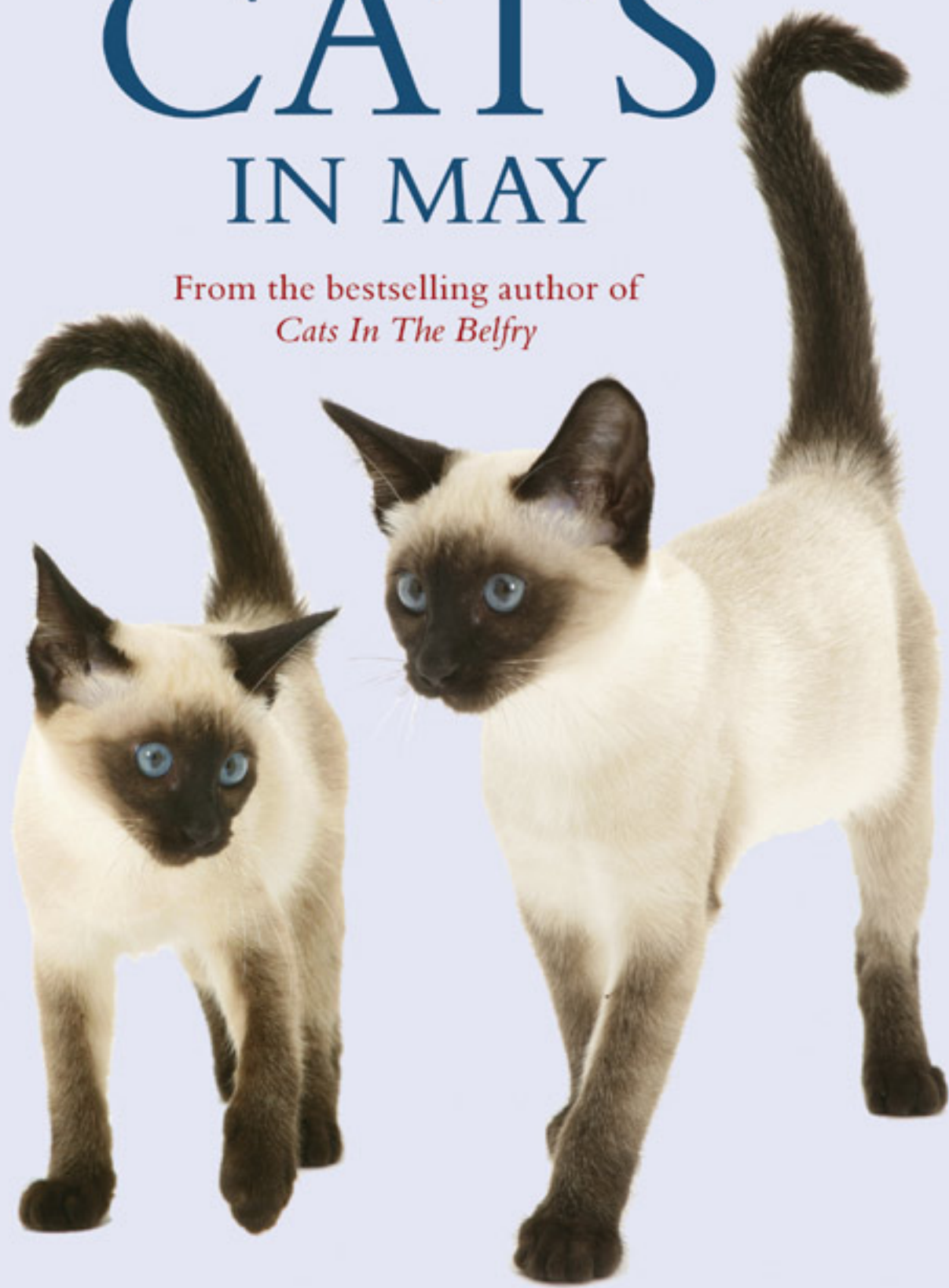


CATS IN MAY

From the bestselling author of
Cats In The Belfry



DOREEN TOVEY

Praise for *Cats in the Belfry*

'A chaotic, hilarious and heart-wrenching love affair with this most characterful of feline breeds'

The People's Friend

'If you read *Cats in the Belfry* the first time round, be prepared to be enchanted all over again. If you haven't, then expect to laugh out loud, shed a few tears and be totally captivated by Doreen's stories of her playful and often naughty Siamese cats'

Your Cat magazine

'An invasion of mice prompted Tovey and her husband to acquire a cat – or rather for Sugieh to acquire them. A beautiful Siamese, Sugieh turned out to be a tempestuous, iron-willed prima donna who soon had her running circles around her. And that's before she had kittens! A funny and poignant reflection of life with a Siamese, that is full of cheer'

The Good Book Guide

'*Cats in the Belfry* will ring bells with anyone who's ever been charmed – or driven to distraction – by a feline'

The Weekly News

‘A warm, witty and moving cat classic. A must for all cat lovers’

Living for Retirement

‘Absolutely enchanting... I thoroughly recommend it... One of the few books which caused me to laugh out loud, and it sums up the Siamese character beautifully’

www.summerdown.co.uk

‘The most enchanting cat book ever’

Jilly Cooper

‘Every so often, there comes along a book – or if you’re lucky, books – which gladden the heart, cheer the soul and actually immerse the reader in the narrative. Such books are written by Doreen Tovey’

Cat World

CATS

IN MAY



DOREEN TOVEY



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CATS IN MAY

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ONE

Seen Him on Television?

It was stupid to write about those cats, of course. All it did – like getting their names in the Sunday papers – was make them worse than ever.

In the old days when people stopped to talk to us over the cottage gate the cats usually disappeared immediately. Particularly if they thought anybody wanted to talk about *them*.

Got a mouse to catch, Sheba would say, marching determinedly up the garden when people pleaded for a closer view of the dear little Blue Siamese. Going for a Walk, roared Solomon, beating it rapidly into the woods when somebody remarked what a big man he was and did he bite? Wasn't coming back Ever, he would add when people committed the unforgivable insult and asked – as

they often did, because he was so big and dark and Sheba so small and silvery – whether he was her mother. Often after the visitors had gone I would go after him into the woods and there he'd be, sitting forlornly under a pine tree as only a Siamese can – wondering, he said sadly as I heaved him over my shoulder and carried him back to the cottage, whether to go and live with the foxes or join the Foreign Legion.

Fame changed all that. Any time anybody stopped to talk to us now, even if it was only the coal man asking whether he should come through the front gate or the back, within seconds they would materialise from nowhere. Sheba streaking down the path in a cloud of dust, skidding to a breathless halt on the wall to ask coyly whether they had read about her, Solomon swaying round the corner on long, languid legs to assure anybody who was interested that he had written it all himself.

How that cat could do it I don't know. Every single sentence of that book had been written – unless I locked him out of the house, when he sat on the garden wall gazing at passers-by with sad blue eyes and telling them that he was unwanted, or shut him in the garage where he sat and screamed blue murder – to the accompaniment of Solomon leaping round the place like an overgrown grasshopper, saying the typewriter was bad for his nerves.

I felt like a criminal every time I used it. Sometimes, indeed, seeing him stretched out on the rug with the firelight playing on his sleek cream stomach and his great black head pillowed blissfully on Sheba's small blue one, I would sneak upstairs and tap out a few lines in the spare room rather than disturb him. It was no use. Solomon, deaf as a post

when he was in the woods and I, trying to get him in, was rushing up and down the lane yodelling ‘Tollywollywolly’ like something out of *Autumn Crocus* (it was the only call he would answer and the fact that it made people look at me rather oddly and back rapidly up the lane again was no doubt his idea of a huge Siamese joke) – Solomon, when it came to typewriters, had ears like a hawk.

One of our neighbours, long used to our cats peering nosily through her windows to see what she was doing and even, on occasion, marching in procession through her cottage from front to back, had an awful shock one day when she looked up from a spot of one-finger typing on her husband’s portable to see Solomon on her windowsill leaping up and down like mad. She rang me at once in a panic. He’d gone nuts at last, she said. (There was no need to ask who, of course. The whole village had been anticipating it ever since he was born.) Would I come and fetch him, or should she call the Vet?

She could hardly believe it when I told her it was just his reaction to a typewriter. In that case, she said, why didn’t he go away? Why stand on *her* windowsill jumping round like a circus flea? Why indeed, except that it was typical of him. Creep silently to the spare room or the kitchen; even, as I did on occasions, slink out, typewriter in hand, to the potting shed – and after a couple of minutes Solomon would appear, gazing at me in sad reproach and, every time I touched a key, leaping several feet in the air.

Even after I’d shut down the typewriter in disgust he still went on doing it. Move a foot – up he went like a rocket. Lift the coal-tongs – somebody, he said, turning a full circle in mid-air and landing defensively on the bureau, was After

Him. One day after a typing session the Rector spoke to him unexpectedly from behind, as he was drinking from a flower vase on the hall table, and poor old Sol was so scared he nearly hit the ceiling. It cost us a new noiseless typewriter to overcome that foible, and if anybody accuses us of being silly about animals I can assure them that it wasn't bought on Solomon's account, but because by that time Charles's and my nerves were so bad we were going round like grasshoppers too.

By the time the book came out Solomon had forgotten the typewriter, but we hadn't. When we were asked to take them to a Siamese party in London we turned green and refused on the spot. Solomon's nerves were bad, we said, and so were ours. If we took him on a train we'd be lucky to get to London in one piece. Bring Sheba, they said. But we couldn't do that either. Solomon, left on his own even for half an hour – as we knew from the time Sheba's boyfriend bit her on the tail and we had to rush her to the Vet for treatment – sat in the hall window so that the whole village could see how we were neglecting him, and howled the place down.

So we went to the party on our own and that was how the trouble started, because there we met some cats who did know how to behave themselves. A dear old Siamese queen called Suki who, judging from her crumpled ear and battle scars, had been hell-on-wheels in her day but sat there looking placidly out of her frail wickerwork cage as if she were Victoria herself. Bartholomew and Margharita, two sleek young Seal Points from Chelsea who drank sherry and looked so much like Solomon that in the midst of all the gaiety my heart sank like a stone thinking of what *he*

was probably doing at that very moment – either ripping up the stair carpet or broadcasting *basso profundo* to the whole village that we'd gone away and left him. And, most impressive of all, Tig, who'd come straight from being televised at Lime Grove.

Tig was very like Solomon too, except that – though his mistress looked rather harassed and had her hat over one eye in the normal way of Siamese owners – he himself was as calm as a cucumber. When she produced his earth pan saying she hoped nobody minded but he'd been too busy up till now and it wasn't good for him to go all that time with a full bladder he looked at her with disdain. Didn't *have* a bladder, he said, strolling off to greet the pressmen and photographers as to the manner born. And sure enough, though every time we saw his owner she was looking more and more worried and still trailing him anxiously with his little pan, such was his self-control that the whole evening Tig, as became a public figure, firmly declined to use it.

I was green with envy as we rolled home on the train that night. All those cats behaving like society's top ten, even down to Tig's superb refusal of the earth box... Tig himself, suave, controlled, self-assured, actually appearing on television... What, I asked Charles wistfully, did he think would happen if our two were ever asked to go on TV?

Probably be quite all right, murmured Charles, relaxing blissfully in his seat and prepared at that moment to view anything – even Siamese cats – through a champagne-coloured haze. Probably we (which meant me) made too much fuss about taking them places. Our cats, he said, patting his headrest affectionately in lieu of Sheba's small blue rump before he fell asleep, would absolutely knock

'em on TV. Which explains why the next day, when the BBC rang up to say they had heard about the party and the book and what about Solomon and Sheba going on a programme that night, we, without a second thought, said yes.

It was a mistake, of course. I realised it the moment I put down the receiver and saw Solomon watching me with dark, Oriental suspicion from the doorway. It was a habit of his when I was on the phone and though it no doubt sprang from curiosity as to what on earth I was doing talking to myself, and probably a firm conviction that I was mad and if he hung around long enough I might do something interesting, the sight of him sitting there like some character from a Limehouse thriller sent a nervous shiver up my back.

It was a well-founded shiver, too. The moment Charles brought the cat baskets in through one door ready for the journey, Solomon, hastily abandoning his role of Fu Manchu, put his ears down and marched determinedly out through the other. By the time we had cornered him – flat under the bed yelling he wasn't going any place, it was winter and we *knew* he never went anywhere in the winter – and hauled Sheba down from the top of the wardrobe where she had gone not because she was scared but because she wanted Charles to chase her too, it was obvious what our television appearance was going to be like. Complete and utter bedlam.

It was too. Mercifully by the time we arrived at the studio – what with my nerves, Solomon gnawing frantically away at his basket like an outsize termite, and Charles, the effect of the champagne having worn off, informing me

dramatically as we drove through the night that if those damned cats made a fool of him in public he'd be ruined, that was all, absolutely ruined – I was practically in a coma. What I do remember of that night, however, will haunt me till I die.

It rises before me now like a horrible dream. The procession through the foyer with Charles carrying Sheba, me carrying Solomon, and – from the look on his face that was something the BBC *hadn't* thought of – an assistant producer gingerly carrying Solomon's earth box. The briefing in the studio, with the producer practisedly arranging what I should say and where I should sit while I grew hotter and hotter thinking of what might happen when the baskets were opened. The awful moment came when they *were* opened and, in a matter of seconds, that quiet, dignified studio was transformed into a merry-go-round with Charles and the producer belting in furious circles after Solomon, who was going it like a racehorse and still shouting we knew he never went anywhere in winter. The nightmare intervals when they caught him, thrust him feverishly into my arms and, in voices hoarse with anxiety, implored me for Pete's sake to *hold* him this time. And the paralysing climax when, with Solomon's claws stuck in my back like grappling hooks, Sheba smirking complacently at the camera from my lap and the producer praying aloud in the control room, we went on the air – to be greeted, of all the damfool opening remarks, by an interviewer saying he understood I had the cats in the studio with me that evening.

What happened after that, beyond Solomon leaping from my back with one deafening yell and heading for a ventilator,

I never knew. I gather I said something about him being able to open the refrigerator, because next day two old ladies turned up to watch him do it. Sheba obviously gave her usual smug account of herself because we had a letter from a woman offering to adopt her. 'Dear wee thing,' she called her, not knowing that the one and only time we'd got Solomon to settle on my lap for half a second the little perisher had nipped him surreptitiously in the rear and set him off again like a rocket.

I dimly remember, too, Charles driving us home again, pounding his forehead with his clenched fist and asking brokenly why it had to be him, *him*, that these things happened to.

I didn't really recover consciousness till the next day, however. Next day – when the Rector came to see how I was and ask after Solomon, for whom, he said, it must have been a terrible, terrible ordeal. At that moment, Solomon hove into view. Not cringing, cowed or shaking with fright as one might have expected, but lounging loftily along with what was soon to be known as his Rex Harrison walk. He greeted the Rector with a loud bass bellow as he came up. Had he, he enquired airily – pausing in the doorway so that we might get the full effect, while behind his glasses the Rector's eyes grew round as a pair of poached eggs – seen him on Television?



TWO

Up Drains and at 'em

There must, said Charles, pulling the lavatory flush and listening despondently to the hollow gargling noise that responded immediately from the washbasin, be a reason why things happened to us.

I knew exactly how he felt. The things that had happened to us that week included Solomon being bitten by a kitten, the pressure cooker blowing up and now, as a last straw, the drains going wrong.

The immediate reasons were obvious, of course. Solomon got bitten because, having cornered a stray kitten about the size of a flea and settled down for a spot of mild torture – which consisted of sitting about two feet away, where the kitten couldn't get at him and dabbing at it inquisitively with a long black paw – he'd discovered it was even more