

Stables Gordon

Shireen and her Friends: Pages from the Life of a Persian Cat



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Preface

Dedicated to the Reviewer

Yes, this little preface is written for the Reviewer and nobody else. Indeed, the public seldom bother to read prefaces, and small blame to them. Reading the preface to a book is just like being button-holed by some loquacious fellow, as you are entering the theatre, who wants to tell you all about the play you are just going to see. So sure am I of this, that I had at first thought of writing my preface in ancient Greek. Of course every reviewer is as well-versed in that beautiful language as Professor Geddes, or John Stuart Blackie himself. I was only restrained by remembering that my own Greek might have got just a trifle mouldy.

Well, all I want to say in this page is, that there is a deal more truth in the pages that follow than might at first be imagined.

Both Shireen and Tom Brandy were real characters, and the incidents and adventures of their life on board ship were very much as I have told them. The starling, and Cockie, the cockatoo, were also pets of my own; and Chammy, the chameleon, is described from the life. She died this year (1894).

The story Stamboul tells about his life as a show cat is a sad one, and alas! it tells but half the truth. Cat shows have done good to the breed of cats in this country, but it has raised up a swarm of dealers, that treat poor pussy in a shameful way, and look upon her as simply so much merchandise.

In conclusion, I am not going to deny, that while trying to write a pleasant book as a companion to my last year's "Sable and White," I have endeavoured now and then to get a little hint slipped in edgeways, which, if taken by the intelligent reader, may aid in gaining a more comfortable position in our homesteads for our mutual friend the cat. If I be successful in this, I shall consider myself quite as good as that other fellow, you know, who caused two blades of grass to grow where only one grew before.

Gordon Stables.

The Jungle, Twyford, Berks.

Dedication

Swinburne and the Cat

The following beautiful verses by the poet Swinburne, to whom I have the honour of dedicating this work, appeared last year in the "Athenaeum."

To a Cat.

Stately, kindly, lordly friend,

Condescend

Here to sit by me, and turn
Glorious eyes that smile and burn,
Golden eyes, love's lustrous meed,
On the golden page I read.

All your wondrous wealth of hair,
Dark and fair,
Silken-shaggy, soft and bright
As the clouds and beams of night,
Pays my reverent hand's caress
Back with friendlier gentleness.

Dogs may fawn on all and some
As they come;
You, a friend of loftier mind,
Answer friends alone in kind.
Just your foot upon my hand
Softly bids it understand.

Morning round this silent sweet
Garden-seat
Sheds its wealth of gathering light,
Thrills the gradual clouds with might,
Changes woodland, orchard, heath,
Lawn and garden there beneath.

Fair and dim they gleamed below:
Now they glow
Peep as even your sunbright eyes,
Fair as even the wakening skies.
Can it not or can it be
Now that you give thanks to see?

May not you rejoice as I,
Seeing the sky
Change to heaven revealed, and bid
Earth reveal the heaven it hid
All night long from stars and moon,
Now the sun sets all in tune?

What within you wakes with day
Who can say?
All too little may we tell,
Friends who like each other well,
What might haply, if we might,
Hid us read our lives aright.

A.C. Swinburne.

Chapter One

“You’re the New Dog, aren’t you?”

It was an autumn evening, or rather afternoon, for the sun was still high over the blue hills of the West. The sky was clear too, and twilight would last long.

The trees, however, were already casting longer shadows on the grass, and the breeze that swayed their brandies, cast, playfully, ever and anon, handfuls of brown leaves towards the earth.

Shireen was coming slowly across the road towards Uncle Ben’s bungalow.

Uncle Ben was an old sea captain, and had been in India for some years of his life. This was the reason why he called his home a bungalow. It really was a sturdy stone-built cottage, a verandah in front to which in June and July the roses clung, with two gables embowered in the greenery of ivy, one of which had a large casement window in it, with steps leading down to the lawn, where, under the trees in the sweet summer-time Ben was often to be found smoking a pipe in his grass hammock.

The whole place was a sort of arboretum, however, and the very most the sun could ever do was to shine down upon the grass in patches. Once inside the railing that surrounded it. Shireen knew she would be safe, so there was no need to hurry. Besides, it had been raining, and the road was not only wet, but the water lay here and there in little pools.

These pools Shireen took care to avoid, for she was a very dainty cat indeed. Every time she took a step she lifted her paw as high as she could and shook it. She tried also to elevate that tail of hers so as to keep it unsoiled, but it was so big and bushy that in this she was only partially successful.

The bungalow lay or stood in the outskirts or suburbs of the village, and not a long way from the sea either, for old Ben would have slept but poorly could he not have gone to sleep every night – that is every still night – with the whisper of the waves singing a kind of lullaby to him as they broke lazily on the yellow sands. But if a breeze blew off the shore or down from the hills to the nor’ard and cast, then Ben went to sleep with the half-formed idea in his mind that he was at sea; an idea that ere long commingled with his dreams. The wind would seem to be roaring through rigging and shrouds, and not through the oaks and elms and rustling pine trees; but sail was shortened, the ship was snug, and it was the mate’s watch on deck. What more could any sailor desire?

Ben had no wife; only a little old woman came and charred for him, and a tall ungainly Portuguese lad, who had been cook’s mate with him on board the *Alibi*, and could make an excellent curry, officiated as Ben’s factotum and valet. Then there was the cockatoo. Perhaps it may be said that cockatoos don’t count as members of a household, but Cockie was no ordinary cockatoo, I can assure you. She came originally from the bush or jungle of Western Australia. Ben used to nod his head at Cockie in a semi-solemn kind of way when anyone put a question to him concerning the bird.

She came into my possession in a queer kind of way. Some of these days I may tell you the story. Haven’t told it to anybody yet except to Pussy Shireen. Some day? – Yes, some day – perhaps.

The little old woman who charred for Ben only came once a week, and that was on a Friday. Then Ben would clear out, get away to the hills, or off in a boat, with bread and cheese in his coat-tail pocket, and not come home till evening.

Fridays were called by this sailor “wash-and-scrub-deck-days,” and there wasn’t a deal of comfort in them. Besides, Ben dreaded a woman’s tongue.

“And old Sally’s tongue,” he would tell his friends, “is about the waggingest thing out. Just set the old creature agoing, and she’ll go on without a hitch for a two hours’ spell as steady’s the trade wind.”

So he was always glad when Sally finished her tea in the kitchen, received her well-earned two shillings, and took her departure. Then, and not until then, would Ben sink into his rocking-chair with a sigh of relief and satisfaction, and light his very largest meerschaum pipe.

Ben never boasted about Sally, but he was willing enough to talk about Pedro, or the cockatoo.

“He is a faithful creature, a faithful creature, and I don’t care who knows it. And the curry he makes! Ah!” It will be noted that Ben would be alluding thus to Pedro, not to Cockie the cockatoo. “Yes, that curry, why, the very flavour of it takes ten years off my life at least. Calls me as regular of a morning as a bo’s’n’s pipe. Eight bells, and there I am; clothes all brushed and folded; bath waiting for me; clean white shirt laid out, and never a button missing off my waistcoat. Breakfast served nice and comfortable soon’s I go down; letters alongside my plate, and Cockie’s cage as sweet as nuts. A faithful creature indeed, although he isn’t much to look at!”

No. Ben spoke the truth, for certainly Pedro was not much to look at; not much to admire. He wore the same dress apparently winter and summer; a very short blue-cloth sailor’s jacket, under this a checked shirt, no necktie, no collar, no waistcoat. The continuations of his dress downwards did not reach to his low-heeled shoes by inches, so he always showed a goodly amount of blue-ribbed stocking, but his shoes were always nicely polished, and his long lean hands were clean. In complexion Pedro was sallow, almost saffron-hued, and his eyes were like this jet; while his hair, which was black, of course, was scarcely half-an-inch long all over, and stood on end like the bristles of a blacking brush. People used to say that at some period of his life Pedro must have seen a ghost, and that his hair had never fallen flat again.

“But he is good to the birds,” Ben would have told you.

“God’s birds, I mean,” he would have added. “The birds that cheer us and charm us in the sweet spring-time, you know, and all the summer through.

“‘All thro’ the sultry hours of June,
From morning blithe to golden noon,
And till the star of evening climbs
The grey-blue zest, a world too soon,
There sings a thrush among the limes.’

“Ay, and that bird, and our blackbirds with their mellow music, and bold lilting chaffie and tender-songed cock-robin know Pedro, and when the winter snows are on the lawn they will almost feed out of his hand. They know me, too, and they know Cockie, and they know Colonel Clarkson’s cat Shireen.”

And that, reader, is the very cat that is now slowly and wearily crossing the road towards the good old sailor’s bungalow. Shireen, it will therefore be observed, did not belong to Ben. She was simply an occasional visitor, for cats very soon find out who loves them and who does not.

But Ben’s bungalow was not the only place to which Shireen was in the habit of paying a visit. No, not by very many. Indeed, everybody knew Shireen, and there were few houses in the village that this strange cat did not walk into now and then. Very coolly, too; but always with a little fond cry or expression of friendliness and goodwill to the inmates.

She was always welcome, and many a saucerful of creamy milk was put down to her on these occasions. Not that Shireen paid the visit for sake of being fed, for often she would not touch the milk-offering. But she had formed this wandering habit somehow. The fact is, Shireen, like her owner, the Colonel, was a very far-travelling cat, and cats, like old soldiers and old sailors who have been here and there in many lands, find it difficult to settle in one place or one home.

If ever a cat was a village favourite, this droll puss Shireen was.

It must not be supposed, however, that she was anybody’s cat, for a cupful of milk, as the saying is. For there were people that Shireen liked better than others, and some she did not like

at all; while there were men and women that she would fly from, and houses in the village that she gave a wide berth to.

Sometimes she would take it into her head to pay a visit to the girls' school during working hours. The young lady teachers did not object, because she did not interfere with the duties; but here again she evinced likes and dislikes. Pretty Matty Loraine, for example, she quietly ignored, and never responded to her caresses, but to everybody's astonishment she seemed greatly attached to Emily Stoddart, although Emily was considered somewhat plain in appearance, and not very clever. Besides, she had red hair; but she had soft blue eyes, and perhaps Shireen had found out down in their hidden depths a gentle nature dwelt.

Everybody said that when Matty grew up she would be very beautiful indeed, and might possibly marry the squire's son, but a wealthy marriage was never prophesied for poor Emily. There were stonemasons and hedgers or ditchers for girls like her. However, prophecies did not seem to trouble Emily, though the evident preference that Shireen showed for her pleased her not a little. Perhaps cats are students of human character, and in very truth they need to be if they are to enjoy life at all, and give themselves a chance of securing the allotted span of eighteen or twenty years which Providence has decreed as the extent of poor persecuted pussy's existence – in this world at all events.

Singularly enough, Shireen evinced not the slightest fear of dogs. As a rule, I mean, though every rule has its exceptions. But puss could have told you the idiosyncrasies of all the dogs in the village downwards, from the doctor's great good-natured Newfoundland, on whose broad back all the children in the place had ridden when very young. *He* wouldn't touch a cat. He was too noble by far. Nor would the saddler's bull-dog, ferocious-looking and ugly to a degree though he was; nor Squire Blythe's mastiff; nor Miss Ponsonby's collie, with his long shaggy coat, his beautiful face and gentle eyes.

Whenever a new dog came to the village Shireen set out to meet him and make friends with him. She would come trotting up to the fresh arrival with her tail in the air, and purring nearly as loud as a turtle dove, and some such conversation as the following might be supposed to take place between the two.

Shireen (*loquitur*): "Oh, you're the new dog, aren't you? What's your name, and what's your breed? I'm simply delighted to see a new face!"

Fresh Arrival (*looking astonished*): "My name is Cracker. My breed is the Airedale terrier. I come from Yorkshire. I have fought and slain an otter single-handed. I'm a terrible fellow when I'm put out. My duty is to kill rats, and – listen – sometimes even *cats*!"

Shireen (*purring louder than ever*): "Oh, I daresay and, indeed, Cracker, some cats deserve to be killed. But I'm Shireen. Nobody ever kills me. What a nice good-natured face you have! Just let me rub my back against your chest. So – and – so! I'm sure we shall be tremendous friends, and you might do me a favour if you care to."

Fresh Arrival: "Is it rats?"

Shireen: "No, it isn't rats. It is Danger, the butcher's bull-terrier. He wants killing ever so much. He thinks he can fight any dog, and he always chases me. But be sure you shake him well up whenever you meet him. He has one ear slit in two. I managed that for him one day. I'll sit in a tree and see you open him up, and nobody will be a bit sorry. Good-bye, you beautiful handsome Cracker. So pleased to have met you. Just over the way there, in that low-thatched cottage, there is a sick child, and I am going in to sit and sing to her till she drops off asleep and forgets her pains and sorrows. Good-bye."

Shireen, it will be seen, quite disarmed dogs by her coolness and her perfect friendliness. No dog that ever lived would kill a cat who ran up to meet him in the street and rubbed her head against his chest.

This strange pussy had, however, one or two human enemies as well as the dog Danger. Almost everyone has, and Shireen could be no exception. But in her case they were either old wives, who looked upon her with superstitious dread because she was reported to carry a ruby in one of her teeth, or they were mischievous boys, who threw stones at her from that nasty little contrivance called a catapult, or cat-a-pelt, as some horrid boys call it, because they think it was invented to pelt poor pussies with.

Shireen, however, had managed hitherto to keep out of their way. She was very often to be seen in the village street, walking along leisurely enough, but as soon as that hideous yell was borne along on the breeze, which told her the boys' school had just been dismissed, pussy increased her pace and disappeared.

Shireen knew boys. She knew all their tricks and their manners, and she could have told you that boys were boys all the wide world over.

Well, as she is crossing the street to-day, giving a glance up and down every two or three seconds to make certain the coast was clear, the rattle of light wheels was heard.

That was the butcher's cart.

She listened and looked, one paw in the air.

Yes, there was Danger himself coming round the corner with his red tongue lolling out of his open mouth, for though it was autumn the weather was warm.

Danger sees pussy almost as soon as she sees him.

"There's that long-tailed white cat again," he says to himself. "Well, I'll have her this time right enough. Here goes!"

And straight along the road he comes rushing with the speed of a torpedo.

Shireen doesn't lose her presence of mind. Not a bit of it. She measures the distance with a glance from Uncle Ben's railing, and calculates to the tenth part of a second the time it will take her to reach it.

She wants to make that dog believe that he is sure of her, so that she may, in triumph and safety, enjoy his chagrin and disappointment all the more.

On he comes, on and on.

Shireen pretends she doesn't see him.

He is within two yards of her. Oh! he has caught her! No, he hasn't! One dart, one dive, and she is safe on the other side of Ben's friendly railing.

He – Danger – can't get through.

Only just his nose, and no more.

And what a fool he was to stick that between the rails. Shireen springs round like fire from flint.

"Fuss! Fut!"

That blow was beautifully aimed, and poor Danger goes howling off with a sadly torn nose.

I say *poor* Danger, because it really was the fault of that wicked butcher-boy. Dogs are only what men make them.

Shireen is not so young as she was once upon a time, but she feels very youthful now. And very happy too. She stops for a few minutes to dry herself in a patch of sunshine, then goes galloping off across Ben's lawn, making pretences that the withered leaves are mice, and whacking them about in all directions.

Next moment she has jumped into Ben's hammock.

"Why, old girl," cries Ben, "you're as playful as a kitten. Who would think, Shireen, that you were over twenty years of age, and had seen nearly as much of the world as Uncle Ben himself? Well, sit there and sing to me. Now, that is real soothing, and I'm not at all sure I won't go to sleep. For at my time of life, Shireen, it's best to take all out of life you can get."

Ben's hand and book drop listlessly on his breast, and while the autumn wind goes moaning through the pine trees overhead, keeping up a kind of sibilant bass to Shireen's song, while his pet cockatoo nods on his perch near by, the ancient mariner dozes – and dreams.

Chapter Two

Old Friends Around the Fire

“The day is done, and the darkness
Falls from the wings of night,
As a feather is wafted downward
From an eagle in its flight;

“But the night shall be filled with music,
And the cares that infest the day,
Shall fold their tents, like the Arabs,
And as silently steal away.”

No cares had Colonel Clarkson to trouble him. So everyone would have told round the village or in the parish. It was then nearly the autumn of life with the Colonel, but really and truly he seemed to be growing old gracefully. Nor did he allow the little worries of life to interfere in the least with the calm enjoyment of his placid existence.

He had been a busy man in his younger days. But that was years ago. He had fought in the Crimea, he had waved his sword on Persian plains, and on Afghanistan heights, and he had gone through all the horrors of the Indian Mutiny. He had even been side by side with brave Havelock in the rush for the Residency up that long street of death and fire where brave Neill fell. Yet concerning these and his many other adventures he was seldom very communicative, albeit there were times when his friend Uncle Ben succeeded in drawing him out, and then his stories were well worth listening to.

The Colonel was like many brave soldiers, a somewhat shy man, and certainly kept himself personally very much in the background when describing a battle or the storming of a trench against fearful odds. That he had not kept himself in the background on the real field of fight was evident enough from the medals he had won but seldom if ever wore. And one of these was the Victoria Cross.

When the Colonel did suffer himself to be drawn out, as Sailor Ben phrased it, he never told his stories excitedly, but in low calm tones, and in earnest conversational English, that carried conviction of the truthfulness of every item of his narrative to the hearts of his listeners.

And who would these listeners be? I must tell you that, and having done so I shall have introduced you to most of the personalities who figure in this biography.

The listeners then may, indeed they must be, divided into two groups. The first group was composed of human beings, the second of what I am loth indeed to call the lower animals. It is mere conventionality on my part to do so, for the creatures God has permitted us to domesticate, and who are such faithful and trustworthy servants, are oftentimes quite as interesting in a way as many of their masters – men.

On that very autumnal evening on which Shireen paid her visit to Uncle Ben's bungalow, and made it so hot for the butcher's dog, our two groups were all together around the fire at the Colonel's Castle, as the old soldier's house was generally called, and Castle it once had been in reality.

On this particular evening after Ben had finished his pipe and drank the tea that Pedro had brought him, he had smoothed pussy once more, and said: – “I think now, Shireen, we'll take a walk to the Castle and see your master. By that time gloaming will be falling, and it will be what my dear friend the Colonel calls the ‘Children's Hour.’”

“Meow!” said puss, as if she knew all about it, and quite understood every word that Uncle Ben said when he repeated Longfellow’s dreamy lines:

“Between the dark and the daylight,
When the night is beginning to lower,
Comes a pause in the day’s occupations,
That is known as the Children’s Hour.

“I hear in the chamber above me
The patter of little feet,
The sound of a door that is opened,
And voices soft and sweet.”

People who had met Uncle Ben this evening walking along towards the Colonel’s Castle, were not a bit astonished to see Shireen trotting contentedly beside him, her tail in the air and head erect; nor to see his wonderful cockatoo balancing himself uneasily on his shoulder, and giving vent now and then to a war-whoop that would have scared a Comanche Indian, and certainly frightened the dogs.

Uncle Ben’s cockatoo was as often on his shoulder as anywhere else, and the bird was a frequent visitor at the old Castle, only he insisted on remaining on his master’s shoulder all the time he stayed there, generally taking stock of things around him; sometimes making a remark or two of his own, or allaying his feelings with a little dance or a song.

Well, Ben was one of Colonel Clarkson’s listeners to-night. But there were three others, namely, the Colonel’s wife, a lady who was still strangely interestingly pleasing to behold, although she was evidently not English. People called her beautiful. She must have been many years younger than her husband, all owing to the fact that women age sooner than men. On the swaying, sighing trees outside yonder, the leaves had assumed their autumn tints. There were autumn tints on Colonel Clarkson’s hair as well, but the tints on both were beautiful. Tom, a handsome boy of some eight years of age, sat on his aunt’s knee, his head nestling on her shoulder, but his eyes on his soldier uncle. On this uncle’s knee sat a fairy fragile little maiden, the boy’s sister, and some two years his senior. They were orphans, and the Castle was now their home. These then were the human group.

The other group were altogether on the skin hearthrug in front of the fire – a group of undergraduates let me term them.

The members of this group were far indeed from uninteresting, each in his or her own way. But their individualisms must develop themselves as the story goes on, only I want you to be introduced to them here at once.

Shireen you already know. She is seated on a footstool, singing low to herself, and gazing somewhat pensively into the fire.

She is not the only cat in the group, however. There is a much younger one stretched on the rug. A short-haired tabby.

And seated on top of her, busily preening his feathers very much to his own satisfaction, is Dick. Now Dick is a starling, and it may surprise some to learn that he is on terms the most friendly with both cats, and that far from seeking to harm him, they would at any hour of the day risk their lives in protecting him.

The particular trait in Dick’s character, judging from his every look and movement, is consummate *chic* and independence.

But there are two dogs here also, both characters in their way.

One is a white Pomeranian. He is sitting as near as he can get to his master’s knee, for his love for Colonel Clarkson knows neither bounds nor limits.

The other dog is the drollest, daftest, wildest little rascal you could conceive. He is an iron-grey, hard-haired Scotch terrier. He comes of a race of dogs that are simply indomitable, that know no such thing as fear, who will, single-handed, face and fight either fox, badger, or otter, and if vanquished, know at least how to die.

There is an old-world look in that doggie's face which is wonderful to behold, and a depth of wisdom in his dark eyes that is unfathomable. Warlock, for that is his name, is cheek-by-jowl with that young tabby cat, for curiously enough, the two are inseparables. Almost every day they go out by themselves to the fields and banks and woods, to hunt together, and even at night they come trotting home side by side.

So that is all my group of undergraduates – no, stay a moment. There is yet another, and in one way he or she is the drollest of the crew. In yonder far-off corner there, but not a great way from the fire, a branch of wood has been fixed in a block to keep it upright, and on one limb of this artificial tree is stretched at length a large chameleon. Chammy, as he is called, is very wide awake, and evidently enjoying the warmth of the fire, for hand after hand he extends, time about at intervals of about a minute to woo the welcome blaze.

And what a fire that is too! Pray do not let such a thing as a grate arise up before your mind's eye at my mention of the word fire. The idea of a tall ungainly grate would utterly dispel all ideas of romance.

This is a low fire, a fire of logs and coals and peat, all beautifully, artistically, and thoughtfully arranged with the art that conceals art. A fire that to sit in front of on a winter's evening would be an entertainment in itself; a fire that would make the oldest and loneliest man feel he had good company; a fire that laughs and talks to one; that speaks to the very soul itself, while it warms the very heart, and that carries the thought away back to pleasant scenes in past life, or merrily forward to a hopeful future; verily a fire to be thankful for, especially if wild winds are careering round the house, and moaning in the old-fashioned chimney, while we think of sailors far at sea.

Colonel Clarkson finishes his story, and stretches out his hand to find his pipe. Lizzie snuggles up closer to his chest, and pats his cheek with her fingers.

“God brought you safely back, didn't he, dearest?” she says.

Uncle Clarkson kisses her brow for answer.

Ben clears his throat and is about to speak. But he seems to think better of it, and commences to refill his pipe instead, smiling to himself as he does so.

But bold little Tom holds up his hand, and says grimly —

“Uncle Clarkson, when I'm a big big man I'll be a sodser (soldier), and tut (cut) off black men's heads by the store (score)!”

Ben laughs, but shakes a finger at Tom.

“Poor dear Cockie!” says the cockatoo, in a mournfully lugubrious tone.

“Eh? Eh?” cries the starling, briskly looking up from his perch on top of the tabby. “Eh? What is it? What d'ye say? Tse, tse, tse.”

Vee-Vee, the Pomeranian, changes his position and faces Shireen.

He looks at her for a minute, then leans his head on her footstool, but his eyes are still fixed upon her.

Shireen was Vee-Vee's foster mother. Six years ago he came to the Castle, being then a mere dossil of cotton wool apparently, with a black dot for a nose and two black dots for eyes, so that Lizzie called him a little snow dog. Well, the little snow dog was only a fortnight old, and it happened just then that Shireen had had kittens, the whole of which had died. No they had *not* been drowned, for Colonel Clarkson was too humane a man to think of depriving the pussy of all her family at once. But, I repeat, they died.

Then Shireen had taken pity on Vee-Vee, the little snow dog.

“You’re an orphan,” she said, or seemed to say, for it is all the same thing. “You’re an orphan, and a miserable little mite at that; well, I have oceans of milk, so I shall rear you if you are so inclined.”

The little snow dog was so inclined, and Shireen took him over at once, and till this day, next to his dear master, Vee-Vee loved his foster mother.

“Just look,” said Mrs Clarkson, “how fondly Vee-Vee is gazing at his foster mother!”

“Oh,” cried Lizzie, “I know what Vee-Vee wants. He wants her to tell him a story.”

“Ah! indeed,” said Colonel Clarkson, “she well may tell her friends a story, for few cats have had a more adventurous life than she.”

Shireen patted Vee-Vee on the nose with her paw, but the nails were sheathed, then she proceeded to tell her strange story.

Cats and all the lower animals, or undergraduates, have a language of their own, you know, but I have made myself master of it, and I shall try to translate what Shireen said. Only I must take a new chapter to it.

Chapter Three

“Oh! Kill me Quick and put me out of Pain.”

The story of my life? Was that what you asked me for, my little foster son? I see Warlock pricking one ear. He is going to listen too, is he?

Ah! well, my friends, my life has been a very long and a very eventful one, for I have travelled very far and seen much, and you all know I am getting old. Dick is laughing and chuckling to himself. Of course, he thinks that I am centuries old, but that is only because he himself is so young.

Chammy, the chameleon, looks down at Shireen with one of his droll eyes, while he watches a fly on the ceiling with the other. He holds up a hand, too, opening and shutting it as he remarks —

“Don’t give yourself airs about your age, Shireen. Look at me. It is a hundred years yesterday since I came to life again.”

“Came to life again, Chammy,” says Warlock, winking to Dick. “Why, what are you telling us?”

“The truth,” said the chameleon. “One thousand one hundred years ago yesterday – and it doesn’t seem very long to look back to – after a good dinner on butterflies I retired into the hollow of a young banyan tree in an African forest to have a nap. I had dined heartily, and I slept long, so long that the tree grew up over me. And it grew and grew and grew for a thousand years till it became the most wonderful tree in all the forest. But one day it was rent in twain by a lightning flash, and – I awoke and crawled out and found a moth and swallowed it.”

“Tse, tse, tse!” said Dick.

“We can’t be expected to swallow your story though, Chammy,” said Warlock.

Chammy did not reply, for the fly had come down from the ceiling, and settling in front of the chameleon began to wash its face.

Chammy turned both eyes in towards his nose, and focused the fly, then his mouth slowly opened, and presently out darted a long round tongue, more like a slug than anything else, and the fly never finished washing its face.

Well, as I was saying, continued Shireen, when interrupted by our dear and excessively old friend Chammy, I am getting on! Twenty years, you know, children, is a long, long life for a cat, if not for a chameleon, and oh! what ups and downs I have seen in that time!

My very earliest recollections take me back to scenes in beautiful Persia, “the land of the lion and the sun.”

“Some day,” said Dick, the starling, making pretence to bathe himself in tabby’s glittering fur – “some day I mean to fly there. None of you fellows have wings, so you can’t do that sort of thing. It would take poor old dummy yonder fully another thousand years to wriggle that length. Better he should go to sleep again in an old log of wood!”

“Yes,” continued Dick, while Shireen sat thoughtfully washing her face and gazing at the fire. “I shall go to Persia. I had quite a long talk the other day with the cuckoo about it. He says that Persia in the South is no end of a nice place, with flies and things to be found all throughout the winter. He says he wouldn’t come here at all if it wasn’t that there is less danger in this country in summer-time to his eggs, and the climate is more bracing for the mother and the young. The Mother Cuckoo, you must remember, is very delicate, and wouldn’t think of rearing her own family, so she employs a nurse, or maybe three or four nurses; and the more fools they, *I* say, for accepting the situation, for they toil away all the best part of the summer, leaving their own little families to starve and never get a thank-you for their pains. But Mother Cuckoo is a knowing old bird; she finds a nest nicely hidden – it may be a robin’s, it may be a tit-lark’s, or a water wagtail’s – and then a conversation begins at once.

“‘Nice little place you’ve got here,’ says Mother Cuckoo to the little bird, smiling all down both sides of her head as she speaks, for you know, Warlock, you couldn’t make a cuckoo’s mouth much bigger without cutting her head off. ‘Nice little place!’

“‘Yes,’ says the little bird, feeling much flattered.

“‘And such a cosy warm well-lined nest!’

“‘Yes,’ says the little bird again, ‘my husband and I did that.’

“‘How clever. And the nest is so well hidden!’

“‘Oh, yes, that is the best of it. There are no cats about, and wicked schoolboys would never think of looking here for a nest.’

“‘It isn’t a very large nest!’

“‘Oh, it is big enough for our little family.’

“‘Let me see,’ says Mother Cuckoo, ‘you have three eggs laid already. How clever of you!’

“‘Yes, and I’m going to lay another.’

“‘Your husband’s from home to-day, isn’t he?’

“‘He has gone to the woods for a certain kind of beetle that I’ve set my heart upon.’

“‘Oh, dear!’ says sly Mother Cuckoo, ‘I do feel so faint; all over of a tremble. Do, like a dear little mite, go and find my husband. He is in the copse down by the miller’s pond. I’ll sit here and keep your eggs warm till you return.’

“But the little bird never finds Father Cuckoo, and when she comes back, lo! old Mother Cuckoo has gone, but the sly bird has left an egg bigger and different from any in the nest. And that egg seems to throw a glamour over the little bird; she feels compelled to hatch it, and to rear the little one when it comes out to the neglect of her own family, for the young cuckoo is such a powerful eater that it takes both the little bird and her husband all their time to gather insects for it and stuff them down its gaping throat, and – ”

“Now, Dick,” cried Warlock, “if you’re quite done we would like to hear Shireen’s story; you may fly to Persia with the cuckoos in August if you like, and – ”

“And perhaps never come home again,” said Tabby; “don’t you go, Dick, don’t you go.”

From all I can recollect of Persia, said Shireen, it is a very beautiful country in summer-time, although away high up in the mountain fastnesses of the North, terrible snowstorms sometimes blow, and here dwell tribes and clans of wild Persian Highlanders that are at war with all the world.

Yet, strange to say, these wild men are kind to their cats, and pussy in these regions is looked upon as quite one of the family.

But it was not in these wilds that I first saw the light of day, or any other light, children, but far away in what my mother called the sunny South.

“Much game there, mother?” asked Warlock, pricking both his ears.

“I’ll come to that presently, Warlock, you mustn’t interrupt, you know.”

My very earliest recollections then, you must know, are all centred in my mother. This is only natural. Besides, my mother was very beautiful indeed. My little brother and I – we were both born at the same time – disagreed about many matters connected with domestic life and family arrangements, but we were both of the same opinion concerning mother’s beauty. I was very young when I first opened my eyes, but I have only to close them again now, and mother rises up before me in all her loveliness. White were the snows that capped the jagged hills of the Zarda Koo, no snows could be whiter, but more spotless still, I thought, was the coat of my dam. Blue were the rifts between the clouds in the autumn, but bluer and brighter my mother’s eyes. Then every movement she made was graceful and easy. Was it any wonder that brother and I loved her, or that we sometimes fought for the best place in her arms?

Looking back through the long vista of years, I cannot help thinking that perhaps my mother loved my brother better than me. I am sure she spent more time in licking him, but then I may be wrong, for I was restless, and would at any time rather have romped with mother’s tail than

submitted to her caresses when they took the shape of licking my face and ears with her tongue. Besides, brother had a black spot on his brow, which mother thought she would succeed in licking off. So she would lick and lick and lick until she fell back tired and exhausted on the cushion of crimson silk that formed our bed.

I did not know then the value that human beings attached to a cushion like this. Nor the value of anything around me.

Everything, brother and I believed, belonged to mother, the whole universe, as far as we had yet seen it, belonged to her, and the slaves that came softly stealing across the thick carpets and placed mother's food before her in dishes of solid gold and silver, were, in our opinion, if we thought about the matter at all, only creatures of common clay that lived and moved and had their beings merely to minister to mother's wants and needs.

I am much wiser now, children, and I can tell you that the splendid apartments where mother lived when we were very young, were furnished with splendour and elegance, unknown to this land of cloudy skies and misty rain.

That silk cushion, children, on which mother lay, was richly embroidered with threads of gold, and tasselled with pearls and precious stones. The room itself was lofty, and hung everywhere with curtains of rarest value. Great punkahs, moved by invisible hands, depended from the roof, and, waving to and fro, kept us cool. Costly vases and musical instruments stood here and there, and couches of pale-blue silk and silver were ranged along the walls. There was a dim religious light throughout, and from an arched window we could catch glimpses of gardens filled with lovely flowers and fruit, and watered by cool fountains that threw their snow-white spray far up against the blue of the sky. And everywhere the air was laden with the rich and rare odour of orange and citron blooms.

Then on the soft Persian carpets, I was afterwards told, my brother and I used to play with rubies as large as marbles.

"Something to eat?" said Dick, thoughtfully.

"No, Dick, a ruby is nothing to eat, but it is something held so sacred by human beings, that one such precious stone would buy all the fine things a man could use in a long, long lifetime."

Now, some weeks after brother and I opened our eyes, we learned to lap milk. It was difficult to do this at first, though we wanted to, because our eyes were not yet strong enough to judge distances, and sometimes when we thought we were licking the milk we were only lapping the air; then when we put our heads further down our noses went into the silver saucer up to the eyes, and we thought we were drowned, and sprang up and sneezed.

While trying one day to lap some milk, we noticed that mother was singing to a very pretty human being, who sat cross-legged upon a low ottoman. Mother was singing, and she was also rubbing her head backwards and forwards against this lovely human creature's bare arm. Brother and I sat back and looked up in astonishment, although looking up made our heads so light that we nearly tumbled.

"Oh! aren't they funny, funny, funny?" cried a voice. It was that of the beautiful human being.

The words only sounded to us like rippling music then, music such as the birds in their golden cages made, and the spray of the fountain splashing down and falling into its marble basin. But mother afterwards translated the language to us.

Day after day now this human being sat there cross-legged on the ottoman, and we soon began to like her as much as mother did.

She was very young and very beautiful, her little mouth was a rosebud, her eyes were very large, but jetty black, not blue like mother's. She was dressed in robes of flowing silk of many colours, and when she walked, glittering chains of gold and precious stones jangled and rang. Beside her often stood a tall and powerful man-human, as dark as night, with fierce red eyes, white flashing teeth, and a girdle around his waist, from which hung an ugly half-moon knife. Brother

and I were much afraid of this man-human. He was an ogre, and we ran backwards, raised our hair, and spat aloud at him when he came near us. But the young and lovely lady was not at all afraid of the ogre, but used to play with his knife and tease him.

Mother told us then that we must love the beautiful girl. She was our mistress and our queen.

Well, this would not have made brother and me love the queen one little bit, for we did not want any queen but mother. But the queen was so fond and so gentle, and used to smooth us so tenderly with her white and taper fingers, which were all bedecked with rings and sparkling stones, that we came to love her as much in time as mother seemed to do.

One day we had an adventure that I shall never forget.

Far, in through the open window, sprang a splendid lion-looking cat, just like mother, only bigger and bolder. He advanced to where we all lay with a fond and loving cry; but mother sprang up in a rage. All her hair was raised from end to end, her back was arched, and her eyes flashed like glowing lights.

Brother and I got up and tried to follow her example, but we both tumbled over on the cushion and lay there in most inglorious attitudes.

“Mrrrak, mrr – mrr – mrrk!” That is what father said. Yes, Warlock, I must tell you at once this lion-like cat was our father.

At first mother advanced to meet him growling like a volcano, but he threw himself on his back and behaved in a fashion altogether so ridiculous, and with so many droll attitudes of blandishment, that mother finally softened, all her hair flowed backwards again, and she began to sing. Then she ran back to the cushion and picked my brother up, and, throwing herself on her back, held him high in her arms for father to admire.

“Mrr – wrr – wrr – wurruk!” cried father, and gently tapped brother on the back.

This so pleased mother that she jumped up and ran round and round the room. Then she came back and slapped father with a gloved hand. Then father slapped her and sent her flying half-way across the room. In a moment she sprang up and leapt on top of him, and the two rolled over and over on the carpet in mimic warfare, but so like a real battle was it, that for some time brother and I were very much afraid indeed.

Well, father came nearly every day after this, and he nearly always brought a little bird, warm but dead, and perhaps, with a little spot of blood on its breast. I’m afraid it was sometimes a bulbul, or nightingale, and more than once it was a canary.

But it did not matter to mother one whit. She ate it, feathers and all, except the tail and the wings, growling awfully all the time she was devouring it. Meanwhile father stood aside and seemed so pleased that he did not know what to do with himself.

When she had finished the bird, brother and I had the wings and tail to play with, and we pretended to be mother, and growled like little wild beasts. Then mother would sit down and wash her face. As soon as she had done so she jumped merrily off the cushion and slapped father, and then the fun began.

One day father came into the room looking much more like a lion than ever, and he had something in his mouth.

He was growling, too, and I think mother was half afraid of him. But he came right up to the spot where brother and I were playing with our ruby, and placed a strange and weird-looking creature down right in front of us.

We had never seen such a little animal before. It wasn’t a bird, for it had no wings, only feet, and fur as soft as mother’s, but dark in colour. It lay on its side, and, dreadfully frightened though we were, brother and I both put up our backs and spat and growled most bravely.

The little vision in fur, which I now know to have been a harmless mouse, lay on its side quite paralysed with fear, but father stretched out his gloved hand and pushed it. Then it jumped up and ran away.

Oh, what a fright brother and I got when we saw that the wild mouse was alive! And how brave we thought father was when he sprang after it and brought it back.

But we soon regained our courage, and father and mother stood aside to see us play with it. Whenever it escaped they brought it back.

At last the poor little morsel, all wet and bedraggled, stood up on its hind legs in front of father, and wagged its two wee naked hands in front of its nose. Mother told me afterwards what it was saying.

“Oh, kill me please,” it pleaded. “Kill me quick and put me out of pain.”

Chapter Four

“You Must have a Name, My Lovely Flower.”

Hitherto, continued Shireen, shifting her position on the footstool to one of greater comfort, hitherto, my children, the life of brother and myself had been all indoors. We knew of no other world than that bounded by the four walls of the room around us, and it never occurred to me to wonder where our lion-like father obtained the birds which he never forgot to bring mother daily.

À propos of Shireen’s father bringing the mother pussy the birds, I have a little anecdote to tell that is not without its humorous side. Some years ago I possessed a very large and handsome half-Persian white Tom, whom the children called Jujube. This cat, being allowed to roam the world at the freedom of his own will, formed an attachment with a neighbour’s lady-cat, and married her. I was not invited to the marriage, so do not know when it took place, nor what speeches were made at the wedding-breakfast. However, in course of time, Mrs G – ’s cat was about to have kittens, and, not having any knowledge of how cats should be treated under such circumstances, she rather cruelly turned her out of doors. It happened at this time that Mrs G – had also twenty-one young chickens. And now they began to disappear at the rate of one every day, and so on for nineteen days. Her cat had also disappeared, and could not be found. But on the nineteenth day the mystery was explained, for walking in my orchard I happened to look between two tall hedges, and there, on a nest of dry leaves was the mother cat, with five beautiful kittens. Poor Ju had brought her here, had made the warm nest for her, and gone every day back to her old home and brought her a chicken. Ju had evidently reasoned that although Mrs G – had turned her out, she ought to be well-fed at the expense of her mistress. Hence, the robbery of the chicken-roost.

He did not come in through the curtained doorway that led out into the orangery with its fountains and its flowers, but leapt down from a window that was too high for us to reach.

One day, the door leading into the garden was left open, and mother, discovering this, determined to take us out.

If I should live to be as old as Chammy yonder, my children, I shall never forget that morning. We followed mother timidly, fearfully, and on rather shaky legs I must admit, for we were not yet very strong.

And every time a leaf fell, or went fluttering past us we started and trembled, nay, I am not sure we did not even start at our own shadows in the strong sunlight.

We gathered a little more confidence at last, but everything was so new and so strange and so unaccountable that it seemed like walking in a dream. I looked up for a moment at the sun, but quickly withdrew my gaze; then all was suddenly dark around me. I thought the earth had opened and swallowed us all up, and mewed in terror. But things soon became light once more, mother licked the top of my head, and on we went, now with more confidence.

There were birds singing here, and flitting to and fro through the spray of the gurgling fountains; light and colour and beauty were everywhere. Then the air was strong and fresh and balmy, and, oh, so delightfully warm, that we soon felt perfectly at home, and bold enough even to chase the fluttering leaves.

But for all this we would not venture far away from mother. And when at last we were tired of romping, and our beautiful mother went trotting back into the room again, we were all glad enough to follow. What with the exceeding brightness of the sun out of doors, we could not see anything at all when we went inside. Night seemed to have descended and enveloped us all in its darksome

folds. But mother, wiser than we, led us back to our cushion, and no sooner did we lie down than we fell into a sound and dreamless slumber.

So ended our first outing.

It became a regular thing now, however, this walk in the garden, and seeing we enjoyed it so much, our mistress and queen, whom the tall, black, red-eyed savage called Beebee, took us out to revel among the sunshine and the flowers every day; and every day brother and I seemed to grow stronger and bigger.

I began to love Beebee very much too, and it was she who named me Shireen.

Yes, Warlock, it is a strange name, and so would yours appear to the people of Persia.

But one day, Beebee took me on her lap, and told me why she had named me Shireen. "You must have a name, my lovely flower," she said, in her sweet child voice, "so it shall be Shireen. For know ye, that this was the name held by the wife of a very great king and lord of Persia, who lived ages and ages and ages ago, when this lovely land was even greater than it is now."

I fear, my children, that I did not pay very much heed to all Beebee was telling me, for I was very much taken up with a string of pearls and rubies that she wore around her beautiful arm just above the elbow, and all the time she was speaking, I was chewing at it. But mother listened and told me the tale of the Queen Shireen over again when we were all by ourselves.

"I remember it," said a voice which wasn't Warlock's. It was a voice that seemed to come from the clouds, and a strange, sepulchral tone it had. "Yes, I remember it. Just wait till I get down the chimney."

To say that every member of that circle of old friends round the fire was startled would be a poor way of describing the general consternation.

A strange voice coming down the chimney! A weird, sepulchral voice! And the owner of that voice was going to follow it. He, she, or it, was coming down the chimney!

Would the lights burn blue when the ghostly thing – the dread apparition appeared?

"Eh? eh?" cried the starling. "What is it? What is it? Tse, tse, tse!" (These were favourite expressions of my starling.)

Tabby's hair stood on end from tail to crown. Vee-Vee's hair would have followed suit, only a Pomeranian's hair is always on end, and fright even couldn't fix it a bit higher. Shireen herself, being slightly imbued with superstition, confessed afterwards that she felt a trifle uneasy as she gazed at the chimney and waited.

The only really brave individual in the whole circle was Warlock. There was nothing belonging to this world, or even to a much worse world than ours, that could have frightened Warlock. So he sprang up, faced the fire, and barked.

"Don't be alarmed, any of you," said the voice in the chimney. "It's only me. I'm coming down to tell you the story of Shireen, Queen of Persia. Bless you, I remember her. It's only a matter of a thousand and a half years –"

Here the creature was seized apparently with a fit of coughing, and next moment he, she, or it, landed all in a heap close to Shireen's footstool.

It was only Chammy after all, and everybody felt so relieved.

"I daresay," he explained, "I've changed colour a bit. Nothing unusual in a chameleon changing colour, is there, Shireen, my furry dear?"

"No, Chammy, and you really have changed colour. Why, you are as black as a sweep. Whatever made you creep up the chimney?"

I may observe here, parenthetically, that Chammy was sometimes found in the queerest places. You see, he had the run of the room, and made strange use of it at times.

Once, for example, he disappeared for a whole week, and was found at last hiding behind a large cobweb in Colonel Clarkson's study. The Colonel was a humane sort of man, you must know, and this particular cobweb belonged to his pet spider, and was never touched. Oh, no, Chammy

had not eaten the spider; Chammy knew better than that. The fact is, he had been studying that pet spider for weeks perhaps before he carried his scheme into execution.

I notice he must have said to himself, "That that big spider never wants plenty of flies, and that she repairs her web, after it has been broken by a blue-bottle fly, overnight, and has it nice and new and fresh next morning fit for another day's sport. Well, why should she have all the blue-bottles? The blue-bottles are as much mine as hers. Now, *I* can't build a web and catch them, but I can sit snugly enough near hers, and when a blue-bottle comes I can just touch him off. That sort of life will suit me far better than catching my own flies, for I'm not so young as I used to be a thousand years ago."

Another time Chammy had been away a whole month, after partaking of about five-and-twenty mealworms. The Colonel felt sure he would never see his droll favourite again; but one day he told the servant to put a little fire in his study, and half an hour after that, Chammy was found sitting on the fender, holding up his fingers and palms to woo the welcome blaze.

In the sweet summer-time, Chammy was taken out of doors and allowed to crawl on a grizzled old apple tree that grew near to the study window. This used to please Chammy very much, and he stalked flies with unerring skill, and had plenty of exercise at the same time. The strange point of the story is this: the tree was for the most part grey and gnarled, so was Chammy, and a fly would often alight right in front of him. Out would go Chammy's tongue, slowly and steadily at first, then – pop! and the fly would wonder where in all the world he had got to. But there were large patches of green moss on the apple tree, and Chammy dearly loved these because they were warm and soft for his feet; but when resting on one, he took the precaution to change colour to a beautiful sea-green, and so the flies got licked in just the same. Well, one evening, when Colonel Clarkson went to fetch Chammy in, he couldn't find him high nor low; he looked on the grey and gnarled parts of the tree, and he carefully examined the patches of moss, and he even focussed his lorgnettes and scanned the tree up and down; but no Chammy was to be seen, green or grey. So the Colonel put up his glasses with a sigh, saying to himself, "Some vagrant cat has no doubt taken my poor pet away."

Weeks flew by, and one evening while the kindly old soldier sat alone with his wife in the drawing-room, both very still, because they were reading and the children were away in the woods, lo! the cottage piano in the corner suddenly began to play.

Colonel Clarkson looked at his wife and his wife looked at the Colonel. Both, I think, were a little frightened, for when they glanced towards the piano there was nobody there.

But the ghostly music continued. It was strange, it was unaccountable and wonderful! The music was all on the descending scale, and chords were struck chiefly fifths. But the keys of the piano did not move, and the notes sounded far away. Presently the performance was concluded with a series of groans emitted by the bass strings.

"I have it," the Colonel cried, "it is Chammy. Dear old Chammy."

He jumped up and opened the instrument wide, and there sure enough was the chameleon. He had been asleep in there for three weeks or more, and had awakened hungry and lively – poor Chammy.

"Whatever made you get up the chimney, Chammy?" said Shireen again.

"Just to find a cosy corner," replied the chameleon, "for lor', bless your pretty face, Shireen, now that the days are getting shorter, my poor old toes do be that wondrous cold sometimes, you wouldn't believe."

"But you wanted to hear the story of Queen Shireen, didn't you?"

"Yes, Chammy, if you won't take long to tell it."

"Oh, not more'n a hundred years or so. Time is nothing to me, you know."

But time was a good deal to these old friends around the fire, so it ended after all in Chammy climbing up into his perch again, and apparently going to sleep there, with his droll eyes open, and Shireen herself having to tell the story.

Chapter Five

Chosroës and his Queen Shireen

Though Chammy talks about having been up in those days, said Shireen, when everybody was once more comfortably settled in his place, I don't really believe it, you know. For I think Chammy falls asleep and dreams things. Besides, Queen Shireen lived far longer ago than one thousand years. More nearly thirteen hundred years ago, my dear mistress Beebee told me. (Chosroës Parveez commenced his second reign Anno Domini 591.)

"You must know, dear Shireen," Beebee said as she smoothed my back and brow, "that in olden times Persia was a far grander country, and far more rich and warlike than it is now, and old King Chosroës the First, the grandfather of Shireen's husband, reigned for fifty years in Persia, his wonderful palace being at Ctesiphon."

"Tse, tse, tse!" interrupted Dick.

Yes, Dick, said Shireen, I daresay you find that a hard word to remember. Well, the acts of Chosroës during the closing years of his long life are wonderful, for he not only expelled the Turkish hordes that had deigned to cross the Persian frontiers, but led an army against the greatest fortress that the Romans had in the south-east, and after tremendous fighting, that lasted for nearly six months, he captured it, and compelled the enemy to pay an indemnity of forty thousand pieces of gold.

I relate this story with conscious pride, my children, because, remember, I am a soldier's cat.

Well, Warlock, I daresay there were no Scotch terriers in those days, for while Persia was in the height of its glory, Britain was inhabited by a race, or rather many races, who knew very little indeed of civilisation. Don't be angry, Warlock. Well, children, the old king was succeeded by his son, Hormazd, who celebrated his coronation by putting all his brothers to death. This was certainly not very humane, but it was the common practice in those days, and it probably saved the reigning king's life, for poisoned cups and daggers were much used in olden times as an easy way of securing accession to estates and thrones.

(The author begs to say that he believes Shireen may be wrong about the Scotch terriers, for in a hotel in Surrey there is a beautiful engraving of a picture by one of the old masters – he can't say which old master – called "Noah alighting from the Ark." Well, Noah is surrounded by his family, and accompanied by two Scotch collie dogs, good enough to win a prize anywhere. Question: If there were Scotch collies, why not Scotch terriers?)

Nevertheless this new king was tolerant of Christianity, and this itself speaks in his favour. However, he committed one mistake, and this cost him his throne; for one of his greatest generals happening to lose a battle, as any general might once in a way, he degraded him by sending him the dress and the distaff of an old woman. "Wear these, general," was the message that accompanied the gift. "Give up war now and take to spinning."

Now this general was the hero of a hundred fights, so he now swore revenge, and marched with an army against the king's capital. This was the beginning of the end of Hormazd's reign. The end itself soon came, and a terrible one it was. The army that Hormazd sent against the general mutinied. Then the maternal uncle of Chosroës, the son of the king, arose and threw Hormazd into prison. A prison in those days was a vile and slimy dark dungeon, alive with vermin of every description. It was soon darker still for poor Hormazd, because men came at night and blinded him with red-hot wires. Death was surely a relief to him after this. And it soon came. He was murdered, and his son reigned in his stead.

It has been said that Chosroës the Second had had some hand in his father's death, but Beebee, my mistress, did not believe this, neither must we. We should be charitable. Besides, I don't think

that if Chosroës had given orders for his father's execution, that he would have condemned his uncle to death as soon as he mounted the throne.

But Chosroës the Second became a very great king, or shah, though in the end, very unfortunate.

For my own part, continued Shireen after a little pause, I would rather have been a cat than a king in those days. It does seem very sad that although Chosroës the Second was a great conqueror, and expelled the fighting power of Rome from both Asia and Africa, that although he elevated his own country to perhaps the highest rank it had ever held, he should have lived to see Persia ruined. He himself was thrown into prison. Oh! the pity of it, children; and his favourite sons and daughters brought in and murdered before his face.

Shireen, his queen, was the one only wife he had ever loved.

And what a fearful fall was his! Remember that he was a very great king, a very mighty conqueror, and his whole story reads like one of the grandest of old romances. It is too long for a poor pussy cat like me to tell, but I heard my master only yesterday say to Lizzie and Tom, that they must read histories like that of Persia in the days of its glory, if they would really enjoy chivalry and romance combined, and Lizzie says she is sure she will, and Tom too, when they get a little older.

But Chosroës was at the height of his glory after he had cowed and conquered the proud Romans, depriving them of every foot of territory won by their legions under Caesar and Pompey and many others.

And nothing could exceed the splendour of his court and palace at Ctesiphon, nor the extent of his wealth and riches.

The Persians do not turn night into day. They live naturally, go to bed early and get up while the morning is still in its pristine beauty; and this healthful practice was in fashion even in the days of Chosroës the Second. And it was at sunrise, in his splendid pavilion, that this king and conqueror gave audience. From Arabia, from Egypt, from Mesopotamia, from Armenia, yea, from east and west, and north and south, flocked couriers to these audiences. And there the king would be to receive them, and at his side the beautiful and virtuous Shireen; while around him were gathered in robes of state his generals, his wise men, and his nobles of every rank, all proud of their great lord and master, yet trembling at every word he uttered; while each minute there sped from the gates of the magnificent palace swift horsemen, bearing to every nook of his vast dominions the commands of this mighty king.

But the luxury of this palace, the art displayed, the carvings, mosaics, the draperies, the ornamentation of every summer or winter room or saloon, and the voluptuous splendour and comfort, what tongue could describe?

Some notion of the extent of the palace and its magical surroundings may be gathered from the fact that three thousand ladies-in-waiting lived in or around the vast and luxurious fort, and that these had twelve thousand hand-maidens to wait upon them. But the stables must have been a marvellous show. Fancy, Warlock, twelve thousand white camels, a thousand lordly elephants, and fifty thousand horses, asses, and mules.

"Tse, tse, tse!" from Dick once more.

"You well may marvel, Dick darling."

But alas! and alas! the tide took a turn, and all the glory of Chosroës ended in gloomy tragedy.

The fortunes of Rome were at the lowest ebb in 617 A.D. The warriors of Persia were actually within a mile – of water – of the capital, and Herodius, the emperor, had already sent away his family and his treasures, and was himself preparing to fly, when, instigated by his people and their patriarch, he took a solemn oath to do or die for Rome.

"And when can men die better,
Than in facing fearful odds,

For the ashes of their fathers,
And the country of their Gods?”

The Persians were getting ready their fleet to cross that silvery streak. The Romans, had a fleet. That fleet was the beginning of the salvation of Rome and the overthrow of mighty Chosroës. Herodius sailed on Easter Monday 622 A.D. for the Gulf of Issus, with the remains of his shattered army, and the great general and hero, Shahr Barz, made haste to annihilate the Romans and their emperor. But these fought with all the energy and fury of despair, and the Persians were beaten.

Down, down, down went Chosroës now. His own people at last revolted against him, and he was thrown into a vile dungeon called the Dungeon of Darkness. Bread and water was his only fare, and even the officers of his guard spat upon and reviled him. He was led forth at last, suffered every indignity, and was tortured to death.

His only consolation in his terrible imprisonment in that dark and loathsome dungeon, was the thought that his beautiful Queen Shireen was dead.

Nay, she was not dead, she had gone before. For Shireen was not only a beautiful and good woman, but a Christian in every sense of the word.

But although so many hundreds of years have fled since then, far away in the palatial homes of Persia, and in the humbler houses of her sons and daughters, bards and minstrels sing to this day of the deeds of the hero-king, bold Chosroës, and of the love he bore for sweet Shireen.

Chapter Six

“Na, Lass,” said Cracker, “I’ll No Drink the Little ’un’s Milk.”

But it is time, said Shireen, that I should return in the home of my dear mistress, the beautiful young Beebee, and the events of my own early days. It may be thought a descent from the heroic, and yet I don’t know, Warlock; for you know a cat, or even a Scotch terrier, may show real heroism at times.

I do not want to boast, but I must tell you, children, that I once had a terrible encounter with a wild lion in the forest, and that I came off victorious. Oh, dear me, I should not have nerve enough for so awful an adventure now, but then I knew not what fear was.

My lovely mistress then used to take me out into the woods with her. She rode upon a charming milk-white steed, with tail and mane dyed crimson, and was attended by many armed horsemen. I used to sit in front of her on the saddle.

But one day a bird on a bough that bent very low over us attracted my attention, while Shireen stopped her horse, and was talking to one of her armed attendants.

I sprang at once into the tree to seize the bird, that I might take it home in triumph to my mother. Alas! I not only missed my bird, but I lost my mistress.

For when I descended the bough again no one was there. The whole cavalcade had ridden on. What should I do? I ran hither and thither, mewing and crying in terror and anguish, but no one came near me. Had I been an older cat I might easily have found my way back. But I was then only four months old, and knew not what to do, or which way to turn.

I descended to the ground, however, and did the best thing perhaps that I could have done. I sat down on the greensward and determined to wait. My mistress, I felt sure, would send back for me as soon as she missed me.

But, as ill-luck would have it, a small nut fell from a tree close to my nose. I jumped to my feet in a moment. What a game I did have to be sure with that nut! My mistress, my mother, every creature in the world was forgotten in the mad excitement of that merry game. I played and played till the shades of evening fell around me, then tired, exhausted, and hungry, yet not knowing where to look for food, I threw myself down under a bush and went fast asleep.

I awoke at last, though how long I had slept I could not tell, nor could I tell my whereabouts, for in my mad merry game I must have gone miles away from the spot where I had been lost. I was lost now, indeed! And I was also dreadfully frightened, for the forest all around me resounded with the cries and the roaring of wild beasts. I had heard my mother speak of these, and how terrible they all were, and how quickly they could cranch the life out of the biggest cat that ever lived. But, strange to say, I was not a bit afraid.

The moon was shining as bright as day, so I got up and determined I would try to find my way out of the awful forest. Luck favoured me for once. Not that my situation was changed much for the better, for I now found myself in a broad or treeless waste; but the awful noise of the wild beasts no longer confused me, and I thought I would soon be home.

That plain was wider far than I had any idea of, and when the moon went down at last, after walking some distance further, I once more lay down to sleep. It was grey dawn when I awoke, and found I was not far from another forest. This I entered. But I had not gone far when a loud peal of thunder seemed to shake the earth to its very foundation, and I thought for a moment that the trees were going to fall upon me and crush my life out. I looked up, and lo! instead of thunder I found that the awful sound proceeded from a monster cat with eyes like yellow fire, and great teeth as thick as my tail.

I knew it was a lion, so I determined to slay him where he stood, and advanced towards him with this bold intent.

I arched my back to make myself look as terrible as possible, and my hair standing all on end made me look double the size. Then I growled, but not *quite* so loud as the lion. The lion had lain down for a spring, but I am sure he had never seen the like of me before.

On I marched, half sideways.

The lion looked droll and puzzled.

I was within a yard of him now, still walking half sideways, with arched back and one foot in the air. I did this for effect.

“Fuss-ss! Fut! Sphut!”

I jumped directly at his face. But I never got near him. With a yell of terror he sprang high in the air, then made off into the dark depths of the forest as fast as his four legs could carry him.

My adventure was over, for I saw him no more; but oh, joy! half-an-hour after this, just as the beautiful sun was rising, red and rosy, over the wooded hills, something as white as snow came feathering along towards me. It was my own dear blue-eyed mother, and in two hours’ time I was safely home again and on my little mistress’s lap.

The days and weeks flew by, oh, so quickly at my Persian home, and when I look back to them now it is with some degree of regret that I did not then realise my happiness. It is ever thus, and even mankind himself laments the loss of his youth. The days of the young are golden, their pathway leads over the soft sward; there are flowers at *every* side and trees nod green above; beyond is the azure sky, and the young think that storms will never arise, that their path will ay be smooth, that the trees will never be stripped of their foliage, nor the bright flowers cease to blow. Alas! and alas! for the dreams of youth.

Well, my youth or my kittenhood came to an end. And I think it came all at once. I was in the garden one day all by myself, when suddenly I was confronted with a monster brown rat of a breed that grows larger in Persia, they tell me, than anywhere else in the world.

Will you believe me, children, when I tell you that I felt more afraid of that rat than I had been of the lion? The awful beast did not even run away, and I knew it would be a battle to the bitter end.

“Only you, is it?” he said. “Fiss! I’m not afraid of a kitten. Your father killed my brother, and I mean to be revenged on you. Fiss!”

Then the fight began. How long it lasted I do not know. But in the end I was conqueror. What mattered it that I was bitten all about the face and feet, or my beautiful white coat bedabbled with blood!

Oh, that was a proud moment when I rushed in to my mother’s presence dragging my dead enemy across the mosaic floor. He was far too big to lift and carry.

I came in growling, feeling *every* inch a heroine. Nor would I permit my brother to touch my rat. My mother seemed very proud of me now, and as soon as the slave came and carried away the trophy of my triumph, mother commenced to clean my coat and bathe my wounds with her soft warm tongue. I was soon well, but felt another being now, and would have been quite ashamed to play any longer with my mother. I even deserted the cushion on which I had slept so long, and slept higher up on an ottoman.

I now attached myself more and more to my young mistress Beebee, and I became her favourite and her pet. I was almost constantly by her side during the day, except when on the warpath slaying huge rats, and I always occupied her lovely sleeping apartment at night.

But young though she was, Beebee was never idle. And her story which she told me one day, weeping bitterly, was, I thought, a very sad one.

“My own Shireen,” she said, “you see how hard at work they keep me. For to me, Shireen, study is indeed the hardest of work. But my teachers seldom leave me. I have a European lady to teach me English. This is the best of it, and oh, how I wish I were English, and free; as it is, I am

but a slave. But this dear lady is good to me, and gives me lovely fairy-tale books to read in her own language; but yet these I must hide from the fierce-eyed eunuchs who guard me night and day. I am also taught music, the piano, and the zither, and I am taught to sing. Then a scion of the prophet – that old, old man with the long dyed beard, and the cloak of camel's hair – teaches me Sanscrit and the higher branches of the Persian, so that my poor little head is turned, and my night is often passed in weeping and dreaming.

"I have no mother, my sweet Shireen. Look at these pearls and rubies and amethysts; I would give them all, all to have a mother, if only for a month."

I purred and sung to Beebee, but she would not be comforted.

"I tell my story to you, Shireen, though you are only a cat. But I must speak to some one who loves me, else I soon would die."

Here her tears fell faster and faster.

"And oh, Shireen, I have not told you the worst.

"It is this, Shireen. Those beautiful English books tell me that in England a man has someone to love and care for him, someone whose lot in life is the same as his; that someone is his life. But here in Persia – oh! Shireen, Shireen – if one is as I am, the daughter of a noble, and if she is beautiful and clever, her lot is indeed a hard one. She is sold – yes, sold is the right name, to the Shah.

"My father is cold-hearted and cruel. I seldom see him. He is ever, ever at Court, and when in the hunting season he brings a party to this lovely castle I am hidden away. And why, think you, Shireen? It is because when I grow older and cleverer in a few years' time I shall go in state to the Shah. My prince will never come, as he always does, in beautiful English books; he will never come to bear me away. I shall be but one of a thousand, and spend a life like a bulbul in a golden cage.

"I have no one that loves me but you, Shireen. And now, lest they take you from me, I am going to mark you. Oh, my beautiful cat, it will not hurt. The magician himself will insert a tiny ruby in one of your teeth, Shireen; then if they take you away because I love you so, and bring me another cat like you, I can say, 'No, no, this is not Shireen; give me back Shireen.' And no peace will they have until you are restored."

Well, children, the magician took me from Beebee, and he put me into a deep trance, and in one of my teeth he drilled a hole and inserted a tiny ruby.

That ruby is there now, and ever will remain.

"Just look at that happy group, Mrs Clarkson," said Uncle Ben, "and that wonderful cat in the midst of them. Wouldn't you think she had been, or *is* talking to them?"

"Well," said Mrs Clarkson, "I shouldn't really wonder if animals that are so much together day after day as these are, have a sort of language of their own."

"A kind of animal Volapuk," said the Colonel laughing. "Well, it may be, you know, but I am of opinion, and have long been so, that animals have souls. Oh, surely God never meant affection and love such as theirs, and truth and faithfulness to rot in the ground."

"Well, I can't say, you know," said Uncle Ben.

"There is my cockatoo here."

"Oh, pardon me for interrupting you, my sailor friend, but a cockatoo hasn't half the sense and sagacity a cat has."

"Poor Cockie wants to go to bed!" – This from the bird on Ben's shoulder.

"Hear that?" cried Ben laughing.

"When you can make your cat give utterances to such a sensible remark as that, I'll – but, my dear soldier, it is eleven o'clock, and Tom and Lizzie, poor little dears, have both dropped off to sleep. Good night!"

"Good-night! Good-night!" shrieked the cockatoo in a voice that waked the children at once. "Good-night. Cockie's off. Cockie's off."

And away went the sailor.

But next morning Shireen had an adventure that very nearly put a stop to her story-telling for ever.

She had gone off after breakfast for a ramble in the green fields and through the village. It happened to be Saturday, so there was no school to-day, and just as she was coming out of the cottage where the sick child was, and promising herself a nap in Uncle Ben's hammock, who should she see coming up the street with her little brother in a tall perambulator, but her favourite schoolgirl, Emily Stoddart.

Up marched Shireen with her tail in the air.

"Oh, you dear lovely pussy!" cried Emily, lifting her up and placing her in the perambulator, when she at once commenced to sing, greatly to the delight of the child.

And away went Emily wheeling them both.

"Oh, dear, what shall we do, Shireen?" cried Emily next moment, trying to hide pussy with a shawl. "Here comes the butcher's awful dog."

The bull-terrier made straight for the perambulator.

"Come down out o' there at once," he seemed to cry. "I've got you now. You'll be a dead 'un in half-a-minute more."

"You won't? Then here goes."

The bull-terrier – and he was no small weight either – made a spring for the perambulator. Emily made a spring to save the child. Danger had no intention, however, of harming a hair in that child's head. It was the cat Shireen he was after; the cat, the cat, and no one else.

The child swayed to one side to save himself, and next moment down went his carriage. Down went cat and carriage, the child and Emily, and the bull-terrier, all mixed up in one confused heap.

Shireen was the first to extricate herself and to bolt for her life, but Danger was the next, and it did not seem that poor pussy's span of existence was at that moment worth an hour's purchase.

For a cat to permit herself to be caught by a dog while running away is the worst possible policy for the cat, because the pursuer gets her by the brick and the spine is broken. Shireen knew this, and she also knew there was no way of escape handy, no railing to run through, no doorway to enter, no tree to climb, so she determined to sell her life dearly.

Round she turned, and the blow she caught that dog staggered him for a little, and the blood ran over his face.

All in vain though. He came on now with redoubled ferocity, and down went poor Shireen.

Emily screamed and flew to her assistance.

But in two seconds more a true hero came to the rescue. This was none other save Cracker himself, the large Airedale terrier.

"Here, lad!" cried Cracker, or seemed to cry in good broad honest Yorkshire English. "What's tha' doin' wi' t'ould cat?"

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

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