

## The Cat

Kate was sitting quietly by the window of her living room. In her mind she was turning many thoughts over and over, of her children, and her grandchildren, and of Erica, in particular.

Erica was engaged to be married in the spring. She was now living in London, sharing a flat with a girl friend. Soon after she had settled in the flat she intended to take her cat, Flopsy, back to London with her.

Flopsy, who had been living with Kate, was not very well at that time, having what seemed to be something like sciatica in her hind legs and could not move around easily. So that she could get in and out with as little bother as possible, Kate left a window open in her back bedroom with a short plank of wood leading from the window sill on to the roof of the kitchen of the flat downstairs, and from there Flopsy could jump down on to the dust bin and from there on to the ground. It was becoming quite an effort for her to make the journey back, but she did it.

She was not a friendly cat, but she seemed to love Erica, and her grandmother, Kate. She would fawn on them, rubbing herself against their legs, or twisting herself in and out as they walked around. Flopsy had a particular admirer, a large, tatty, black and white tom. They sported together around the garden and piece of greenery Kate laughingly called her lawn. They would sit for a time watching other cats and flying birds.

The day came when Flopsy was transported to her London home. But she never really settled down to being a "towny" cat. Her sciatica grew worse, and when Erica took her to see a vet, she was told Flopsy was in some pain and would never get any better. The inevitable day came when she had to be put to sleep. Erica was very upset over this, and as she knew that Kate would also be upset, she decided to go and stay with her grandmother for the weekend.

When Kate received Erica's letter, she was about to make herself a mid-afternoon cup of tea. This was the time of day she enjoyed the most. All the daily chores were done, and she could relax and get on with crocheting a multi-coloured wool blanket which grew in beauty under her skilful hands. This particular afternoon she fell to talking to herself which was unusual, as she was a very "earthy" person.

"I don't suppose anyone would believe me if I told them," she said to herself. "They would, more than likely, rush me off to the funny farm."

She went into her bedroom and pulled out from under her bed four canvases that she had been painting. None of them were finished. She had stopped painting each one before she had completed the left hand corners. Each time some unseen power seemed to prompt her to leave this corner until the last; and then each time, her brush was gently taken over; and then she found she had painted in a misty, grey shadow of a cat. The same thing had happened in each of the pictures. She ranged the four paintings on her bed, leaning them against the wall for support. Each cat was sitting up with its tail curled round in front of its forepaws. But the cats had no eyes, and this worried Kate.

"Why haven't I painted the eyes?" she asked herself.

She tried to laugh it off, but all the same she was puzzled. She put the canvasses away and went into the spare bedroom. The day was warm and sunny. She looked out of the window. In the middle of the lawn was a round indentation which looked as if a small animal had twisted its body round and round in it before settling down for a quiet snooze. Kate, thinking of Flopsy, through habit, opened the window at the bottom about eight inches, adjusted the plank of wood, and was about to leave the room when she remembered that Flopsy was no longer with her. She decided to leave the window open to let in some air, and

then passed into the kitchen to make a pot of tea. She laid the tray, made the tea, and carried into the sitting room. She poured herself out a cup of tea and was leaning back in her chair, her eyes closed with sheer enjoyment. She had almost drifted off to sleep with the cup in her hand, when she heard a noise in the hall, just outside the sitting room door. She rose up slowly, thinking something had fallen from the kitchen table, but as she reached the door she saw the large black and white tomcat backing away from her with its fur standing on end.

"What do you want? Skat! Get out of here, go on, shoo, shoo!"

The black cat looked at her with its rheumy eyes, turned tail and walked slowly into the spare bedroom, yowling mournfully as it went. Before it jumped onto the window-sill, it turned its head and looked at Kate with such misery in its eyes that it looked almost human. She closed the window feeling a little sick and frightened. The black and white cat had never attempted to come in the house before, although he had often sat on the window sill with his nose pressed against the glass. Sometimes she and Erica had wondered if the cat was dumb, because he would open his mouth but without any sound coming out. It was quite a shock to Kate to hear this harsh, throaty, sound coming from him. She watched him walk down the garden path. He found the indenture in the green grass, walked slowly round it, and then curled up in it to go to sleep.

Kate walked back into her sitting room to her now cold cup of tea. She sat down with the cup in her hand when she remembered Erica's letter. She finished the tea to the dregs, idly turned the cup upside down on to the saucer, and reached for the letter. As she was reading it she thought she felt Floppsy's warm, furry body rubbing against her legs. Kate was saddened by the thought that the cat had been so ill. Floppsy had never been a strong cat, and had been very nervous, preferring to creep under places to sleep. Tears welled up in Kate's eyes, stinging tears.

"Poor little Floppsy," she thought.

She stood up to take the tray into the kitchen, idly righting the cup as she did so. She peered into the hollow cup expecting to see the usual swirl of tea-leaves and unstirred sugar at the bottom of the cup, but there, at the bottom, was the image of a cat, sitting up with its tail curled round in front of its forepaws. There were black circles where the eyes should have been. Kate could hardly believe her eyes. She turned the cup this way and that way, she shook it, and even blew on it to try to change the shape, but it would not move.

"I must save this to show Erica when she comes," she said to herself.

She took the cup into the kitchen and wrapped it in a small, plastic bag to keep it moist, and placed it on a high shelf so that it would not get broken. It was her favourite cup.

Erica arrived about five o'clock the next evening with one small bag slung over her shoulder.

"Oh, Gran, it is so lovely to see you." she said, as she gave Kate's ample figure a hug.

"I'm starving. What have you got for tea? Very soon I shall be as fat as butter and no one will want to marry me, not even Leslie."

"It won't be long." said Kate, keeping her arms around Erica's shoulders. "I have fish in mushroom sauce. You liked this at one time."

It seemed as if they both wanted to keep off the subject of cats. When the meal was finished, Erica helped her grandmother wash the dishes.

"We'll have a nice cup of tea." Erica said. "You sit down while I make it."

It was then that Kate remembered about the cup. She reached for it.

"I have something to show you, Erica," she said, and unwrapped the cup and showed it to her granddaughter. Then she told her about the black and white cat coming into the room, and of the paintings. Erica looked at the image of a cat in the bottom of the cup formed by tea-leaves and sugar at the bottom of the cup.

"It's a cat alright. It does seem odd when the black cat comes around when Floppsy is no

longer here, doesn't it?"

She put the cup into the water to wash it.

"Show me the paintings while the cup is soaking in the water." she asked

Kate led her to the pictures, still on the bed where she had left them.

"There. What do you think of that? What do you see in the bottom left hand corners of each one?"

Erica stared at the pictures in amazement. She saw the unmistakable outlines of cats in sitting positions with their tails curled around their forepaws, in each of the four canvasses.

They left the bedroom and went back into the kitchen. Erica picked the cup out of the water, ran her hand round the inside, and turned it upside down. Kate picked it up from where Erica had placed it and turned it over, saying as she did so,

"This is my favourite cup. It is the last one left of the service that your grandfather bought for me many years ago. I hope nothing happens to it. I don't think much of your washing up; the tea leaves are still in the bottom of the cup."

"Oh, Gran, don't be so fussy. Give it to me."

The girl took the cup from Kate and looked inside. The leaves were still there forming the shape of a sitting cat. She plunged the cup into the water with a smile, and swirled it round. The leaves came away but a grey, cat-like stain remained at the bottom of the cup. It would not wash off, but this time the shadowy thing had eyes. Erica's hands trembled, and her eyes grew wide as she handled it. She turned the cup over in her hands, then, opening her fingers very slightly, she let the cup fall to the floor. She looked at her grandmother's horrified face.

"I'm so sorry, Gran, I've broken your favourite cup."

Tears ran down Kate's face. She had used that cup for so many years, and now it was gone, taking part of her with it. Then as she realised she would never again use it, she put her arm around Erica saying as she did so,

"Poor little Floppsy! Never mind, darling, let's enjoy the rest of this weekend together, shall we?"

After Erica had gone back to London, Kate looked at the paintings again. She lifted them onto the bed to study them. The cats were still there, but this time they had eyes, big golden eyes, that followed her round the room. She lifted one of the paintings onto an easel, mixed some paint, and approached the canvas. As she did so, it seemed to fade in the bottom left hand corner until there was nothing left but the bare canvas which was shaking on the easel. She looked again. The cat was gone! She went to touch the other paintings, but as soon as her brush touched the canvas, the cats disappeared, leaving bare, unpainted canvas. She filled each corner of the paintings, washed her hands and left the room.

"Poor little Floppsy," she said, "Poor little Floppsy."