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Broomsticks

Miss Chauncey's cat, Sam, had been with her many years before she noticed anything unusual, anything *disturbing*, in his conduct. Like most cats who live under the same roof with but one or two humans, he had always been more sagacious than cats of a common household. He had learned Miss Chauncey's ways. He acted, that is, as nearly like a small mortal dressed up in a hairy coat as one could expect a cat to act. He was what is called an 'intelligent' cat.

But though Sam had learned much from Miss Chauncey, I am bound to say that Miss Chauncey had learned very little from Sam. She was a kind, indulgent mistress; she could sew, and cook, and crochet, and make a bed, and read and write and cipher a little. And when she was a girl she used to sing 'Kathleen Mavourneen' to the piano. Sam, of course, could do nothing of this kind.

But then, Miss Chauncey could no more have caught and killed a mouse or a blackbird with her five naked fingers than she could have been Pope of Rome. Nor could she run up a six-foot brick wall, or leap clean from the hearthmat in her parlour on to the shelf of her chimneypiece without disturbing a single ornament, or even tinkling one crystal lustre against another. Unlike Sam, too, she could not find her way in the dark, or by her sense of smell; or keep in good health by merely nibbling grass in the garden. If, moreover, she had been carefully held up by her feet and hands two or three feet above the ground and then dropped, she would have at once fallen plump on her back; whereas when Sam was only three months old he could have managed to twist clean about in the air in twelve inches and come down on his four feet, as firm as a table.

While then Sam had learned a good deal from Miss Chauncey, she had learned nothing from him. And even if she had been willing to be taught, and he to teach her, it is doubtful if she would have proved a promising pupil. What is more, she knew much less about Sam than he knew about his mistress—until, at least, that afternoon when she was doing her hair in the glass. And then she could hardly believe her own eyes. It was a moment that completely changed her views about Sam—and nothing after that experience was ever quite the same again...

Sam had always been a fine upstanding creature, his fur jet-black and silky, his eyes a lambent gold, even in sunshine, and at night aglow like green topazes. He was now full five years of age, and had an unusually powerful miaou. Living as he did quite alone with Miss Chauncey at Post Houses, it was natural that he should become her constant companion. For Post Houses was a singularly solitary house, standing almost in the middle of Haggurdsdon Moor, just where two wandering by-ways cross each other like the half-closed blades of a pair of shears or scissors.

She was well over a mile from her nearest neighbour, Mr. Cullings, the carrier; and yet another mile from the straggling old village of Haggurdsdon itself. Its roads were extremely ancient. They had been sheep-tracks long before the Romans came to England and had cut *their* roads from shore to shore. But for many years few travellers on horse or foot, or even sheep with their shepherd had come Miss Chauncey's way. You could have gazed from her windows for days together without seeing so much as a tinker's barrow or a gipsy's van.

Post Houses too was perhaps the ugliest house there ever was. Its four corners stood straight up on the moor like a pile of nursery bricks. From its flat roof on a clear day the eye could see for miles and miles across the moor, Mr. Cullings's cottage being out of sight in a shallow hollow. It had belonged to Miss Chauncey's respectable ancestors for generations. Many people in Haggurdsdon indeed called it Chauncey's. And though in a blustering wind it was as full of noises as an organ, though it was cold as a barn in winter, and though another branch of the family had as far back as the 'seventies gone to live in the Isle of Wight, Miss Chauncey still remained faithful to the old walls. In fact she loved the ugly old place. Had she not lived in it ever since she was a little girl, with knickerbockers showing under her skirts, and pale-blue ribbon rosettes at her shoulders.

This fact alone made Sam's conduct the more reprehensible, for never cat had kinder mistress. Miss Chauncey herself was now about sixty years of age—fifty-five years older than Sam. She was tall and gaunt, and straight as a ramrod. On

weekdays she wore black alpaca, and on Sundays a watered silk. Her large round steel spectacles straddling across her high nose gave her a look of being keen as well as cold. But truly she was neither. For even so stupid a man as Mr. Cullings could take her in over the cartage charge for a parcel—just by looking tired, or sighing as he glanced at his rough-haired, knock-kneed mare. And there was the warmest of hearts under her stiff bodice.

Post Houses being so far from the village, milk and cream were a little difficult. But Miss Chauncey could deny Sam nothing—in reason. She paid a whole sixpence a week to a little girl called Susan Ard, who brought these dainties from the nearest farm. They were dainties indeed, for though the grasses on Haggurdsdon Moor were of a dark sour green, the cows that grazed on it gave an uncommonly rich milk, and Sam flourished on it. Mr. Cullings called once a week on his round, and had a standing order to bring with him a few sprats or fresh herrings, or any toothsome fish that was in season, Miss Chauncey would not even withhold her purse from whitebait, if no other cheaper wholesome fish were procurable. And Mr. Cullings would eye Sam fawning about his cartwheel, or gloating up at his dish, and say, "Ee be a queer animal, Mum, shure enough; 'ee be a wunnerful queer animal, 'ee be."

As for Miss Chauncey herself, she was a niggardly eater, though much attached to her tea. She made her own bread and cookies. On Saturday a butcher-boy drove up in a striped apron with her Sunday joint; but she was no meat-lover. Her cupboards were full of home-made jams and bottled fruits and dried herbs—everything of that kind, for Post Houses had a nice long strip of garden behind it, surrounded by a high old yellow brick wall.

Quite early in life Sam, of course, had learned to know his meal-times—though how he 'told' them was known only to himself, for he never appeared even to glance at the face of the grandfather's clock on the staircase. He was punctual, a dandy in his toilet, and a prodigious sleeper. He had learned to pull down the latch of the back door, if, in the months when an open window was not to be found, he wished to go out. Indeed, he often seemed to prefer the latch. He never slept on Miss Chauncey's patchwork quilt unless his own had been placed over it. He was fastidious almost to a foppish degree in his habits, and he was no thief. He had a mew on one note to show when he wanted something to eat; a mew a semitone or two higher if he wanted drink (that is, cold water, for which he had a natural taste); and yet another mew—gentle and sustained—when he wished, so to speak, to converse with his mistress.

Not, of course, that the creature talked *English*. He liked to sit up on one chair by the fireside, especially in the kitchen—for he was no born parlour cat—and to look up at the glinting glasses of Miss Chauncey's spectacles, and then down a while at the fire-flames (drawing his claws in and out as he did so, and purring the while), almost as if he might be preaching a sermon, or reciting a poem.

But this was in the happy days when all seemed well. This was in the days when Miss Chauncey's mind was innocent of doubts and suspicions.

Like others of his kind, too, Sam had delighted in his youth to lie in the window and idly watch the birds in the apple-trees—tits, thrushes, blackbirds, bullfinches—or to crouch over a mousehole, for hours together. Such were his house amusements (he never ate his mice), while Miss Chauncey with cap and broom, duster and dish-clout, went about her work. But he also had a way of examining things in which cats are not generally interested. He as good as told Miss Chauncey one afternoon that moths were at work in her parlour carpet. For he walked to and fro and back and forth with his tail up, until she attended to him. And he certainly warned her, with a yelp like an Amazonian monkey, when a red-hot coal had set her kitchen mat on fire.

He would lie or sit with his whiskers to the north before noon-day, and due south afterwards. In general his manners were perfection. But occasionally, when she called him, his face would appear to knot itself into a frown—at any rate to assume a low sullen look, as if he expostulated: 'Why must you be interrupting me, Madam, when I was attending to something else?' And now and then, Miss Chauncey fancied, he would deliberately secrete himself or steal out of (and into) Post Houses unbeknown.

Miss Chauncey too would sometimes find him trotting from room to room as if on a visit of inspection. On his second birthday he had carried in an immense mouse and laid it beside the shiny toecap of her boot as she sat knitting by the fire. She smiled and nodded merrily at him, as usual, but on this occasion he looked at her intently, and then deliberately

shook his head. After that he never paid the smallest attention to mouse or mousehole or mousery, and Miss Chauncey was obliged to purchase a cheese-bait trap, else she would have been overrun.

Almost any domestic cat may do things of this nature, and all this of course was solely on Sam's domestic side. For he shared house with Miss Chauncey and, like any two beings that live together, he was bound to keep up certain appearances. He met her half-way, as the saying goes. When, however, he was 'on his own', he was no longer Miss Chauncey's Sam, he was no longer merely the cat at Post Houses, but just *himself*. He went back, that is, to his own free independent life; to his own private habits.

Then the moor on which he roved was his own country, and the 'humans' and their houses on it were no more to him in his wild privy existence than mole-hills or badgers' earths or rabbit warrens are to ourselves. Of this side of his life his mistress knew practically nothing. She did not consider it. She supposed that Sam behaved like other cats, though it was evident that at times he went far afield, for he now and again brought home a young Cochin China pullet, and the nearest Cochin China fowls were at the vicarage, a good four miles off. Sometimes of an evening, too, when Miss Chauncey was taking a little walk herself, she would see him—a swiftly moving black speck—far along the road, hastening home. And there was more purpose expressed in his gait and appearance than ever Mr. Cullings or even the vicar showed!

It was pleasant to observe, too, when he came within miaouing distance, how his manner changed. He turned at once from being a Cat into being a Domestic Cat. He was instantaneously no longer the Feline Adventurer, the Nocturnal Marauder and Haunter of Haggurdsdon Moor (though Miss Chauncey would not have so expressed it), but simply his mistress's spoiled pet, Sam. She loved him dearly. But, as again with human beings who are accustomed to live together, she did not *think* very much about him. It could not but be a shock then that late evening, when without the slightest warning Miss Chauncey discovered that Sam was deliberately deceiving her.

She was brushing her thin brown front hair before her looking-glass. At this moment it hung down over her face like a fine loose veil. And as she always mused of other things when she was brushing her hair, she was somewhat absent-minded the while. On raising her eyes from her reverie behind this screen of hair, she perceived not only that Sam's reflection was in sight in the looking-glass, but also that something a little mysterious was happening. Sam was sitting up as if to beg. There was nothing in that. It had been a customary feat of his since he was a few months old. Still, for what might he be begging, no one by?

Now the window to the right of the chintz-valanced dressing-table was open at the top. Outside, it was beginning to grow dark. All Haggurdsdon Moor lay hushed and still in the evening's thickening gloom. And apart from begging when there was nothing to beg for, Sam seemed, so to speak, to be gesticulating with his paws. He appeared, that is, to be making signs, just as if there were someone or something looking in at the window at him from out of the air—which was quite impossible. And there was a look upon his face that certainly Miss Chauncey had never seen before.

She stayed a moment with hair-brush uplifted, her long lean arm at an angle with her head. On seeing this, Sam had instantly desisted from these motions. He had dropped to his fours again, and was now apparently composing himself for another nap. No; this too was a pretence; for presently as she watched, he turned restlessly about so that his whiskers were once again due south. His backward parts towards the window, he was now gazing fixedly in front of him out of a far from friendly face. Far indeed from friendly for a creature that had lived with her ever since he opened the eyes of his blind kittenhood.

As if he had read her thoughts, Sam at that moment lifted his head to look at his mistress; she withdrew her eyes to the glass only in the nick of time, and when she turned from her toilet there sat he—so serene in appearance, so puss-like, so ordinary once more that Miss Chauncey could scarcely believe anything whatever had been amiss. Had her eyes deluded her—her glass? Was that peculiar motion of Sam's fore-paws (almost as if he were knitting), was that wide excited stare due only to the fact that he was catching what was, to her, an invisible fly?

Miss Chauncey having now neatly arranged her 'window-curtains'—the sleek loops of hair she wore on either side her high forehead—glanced yet again out of the window. Nothing there but the silence of the Moor; nothing there but the faint pricking of a star as the evening darkened.

Sam's supper cream was waiting on the hearthrug in the parlour as usual that evening. The lamp was lit. The red blinds were drawn. The fire crackled in the grate. There they sat, these two; the walls of the four-cornered house beside the crossroads rising up above them like a huge oblong box under the immense starry sky that saucered in the wide darkness of the Moor.

And while she sat so—with Sam there, seemingly fast asleep—Miss Chauncey was thinking. What had occurred in the bedroom that early evening had reminded her of other odd little bygone happenings. Trifles she had scarcely noticed, but which now returned clearly to memory. How often in the past, for example, Sam at this hour would be sitting as if fast asleep (as now) his paws tucked neatly in, looking very much like a stout alderman after his dinner. And then suddenly, without warning, as if a distant voice had called him, he would leap to his feet and run straight out of the room. And somewhere in the house—door ajar or window agape, he would find his egress and be up and away into the night. This had been a common thing to happen.

Once, too, Miss Chauncey had found him squatting on his hindquarters on the window-ledge of a little room that had been entirely disused since, years ago, Cousin Milly had stayed at Post Houses when Miss Chauncey was a child of eight. She had cried out at sight of him, 'You foolish Sam, you; come in, sir! You will be tumbling out of the window next!' And she remembered as though it were yesterday that though at this he had stepped gingerly in at once from his dizzy perch, he had not looked at her. He had passed her without a sign.

On moonlight evenings, too—why, you could never be sure *where* he was! You could never be sure from what errand he had *returned*. Was she sure indeed where he was on *any* night? The longer she reflected, the gloomier grew her doubts and misgivings. This night, at any rate, Miss Chauncey determined to keep watch. But she was not happy in doing so. She hated all manner of spying. They were old companions, Sam and she; and she, without him in bleak Post Houses, would be sadly desolate. She loved Sam dearly. None the less, what she had witnessed that evening had stayed in her mind, and it would be wiser to know all that there was to be known, even if for Sam's sake only.

Now Miss Chauncey always slept with her bedroom door ajar. She had slept so ever since her nursery days. Being a rather timid little girl, she liked in those far-away times to hear the grown-up voices downstairs and the spoons and forks clinking. As for Sam, he always slept in his basket beside her fireplace. Every morning there he would be, though on some mornings Miss Chauncey's eyes would open gently to find herself gazing steadily into his pale green ones as he stood on his hind paws, resting his front ones on her bedside, and looking into her face. 'Time for breakfast, Sam?' his mistress would murmur. And Sam would mew, as distantly almost as a seagull in the heights of the sky.

To-night, however, Miss Chauncey only pretended to be asleep. It was difficult, however, to keep wholly awake, and she was all but drowsing off when there came a faint squeak from the hinge of her door, and she realised that Sam was gone out. After waiting a moment or two, she struck a match. Yes, there was his empty basket in the dark silent room, and presently from far away—from the steeple at Haggurdsdon Village—came the knolling of the hour.

Miss Chauncey placed the dead end of the match in the saucer of her candlestick, and at that moment fancied she heard a faint *whssh* at her window, as of a sudden gust or scurry of wind, or the wings of a fast-flying bird—of a wild goose. It even reminded Miss Chauncey of half-forgotten Guy Fawkes days and of the sound the stick of a rocket makes as it slips down through the air—while its green and ruby lights die out in the immense vacancy above. Miss Chauncey gathered up her long legs in the bed, got up, drew on the blue flannel dressing-gown that always hung on her bedrail, and lifting back the blind an inch or two, looked out of the window.

It was a high starry night; and a brightening in the sky above the roof seemed to betoken there must be a moon over the backward parts of the house. Even as she watched, a streak of pale silver descended swiftly out of the far spaces of the heavens, and fading into the darkness dwindled and vanished away. It was a meteorite; and at that very instant Miss Chauncey fancied she heard again a faint remote dwindling *whssh* in the air. Was *that* the meteorite too? Could she have been deceived? Was she being deceived in everything? She drew back.

And then, as if in deliberate and defiant answer, out of the distance and from what appeared to be the extreme end of her long garden where grew a tangle of sloe bushes, there followed a prolonged and as if half-secret caterwaul: very low—

contralto, one might say—*Meearou-rou-rou-rou-rou!*

Heaven forbid! Was *that* Sam's tongue? The caterwauling ceased. Yet still Miss Chauncey could not suppress a shudder. She knew Sam's voice of old. But surely not that! Surely not that!

Strange and immodest though it was to hear herself, too, in that solitary place calling out in the dead of night, she nevertheless at once opened the window and summoned Sam by name. There was no response. The trees and bushes of the garden stood motionless; their faint shadows on the ground revealing how small a moon was actually in the sky, and how low it hung towards its setting. The vague undulations of the Moor stretched into the distance. Not a light to be seen except those of the firmament. Again, and yet again, Miss Chauncey cried 'Sam, Sam! Come away in! Come away in, sir, you bad creature!' Not a sound. Not the least stir of leaf or blade of grass.

When, after so broken a night, Miss Chauncey awoke a little late the next morning, the first thing her eyes beheld when she sat up in bed was Sam—couched as usual in his basket. It was a mystery, and an uneasy one. After supping up his morning bowl, he slept steadily on until noonday. This happened to be the day of the week when Miss Chauncey made bread. On and on she steadily kneaded the dough with her knuckled hands, glancing ever and again towards the motionless creature. With fingers clotted from the great earthenware bowl, she stood over him at last for a few moments, and eyed him closely.

He was lying curled round with his whiskered face to one side towards the fire. And it seemed to Miss Chauncey that she had never noticed before that faint peculiar grin on his face. 'Sam!' she cried sharply. An eye instantly opened, wide and ferocious, as if a mouse had squeaked. He stared at her for an instant; then the lid narrowed. The gaze slunk away a little, but Sam began to purr.

The truth of it is, all this was making Miss Chauncey exceedingly unhappy. Mr. Cullings called that afternoon, with a basket of some fresh comely young sprats. 'Them'll wake his Royal Highness up,' he said. 'They'm fresh as daisies. Lor, m'm, what a Nero that beast be!'

'Cats *are* strange creatures, Mr. Cullings,' replied Miss Chauncey reflectively; complacently supposing that Mr. Cullings had misplaced an *h* and had meant to say, *an hero*. And Sam himself, with uplifted tail, and as if of the same opinion, was rubbing his head gently against her boot.

Mr. Cullings eyed her closely. 'Why, yes, they be,' he said. 'What I says is is that as soon as they're out of your sight, you are out of their mind. There's no more gratitood nor affection in a cat than in a pump. Though so far as the pump is concerned, the gratitood should be on our side. I knew a family of cats once what fairly druv their mistress out of house and home.'

'But you wouldn't have a cat *only* a pet?' said Miss Chauncey faintly; afraid to ask for further particulars of this peculiar occurrence.

'Why, no, m'm,' said the carrier. 'As the Lord made 'em, of they be. But I'll be bound they could tell some knotty stories is they had a human tongue to their heads!'

Sam had ceased caressing his mistress's foot, and was looking steadily at Mr. Cullings, his hair roughed a little about the neck and shoulders. And the carrier looked back.

'No, m'm. We wouldn't keep 'em,' he said at last, 'if they was *four* times that size. Or, not for long!'

Having watched Mr. Cullings's little cart bowl away into the distance, Miss Chauncey returned into the house, more disturbed than ever. Nor did her uneasiness abate when Sam refused even to sniff at his sprats. Instead, he crawled in under a low table in the kitchen, behind the old seaman's chest in which Miss Chauncey kept her kindling wood. She fancied she heard his claws working in the wood now and again, and once he seemed to be expressing his natural feelings in what vulgar people with little sympathy for animals describe as 'swearing'.

Her caressing 'Sam's, at any rate, were all in vain. His only reply was a kind of sneeze which uncomfortably resembled

'spitting'. Miss Chauncey's feelings had already been hurt. It was now her mind that suffered. Something the carrier had said, or the way he had said it, or the peculiar look she had noticed on his face when he was returning Sam's stare in the porch, haunted her thoughts. She was no longer young, was she becoming fanciful? Or must she indeed conclude that for weeks past Sam had been steadily circumventing her, or at any rate concealing his wanderings and his interests? What nonsense. Worse still: was she now so credulous as to believe that Sam had in actual fact been making signals—and secretly, behind her back—to some confederate that must either have been up in the sky, or in the moon!

Whether or not, Miss Chauncey determined to keep a sharper eye on him. Their future was at stake. She would at least make sure that he did not leave the house that night. But then: Why not? she asked herself. Why shouldn't the creature choose his own hour and season? Cats, like owls, *see* best in the dark. They go best a-mousing in the dark, and may prefer the dark for their private, social, and even public affairs. Post Houses, after all, was only rather more than two miles from Haggurdsdon Village, and there were cats there in plenty. Poor fellow, her own dumb human company must sometimes be dull enough!

Such were Miss Chauncey's reflections; and as if to reassure her, Sam himself at that moment serenely entered the room and leapt up on to the empty chair beside her tea-table. As if, too, to prove that he had thought better of his evil temper, or to insinuate that there had been nothing amiss between himself and Mr. Cullings, he was licking his chops, and there was no mistaking the odour of fish which he brought in with him from his saucer.

'So you have thought better of it, my boy?' thought Miss Chauncey, though she did not utter the words aloud. And yet as she returned his steady feline gaze, she realized how difficult it was to read the intelligence behind those eyes. You might say that, Sam being only a cat, there was no meaning in them at all. But Miss Chauncey knew better. There could be meaning enough if such eyes had looked out of a *human* shape at her.

Unfortunately, and almost as if Sam had overheard his mistress's speculations regarding possible cat friends in the village, there came at that moment a faint wambling mew beneath the open window. In a flash Sam was out of his chair and over the window-ledge, and Miss Chauncey rose only just in time to see him in infuriated pursuit of a slim sleek tortoiseshell creature that had evidently come to Post Houses in hope of a friendlier reception, and was now fleeing in positive fear of its life.

Sam returned from his chase as fresh as paint, and Miss Chauncey was horrified to detect—caught up between the claws of his right forefoot—a tuft or two of tortoiseshell fur, which, having composed himself by the fire, he promptly removed by licking.

Still pondering on these disquieting events, Miss Chauncey took her usual evening walk in the garden. Candytuft and virginia stock were seeding along the shell-lined path, and late roses were already beginning to blow on the high brick wall which shut off her narrow strip of land from the vast lap of the Moor. Having come to the end of the path, Miss Chauncey pushed on a little further than usual, to where the grasses grew more rampant, and where wild headlong weeds raised their heads beneath her few lichenous apple-trees. Still further down, for hers was a long, though narrow, garden—there grew straggling bushes of sloe and spiny whitethorn. These had blossomed indeed in the moor's bleak springs long before Post Houses had raised its chimney pots into the sky. Here, too, flourished a frowning drift of nettles—their sour odour haunting the air.

It was in this forlorn spot that—just like Robinson Crusoe, before her—Miss Chauncey was suddenly brought to a standstill by the appearance of what might be nothing other than a footprint in the mould. But not only this. A few inches away there showed what might be the mark of a walking-cane or even of something stouter and heavier—a crutch. Could she be deceived? The footprint, it was true, was of a peculiar kind. 'A queer shoe that!' thought Miss Chauncey. Could the resemblance be accidental? *Was* it a footprint?

Miss Chauncey glanced furtively across the bushes towards the house. It loomed gaunt and forbidding in the moorland dusk. And she fancied she could see, though the evening light might be deluding her, the cowering shape of Sam looking out at her from the kitchen window. To be watched! To be herself spied upon—and watched!

But then, of course, Sam was always watching her. What oddity was there in that? Where else would his sprats come from, his cream, his saucer of milk, his bowl of fresh well-water? Nevertheless, Miss Chauncey returned to her parlour gravely discomposed.

It was an uncommonly calm evening, and as she went from room to room locking the windows, she noticed there was already a moon in the sky. She eyed it with misgiving. And at last bedtime came; and when Sam, as usual, after a lick or two, had composed himself in his basket, Miss Chauncey, holding the key almost challengingly within view, deliberately locked her own bedroom door.

When she awoke next morning Sam was asleep in his basket as usual, and during the day-time he kept pretty closely to the house. So, too, on the Wednesday and the Thursday. It was not until the following Friday that having occasion to go into an upper bedroom that had no fireplace, and being followed as usual by Sam, Miss Chauncey detected the faint rank smell of soot in the room. No chimney, and a smell of soot! She turned rapidly on her companion: he had already left the room.

And when that afternoon she discovered a black sooty smear upon her own patchwork quilt, she realized not only that her suspicions had been justified, but that for the first time in his life Sam had deliberately laid himself down there in her absence. At this act of sheer defiance she was no longer so much hurt as exceedingly angry. There could be no doubt. Sam was now openly defying her. No two companions could share a house on such terms as these. He must be taught a lesson.

That evening, in full sight of the creature, having locked her bedroom door, she stuffed a large piece of mattress ticking into the mouth of her chimney and pulled down the register. Having watched these proceedings, Sam rose from his basket, and with an easy spring, leapt up on to the dressing-table. Beyond the window, the Moor lay almost as bright as day. Ignoring Miss Chauncey, the creature crouched there, steadily and sullenly staring into the empty skies, for a vast gulf of them was visible from where he sat.

Miss Chauncey proceeded to make her toilet for the night, trying in vain to pretend that she was entirely uninterested in what the animal was at. A faint sound—not exactly mewings or growlings—but a kind of low inward caterwauling, hardly audible, was proceeding from his throat. But whatever these sounds might imply, Sam himself can have been the only listener. There was not a sign of movement at the window or in the world without. And then Miss Chauncey promptly drew down the blind. At this Sam at once raised his paw for all the world as if he were about to protest, and then, apparently thinking better of it, he pretended instead that the action had been only for the purpose of beginning his nightly wash.

Long after her candle had been extinguished, Miss Chauncey lay listening. Every stir and movement in the quiet darkness could be easily understood. First there came a furtive footing and tapping at the register of the fireplace, so clearly showing what was happening that Miss Chauncey could positively see in her imagination Sam on the hearthstone, erecting himself there upon his hind legs, vainly attempting to push the obstacle back.

This being in vain, he appeared to have dropped back on to his fours. There came a pause. Had he given up his intention? No: now he was at the door, pawing, gently scratching. Then a leap, even, towards the latch: but only one—the door was locked. Retiring from the door, he now sprang lightly again on to the dressing-table. What now was he at? By covertly raising her head a little from her pillow, Miss Chauncey could see him with paw thrust out, gently drawing back the blind from the moon-flooded window-pane. And even while she listened and watched, she heard yet again—and yet again—the faint *whssh* as of a wild swan cleaving the air; and then what might have been the night-cry of a bird, but which to Miss Chauncey's ears resembled a thin shrill pealing cackle of laughter. At this Sam hastily turned from the window, and without the least attempt at concealment pounced clean from the dressing-table on to the lower rail of her bed.

This unmannerly conduct could be ignored no longer. Poor Miss Chauncey raised herself in her sheets, pulled her nightcap a little closer down over her ears, and thrusting out her hand towards the chair beside the bed, struck a match and relit her candle. It was with a real effort that she then slowly turned her head and faced her night-companion. His

hair was bristling about his body as if he had had an electric shock. His whiskers stood out at stiff angles with his jaws. He looked at least twice his usual size, and his eyes blazed in his head, as averting his face from her regard he gave vent to a low sustained *Miariou-rou-rou-rou!*

'I say you shall *not*,' cried Miss Chauncey at the creature. At the sound of her words, he turned slowly and confronted her. And it seemed that until that moment Miss Chauncey had never actually seen Sam's countenance as in actual fact it really was. It was not so much the grinning tigerish look it wore, but the morose assurance in it not only of what he wanted but that he meant to get it.

All thought of sleep was now out of the question. Miss Chauncey could be obstinate too. The creature seemed to shed an influence on the very air which she could hardly resist. She rose from her bed and thrusting on her slippers made her way to the window. Once more a peculiar inward cry broke out from the bedrail. She raised the blind and the light of the moon from over the moor swept in upon her little apartment. And when she turned to remonstrate with her pet at his ingratitude, and at all this unseemliness and the deceit of his ways, there was something so menacing and stubborn and ferocious in his aspect that Miss Chauncey hesitated no more.

'Well, mark me!' she cried in a trembling voice, 'go out of the *door* you shan't. But if you enjoy soot, soot it shall be.'

With that she thrust back the register with the poker and drew down the bundle of ticking with the tongs. Before the fit of coughing caused by the smotheration that followed had ceased, the lithe black shape had sprung from the bedrail, and with a scramble was into the hearth, over the firebars, up the chimney, and away.

Trembling from head to foot, Miss Chauncey sat down on a cane rocking-chair that stood handy to reflect what next she must be doing. *Wh-ssh! Wh-ssh!* Again at the window came that mysterious rushing sound; but now, the flurrying murmur as of a rocket shooting up with its fiery train of sparks thinning into space, rather than the sound of its descending stick. And then in the hush that followed, there sounded yet again like a yell of triumph from the foot of the garden, a caterwauling piercing and sonorous enough to arouse every sleeping cock in the Haggurdsdon hen-roosts, and for miles around. Out of the distance their chanticleering broke shrill on the night air; to be followed a moment afterwards by the tardy clang of midnight from the church steeple. Then once more, silence; utter quiet. Miss Chauncey returned to her bed, but that night slept no more.

Her mind overflowed with unhappy thoughts. Her faith in Sam was gone. Far worse, she had lost faith even in her affection for him. To have wasted that! All the sprats, all the whitebait in the wide, wide seas were as nothing by comparison. That Sam had wearied of her company was at last beyond question. It shamed her to think how much this meant to her—a mere animal! But she knew what was gone; knew how dull and spiritless the day's round would seem—the rising, the housework, the meals, her toilet in the afternoon, her evening slippers, book or knitting, a dish of tea, her candle, prayers, bed. On and on. In what wild company was her cat, Sam, now? At her own refusal to answer this horrid question, it was as if she had heard the hollow clanging slam of an immense iron door.

Next morning—still ruminating on these strange events, grieved to the heart at this dreadful rift between herself and one who had been her trusted companion for so many years; ashamed too that Sam should have had his way with her when she had determined not to allow him to go out during the night—next morning Miss Chauncey, as if merely to take a little exercise, once again ventured down to the foot of her garden. A faint, blurred mark (such as she had seen on the previous evening) in the black mould of what *might* be a footprint is nothing very much. But now—in the neglected patch beyond the bushes of whitethorn and bramble—there could be no doubt in the world—appeared many strange marks. And surely no cats' paw-prints these! Of what use, indeed, to a cat could a crutch or a staff be? A staff or a crutch which—to judge from the impression it had left in the mould—must have been at least as thick as a broomstick.

More disquieted and alarmed than ever over this fresh mystery, Miss Chauncey glanced up and back towards the chimneypots of the house clearly and sharply fretted against the morning light of the eastern skies. And she realized what perils even so sure-footed a creature as Sam had faced when he skirred up out of the chimney in his wild effort to emerge into the night. Having thus astonishingly reached the rim of the chimney—the wild burning stars above and the wilderness of the moor spread out far beneath and around him—he must have leaped from the top of the low pot to a

narrow brick ledge not three inches wide. Thence on to the peak of the roof and thence down a steep, slippery slope of slates to a leaden gutter.

And how then? The thick tod of ivy, matting the walls of the house, reached hardly more than half-way up. Could Sam actually have plunged from gutter to tod? The very thought of such a peril drew Miss Chauncey's steps towards the house again, in the sharpest anxiety to assure herself that he was still in the land of the living.

And lo and behold, when she was but half-way on her journey, she heard a succession of frenzied yelps and catcalls in the air from over the Moor. Hastily placing a flower-pot by the wall, she stood on tiptoe and peered over. And even now, at this very moment, in full flight across the nearer slope of the Moor, she descried her Sam, not now in chase of a foolishly trustful visitor, but hotly pursued by what appeared to be the complete rabblement of Haggurdsdon's cats. Sore spent though he showed himself to be, Sam was keeping his distance. Only a few lank tabby cats, and what appeared to be a grey-ginger Manx (unless he was an ordinary cat with his tail chopped off) were close behind.

'Sam! Sam!' Miss Chauncey cried, and yet again, 'Sam!' but in her excitement and anxiety her foot slipped on the flower-pot and in an instant the feline chase had fallen out of sight. Gathering herself together again, she clutched a long besom or garden broom that was leaning against the wall, and rushed down to the point at which she judged Sam would make his entrance into the garden. She was not mistaken, nor an instant too soon. With a bound he was up and over, and in three seconds the rabble had followed, in vehement pursuit.

What came after Miss Chauncey could never very clearly recall. She could but remember plying her besom with might and main amid this rabble and mellay of animals, while Sam, no longer a fugitive, turned on his enemies and fought them man to man. None the less, it was by no means an easy victory. And had not the over-fatted cur from the butcher's in Haggurdsdon—which had long since started in pursuit of this congregation of his enemies—had he not at last managed to overtake them, the contest might very well have had a tragic ending. But at sound of his baying, and at sight of teeth fiercely snapping at them as he vainly attempted to surmount the wall, Sam's enemies turned and fled in all directions. And faint and panting, Miss Chauncey was able to fling down her besom and to lean for a brief respite against the trunk of a tree.

At last she opened her eyes again. 'Well, Sam,' she managed to mutter at last, 'we got the best of them, then?'

But to her amazement she found herself uttering these friendly words into a complete vacancy. The creature was nowhere to be seen. His cream disappeared during the day, however, and by an occasional rasping sound Miss Chauncey knew that he once more lay hidden in his dingy resort behind the kindling-wood box. There she did not disturb him.

Not until tea-time of the following day did Sam reappear. And then—after attending to his hurts—it was merely to sit with face towards the fire, sluggish and sullen and dumb as a dog. It was not Miss Chauncey's 'place' to make advances, she thought. She took no notice of the beast except to rub in a little hog's-fat on the raw places of his wounds. She was rejoiced to find, however, that he kept steadily to Post Houses for the next few days, though her dismay was reawakened at hearing on the third night a more dismal wailing and wauling than ever from the sloe-bushes, even though Sam himself sat motionless beside the fire. His ears twitched; his fur bristled; he sneezed or spat but otherwise remained motionless.

When Mr. Cullings called again, Sam at once hid himself in the coal cellar, but gradually his manners towards Miss Chauncey began to recover their usual suavity. And within a fortnight after the full moon, the two of them had almost returned to their old friendly companionship. He was healed, sleek, confident and punctual. No intruder of his species had appeared from Haggurdsdon. The night noises had ceased. Post Houses to all appearance—apart from its strange ugliness—was as peaceful and calm as any other solitary domicile in the United Kingdom.

But alas and alas. With the very first peeping of the crescent moon, Sam's mood and habits began to change again. He mouched about with a sly and furtive eye. And when he fawned on his mistress, purring and clawing, the whole look of him was a picture of deceit. If Miss Chauncey chanced to enter the room wherein he sat, he would at once leap down from the window at which he had been perched as if in the attempt to prove that he had *not* been looking out of it. And once, towards evening, though she was no spy, she could not but pause at the parlour door. She had peeped through its

crack as it stood ajar. And there on the hard sharp back of an old prie-Dieu chair that had belonged to her pious great-aunt Miranda, sat Sam on his hind quarters. And without the least doubt in the world he was vigorously signalling to some observer outside with his forepaws. Miss Chauncey turned away sick at heart.

From that hour on Sam more and more steadily ignored and flouted his mistress, was openly insolent, shockingly audacious. Mr. Cullings gave her small help indeed. 'If I had a cat, m'm, what had manners like that, after all your kindness, fresh fish and all every week, and cream, as I understand, not skim, I'd—I'd *give* him away.'

'To whom?' said poor Miss Chauncey.

'Well,' said the carrier, 'I don't know as how I'd much mind to who. Beggars can't be choosers, m'm.'

'He seems to have no friends in the village,' said Miss Chauncey, in as light a tone as she could manage.

'When they're as black as that, with them saucer eyes, you can never tell,' said Mr. Cullings. 'There's that old trollimog what lives in Hogges Bottom. She've got a cat that might be your Sam's twin.'

'Indeed no, he has the mange,' said Miss Chauncey, loyal to the end. The carrier shrugged his shoulders, climbed into his cart, and bowled away off over the Moor. And Miss Chauncey, returning to the house, laid the platter of silvery sprats on the table, sat down, and burst into tears.

It was, then, in most ways a fortunate thing that the very next morning—five complete days, that is, before the next full-moon-tide—she received a letter from her sister-in-law in Shanklin, in the Isle of Wight, entreating her to pay them a long visit.

'My dear Emma. You must sometimes be feeling very lonely [it ran] shut up in that grate house so far from any neighbours. We often think of you, and particularly these last few days. It's very nice to have that Sam of yours for company, but after all, as George says, a pet's only a pet. And we do all think it's high time you took a little holiday with us. I am looking out of my window at this very moment. The sea is as calm as a mill-pond, a sollem beautiful blue. The fishing boats are coming in with their brown sails. This is the best time of the year with us, because the *tripper* season is drawing to a close and there are fewer of those horrid visitors to be seen, and no crowds. George says you *must* come. He joins with me in his love as would Maria if she weren't out shopping, and will meet you at the station in the trap. And we shall all be looking forward to seeing you in a few days. Emmie is now free of her cough—only hooping when the memory takes her, and never sick. Yours affec., (Mrs.) Gertrude Chauncey.'

At this kindness, and with all her anxieties, Miss Chauncey all but broke down. When the butcher drove up in his cart an hour or two afterwards, he took a telegram for her back to the village, and on the Monday her box was packed, and all that remained was to put Sam in his basket in preparation for the journey. But I am bound to say it took more than the persuasions of his old protectress to accomplish this. Indeed Mr. Cullings had actually to hold the creature down with gloved hands and none too gently, while Miss Chauncey pressed down the lid and pushed the skewer in to hold it close. 'What's done's durned done,' said the carrier, as he rubbed a pinch of earth into his scratches. 'And what *I* says is, better done for ever. Mark my words, m'm!'

Miss Chauncey took a shilling out of her large leather purse; but made no reply.

Indeed, all this trouble proved at last in vain. Thirty miles distant from Haggurdsdon, at Blackmoor Junction, Miss Chauncey had to change trains. Her box and Sam's basket were placed together on the station platform beside half a dozen empty milk-cans and some fowls in a crate, and Miss Chauncey went to make inquiries of the station-master in order to make sure of her platform.

It was the furious panic-stricken cackling of these fowls that brought her hastily back to her belongings, only to find that by hook or by crook Sam had managed to push the skewer of the basket out of its cane loops. The wicker lid gaped open

—the basket was empty. Indeed one poor gasping hen, its life fluttering away from its helpless body, was proof enough not only of Sam's prowess but of his pitiless ferocity.

A few days afterwards, as Miss Chauncey sat in the very room to which her sister-in-law had referred in her invitation, looking over the placid surface of the English Channel, the sun gently shining in the sky, there came a letter from Mr. Cullings. It was in pencil and written upon the back of a baker's bag.

'Dear madam i take the libberty of riteing you in reference to the Animall as how i helped put in is bawskit which has cum back returned empty agenn by rail me having okashun to cart sum hop powles from Haggurdsden late at nite ov Sunday. I seez him squattin at the parlour windy grimasin out at me fit to curdle your blood in your vanes and lights at the upper windies and a yowling and screeching as i never hopes to hear agen in a Christian lokalety. And that ole wumman from Hogges Botom sitting in the porch mi own vew being that there is no good in the place and the Animall be bewhitched. Mister flint the boutcher agrees with me as how now only last mesures is of any use and as i have said afore i am willing to take over the house the rent if so be being low and moddrit considering of the bad name it as in these parts around haggurdsden. I remain dear madam waitin your orders and oblige yours truely William Cullings.'

To look at Miss Chauncey you might have supposed she was a strong-minded woman. You might have supposed that this uncivil reference to the bad name her family house had won for itself would have mortified her beyond words. Whether or not, she neither showed this letter to her sister-in-law nor for many days together did she attempt to answer it. Sitting on the esplanade, and looking out to sea, she brooded on and on in the warm, salt, yet balmy air. It was a distressing problem. But 'No, he must go his own way,' she sighed to herself at last; 'I have done my best for him.'

What is more, Miss Chauncey never returned to Post Houses. She sold it at last, house and garden, and for a pitiful sum, to the carrier, Mr. Cullings. By that time Sam had vanished, had never been seen again. He had gone his way.

Not that Miss Chauncey was faithless to his memory. Whenever the faint swish of a seagull's wing whispered through the air above her head; or the crackling of an ascending rocket for the amusement of visitors broke the silence of the nearer heavens over the sea; whenever even she became conscious of the rustling frou-frou of her Sunday watered-silk gown as she sallied out to church from the neat little villa she now rented on the Shanklin Esplanade—she never noticed such things without being instantly transported in imagination to her old bedroom at Post Houses, and seeing again that strange deluded animal, once her Sam, squatting there on her bed, and as it were knitting with his fore-paws the while he stood erect upon his hind.

[End of *Broomsticks* by Walter de la Mare]