

JILL'S CAT.

Where Jill's cat came from I have no idea ; she just came. I first set eyes on her when one night, returning from dinner, I found her coiled up in an arm-chair in the drawing-room very fast asleep. So with a certain amount of mild, though I think, justifiable indignation, I thereupon opened the door of the room and the door into the garden, and advanced upon her clapping my hands and emitting loud and terrible noises in order to drive her out. But she merely stretched one paw with extreme laziness, looked at me with half a yellow eye, as if to say : "That noise is in deplorably bad taste, but I suppose you don't know any better," and went to sleep again.

This would not do at all, and though I was sorry to have to do it, thus violating the ancient and sacred rights of sanctuary, still it was impossible for me to give a home to any cat who might happen to come along. So I took her up with both hands, as M. Pierre Loti so justly advises, intending to put her bodily out into the garden and shut the door. But the moment I touched her she set up a loud tea-kettle purr, and still more than half asleep, licked with a rough pink tongue the hand that was near her head.

Now of all the curious qualities which cats possess, that of confidence in strangers is one of the rarest, and to the stranger who knows anything about them, certainly the most disarming. Most cats would have scurried angrily from the room at the rude noises I had made, and woke up all green distrustfulness on being touched. Not so Jill's cat; she just said: "Are you still there? How nice! Let's go to sleep again at once." So I told myself (without really believing it), that I would definitely drive her away in the morning, and left her in possession of her chair. But all my instincts told me that she had come to stay, and I know that if a cat really makes up its mind to do anything, that thing, unless you kill it, it will do.

Now most cats are absolutely without tact; they are obstinate, easily bored (shewing their boredom in a manner which it is impossible to mistake), and have the rooted conviction that the whole round world exists in order to amuse and interest them. But Jill's cat, so I firmly believe, had the tact

of all the other cats ever created, which accounts for their having none. For when the housemaid came into the room next morning to dust, Jill's cat greeted her at once as an old and valued friend, and went to meet her with little cries of welcome, making a poker of her tail. The housemaid in consequence, thawed by these well-bred manners, took her down into the kitchen to give her a saucer of milk before ejecting her. Jill's cat was hungry, and with the dainty eagerness of her race began to lick up her breakfast. But half-way through she suddenly froze into stone, but for the end of a twitching tail, and regarded with the eye of a Huntress the wainscoting opposite. Next moment a mouse was pinned by those velvet paws, and in less than another moment there was no mouse at all. The tail she did not care about, and deposited it, as a small token of homage and affection, at the feet of the cook. Then, this piece of diplomacy successfully carried through, she finished her milk, the walls of Jericho, so to speak, tottering to their fall at her assault.

But had Jill's cat known, there was a far more critical and hazardous passage still before her, for the house was ruled not by me, nor by the housemaid, nor even by the cook, that dispenser of succulence and joy, but by Jill, and Jill being young was capricious, and being far more highly born than any of us, was proud. Being also a fox-terrier she liked biting. She had slept as usual that night on various parts of my bed and me, and came down with me in the morning. I had forgotten for the moment all about the cat, and entered

the dining-room for breakfast with Jill circling round me and making short runs at my boots, which she had lately taken into her head were enemies of some kind and dangerous to hearth and home.

There on the hearth-rug, neatly arranged round one hind-leg which stuck up in the middle of her like a flagstaff, sat the cat, diligently employed on affairs of the toilet. The scurry of our entrance disturbed her ablutions, and looking round with a calm and trustful eye she saw Jill. Probably Jill had never seen a cat before, and I had one moment of horrified suspense as to whether the cat would go for Jill, or Jill for the cat. In any case the flying of fur or hair seemed imminent and inevitable. But Jill's cat was equal, more than equal to the occasion, and never have I seen "the right thing" so quickly conceived, or so instantaneously performed. With one stealthy movement she was underneath a corner of the tablecloth, which hung down to the ground, and a paw was put gingerly out with little dabs and jerks to entice Jill to begin to play at once. Now how should that cat have known that a hand concealed under a rug or the corner of a curtain, and making known its presence by concealed movements, was a thing irresistible to Jill? But she did know it, and before I could snatch Jill up to avert the impending catastrophe, no catastrophe impended any longer, and the two were engaged in a gorgeous game of hide-and-seek behind curtains, table legs, fenders, the Daily Telegraph and chairs, wherever in fact there was a possibility of making mysterious and secret stirrings.

So destiny shapes our ends ; from that moment the stranger of the night before had entered on a new existence, and became Jill's cat.

In a manner of speaking, she had also become Jill's governess, for Jill being young was flirtatiously inclined, and through the railings of the front garden, which gave on to the road, behaved in a very vulgar barmaid sort of fashion, and "drew in" (I am sorry to use such an expression, but I know of none other that fits the case) the young gentleman of the neighbourhood. The railings were too narrow to admit of Jill's squeezing her plump little body through (she tried once and stuck, and roused the entire parish by the shrillness of her lamentations) and she had to content herself with putting her head through, and kissing practically any gentleman who came to present himself. But Jill's cat—a model of respectability—instantly stopped these very unladylike proceedings, for whenever she observed Jill trotting off with a particularly demure air to talk to her friends, she would follow, and from the vantage-ground of the gate-post turn herself into a perfect fury of vindictive rage, and by her spitting and swearing, distract the gentlemen from their love giving them war instead. Our particular terrier, who was a common loafer at Jill's bar was the object of her special aversions, and the language she thought fit to employ to him was really responsible, I fancy, for the blistering of the paint on the gate.

Jill's cat had a perfect mania for work, and her work consisted in catching anything that was alive. Within three days

of her arrival I am convinced there was no mouse left in the house, and having cleared the place of them she turned her attention to birds, butterflies, and snails. The work among the birds I regretted, but it was quite impossible to stop it, since it seemed engrained in her nature that no living thing except ourselves had any right to enter the house or garden. It took her some time to discover that snails were alive, but that fact once clearly grasped, they took their place among the trophies of the chase, which were duly presented on the return of the huntress to Jill, the cook, or me. This generosity had its drawbacks, for Jill was like other children very fond of "collections," and was in the habit of concealing small objects of various kinds in the folds of the blanket in her basket. Thus one day I found there two dead and unfledged birds, a snail, and portion of what had once been a white butterfly.

Her work, together with various sudden excursions to the garden-railing to swear at the dogs of the neighbourhood, used to take Jill's cat's morning; that over, she cleaned herself, for it was clearly a waste of time to do so until the house-work was done, and played with Jill till dinner. Then came the desolating moment of the day, for Jill went for her walk, and her cat sat disconsolately at the window waiting for her return. The moment she entered the gate she rushed to meet her, and indulged in extravagant displays of affection. Evening came, and they slept together in Jill's basket, after a wild romp in which they kicked each other in the face, by way of showing their deep and unalterable regard.

A year passed thus, and then occurred an event which for the time completely puzzled Jill's cat, for Jill became the mother of four puppies, and in a moment turned from being a rather flighty young woman into a perfect demon of rage and suspicion if anyone approached them. Even when she was given her food it had to be placed at some distance from her box, where she lay with chattering snarling mouth, ready to defend her own against any who came near. But Jill's cat did not know this, and coming into the outhouse where Jill lay, after her work was done on the morning the puppies were born, ready to play, she had to fly for her life, and seek refuge on the top of the garden wall, where she crouched, trembling with fright and indignation, and deeply hurt at this outrageous reception. Never had such a thing occurred; it was a bolt from the blue; the bottom had fallen out of her universe, and she lifted up her voice and howled for the anguish of her heart. And Jill quivering with rage snarled at her from below.

For the time Jill's whole nature was changed; there were, no more excursions to the garden-gate to kiss indiscriminate gentlemen, she had neither time nor inclination to play with her cat, and she was convinced that the world was banded together to work the destruction of her puppies. But this fierce access of protective maternity on her part lasted not more than a few days, and one afternoon she left the hay-packed box where the puppies lay, and trotted across the lawn to where I sat at some little distance off with her cat. The latter remembering Jill's unprovoked assault sprang up

the trunk of a tree as she approached, and glared distrustfully through the leaves, while Jill whined and whimpered below, and put herself into engaging postures of play on the grass. Then step by step still cautiously her cat descended to the lowest branch of the tree, and after a long pause there forgot and forgave, and took a flying leap at her friend. Next moment they were kicking each other in the face in the old manner, and flying in agitated excursions through the flower-beds.

But soon Jill's maternal heart yearned again for the muzzling noses, and she ran back to the wood-shed. Then ensued a thrilling piece of animal psychology. Very slowly the cat followed, and at length peeped cautiously in. From inside there was dead silence; Jill was evidently pondering whether her friend could be trusted, then after a pause I heard a little friendly note of welcome and her cat entered. So I followed and looked in. Jill was lying inside her box, the four puppies cuddled up against her, and her cat was sitting by it looking with wide and wondering eyes at the phenomenon. Then she raised one paw gently and delicately, and with it just touched the puppies. Then advancing another step, she licked them very gently with the top of a pink tongue. And Jill said "Wooff: wasn't it clever of me to have got them?" And we were all very happy that marriage after all had not caused any separation between old friends.

So the mysterious bond of sympathy and affection between the two, only deepened instead of being broken, and Jill's cat became a sort of aunt to the puppies. True, there

was one moment of unfounded suspicion on Jill's part when two out of the four puppies unaccountably vanished, and she was inclined to set it down to her cat, but this past, she welcomed her friend as joint educator of the young, and even allowed the best-beloved to go staggering excursions, first about the wood-shed and later over the whole romantic playground of the garden, under the protection of his aunt. By degrees, too, the fascination of biting and kicking one's aunt in the face became apparent, and I have often seen the whole four of them mingled in one inextricable and struggling mass of paws and open mouths.

The road just outside the gate was a long straight level, much haunted by motor-cars. It was here that the end came to that strange animal friendship, for one day Jill was run over and killed just outside the house. The small slain body was brought in, and while the grave was being dug in the garden, Jill lay on the grass, quite still. And as she lay there, her cat came out of the house and went up to her, her work being over, and she therefore disengaged and desirous of relaxation. But Jill did not seem inclined to play, and her cat strolled off again. Then she returned and sat down by her looking at her, and again tried to attract her attention, touched her on the nose with her paw, and made a feint of running away. Then as this did not answer she stole off into the bushes and came back carrying a snail in her mouth, which she laid by her, giving a little cry of appeal. But the grave was ready by now, and they took Jill up and laid her in it and filled in the earth.

That night I was strolling about the garden and saw something white under the tree where Jill had been buried. It was Jill's cat sitting on the grave.

E. F. BENSON.