s arm and dug his claws into the bright nightcap, while the black creature scrabbled up at his knees and mewed.

The sickly boy had crept close to his mother. 'Mother', he said, tugging hard at her dress, 'is that my wicked uncle who sold off his black children?'

As he spoke Herr Bulemann flung the cat down and seized the arm of the boy, who cried out in pain. 'You confounded brood of beggars!' he shouted, 'are you going to harp on that stupid story as well?'

'Brother, brother', wailed the woman. But by then the boy was already lying whimpering on the landing below. His mother sprang after him and picked him up tenderly in her arms. Then she drew herself up to her full height and, clutching the bleeding head of her child to her breast, she shook her clenched fist at her brother who was standing between his purring cats by the banister rail at the head of the stairs. 'You evil villain!' she shouted. 'May you rot along with your two brutes!'

'You can curse to your heart’s content', replied her brother, 'but you must hurry up and get out of my house'.

Then, while the woman made her way down the dark staircase with the weeping boy, he summoned his cats back to him and slammed the door of his room shut behind him. It did not cross his mind to reflect that the curses of the poor can be dangerous when they have been provoked by the hard-heartedness of the rich.

A few days later Frau Anken brought lunch into her master’s room as usual. But her thin lips were twitching more than usual today and her weak little eyes were gleaming with pleasure. For she had not forgotten the harsh words which she had had to tolerate on account of her negligence that other evening, and she believed she could now pay him back for them with interest.

'Did you hear the bells of St. Mary Magdalen ringing?' she asked.

'No', replied Herr Bulemann, who had been sitting over his tables of figures.

'So you don’t know who the bells were ringing for?' pursued the old woman.

'Stuff and nonsense! I don’t pay any heed to all that tinkling.'

'But they were ringing for your sister’s son!'

Herr Bulemann put down his pen. 'What are you babbling about, woman?'

'I’m telling you', she answered, 'they’ve just been burying little Christoph.'

Herr Bulemann was already busy writing again. 'Why are you bothering to tell me that? What's the boy got to do with me?'

'Well, I was only thinking. People do tell each other about the latest things that have happened in the neighbourhood, you know.'

When she had gone out, however, Herr Bulemann laid his pen aside once more, clasped his hands behind his back and walked up and down his room for a long while. When he heard a noise in the street below, he hastily went to the window as though he half expected to see the local constable coming to his house and summoning him to appear before the council on a charge of ill-treating the boy. Black Grab, who was mewing for his share of the meal that had been brought in, was given such a kick that he flew yelping into the corner. But whether it was just because he was hungry, or whether the usually abject nature of the animal had undergone an unforeseen change, he turned against his master and came at him spitting and snorting. Herr Bulemann gave him a second kick. 'Eat away', he said. 'You don’t need to wait for me.'

With one bound the cats fell upon the full dish he had set down on the floor for them.

But then something uncanny occurred.

When yellow Cadger, who finished his meal first, stood in the middle of the room stretching himself and arching his back, Herr Bulemann suddenly stopped and looked at him, then he walked all round the animal, observing it from every side. 'Cadger, you old rascal, what’s this I see?' he said, and scratched the cat’s head. 'You’ve started to grow

again in your old age, have you?' At this moment the other cat came leaping over as well, ruffling its shiny coat and arching itself up to its full height on its black legs. Herr Bulemann pushed his brightly-coloured nightcap back from his forehead. 'What, you as well?' he muttered. 'Odd, it must be a characteristic of the breed, I suppose.'

Dusk was falling by this time, and since no-one came to disturb him, he sat down to the dinner which stood on the table. After a time he began to look at his big cats, which were sitting beside him on the couch, with a certain relish. 'A couple of fine fellows, that’s what you are', he said, nodding at them. 'From now on I’m going to stop that old woman downstairs poisoning the rats for you!' But when that evening he withdrew to his bedchamber next door, he did not let them in as he usually did; and when in the night he heard them thumping against the bedroom door and then falling down it, mewing loudly, he pulled the blanket up over his head and thought: 'You can mew as much as you like; I’ve seen your claws.'

The next day, when lunchtime came round, the same thing happened as the previous day. The two cats bounded away from the dishes they had emptied and landed with a solid thump in the middle of the room, where they stretched and straightened themselves. When Herr Bulemann, who as usual was crouched over his tables of figures, threw them a glance, he pushed back his revolving chair in horror and stood there craning his neck. Grab and Cadger were whimpering softly, as though something unpleasant were being done to them, and they were quivering slightly, with their tails curled and their fur standing up; Herr Bulemann could see, quite distinctly, that, as they stretched themselves, they were growing bigger and bigger.

He hesitated for another moment, gripping the desk firmly with both hands, then he abruptly walked past the two beasts and flung open the door of his room. 'Frau Anken, Frau Anken!' he bellowed, and, since she did not seem to have heard him straight away, he whistled through his fingers. Presently the old woman came shuffling out of the back part of the house and wheezed her way up one flight after another.

'Just take a look at those cats!' he cried as she came into the room.

'I’ve looked at them plenty of times before, Herr Bulemann.'

'But don’t you notice anything about them?'

'I can’t see anything special, Herr Bulemann', she replied, blinking about her with her feeble eyes.

'What kind of animals are those? They aren’t cats any more!' He seized the old woman by the arms and pinned her roughly against the wall. 'You red-eyed witch!' he screamed. 'Confess now: what kind of potions have you been brewing up for my cats?'

The woman clasped her bony hands together and started babbling out incomprehensible prayers. But the terrible cats jumped from left and from right on to the

shoulders of their master and licked his face with their rough tongues. And so he was obliged to let the old woman go free.

Babbling and wheezing continually she slipped out of the room and crept down the stairs. Her mind was in a whirl, she was afraid – whether more afraid of her master or of the huge cats, she didn’t know herself. So she arrived in her little room at the back of the house. With shaking hands she pulled out from among her bedclothes a woollen stocking filled with money; then she took from a drawer a number of old skirts and rags and wrapped them round her treasure, so that by the end it was a sizeable bundle. For she was leaving, no matter what it cost, she was leaving; she thought of the poor half-sister of her master, out there in the suburbs who had always been friendly towards her: she was the person to turn to. To be sure, it was a long way off, through many streets and across many long and narrow bridges which spanned dark ditches and canals, and outside Herr Bulemann’s house the winter evening was already drawing in. But nonetheless she felt impelled to leave. Without thinking of the thousands of bread rolls which, full of simple-minded anxiety to provide for the future, she had piled up in the big walnut cupboards, she walked out of the house, her heavy bundle hoisted up on her back. Carefully she locked the heavy oak door with the big, intricate key, put the key in her leather bag and went wheezing out into the darkness of the city.

Frau Anken never came back, and the door of Herr Bulemann’s house was never unlocked again.

The same day that she left, a young good-for-nothing, who was running around between the houses playing at Santa Claus, told his friends, amid gales of laughter, how, as he was crossing the Crescentius Bridge dressed in his shaggy pelt, he frightened an old woman so much that she sprang down into the dark water, clutching her bundle, as though she had quite gone out of her mind. And indeed early the following day the corpse of an old woman, still firmly attached to a large bundle, was fished out of the water by the watchman in one of the remotest suburbs. Since no-one came to identify her, she was laid to rest shortly after in the paupers’ section of the churchyard there, in an unlabelled coffin.

The following morning was Christmas Eve. Herr Bulemann had spent a bad night, for this time the scratching and worrying of the animals at his bedroom door had given him no peace at all; only towards morning did he fall into a long, leaden sleep. When at length he finally poked his night-capped head into the living-room, he saw the two cats restlessly pacing round and round one another, purring loudly. It was already past lunchtime; the clock on the wall showed one. 'They must be hungry, the brutes', he muttered. Then he opened the door on to the landing and whistled for the old woman. At the same moment the cats forced their way out and pelted down the stairs; soon he heard from the kitchen down below the sound of jumping and the noise of plates. They must have leaped up on to the dresser on which Frau Anken was accustomed to set aside the meal for the following day.

Herr Bulemann stood at the head of the stairs and kept grumbling and shouting loudly for the old woman, but silence was the only answer he got, apart from a faint echo of his own voice from the lowest corners of the old house. He had just folded the tails of his flowered nightgown over one another and was about to go down in person, when there was a thundering on the staircase and the two cats came racing back up again. But they were no longer cats; they were two terrible, unidentifiable beasts of prey. They took up their positions in front of him, stared at him with their glowing eyes and set up a hoarse howling. He tried to pass them, but a blow from a paw which tore a piece of material out of his nightgown drove him back. He ran into his room, intending to throw up a window so as to call down to the people in the street below, but the cats jumped in after him and prevented him. Purring fiercely, they stalked up and down in front of the window, their tails lifted. Herr Bulemann ran out on to the landing and slammed the door shut behind him; but the cats thumped up the latch with their paws and reached the head of the stairs ahead of him. He fled back into his room once more, and again the cats were there before him.

The day was fast disappearing, and darkness was creeping into every corner. From far below in the street he could hear music; boys and girls were going from house to house singing carols. They went to everyone's door; he stood and listened. Would no-one come to his door? But of course he knew the answer to that: he had driven them all away himself. No-one knocked, no-one rattled on the locked front door. They went past, and gradually everything grew quiet; a deathly hush reigned on the street. And once again he attempted to escape; he tried to use force, he wrestled with the beasts, until his face and hands were torn and bleeding. Then he tried cunning, calling them by all their old pet names, stroking the sparks out of their fur and even daring to scratch softly those flat heads with the huge white teeth in them. And indeed they flung themselves down on the ground before him and rolled around at his feet, purring away; but as soon as he judged the right moment had come for him to slip out of the door, they sprang up and barred his way, uttering their hoarse howls. And so the night wore on, and day came and still he was running to and fro between the staircase and the windows of his room, wringing his hands, panting, his grey hair flying.

Twice more day and night succeeded one another; then finally, in a state of total exhaustion, he threw himself down on the couch, quivering in every limb. The cats took up their positions facing him, blinking sleepily at him between half-closed eyelids. Gradually the convulsions of his body grew more infrequent, and then ceased altogether. A grey pallor spread across his face beneath the stubble of his grey beard; he gave one more deep sigh, stretched out his arms and spread his long fingers over his knees; then he lay motionless.

Downstairs in the deserted rooms, on the other hand, there was no peace and calm. On the outside of the door leading to the rear part of the house, which gave on to a confined courtyard, a busy gnawing and chewing was in progress. At length a little opening appeared above the threshold and grew larger and larger; a grey mouse pushed its head through, then another did the same, and before long a whole detachment of mice was pouring across the hallway and up the stairs to the first floor. Here work began again,

this time on the door to the main room there, and when a hole had been gnawed in this, it was the turn of the big walnut cupboards in which the treasures left behind by Frau Anken were stored. Here was a Land of Cockaigne indeed, for any mouse wanting to make headway in the cupboards had to eat his passage. The vermin stuffed their tummies until they could eat no more, and then they rolled up their tails and enjoyed their forty winks in the crusts of the rolls they had hollowed out themselves. At night they emerged, scuttled across the passageways or sat by the windows licking their little paws and looking down into the street below, if the moon was shining, with their little glinting eyes.

But this cosy state of affairs was to come to an abrupt end. In the third night, no sooner had Herr Bulemann's eyes closed at the top of the house than a thundering resounded down the stairs. The giant cats came leaping down and opened the door of the room with a single blow of their paws; and then the hunt began. That was the end of the mouse idyll. Piping and squeaking, the corpulent little creatures ran to and fro, and desperately struggled to climb the walls. But to no avail. One after another the mice fell silent between the crunching jaws of the two predators.

Then all was quiet again, and soon there was no sound to be heard in all the house but the quiet purring of the giant cats, who were lying up outside their master's bedroom, their paws stretched out, licking the blood from their whiskers.

Down below, rust began to eat away at the lock on the front door, verdigris attacked the brass knocker on it, and grass sprouted between the stone steps.

Outside the house the world went about its business, unconcerned. When summer came, there was a white rose-bush in full bloom on the grave of little Christoph in the churchyard of St. Mary Magdalen, and not long after a small commemorative tablet lay beneath the bush. The rose-bush had been planted for him by his mother; the stone, of course, was well beyond her means to supply. But Christoph had had a good friend, a young musician, the son of a junk-shop dealer, who lived in the house opposite theirs. To begin with Christoph used to creep beneath his windows when the musician was inside, seated at the piano; later the musician would take him to St. Mary Magdalen from time to time, where he was accustomed to do his practice on the organ in the afternoons. Then the pale boy would sit on a little stool at his feet, lean his head back against the organ-seat as he listened, and watch the sunbeams playing with the stained-glass windows. When the young musician became carried away with extemporising variations on a theme, and made the powerful deep stops roar through the vaulted roof of the church, or when occasionally he pulled out the tremolo stop so that the notes coming from the organ poured out trembling as if before the majesty of God, the boy would sometimes break into restrained sobbing and his friend had difficulty in calming him down. Once Christoph even said imploringly: 'It hurts, Leberecht; don't play so loud!'

At that the organist pushed the loud stops in again, and pulled out the flute and other soft voices; and then the boy's favourite hymn-tune would sound through the church in sweet and moving tones: 'Commend your ways to Jesus'. Very quietly the boy

began to join in singing the tune in his sickly voice. 'I want to learn to play, too', he said, when the organ fell silent. 'Will you teach me, Leberecht?'

The young musician let his hand fall on to the boy’s head; stroking his blond hair he replied: 'Just you get really well again first, Christoph, then I’ll be happy to teach you.'

But Christoph never got well again. The young organist accompanied his coffin, along with the boy's mother. This was the first time the two had ever conversed together, and the mother told him the story of her thrice-repeated dream about the little silver cup she had inherited.

'That cup', said Leberecht, 'is something I could have given you. My father bought it from your half-brother many years ago, along with lots of other things, and one year he gave me the delicate object as a Christmas present.'

The woman burst out into bitter lamentations. 'Oh, no!' she kept crying out. 'I’m sure he would have got well again if only you had.'

The young man walked on beside her in silence for a while. 'I think Christoph should have the cup all the same', he said at length.

And so he did. A few days later he sold the cup to a collector of such items for a good price, and from the proceeds he had the memorial tablet made for little Christoph. He had a block of marble inserted in the stone, on which was carved a picture of the cup. Under it were engraved the words: ‘Good health!’

For many years afterwards, whether the grave was covered by winter snow, or in June sunshine by the summer snow of blossoms from the white rose-bush above it, a pale woman would often come here and would devoutly and pensively read the two words on the gravestone. Then one summer she no longer came; but the world went about its business unconcerned.

Only once more, many years later, did a very old man visit the grave, look at the little gravestone and pick a white rose from the old bush. He was the retired organist from the church of St Mary Magdalen.

But we must leave the peace of the child’s grave behind now, and, if our account is to be brought to its end, throw one last glance into the old oriel house in Gloomy Street. As before, it is still standing silent and locked up. While outside life rolled ceaselessly past it, inside, in the airless rooms, dry rot spread between the fissures in the hallway, plaster came loose on the ceilings and fell down, wafting weird echoes across passages and staircases in the lonely nights. The children who had sung carols in the street on that far-off Christmas Eve were now old people living in houses of their own, or they had finished with their lives and were dead. The people now walking the streets were wearing different kinds of clothes, and in the churchyard of a distant suburb the

black post with its number marking Frau Anken’s anonymous grave had long since rotted away. Then once again, as so often in the past, the full moon peeped over the top of the house next door and shone in at the oriel window on the third floor, painting the little round window-panes on the floor with its bluish light. The room was empty apart from a tiny figure huddled together on the couch. The figure was about the size of a twelve month-old baby, but the face was old and bearded, and the fleshless nose was disproportionately large; on top of the head was a nightcap which fell down a long way over the ears, and below was a long nightgown evidently intended for a full-grown adult, the empty end of which was pulled up on to the figure's lap.

The figure was Herr Bulemann. Hunger had not killed him, but lack of nourishment had made his body dry up and shrink, so that in the course of the years he had grown smaller and smaller. From time to time, on nights with a full moon such as this one, he had woken up and made an attempt, though with ever-dwindling strength, to escape from his gaolers. When he collapsed exhausted on to the couch after vain efforts of this kind, or when, in later years, he clambered his way up on to it and leaden sleep overtook him once more, then Grab and Cadger would stretch out at the head of the staircase outside, beating the floor with their tails and listening to see whether Frau Anken’s treasures had lured any more migrating columns of mice into the house.

On this day things were different; the cats were neither in the room nor outside on the landing. As the moonlight coming in through the window wandered across the floor and gradually moved up over the little figure, it began to stir; the big round eyes opened and Herr Bulemann stared out into an empty room. After a while, having laboriously folded back the long sleeves of the nightgown, he slithered down from the couch and slowly made his way to the door, with the broad train of the nightgown sweeping along the floor behind him. Standing on tiptoe, he was just able to grope for the latch and open the door of the room; then he walked on until he came to the banisters at the head of the stairs. For a time he stood there, panting from his exertions; then he poked his head through the rails and with a great effort called out: 'Frau Anken! Frau Anken!' But his voice was only as loud as the whisper of a sick child. 'Frau Anken, I’m hungry! Why don’t you hear me?'

All was quiet save for the mice who were now squeaking furiously in the downstairs rooms.

Then he became angry. 'You witch, you cursed witch, what’s that you’re whistling?' And a flood of incomprehensible curses came bubbling from his mouth, until a fit of catarrhal coughing assailed him and silenced his tongue.

Outside, down at the front door, the heavy brass knocker was struck so firmly that the echo reached right up to the top of the house. It was probably that jolly nocturnal reveller mentioned at the start of this story.

Herr Bulemann had got over his coughing. 'Go on then, open the door', he whispered. 'It’s that boy, Christoph, he’s come to fetch his cup.'

Suddenly the leapings and gruntings of the two giant cats could be heard from downstairs between the piping of the mice. He seemed to reflect for a moment; it was the first time that, on waking, he had found the cats away from the top storey, thus leaving him to his own devices. Hastily he turned and stamped back into his room, dragging the long nightgown after him.

Down below, out in the street, he heard the night watchman calling. 'A human being! A human being!' Herr Bulemann murmured. 'The night is so long. I keep on waking up, and the moon is always shining.'

He climbed on to the armchair which stood in the oriel window. Frantically he worked away at the window-catch with his little dried-up hands, for he had seen that out on the moonlit street the watchman had stopped and was standing still. But the snibs had rusted firm, in vain did he make every effort to open them. Then he saw the man, who had been staring up in the direction of his window for a while, move back into the shadow of the houses.

A faint cry broke from his lips; trembling, with clenched fists he beat on the window-panes, but his strength was not sufficient to smash them. Now he began to whisper a medley of entreaties and promises; gradually, while the figure of the man in the street walked further and further from view, his whispers turned to stifled, hoarse croakings: he promised to share all his treasure with the man, if he would only listen, he could have everything, he wanted to keep nothing for himself, absolutely nothing, except for the cup, and that was the property of little Christoph.

But the man down in the street went about his business unconcerned, and very soon he had vanished down a side-street. Of all the words Herr Bulemann uttered that night, not one was heard by a living soul.

At length, after all these vain exertions, the little figure cowered down in the armchair, pulled the nightcap into place and stared up, muttering incomprehensible words, into the emptiness of the night sky.

There he sits to this day, waiting for Almighty God to have compassion.