

DOUBLE TROUBLE



DOREEN TOVEY

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Your Cat magazine

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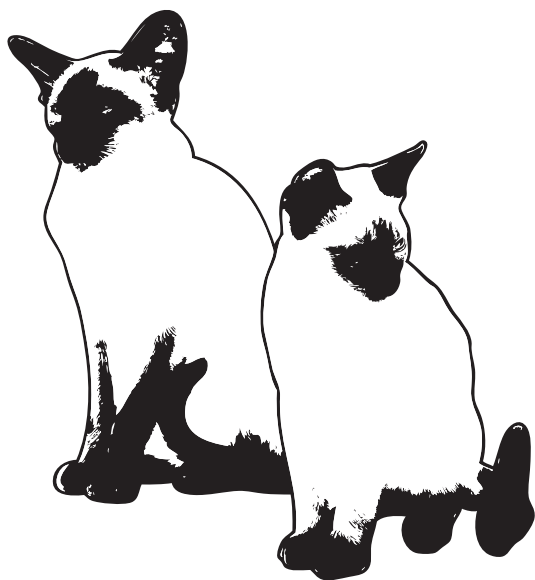
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Publishing News

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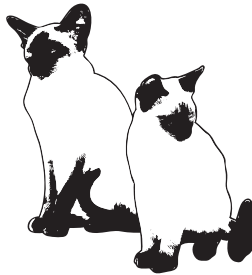
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Also by Doreen Tovey

Cats in the Belfry
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Cats in Concord



One

TIME PASSES, EVEN IN a quiet country backwater such as ours. Sheba, our blue-point Siamese, was now a staid old lady of sixteen. Solomon Secundus, better known as Seeley, whom we'd bought to comfort her and us after our first great Solomon died, was a strapping young Seal Point of eighteen months. Annabel, our donkey, was nine...

Not that she looked it, mind you. Not that she acted like it, either. As I start this book it is with a thumb that feels as though it will never be the same again, thanks to Annabel's idea of a joke.

It so happened that one Monday morning Charles decided to put her out to graze in the Forestry lane which adjoins the cottage – Monday being when the local riding school takes its day off, so there was no chance of her pursuing her favourite pastime of holding

the horses at bay by stretching her tether rope across in front of them.

It also happened that there were, that morning, two private individuals out riding. The first one, whom we didn't know, Annabel let go by without hindrance. When I looked over the gate to check on her she was eating innocently from the side to which she was tethered, neck stretched industriously up to reach a bramble, small rounded bottom tucked neatly out of the way, without so much as a glance at the passing horse.

When the second rider came by, however – and this one was known to us all right; a certain young lady who rode round the place with the air of Elizabeth the First making one of her progresses and she hoped we yokels appreciated it... when she came on the scene Annabel was eating, apparently quite by accident, from the opposite hedge, with her rope stretched tight across the lane like a customs barrier.

'She *would*,' I said when Charles, who'd come tearing down from the orchard, said Annabel was holding up the Robart girl and would I come and help him shift her. Which was why, mortified at the thought of the spectacle we were going to present trying to move that little so-and-so while the other one sat her horse and watched us, I rushed out, not stopping to pick up Annabel's bridle (without which, small as she is, one might as well try to move Mahomet's mountain), untied her tether rope and tried to pull her out of the way on that.

The spectacle began without delay. Annabel reared like a Lippitzer, I fell down in the mud, my shoe came off and, as I got up, Annabel came waltzing backwards and trod on my poor bare foot.

‘You all right?’ enquired Charles, who would ask that, I have no doubt, if I were falling straight down the crater of Vesuvius.

I didn’t trust myself to reply.

‘Grab her collar!’ I muttered between anguished teeth. ‘Grab her *collar*, or she’ll start playing up again.’

Thrusting my foot into a mud-filled shoe, doing my best not to limp and grasping Annabel in a grip of iron by one side of her collar while Charles held her firmly by the other, we led her towards her field. There was a patch near her gate where the lane was even muddier and it was necessary to skirt it in single file along the hillside; I in front, Annabel in the middle and Charles, trying to look insouciant, in the rear. And there, finding it difficult to keep his balance while holding her from behind, Charles let go of her collar, Annabel kicked up her heels and shot back down to the lane and I, the victim as usual of the pair of them, was hauled down behind her like a donkey cart.

I let go of her collar too, of course. But her tether rope was round my thumb, I couldn’t get it loose, and although I ran like mad the moment came when Annabel was running faster than I was; only the fact that I eventually tripped, sat down in the road and so acted as a drag anchor on our dear little donkey prevented my being towed up the hill like a kite.

‘You all right?’ enquired Charles, passing me at the double to retrieve the cause of it all.

I left him to put Annabel into her field. I left him to accept the casual ‘Thank you’ of the imperturbable Miss Robart. (Imperturbable or not, Charles said even she looked slightly stunned as she went past.) I, with as

much dignity as I could muster, hobbled into the cottage to nurse my anguished thumb, which felt about two feet long, and ponder why on earth we kept a donkey when we had two Siamese cats.

It is a matter of circumstances, of course. There are times when I wonder why we keep Siamese cats. But at the moment Seeley – safely in custody for once instead of playing hookey in the woods with our wondering where on earth to look for him first – was sitting on a table closing his eyes at me with such an air of concern as to indicate that he was my only friend in the world and by gosh, he knew how it hurt.

He did at that. Only a few weeks previously Annabel had gummed up his thumbs, too. On that occasion, galloping round the lawn to show off to some passers-by, she'd put one of her feet down the clock-golf hole, trod on the metal lining and, by dint of the fact that she weighed, galloping, about half a ton, had turned down the edge of it like a razor. This we'd deduced following the horrifying discovery one morning that Seeley now had completely flat thumb pads. We'd practically had the Crime Squad on the job till we remembered his addiction to lying on his stomach fishing the ball out of the clock-golf hole with his paws – and sure enough there, when Charles went out to look, was a set of familiar gallop-prints going right across the hole and a sharp metal edge inside.

My, that must have hurt, I said, examining the poor little sawn-off pads. They were healing now. It must have been a couple of days since he'd done it. But they were still pretty red and sore-looking. Like Solomon, who'd once been distinguishable as the only cat in the

district with a forked tongue as a result of howling at his opponent in a cat-fight and inadvertently biting through it, Seeley would now be distinguishable as the only cat around with flat-topped thumbs.

He'd squeezed his eyes at me on that occasion, too. Hardly even noticed it, he said.

All Siamese have their idiosyncrasies and though Seeley was so much like Solomon that many of their habits were identical, this business of meaningful eye-closing was entirely Seeley's own. It conveyed wisdom, innocence, apology, affection – whichever he meant it to do at the moment. Tight-squeezed eyes when I was nursing my thumb meant sympathy. Tight-squeezed eyes when I was demanding Who'd made all those footmarks on the refrigerator meant he just couldn't think, it must have been Sheba – though Sheba was far too frail these days to do any climbing and there was only one cat around who made footprints two inches across. Tight-squeezed eyes when a visitor spoke to him meant he was very pleased to meet them – and ensured, seeing that it produced a more Oriental expression than ever, that they remarked how striking he was. He was indeed. His mask was the darkest seal imaginable, his eyes the most vivid, slanting blue. He was huge and broad-shouldered – a king among cats. Only – which sometimes produced a more striking effect than ever – *he* still thought he was a kitten.

He still couldn't open the hall door, for instance. He expected Sheba to open it for him. And while in his young days it had been an endearing sight to see her pushing practisedly through with a fat little kitten hard on her heels, it looked odd, to say the least, to see her

still frailly doing it at sixteen while a positive young Hercules of a cat waited to jump over her head as soon as she'd made a gap.

He still used his baby voice, too. True he could roar like a buffalo when he wanted to – when we wouldn't let him out, for instance, or there was fish for supper and he was wailing about how he loathed it. But normally he went round conversing in little 'Wooohs' and 'Mrrrr-mrrrs', and he didn't fight, and he never ever sprayed... He'd been neutered at six months old, of course, and wouldn't have sprayed in the house – but, outdoors, our first Solomon had been quite outstanding for his spraying. He'd sprayed to mark his territory. He'd sprayed just to show that he could. 'Proper liddle water-pistol' our neighbour Father Adams had once said admiringly. That was when he was spraying Miss Wellington's gatepost, of course, not Father Adams's own.

Seeley did none of these things. We put it down to his being with Sheba. She was so old, we thought, it probably made Seeley feel like a kitten beside her. Being Sheba she no doubt treated him as one, too. Told him to sit down; be Quiet, she wanted to rest; it was a fact that she could quell him with a glance.

Sometimes we felt that he was missing out on his youth... at his age Sheba and Solomon had whizzed round the place like fireflies. But we couldn't get him a young companion while our faithful old girl was with us. Siamese have very strange temperaments. Pushed into the background she might have felt unwanted and decided to die.

So, that last winter, we continued. Making a fuss of her. Letting her out whenever she asked, which made

her feel very important indeed. Old or not, she still liked putting one over on Seeley and very much the senior prefect she was when, after a late-night stroll up the garden with Charles and a look with him through the gate, she came in to sit by the fire, purring, fresh-furred, with a look at the envious Seeley which informed him that *he* was still a child. Only she was allowed out after dark.

She had priority at milk-time too. At ten o'clock sharp every night she climbed on my lap, tapped me on the cheek with a soft but urgent paw and, when she'd got my attention, fixed me with a look that meant Milk. In the kitchen. Now. She made no sound when reminding me. That, as she and I both knew, would have had Seeley clamouring for His Too in an instant. Silently I proceeded to the kitchen. Silently Sheba accompanied me. She sat on the kitchen stool, drank two saucerfuls of cream off the top of the bottle – and only then was Seeley, by this time bawling his head off because we were Missing and He Knew what we were Doing, allowed tearfully out to join her in a third.

Thus we made her feel that she was wanted. And Seeley, when there wasn't a question of food involved, made her feel wanted too. He would assiduously seek her out when he came in from his outings... Mrr-mrr-mrring about where was she and he hadn't seen her for ages – while Sheba, if it was one of her better days, would Mrr-mrr encouragingly at him back. He would wash her when he was feeling benevolent – not much of a wash it was true, since Seeley, like Solomon before him, didn't go much for the cleaning lark. A lick or two behind her ears, a slurp on the top of the head that nearly laid her flat on the

floor... ‘Not bad, is she?’ he’d demand, sitting proudly by her side like a pavement artist while Sheba, pleased with such attention, would close her eyes and purr.

He slept with her at night; he spent hours during the day sitting with her in front of the fire or on the settee – because he loved her but also, it must be admitted, because he liked sharing the hotwater bottle she now had continuously in her bed. And thereby hangs another tale, because hitherto we’d always used aluminium bottles, which couldn’t be smashed like stone ones, or punctured by claws as could rubber.

They can still be damaged by constant dropping, however. Over the years, our nerves shattered by cats climbing our backs while we were filling them or staging what sounded like the French Revolution suddenly starting up upstairs, we’d demolished bottle after bottle. And one night, harassed by Seeley shouting for his supper in one ear and the pressure cooker with his rabbit in it suddenly letting off steam in the other, I dropped the last metal bottle just once too often and that was that. When I tried to replace it I was told they weren’t making them any longer; most people have electric blankets.

Most people maybe, but not cats with Siamese claws. We didn’t want them electrocuting themselves in the night. For days I hunted in case somewhere there was a shop with an old-fashioned metal bottle under its counter, but it was no use. So eventually I bought a rubber one.

Sheba wouldn’t stick her claws in it, I assured the doubtful Charles. She was too old now for that. And if we put a double layer of rug on top of it Seeley wasn’t really likely to puncture it either. If he did, in any case,