

AARON SHEPARD

King

o' the

Cats

Illustrated by KRISTIN SORRA





Praise for
The Princess Mouse
by Aaron Shepard:

"Quirky, enjoyable, and easily
adapted for storytime."

—Booklist

"The language is bright and
cheery throughout, with the
kind of repetition children,
and storytellers, love."

—Kirkus Reviews



King

o' the

Cats

told by **Aaron Shepard**



illustrated by **Kristin Sorra**

Atheneum Books for Young Readers

New York London Toronto Sydney Singapore

For Rowan, Bramble, and Skeeter

—A. S.

For Dennis, the mad storyteller, and Mama, the queen o' the cats

—K. S.

Alhambra Books for Young Readers
An imprint of Simon & Schuster Children's Publishing Division
1230 Avenue of the Americas
New York, New York, 10020

Text copyright © 2004 by Aaron Stegald

Illustrations copyright © 2004 by Kristen Sorensen

All rights reserved, including the right of reproduction in whole or in part in any form.

Book design by Abelardo Martinez

The text of this book is set in Lydian.

The illustrations are modeled in oil.

Manufactured in China

First Edition

2 4 6 8 10 12 14 16 18 20

Library of Congress Cataloging in Publication Data

Stegald, Aaron.

King of the cats : Aaron Stegald ; illustrated by Kristen Sorensen.—1st ed.

p. —cm.

Summary: A church sexton, known for his wild tales, has stories worth believing with magical cats and can't convince Father Allen that they really happened, until the priest's cat shows an intense interest.

ISBN 0-689-82062-8

[I. Fairy tales. 2. Folklore—England. 3. Cats—Fiction.]

I. Sorensen, Kristen, ill. B. Title.

PZ8.S7425 W3 2004

[398.2]—dc22 2002009202

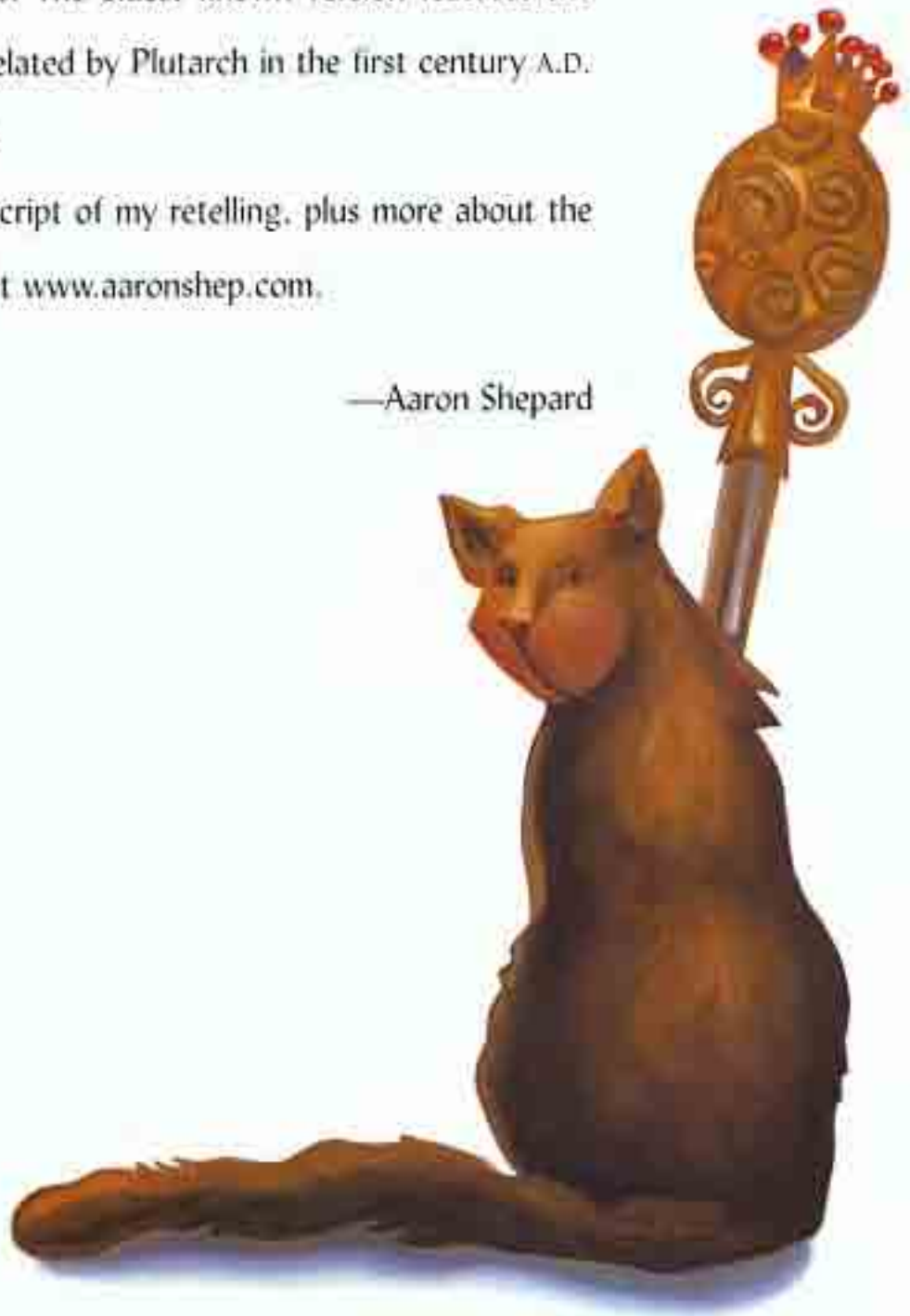


ABOUT THE STORY

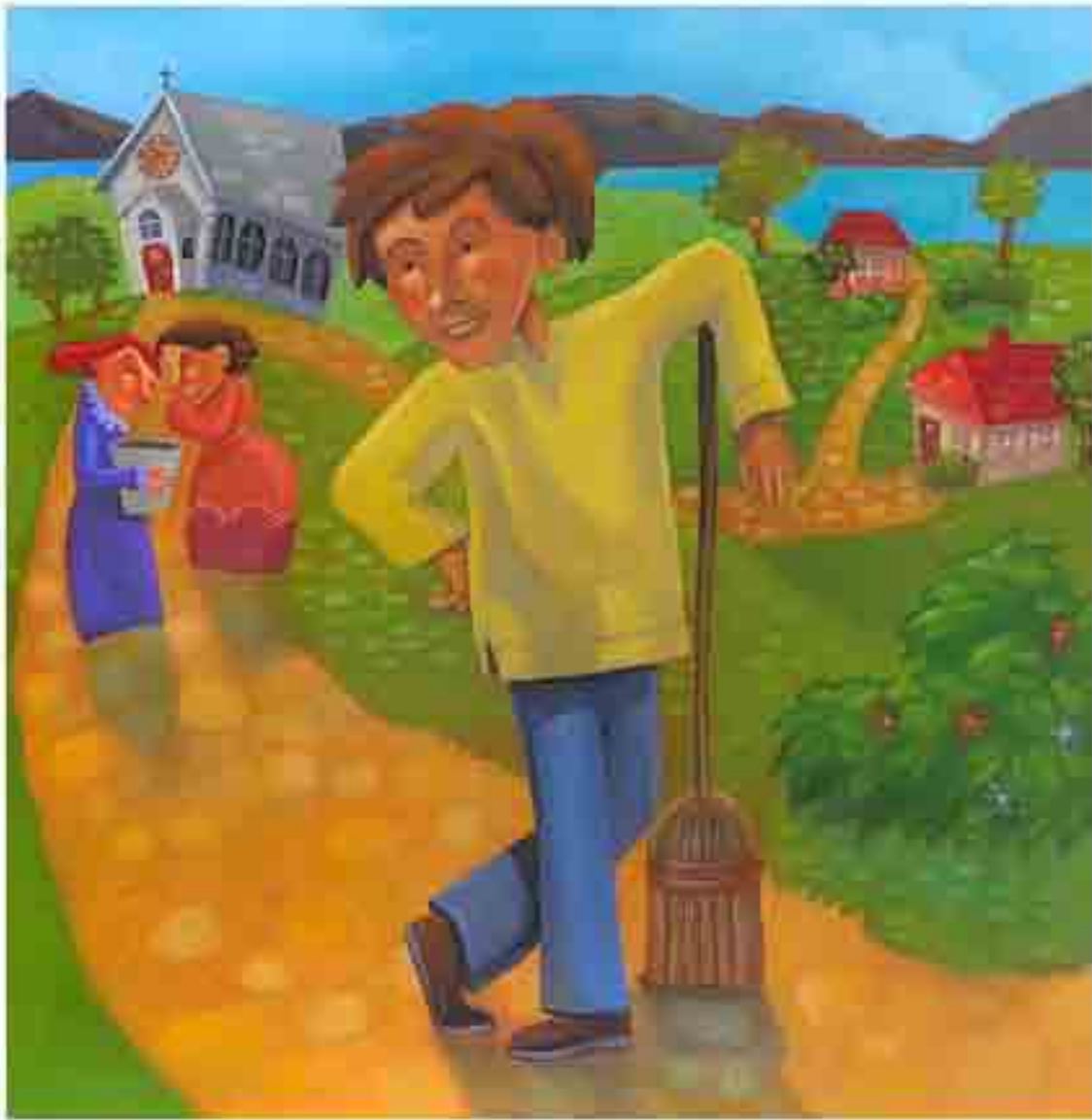
This is a much expanded retelling of the story told by the great English folklorist Joseph Jacobs in his *More English Fairy Tales* (1894). Other versions are found in Ireland and in continental Europe, where the cats may be replaced by other creatures—even tree spirits or werewolves. The oldest known version features the Greek demigod Pan, as related by Plutarch in the first century A.D. and found in his *Moralia*.

For a reader's theater script of my retelling, plus more about the story, visit my Web site at www.aaronshep.com.

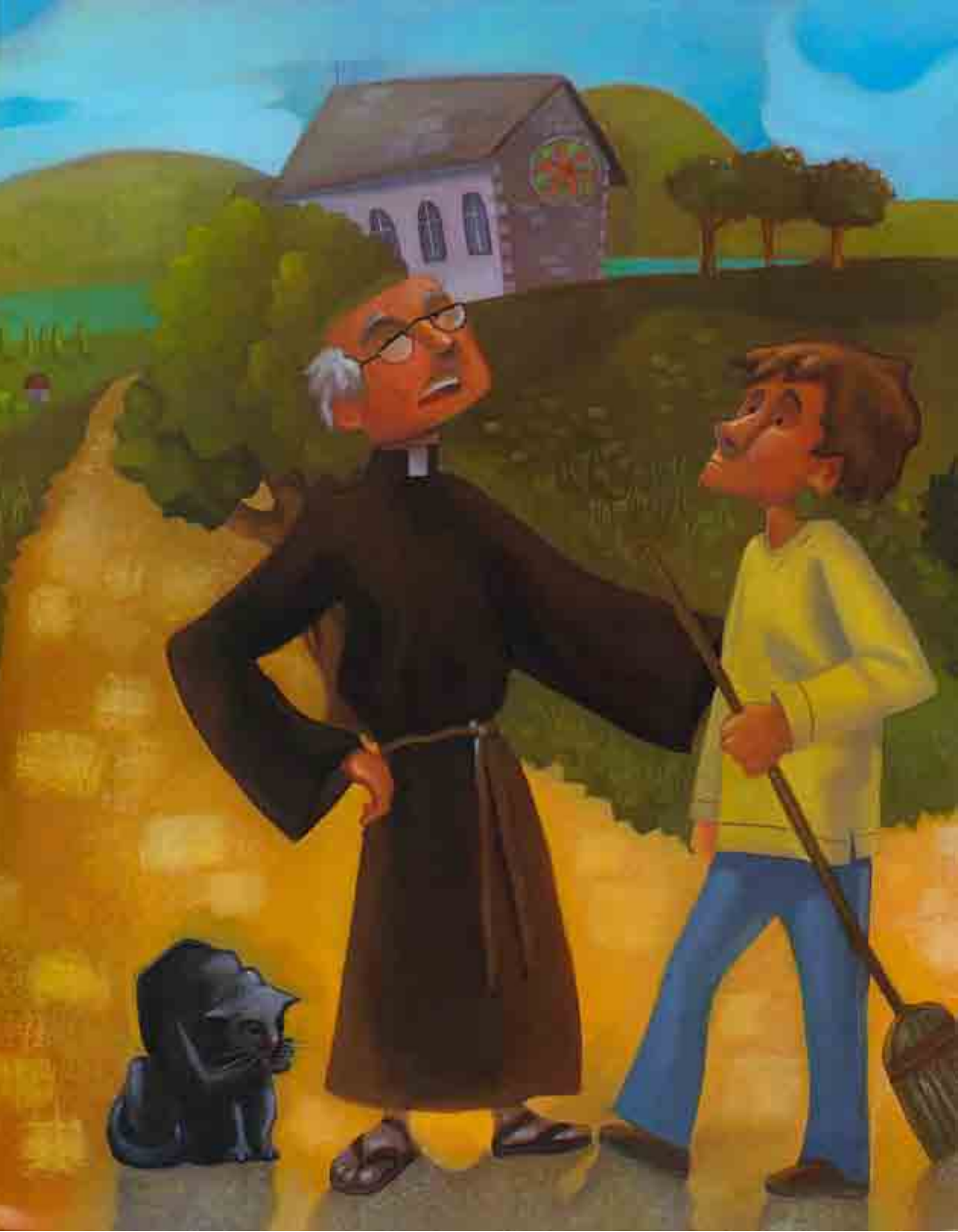
—Aaron Shepard







Young Peter Black was a good man, but everyone said he had one big fault. He loved to tell wild stories.





Peter was the sexton at the Church of St. Thomas the Believer, there in the little town of Tabby-on-Thames. He stayed in the cottage behind the church, right next to Father Allen's house. Many were the jobs he'd held before that, but with his wild stories, he'd managed to lose every one.

Father Allen had warned him, "Peter, this is the last job you're likely to get in this town. If you want to keep it, your wild stories must stop!"



One night Peter couldn't sleep. He tossed and he turned and at last he got up to make himself some tea. But when he glanced out his window, he saw the windows of the church ablaze with light.

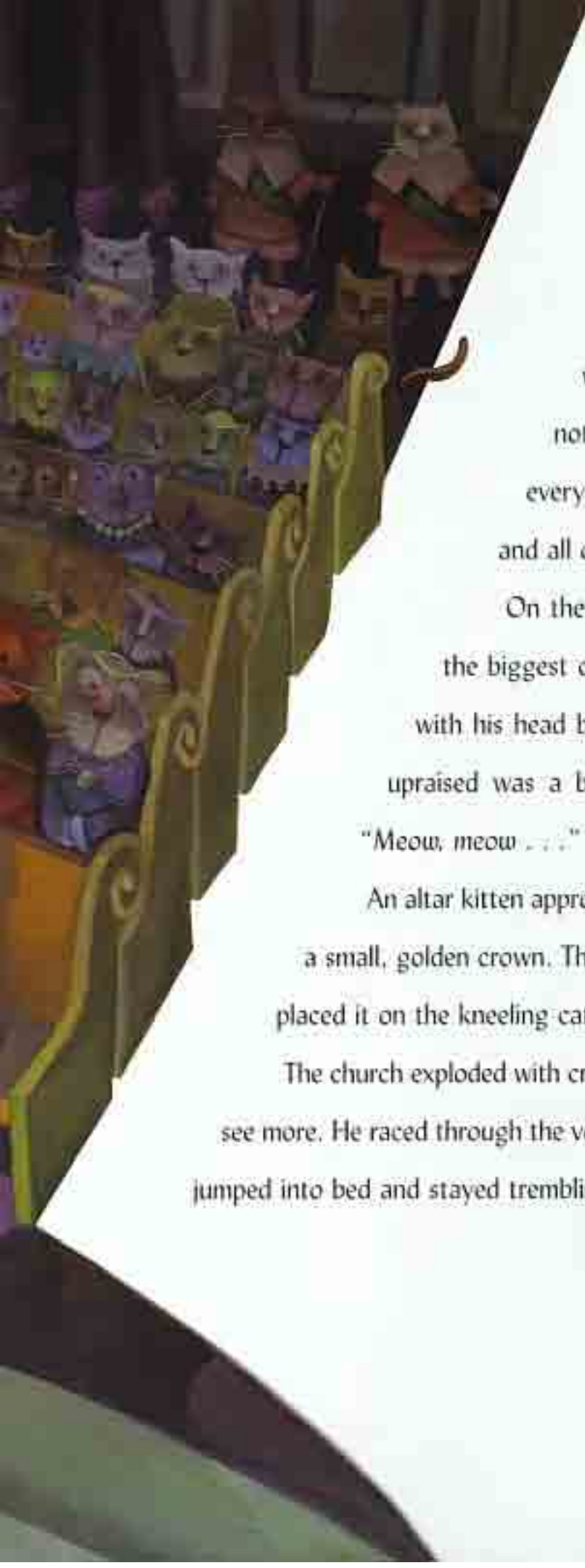
"What in the world . . . ?" muttered Peter. "There shouldn't be anyone there this time of night. And how'd they get in, anyway?"

Peter pulled on a coat, crossed the yard, and quietly unlocked the back door. As he crept through the vestry, he heard a sound from the church—
Meow, meow.

"Sounds like a cat," murmured Peter. "But I never knew a cat to light a candle."







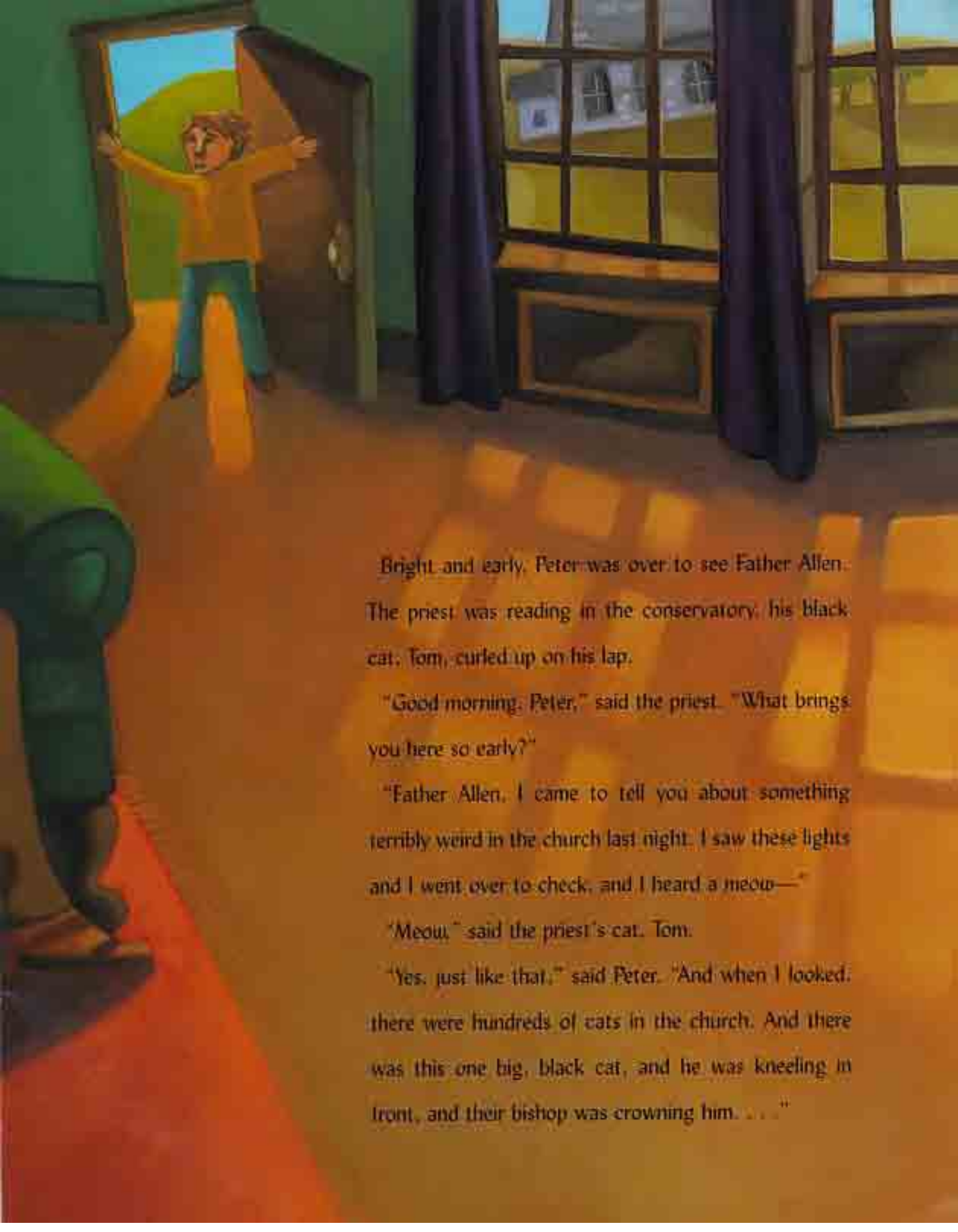
He peered around the curtain hung at the church entrance, and what he saw made him gasp. There was not one cat, but *hundreds* of cats, of every size and coloring. They filled the pews, and all of them sat upright just like people.

On the steps to the altar, a big, black cat—the biggest cat Peter had ever seen—was kneeling with his head bowed. Standing above him with paws upraised was a black cat in bishop's robes, intoning, "Meow, meow . . ."

An altar kitten approached with a velvet pillow on which lay a small, golden crown. The bishop lifted the crown and solemnly placed it on the kneeling cat's head.

The church exploded with cries of *meow, meow!* Peter didn't wait to see more. He raced through the vestry and back to his cottage, where he jumped into bed and stayed trembling under the covers till morning.





Bright and early, Peter was over to see Father Allen. The priest was reading in the conservatory; his black cat, Tom, curled up on his lap.

"Good morning, Peter," said the priest. "What brings you here so early?"

"Father Allen, I came to tell you about something terribly weird in the church last night. I saw these lights and I went over to check, and I heard a meow—"

"Meow," said the priest's cat, Tom.

"Yes, just like that," said Peter. "And when I looked, there were hundreds of cats in the church. And there was this one big, black cat, and he was kneeling in front, and their bishop was crowning him. . . ."



Father Allen was looking at him sternly. "Peter, do you remember what I told you about wild stories?"

"Of course I do, Father."

"Then let's have no more of this, all right?"

"But, Father—"

"Listen, Peter, I have an errand for you. Will you walk over to Brambleton today and deliver a message to Father Rowan?"

Peter would and Peter did. But he didn't get to it till late afternoon, and by the time he started home, it was already dusk. He decided to take a shortcut cross-country.





He was halfway through a meadow and up to a stand of trees when he heard a commotion. From beyond the meadow came the barking of a dog and a chorus of *meow, meow*.

"Is it those cats again?" said Peter in alarm, ducking behind a tree.

An Irish setter raced into the meadow, barking for all it was worth. Right behind were a dozen cats with bows and arrows, riding—yes, riding—on the backs of bridled foxes. The big, black cat at their head was wearing a golden crown.

At first Peter thought the setter was leading the cats on the trail of their quarry. Then he realized, *No, they're hunting the dog!*

