

THE NEW BOY

From the bestselling author of *Cats In The Belfry*



DOREEN TOVEY

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ONE

There was nothing, that last summer, to warn us of the sadness that lay so short a while ahead.

True, Sheba had been ill the previous autumn. ‘Kidney trouble’ the Vet had diagnosed after examining her. And when he told us gently that she was now an elderly cat, that her kidneys were very much enlarged but that with treatment and careful diet we might, if we were lucky, have her with us for another year – we were numbed at the prospect of the future without her.

For thirteen years life in our West Country cottage had been dominated by a pair of Siamese cats: Sheba, the clever one; tiny, blue-pointed and as fragile as a flower: Solomon, her noisy brother; seal-pointed, huge, our bumble-footed clown.

Every inch of the place held a memory of them doing something. Sheba playing tag with us on the coalhouse roof

on a summer's night, for instance. Hanging over the edge bawling she was Here, we weren't to go in without her or the Foxes might Get Her – and then, as we reached up to lift her down, retreating light-heartedly to another corner saying Ha! ha! That one fooled us, didn't it? She wasn't afraid of Foxes...

Or Solomon, dark-backed and seemingly as unmoving as a doorstep, peering stolidly through the gate when he knew we were keeping an eye on him. Always the adventurer was Solomon. Never within our boundaries if he could help it and, on the occasions when we had to go out and were watching him like security guards to make sure he didn't get away (wipe a plate – out to check on him; put away a jug – out to check on him again), there he'd be sitting by the gate. Very ostentatiously With Us. Not a thought in his head about moving. Why on Earth, enquired the set of his back view, were we watching him Like That? And waiting, as well we knew, to vanish like Siamese lightning the moment we took our eyes off him.

One day, of course, we would have to lose them. The one disservice animals render us is that they don't live as long as we do. But cats live longer than dogs. We'd heard of Siamese of twenty and more. And not only had our two, until Sheba's illness, gone through life with the enthusiasm of eternal kittens, but it seemed such a little while since they *had* been young.

I could reach out, it seemed, and almost touch them like it. Going down the lane at three months old with their mother and their brothers in the wheelbarrow ... all the others in the wheelbarrow that is, and Solomon tagging tearfully along behind. Lying on our bed at six months old, when

Sheba had recently been spayed and, when we switched on the light wondering at the peculiar snicking noises, there was Solomon, mortified at being discovered, helping her by trying to bite her stitches out. The first time we took them to the Siamese cattery at Halstock after their mother had died and, as we left, they'd sat side by side in their big paved run, wistfully watching us go. They had the tips of their tails crossed, like children holding hands to give each other courage. They'd done that, said Mrs Francis, every time they sat out in their run.

Thirteen years had slipped by since then like May mist blown by the wind. The cats were seven when we acquired an eleven months' old donkey and now Annabel was seven herself. As wayward as ever and there was no need to worry about *her* age, thank goodness. Donkeys live to twenty at least, and we had been told they could live to forty.

I worried about the cats, though. Being the world's worst pessimist I always had done. I worried when they were ill. I worried when they were out of sight. When Solomon was out of sight, at any rate, for Sheba very rarely strayed. I ran like a deer at the sound of a cat-fight, in case the loudest, most urgent of the howls should be (as they usually were) Solomon, having started the fracas, bawling for me to come to the rescue. Sometimes I ran when it wasn't a cat-fight – bursting through the door, shouting 'SOLOMON!' as I went, only to find that it was the boy who lived on the hill practising bird-calls, or visitors to the Valley calling their dogs.

Embarrassing though it was, it didn't really bother me. I would have gone to the ends of the earth to rescue Solomon. To rescue any of them, if it came to that – but particularly

Solomon, who was not only more likely to *be* at the ends of the earth than any of the others, but because for me he was something very special.

I had never, for a moment, taken him for granted. In thirteen years I had never once seen him come round a corner or into a room with that dawdling, elegant walk of his, without marvelling at the perfection of his beauty. He had the proud, high-boned features of the East from which he came. His face shone like dusky silk. And if his slanted, sapphire eyes had faded a little with the years, they were the most loving, communicative eyes I have ever encountered in a cat.

Beyond all that, he was my friend. If Charles went down first in the morning it was Solomon who came flying up the stairs, stopping an exuberant strop on the stair-carpet by way of exercise and then, if I didn't acknowledge his presence, bumping his head against the door edge until I did and raising his tail in affectionate greeting. Sheba, who was Charles's friend, would be out with him inspecting the garden, but Solomon would wait while I dressed, walk down with me, and only then go out.

If I were missing of an evening – washing my hair, perhaps, and then drying it in the bedroom – it would be only a little while before there was a creak as he pawed back the heavy living-room door, or, if it were latched, the sound of his demanding that Charles should open it, and up he'd come again. His face bright with joy because he'd found me – and wasn't it Nice, his expression demanded, to be, he and I, together?

It was indeed, but sometimes I thought with a pang of the future. Nineteen or twenty, we told ourselves, but already

he and Sheba were thirteen. What grief was I storing up for myself when we lost him and what would I do when it happened?

In the event, however, it seemed it was Sheba who was going to leave us and if Solomon was my Number One cat, Sheba, as I'd so often assured her, was my Point Nine Nine Nine Nine. It was heart-rending, watching her sitting about so wanly while Solomon, doing his level best to get her going again, tore round the place like a spider-legged puppy. He shouted, he poked her with his paw, he invited her to chase him. She was Ill, she informed him mournfully. Couldn't he stop making such a racket?

She grew terribly thin and refused to eat. The Vet gave her treatment and said we shouldn't feed her proteins. They were a cat's natural diet, he said, but hard on the kidneys. When young, a cat thrived on meat and fish. When old, it did better on the cheaper tinned cat foods – and the more cereals they contained, in her condition, the better.

We tried six kinds of cat food but Sheba wouldn't look at them. So, despairingly – deciding that the most important thing at the moment was to get her to eat *something*, we'd worry about the cereal business later – we returned to the foods she normally liked. Dropped (knowing their habits of old when convalescent) in odd, seemingly accidental fragments in front of her, in any place where she happened to be sitting.

It was a long time before it worked. It was Solomon at first who ate the bits, nose to the trail like a walrus-whiskered bloodhound. Jolly good game this, he informed us enthusiastically. Got any more chicken scraps we wanted

tracked down? But we got her eating in the end, on rabbit jelly. Dropped, I regret to say, on the seat of a chair.

Cats have these fads about feeding when they're convalescent. Solomon once, after a serious illness, consented to take nourishment only in the conservatory, from the toe of Charles's shoe. Crab paste it was, I remember, and Charles swore that his shoes reeked for weeks. Another cat I knew fancied shrimps in the bath as a pick-me-up. An empty bath, of course; he wasn't that psychiatric. But nobody was allowed to watch him while he ate; the shrimps had to appear before him one by one or the sight of them put him off; and his owners – I saw them myself – spent hours crouched low beneath the bath-rim, tossing shrimps to him over the top.

If anyone says how typically English that is and it just shows what fools we are about animals, may I also quote an American friend of mine, a hard-headed writer of detective fiction, who once spent the best part of a week on her stomach? Her cat, Robin, was convalescent, and would only eat best minced steak under her bed.

One book we read, discussing this finickiness, suggested dropping the food on pieces of paper. Humour them, it said. Try anything to get them interested. Often, when they're ill, they won't eat from dishes, but they'll take food put on paper because it's unusual.

Sheba wouldn't. On the chair, she informed us faintly. The one behind the door. It was the only place she felt like it – and if we didn't hurry up, the feeling would go off. So on the chair it was. And, as I'd recently re-covered the seat in tomato-coloured whipcord, an encouraging little spectacle

it was, too, until I had the idea of slipping a spare piece of material deftly in front of her and feeding the invalid off that. The identical tomato-coloured whipcord, of course, so she thought she was using the chair. When I tried a piece of towelling she looked reproachful and once more refused to eat.

So, on rabbit jelly mixed with glucose, Sheba slowly turned the corner. A more repulsive mixture one couldn't imagine. It was sticky and looked exactly like sicked-up sherbet. But from that she went on to the rabbit itself and from rabbit to raw minced beef. And then, one day, quite by accident, I discovered about pigs' hearts.

By accident indeed, for I thought I was buying sheep's hearts. I spotted them in a butcher's in town, thought they might tempt our invalid, and in I went. 'Sheep's hearts? Certainly!' said the butcher, clapping a couple of gory objects on to a piece of greaseproof paper...

Sheba thought they were wonderful. She ate them with more relish than she'd eaten for years. She began to appear in the kitchen demanding them noisily. She sat around looking hopeful if I so much as got out the mincing machine. And then, after she and Solomon had been eating them for months – two a week between them and they polished them off like wildfire – I went into the shop one day, said I'd have a couple of those sheep's hearts in the window, and the new young woman assistant said 'But those aren't sheep; they're *pigs!*'

They were too, which shows how much of a Fanny Craddock I am.

'A' course I said they were sheep,' said the butcher when I taxed him with it. 'I says they'm whatever anybody asks for.'

Saves disappointing people, to my way of thinking. Most of 'em can't tell pig from sheep or calf.'

Solomon and Sheba could. Switched precipitately to lambs' hearts – pork, we'd always understood was bad for them, and here they'd been eating pigs' hearts, raw, for *months* – they promptly went on strike. Horrible old Grey Fatty Things, grumbled Solomon, shaking his leg disgustedly at his dish. Just when she was getting Better, said Sheba, turning frailly away from hers.

So, after consulting an expert on cat dietetics who said there was nothing against pigs' hearts in his opinion – nothing particularly in favour of them either, unless it was that pigs were often given antibiotics, some of it probably permeated into the heart tissues, and in eating the hearts the cats might themselves be getting minor doses of the antibiotic – we went back to them again. Only two a week of course, along with fish and rabbit and meat. But our cats liked and thrived on them. Robin, in America, liked and thrived on them too. We gave up bothering about Sheba's cereal. The Vet was right about it in principle, said the expert, but, with an old cat, wasn't it better to let her eat what she enjoyed? Rather a shorter life by a couple of months or so than an existence on food she didn't like... So, watching her closely, we continued. By Christmas she was putting on weight. By spring she was back to hunting. By autumn – a year from the time she'd been so ill – she looked right for twenty or more.

Heartbreak was not far away from us, however. It was Solomon who died.



TWO

We had no inkling whatsoever. Sometimes he drank more water than usual and I worried about his kidneys – but he always *had* done everything lustily. Big drinks when he drank. (Siamese drink lots of water anyway.) Hearty meals when he ate. Charging like a bull in a china shop when he felt like a chase around the house.

We watched him, nevertheless. Perhaps a *little* kidney trouble, we told ourselves, but if so he'd had it for years. We couldn't remember a time when he hadn't, after an afternoon's snooze in the car, come down, stood on the rim of the goldfish pond, and lapped a long and noisy drink you could hear the length of the garden away. But he wasn't *always* drinking, like Sheba when she was ill. Most cats get kidney trouble anyway as they get older, and so long as it stays slight it doesn't harm them.

So we reasoned, and gave thanks for his seemingly boisterous health. He was heavy; his coat was sleek; he looked and acted like a cat who was many years younger.

I have so many memories of Solomon those last few months. In the garden one day in spring, for instance, when it appeared that he wanted to dig a hole. The ground was hard – Charles and I not being very hoe-minded – so to help him I pulled out a dahlia cane and scratched the earth loose with that. Did Solomon get the message? Not the one I was intending, anyway. He spied suspiciously down the hole in case it held a mouse.

There was the time, too, when he actually caught a mouse. Charles had taken up bee-keeping. The combination of two cats, a donkey, Charles and a hive of bees had to be experienced to be believed and of that I will tell more anon. Suffice it for the moment to say that bee-keeping is not as easy as is sometimes thought, we were always having crises and having to send for a bee expert, and this was one of the times.

Charles had lost two swarms in a fortnight. Soon, he kept expostulating, he wouldn't have any bees at all. As far as I was concerned that would have been a jolly good job, but there we were. The expert expected momentarily, Charles in the garden waiting for him and Solomon mousing hopefully on the lawn.

He'd been sitting there on and off for weeks, in front of a clump of grass that grew over by the wall. He sat there when it was fine. He sat there when it rained. When it did, for fear of a chill on his liver I took out a wooden box, turned it on its side and in that, to the obvious surprise of callers, he sat imperturbably before

the grass clump like a sentry at Buckingham Palace. It didn't seem odd to Solomon. That was just when one might come out, he said.

One hadn't. Or if it had, he hadn't seen it. No mighty hunter was Solomon, though he tried so hard to make believe he was. And then, the very moment the bee expert arrived, he landed one. A whacking great grandfather of a field mouse that probably couldn't get away, it was so fat. He lugged it to the middle of the lawn, eyed us forbiddingly over the top of it and prepared to defend it against the world. Make believe again, as well we knew. But through the gate right then came the bee expert, who was also a fervent animal lover – and the first picture he had of us – also animal lovers and pillars of the RSPCA to boot – was of a fierce, slit-eyed Siamese about to torture a mouse, and ourselves standing, apparently unheeding, by.

'Don't you take it away from him?' he demanded. We did, I explained, if it was alive. But this one looked dead – we were watching in fact, to see if it moved – and if it wasn't dead, its rescue needed strategy.

'On account of the cat's so fierce?' asked the bee expert.

On account, I explained, of the fact that we had for years been rescuing mice from Solomon by lifting him by the scruff of his neck – gently, so that, while his body and forepaws were in the air, his back legs were still on the ground – and that made him drop the mouse and then we caught it. But Solomon had now got wise to that one. When we lifted him he held his front paws out to catch the quarry himself if it fell – and, as a further precaution, bit deliberately through its backbone the moment we touched him.