

THE COMING OF SASKA

From the bestselling author of *Cats In The Belfry*



DOREEN TOVEY

Praise for *Cats in the Belfry*

‘The most enchanting cat book ever’

Jilly Cooper

‘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

‘A funny and poignant reflection of life with a Siamese, that is full of cheer’

The Good Book Guide

Praise for *Cats in May*

‘If you loved Doreen Tovey’s *Cats in the Belfry* you won’t want to miss the sequel, *Cats in May*... This witty and stylish tale will have animal lovers giggling to the very last page’

Your Cat magazine

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Michael Joseph edition published 1977

This edition published by Summersdale Publishers Ltd. in 2007

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Summersdale Publishers Ltd
46 West Street
Chichester
West Sussex
PO19 1RP
UK

www.summersdale.com

Printed and bound in Great Britain.

ISBN: 1-84024-595-6

ISBN 13: 978-1-84024-595-0

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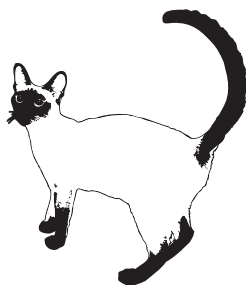
DOREEN TOVEY



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One

WHEN I TOLD FATHER Adams we were planning another trip to the Rockies – to do some more riding, I said, and look for the grizzlies we’d missed last time, and if possible see something of the wolves – he looked at me as if I needed certifying.

He usually does look at me like that, of course. Charles and I have lived along the lane from him for more than eighteen years now, but in his eyes we are still essentially townfolk and therefore dim beyond redemption when it comes to the commonsense matters of life.

This time, however, he regarded me even more old-fashionedly than usual. ‘Hassn’t thee got enough wild animals round here?’ he said. And then, in a voice deep with concern because really he is rather fond of us, ‘Thee’st want to watch thee dussn’t get *et*.’

I knew what he was thinking of. For one thing the previous week, when we’d been bringing down logs from our two

and a half acres of woodland, which is across the lane from the cottage. It could almost have been a scene from the Canadian backwoods then, with Charles stacking the logs at the road-edge and me loading them on to a roughly constructed sledge so that Annabel, our donkey, could haul them down to the cottage.

The idea of the sledge was because the hill is so steep. With wheels the load of logs would probably have shot straight to the bottom with Annabel on top – but with runners it slid gently down behind her, the weight acting as a brake, and it towed up easily again when empty.

Annabel loved it. Not wanting to over-burden her... she is, after all, only a very small donkey... at first I'd tied just a couple of logs to the sledge. She'd wafted them down to the valley as if they were balloons, so next time I'd added a couple more... and the time after that another two... until eventually she was pulling quite a load on every trip. Enjoying it, too. Plodding down the hill with the air of an experienced, if pint-sized, dray-horse and the complacently smug expression on her face that Charles and I knew only too well.

She stood patiently at the bottom while I unloaded the logs on to the grass verge outside the cottage; pulled the sledge back up again without even the slightest pause (normally I'd have to haul her up it bodily, with her fighting to eat dandelions at every step); stood again at the top while I re-loaded... 'I wish we had a camera handy,' I said to Charles as, with me walking at her head, she started down the hill once more. 'Or that somebody would come along and see her. Nobody ever *does* when she's being good like this.'

That did it. Mention the word 'good' in Annabel's hearing and, it being her lifelong principle to be the opposite, non-co-operation sets in at the speed of sound. At the end of

that descent she decided she'd had enough of playing at draught horses. Unfortunately I had my foot on the sledge-rope at the time, anchoring it while I unloaded the logs, so when she moved off down the other fork of the lane (away, that is, from any direction that could possibly be connected with log-hauling), she not only took the still half-loaded sledge with her but me as well, sliding along behind it on my bottom with my foot caught in the rope.

Overburden her, did I say? The sledge and I went down the lane behind her as if we were so much balsa wood. The lane leads, if one follows it far enough, to the field of a donkey friend of hers called Charlie, some three miles away, and I'd no doubt have gone the whole way to Charlie's on my seat if it hadn't been that Father Adams happened to be a short way down there clearing a blockage in the stream at the time, and Annabel shied and stopped when she saw his head come up out of the ditch.

I scrambled up, grabbed her bridle and explained what had happened. Father Adams said nothing for a moment. Just looked at me resignedly from under his hat brim. 'Wur's the Boss?' he asked at length. When I explained that Charles was still up at the top of the hill bringing logs out to the road-edge... I *had* shouted but he couldn't have heard me above the noise of the stream, I said, and anyway he was singing when I left... that didn't help things either. Charles has a very good voice but his habit of singing when working among his fruit trees is down on Father Adams's scorecard as another of our peculiarities.

I remember on one occasion Charles rendering 'On Yonder Hill Declining' from *Fra Diavolo*... standing on a slope in the orchard, one arm out-thrown in the manner of Gigli, performing, as he thought, entirely for my benefit...

and in the pause after a ringing ‘Dia... vo... lo... o prou... oud... ly stands’ a familiar voice floated up from the lane, ‘Ah, an’ if he done a bit more weedin’ instead of standin’, maybe we could see the trees for the nettles.’

No. Years of being our nearest neighbour and therefore rarely missing a thing we do has done nothing to alter Father Adams’s conviction that what we need is a keeper. If I couldn’t cope with a donkey hauling logs, I could see him thinking, what chance would I have against a grizzly?

We couldn’t even win with Siamese cats. We had two. Seeley, a four-year-old Seal Point and Shebalu, a two-year-old Blue Point. And if evidence was needed of our ineptitude in that direction there was, to take the latest example, the affair of Seeley and the dog-food.

This had come about as the result of the husband of Shebalu’s breeder calling to see us one day when he was on business in our neighbourhood. ‘Good Lord, hasn’t she grown!’ he said, hardly able to believe that the tall, beautiful, serenely elegant Blue Point who swayed top-model fashion across the room to greet him was the same matchstick-tailed little scrap who used to race up and down his curtains. ‘She’s twice the size of her mother.’

‘It’s the country air,’ I told him. ‘And tearing about the hillside. And of course she eats like a horse.’ At which we got to talking about feeding – pigs’ hearts and lean mince they liked, I said, and didn’t it cost a bomb... tinned food was good and cheaper, but we couldn’t get them to eat much of it... and he said Shebalu’s mother didn’t like tinned cat-food either, but now they fed her on Chum. She and their dog side by side, from twin bowls, and she ate it as though it were caviare.

Aha! I thought. The next time I went to the village shop I too brought home some Chum. Shebalu was the real stumbling block when it came to the tinned cat-food business. Seeley, our amiable gannet, would eat it if he had to. It was just that it didn't seem fair to feed him on tinned stuff while Shebalu held out for fresh meat. If her mother liked dog-food, however, perhaps she would, too, and that would solve the problem. Not only as regards cost. Our Vet had told us years before that cats *should* eat a fair proportion of tinned pet food. It was scientifically balanced, he said – particularly the kind that contained cereal – and cats were much less likely to get kidney trouble in later life if their diet wasn't exclusively meat and fish.

So I got the Chum. Shebalu refused to look at it, saying she didn't care what her mother said. What jurisdiction did She have, anyway, letting her Daughter leave home at Eight Weeks Old, bawled Abandoned Annie indignantly at the very thought of it. Seeley tunnelled into it saying it was super... better than rabbit, he assured us between noisily appreciative slurps. How were we to know that, having eaten his and Shebalu's platefuls and presumably seen the picture on the tin, his Siamese mind would translate that into meaning that *he* was now a dog, so from now on he was going to behave like one?

He started that very afternoon. When I opened the back door to take them out for their four o'clock run, there, on the other side of it, was one of our neighbours about to put the church news-sheet through our letterbox. Behind her was her dog, a huge black muscle-rippling Labrador at the sight of whom Seeley would normally have fled indoors and hidden under the table.

What, fortified by Chum, did he do on this occasion? Stick his neck out, growl like a guard dog, and charge. ‘Seeley!’ I screeched, diving after him. ‘Bramble!’ yelled the woman, making a futile grab at her dog. Round the corner of the cottage we tore, expecting to find Seeley demolished on the lawn – and what incredible scene met our eyes?

Bramble sitting down hard on the front path, presumably to stop himself from running away, shivering like a jelly with his ears flat in surrender... and, stalking intimidatingly towards him like Gary Cooper in *High Noon*, our normally timid little Seeley.

I grabbed him, wondering what he might do to me in that mood, but he knew even then that I was his friend. He let me carry him away, his coat bushed out like a porcupine, contenting himself with shouting threats over my shoulder as he went. Show his nose in our Valley again and he’d have his Ears off, he bawled at the terrified Bramble. Set foot on our Path and he’d Eat Him. Wet Just Once More on our gatepost and he’d... what dreadful Siamese retribution that would incur we didn’t hear. By that time I’d dumped him in the conservatory and locked the door.

I apologised to our neighbour saying it must have been the dog-food and she said she reckoned the Rector should pay her danger money... both of us laughing, seeing that nobody had been hurt, and neither of us serious in what we said... and a week later Seeley did it again.

This time he’d been up on the hillside in the Forestry Commission estate with me and Shebalu. Basking in the late afternoon sunshine, hunting in the bracken for mice, the pair of them chasing each other up the fir trees... Shebalu shinning effortlessly up like a stevedore mounting the Eiffel Tower; Seeley, like Solomon before him, achieving

four feet up with an excited yell to Look At Him and then falling off with a plop. They'd had their fun and were back sitting on the rug with me when a man leading a horse and accompanied by a boy and an Alsatian dog appeared in the lane below us.

Normally – this, for safety's sake, was something I'd taught them long ago – when we saw a dog the three of us vanished silently into the undergrowth. A right nit I felt too, at times, crouched in a clump of bracken peering out with a couple of cats, but I thought it was good to set an example.

This time, however, before I could make a move, Seeley was up and streaking downhill to the attack. True when he reached the bottom and the Alsatian barked at him he lost his nerve and dodged into an old stone ruin; just over the Forestry fence, it had always been a refuge for our cats. But no sooner did the bitch turn away, called off by the man who said she wouldn't harm him, she was young and only playing, than Seeley shot out again like a cannon ball, thinking her retreat meant that she was afraid of *him*.

By this time, actually, she was. Back to her owner she fled, with Seeley like an avenging fury at her heels. Up in the air went the horse – thank goodness the man wasn't riding him. How I managed to field Seeley as he passed me I will never know. Only that somehow, as in a dream, I did – reflex action is second nature to the owners of Siamese cats – and that I was dimly aware in the background of the man hanging on to the rearing horse, the boy getting up on the bank for safety, Charles running like mad down from the orchard – and, watching from the lower lane, registered even in my extremis by the downturned brim of his trilby, the silent. Job-like figure of Father Adams.

Sometimes I wonder how he does it. Fell a tree up in the top hedge of our wood and round the corner as it falls will come Father Adams. Not deliberately, because he's heard the sawing and wants to know who it is, but because he's happened to come that way home from the pub. Get out quietly repairing one of our garden walls – they are dry-stone walls and always tumbling down – and, just as one puts on a wrongly-balanced stone and the whole lot falls down again, there on the other side of it will be Father Adams.

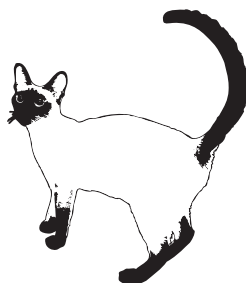
It was a foregone conclusion, therefore, that he'd be in at the end of the dog-food experiment. It was a few days later and we'd stopped giving Seeley Chum. Another Siamese owner had told us that her Vet said one shouldn't feed cats on dog-food. Different types of animals have different metabolisms, she said, and the foods are geared specially to their needs.

We did rather wonder – while telling ourselves that the dog-chasing was, of course, just coincidence – whether leaving it off would make a difference in that respect. Even we didn't bargain for anything so spectacular, however, as that on Wednesday there was Seeley chasing an Alsatian and by Sunday, sans the Chum, we were back to dogs chasing *him*.

'Whass he doin' up there?' asked Father Adams, appearing as if by press-button as we once more hoisted our extension ladder against an ash-tree some fifty yards down the lane. Down through the leaves, from the top-most branch, peered two blue eyes round with woe. Like Solomon before him, while normally a non-climber, when danger threatened he could get up all right; the snag was, also like Solomon, that he then developed vertigo and couldn't get down.

‘Don’t tell I he’ve chased a dog up *there*,’ went on Father Adams, ready after eighteen years to believe anything as far as our animals were concerned. Anything, that is, except the truth. That Seeley had fled up there at the sight of a passing Corgi and didn’t Father Adams think it queer, I said, that he’d chased dogs when we gave him dog-food and got chased by them when we didn’t?

‘Sometimes it strikes I thee bist,’ said our neighbour, who is a man of few but succinct words. In the circumstances it was hardly surprising that he worried about us meeting up with grizzlies.



Two

NORMALLY MISS WELLINGTON WOULD have worried too. She was always worrying about other people. Whether somebody ought to be told about the way they kept their garden. (Miss Wellington's, where it could be seen for the stone gnomes and toadstools that dotted it like the Bayeux Tapestry, was immaculate and couldn't be faulted.) Whether Annabel was happy. Miss Wellington spent many an anxious hour pondering this at Annabel's fence and, because Annabel always bawled when she moved away, was sure she needed a companion. Annabel was actually informing the world that Miss Wellington was stingy with the peppermints... we could always tell her disgusted calls by the derisive snort at the end. But Miss Wellington liked to worry. It made life so much more interesting.

She worried about the church heating. She worried about what things were coming to. She worried considerably about the young people of today. She'd done that ever since

she saw their goings-on on television and now – which was why she wasn't as yet at hysteria stations at the thought of us going out to look for grizzlies – she had a trendy young couple living next door to her and she was worrying more than ever.

Convinced that all young men with beards had sinister motives and that flowing dresses and beads were a sign of fecklessness in girls, Miss Wellington nearly dropped when she saw the Bannetts looking over Rose Cottage. Ern Biggs, Father Adams's rival for the handyman jobs in the village, was working in a nearby garden at the time and according to him she went straight indoors and started playing hymns on her piano. 'Oh God Our Help In Ages Past,' he said, and whether it was to frighten them off or in the hope of invoking heavenly protection nobody knew, but either way it didn't work. The Bannetts bought the cottage, Miss Wellington fluttered round the village anticipating the worst – the place taken over by hippies and probably a pop festival on the village green before we'd finished... and the week before they moved in, everybody had a fright.

Everybody except us, that is. We happened to be coming back from town around ten o'clock at night and while, as we turned the corner by the Rose and Crown and drove along the lane, we were startled ourselves for a moment to see Rose Cottage apparently floodlit, with music throbbing out from it like Congo drums, we did get the true picture as we passed.

The Bannetts were showing another couple around (Liz Bennett's parents, it later transpired). The son et lumière effect was the result of their having switched on the high-powered lamps installed by the builders for working on the dark, low-ceilinged interior. During the day, when