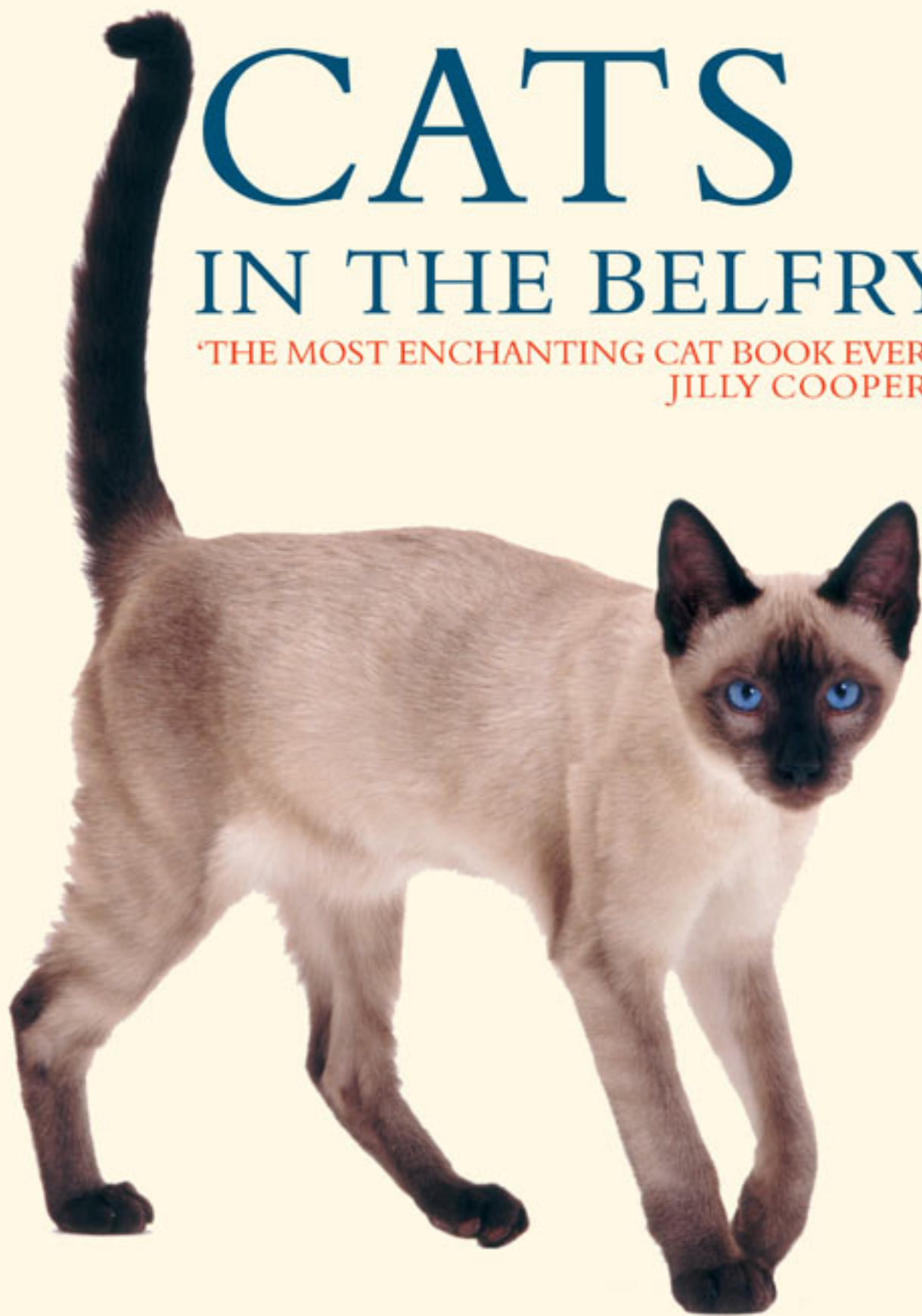


CATS IN THE BELFRY

'THE MOST ENCHANTING CAT BOOK EVER'
JILLY COOPER



DOREEN TOVEY

CATS IN THE BELFRY

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ONE

Can She Catch Mice?

Our first Siamese was called Sugieh and we bought her because we had mice. The only excuse I can offer for such Philistine conduct is that they were not ordinary mice. They were the hangers-on of a pet squirrel we had, called Blondin, and over the years they had developed personalities as distinct from ordinary mice as Blondin was different from ordinary squirrels. As different, in fact, as Siamese are from ordinary cats.

During Blondin's lifetime the mice hadn't worried us overmuch. They were always there. Upstairs, downstairs and trekking to and from the wired-in run in the garden where, as the result of an unfortunate *faux pas* when he chewed a hole through the bottom of the sitting room door one day while we were out, to get an apple, Blondin lived during the daytime.

But they were there on business, industriously tracking down the nuts and slices of bread which he was for ever stuffing under carpets and down the sides of chairs against a rainy day. And though it was a little disconcerting the first time I passed one on the landing, pattering along with a nut in its mouth like a dog carrying a bone, in the end I got quite used to them.

There was one who used to play deliberate hide-and-seek with me in the garden house. Eventually he became so tame that at the end of the game he would come out into the open, sit up on his haunches with a piece of bread sticking rakishly out of the corner of his mouth, and look up at me with the expression of an American millionaire wondering how much to offer for Cleopatra's Needle.

There was another one who, finding it impossible to squeeze out between the kitchen door and the outside doorstep one night with a nut in his mouth, left the nut under the door, nipped outside, and ingeniously started trying to hook it up by lying on the doorstep and fishing down through the gap with his paw.

I was scared stiff at the time. All I could see from inside the room was a nut jiggling frantically up and down under the door, apparently of its own accord. Blondin, I knew, had nothing to do with it. He was in bed. During the long winter evenings he turned in early, scampering off upstairs to the wardrobe where he slept on a shelf, snoring small but audible snores, inside a pile of Charles's socks. I was so relieved when I spotted the fragile paw of a field mouse groping through the crack and realized that we weren't being invaded by poltergeists that I opened the door and put the nut outside. There was nobody there then, of

course – but when I looked out again a few minutes later the nut had vanished.

Had things continued in this friendly vein I might have been writing a book about mice now, instead of Siamese cats. But one wet autumn Blondin caught a chill and died, and within a very short time we were in serious trouble. When the mice found there were no more nuts waiting for them down the sides of the chairs they started chewing holes in the loose covers. When they realized there were none hidden under the carpets they got mad and bit pieces out of those, too. They raided the budgerigar's cage for birdseed and frightened him practically into hysterics – he never had been a very strong bird anyway and was always moulting his tail feathers, and now they were falling out like autumn leaves.

They got into a dresser drawer they had never bothered with in the days of plenty and maliciously chewed all the corners off a big folded damask tablecloth that we only used on special occasions. The next time I opened it, there it was riddled with a pattern of stars and crescents like a Turkish flag and completely unusable. I could almost hear those mice sniggering their silly heads off – and that very night one of them, probably chosen by ballot, ambled airily up the eiderdown and over my face as I lay in bed, just to show me.

The last straw came a few mornings later when I opened the bread-bin and discovered a very small field mouse frantically practising high jumps inside it. He must have sneaked in there for a quiet snack, got himself trapped when the lid was put on, and then completely lost his head. He had been trying for so long to get out

by means of those tremendous panic-stricken leaps that they had become mechanical, and when I tipped him out on to the floor he covered the first few yards to the back door jumping like a kangaroo until he suddenly realized that he was free and shot out through the door like a rocket.

That was the end. We had already tried to replace Blondin with another squirrel, and had we been able to do so the balance between mouse and man might have been restored. Blondin himself we had found as a baby, lying injured under a tree, and we had never thought of him as a particularly unusual pet. Now however, as we trudged the town pet shops, enquiring above a murderous cacophony of yelping puppies, mewling kittens, screeching parrots and glugging goldfish for a simple, ordinary little squirrel, it was obvious that the proprietors thought we were mad. Only the Regent's Park Zoo took us seriously – and they, in reply to our anguished pleading, informed us that they had a waiting list for squirrels.

The only thing to do, as we abhorred setting traps for any animal, was to get a cat and hope that after one or two short, sharp executions the mice would take the hint and go away. The trouble was, we weren't particularly keen on cats. We were afraid that if we had one it would attack the birds around the place, some of whom had already become quite tame. In any case, we said, where would we find a cat with the amusing little habits with which Blondin had endeared himself to us – things like biting through the case of Charles's watch to get at the tick, and chewing the corners off our library books or the buttons off people's trousers when they came to tea?

We hesitated, and did nothing. And then, one fateful Sunday morning, we were introduced to Mimi, a young Siamese queen who had recently come to live with the people down the lane. She was six months old and had been given to them by a woman who had gone abroad and been forced to leave her behind. She had been with them for just two weeks, and already the effect on that unimaginative farm labourer's household, where the dog slept outside chained to a draughty kennel and the ordinary cats, kept to catch rats in the outhouses, were never allowed indoors at all, was revolutionary.

Mimi slept not only indoors, but in Father Adams's armchair, on his corduroy waistcoat which he took off specially for her each night before he went to bed. She was never allowed out after dark or when it rained – neighbours spoke in scandalized tones of seeing the old man himself tenderly filling an unmistakable earth-box in the garden after supper.

And now, in this hill village where men prided themselves on their toughness – within living memory they had held kicking matches on the Green and even now you would never catch one of them pushing a pram in his right mind, not even up a hill – here he was, the oldest, toughest, of the lot, parading down the lane as proud as a peacock with a Siamese cat in a harness of bright red rug wool.

He apologized for the harness. Mother, he said, was going to buy her a proper 'un with a bell next time she went to town. Meantime they had to use the wool because Mimi (he pronounced it My-My and it wasn't till months later, when I was helping him make out the pedigrees for her first kittens, that I discovered her original owner had named her after *La Bohème*), Mimi was in season for the first time, and had to be kept away from other cats.

I stared at her in amazement. I had always heard that Siamese queens in that condition nearly drove their owners off their heads yelling and screaming for a husband, and here was one standing in the road as quiet and demure as a nun, with nothing but a strand of rug wool between her and a countryside alive with ranting farmyard toms.

I asked if she *had* a voice. Not half, she said proudly. Bellowed like a ruddy bull when she wanted food, or for him to get out of her chair. But not for a tom. Class, she was. She wouldn't so much as look at an ordinary cat. The harness was only so that he could pick her up quick if a tom attacked her.

Class she certainly was, from her tapered black head, beautiful as an Egyptian queen carved out of ebony, to the tip of her elegant whip tail. I thought she was the loveliest animal I had ever seen, and when the old man went on to tell us how she climbed the curtains like a monkey when the fit took her, perched on the rail, and refused to come down, or went round the room leaping from the top of the piano to the mantelpiece like a racehorse, I knew I was lost. Here was Blondin all over again – with the added advantage, according to the old man, that Siamese cats never broke a thing.

There was just one thing more I wanted to know. Could she, I asked, catch mice? It was like asking a speed maniac if his car could do fifty on the flat. 'Mice,' roared Father Adams in a voice that vibrated with scorn. 'She brut a gert snake in t'other day four foot long, with his 'ead bit clean off, and played with 'un like he were a bit o' string.'

Within a few weeks both Adams and I were sadder, wiser people. The next time she came in season Mimi ripped the seat clean out of the armchair, drove the whole village

nearly round the bend with her bawling and finally jumped out of the bedroom window and fled up the lane to the farm, where she was only saved from a fate worse than death by the fact that her dusky Oriental face and blazing blue eyes frightened the battle-scarred old tom who lived there nearly out of his wits, and he was still hiding behind the water-butt when Mrs Adams, wailing and wringing her hands, panted up the hill in her wake.

It was a shaken Father Adams who came down to see us the following Sunday with Mimi, once more quiet and demure, padding sleekly at his heels. He said his wife had got a book about cats out of the library last time she was in town, and according to that Siamese queens couldn't be mated till they were a twelve-month old. If they had to put up with this caper for another six months, he said, with the blasted cat shouting her head off for a tom every few weeks and people knocking on the door and complaining about the noise, it would drive him clean up the pole.

We knew how he felt. We had troubles of our own. Since we saw him last we had acquired Sugieh, and the first thing she had done on entering her new domain was to race up the curtains just like he said, hurl herself like a minute, jet-propelled bomb at the birdcage, and frighten Shorty out of his last remaining tail feather.

She'd had no effect at all on the mice. Only the night before they had chewed a hole in the bag of the vacuum cleaner and when I switched it on a couple of pounds of dirt had gushed out all over our new cream Indian carpet. I was still wondering how I was going to get it up.



TWO

Caesar's Daughter

Sugieh fell in love with us the moment she saw us. It was most embarrassing because we had made up our minds to have a Seal Point like Mimi, and when the breeder said all the Seal Point kittens had gone but perhaps we would like to see the two Blue Points that were left it was understood that we did so merely out of interest.

Unfortunately nobody had told Sugieh that. Her brother, who was as good as sold to a woman who had already bought one of the Seal Points and was coming back for him later if her husband agreed, took one look at us when we went in, strolled off into a corner and started to chew the wireless flex. Sugieh, however, was quite certain we had come for her. She sat there on the hearthrug like a small girl with her suitcase packed ready to go on holiday – her

eyes screwed tight with anticipation, her paws pounding up and down like little pistons. When I got down on my knees and spoke to her she opened her eyes for a moment – blue as periwinkles they were, and completely crossed with excitement – greeted us with a squawk that was astounding, considering her size, and screwed them up tight again, waiting for the treat.

Her owner asked if we were intending to breed Siamese ourselves and when we said we were she remarked – just by way of interest, of course – that Sugieh's blue blood was only on her mother's side. Her father was a pure Seal Point, and if she in turn was mated to a pure Seal Point when she grew up, her kittens would be Seal Points as well. Though of course, she said, Blue Points were becoming very popular. Some people thought they had gentler dispositions than the Seal Points, and they were very beautiful. Which reminded her – before we went we really must see Anna.

She opened the door and shouted for Anna at the top of her voice. There was an answering bellow from some distant part of the house, and after a sufficient interval had elapsed for a dignified, unhurried descent of the stairs, Anna appeared.

A Siamese that has apparently just had a blue rinse is, at first sight, something of a shock, and this one reminded me irresistibly of a film star who had married into the aristocracy and gone on from there in a big way. Her legs were long and slender as a gazelle's. Her eyes, which were lighter than those of a Seal Point, glittered like jewelled almonds. She walked as if she owned the earth. If the breeder had reckoned that the sight of Anna would help to sell us Sugieh she was right – but not on account of her

beauty. It was the expression of complete hauteur, once she had looked us over, with which that cat swept past us and over to the corner to kiss her son, who was going to a home where they could afford two Siamese.

Not for anything, after that, could we leave Sugieh to be looked down on as the Cinderella of the litter. When we left she went with us, accompanied by a supply of yeast tablets, a bag of minced rabbit and a pedigree bigger than herself which said her father's name was Caesar. That, incidentally, was why we named her Sugieh. We had intended to call her Scheherazade but – though Anna didn't really *marry* the King of Siam – we decided not to complicate history any more than it was already.

Sugieh herself was so happy that that night, for the first and only time in her life, she rode home in the car without a murmur. She ate her supper down to the last crumb. Even the attack on Shorty was only to show us how in future she was going to defend us against All Creatures, great and small. She loved us so much that when at last we went to bed, shutting her in the spare room for Shorty's sake with a hot water bottle and a brand new cat basket to herself, she was heartbroken at the separation. She wailed and screamed and howled, shouting that she was all alone and wanted her mother. She got down and cried under the door so that we could hear her better, and dragged in the end of the rug off the landing, ripping at it in a frenzy that would have done credit to Lady Macbeth. When at last it seemed that there was to be no reprieve she gave a final tragic 'Mow-wow-wow' which trailed sadly off into the darkness. Then there was silence.

Immediately we began to worry. Supposing she lay by the door all night and caught a chill? Father Adams said