

# The Cat

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Most people think that the cat is an unintelligent animal, fond of ease, and caring little for anything but mice and milk. But a cat has really more character than most human beings, and gets a great deal more satisfaction out of life. Of all the animal kingdom, the cat has the most many-sided character.

He—or she—is an athlete, a musician, an acrobat, a Lothario, a grim fighter, a sport of the first water. All day long the cat loafes about the house, takes things easy, sleeps by the fire, and allows himself to be pestered by the attentions of our womenfolk and annoyed by our children. To pass the time away he sometimes watches a mouse-hole for an hour or two—just to keep himself from dying of ennui; and people get the idea that this sort of thing is all that life holds for the cat. But watch him as the shades of evening fall, and you see the cat as he really is.

When the family sits down to tea, the cat usually puts in an appearance to get his share, and purrs noisily, and rubs himself against the legs of the family; and all the time he is thinking of a fight or a love-affair that is coming off that evening. If there is a guest at table the cat is particularly civil to him, because the guest is likely to have the best of what is going. Sometimes, instead of recognizing this civility with something to eat, the guest stoops down and strokes the cat, and says, “Poor pussy! poor pussy!”

The cat soon tires of that; he puts up his claw and quietly but firmly rakes the guest in the leg.

“Ow!” says the guest, “the cat stuck his claws into me!” The delighted family remarks, “Isn’t it sweet of him? Isn’t he intelligent? HE WANTS YOU TO GIVE HIM SOMETHING TO EAT.”

The guest dares not do what he would like to do—kick the cat through the window—so, with tears of rage and pain in his eyes, he affects to be very much amused, and sorts out a bit of fish from his plate and hands it down. The cat gingerly receives it, with a look in his eyes that says: “Another time, my friend, you won’t be so dull of comprehension,” and purrs maliciously as he retires to a safe distance from the guest’s boot before eating it. A cat isn’t a fool—not by a long way.

When the family has finished tea, and gathers round the fire to enjoy the hours of indigestion, the cat slouches casually out of the room and disappears. Life, true life, now begins for him.

He saunters down his own backyard, springs to the top of the fence with one easy bound, drops lightly down on the other side, trots across the right-of-way to a vacant allotment, and skips to the roof of an empty shed. As he goes, he throws off the effeminacy of civilisation; his gait

becomes lithe and pantherlike; he looks quickly and keenly from side to side, and moves noiselessly, for he has so many enemies—dogs, cabmen with whips, and small boys with stones.

Arrived on the top of the shed, the cat arches his back, rakes his claws once or twice through the soft bark of the old roof, wheels round and stretches himself a few times; just to see that every muscle is in full working order; then, dropping his head nearly to his paws, he sends across a league of backyards his call to his kindred—a call to love, or war, or sport.

Before long they come, gliding, graceful shadows, approaching circuitously, and halting occasionally to reconnoitre—tortoiseshell, tabby, and black, all domestic cats, but all transformed for the nonce into their natural state. No longer are they the hypocritical, meek creatures who an hour ago were cadging for fish and milk. They are now ruffling, swaggering blades with a Gascon sense of dignity. Their fights are grim and determined, and a cat will be clawed to ribbons before he will yield.

Even young lady cats have this inestimable superiority over human beings, that they can work off jealousy, hatred, and malice in a sprawling, yelling combat on a flat roof. All cats fight, and all keep themselves more or less in training while they are young. Your cat may be the acknowledged lightweight champion of his district—a Griffon of the feline ring!

Just think how much more he gets out of his life than you do out of yours—what a hurricane of fighting and lovemaking his life is—and blush for yourself. You have had one little love-affair, and never had a good, all-out fight in your life!

And the sport they have, too! As they get older and retire from the ring they go in for sport more systematically; the suburban backyards, that are to us but dullness indescribable, are to them hunting-grounds and trysting-places where they may have more gallant adventure than ever had King Arthur's knights or Robin Hood's merry men.

Grimalkin decides to kill a canary in a neighbouring verandah. Consider the fascination of it—the stealthy reconnaissance from the top of the fence; the care to avoid waking the house-dog, the noiseless approach and the hurried dash, and the fierce clawing at the fluttering bird till its mangled body is dragged through the bars of the cage; the exultant retreat with the spoil; the growling over the feast that follows. Not the least entertaining part of it is the demure satisfaction of arriving home in time for breakfast and hearing the house-mistress say: "Tom must be sick; he seems to have no appetite."

It is always levelled as a reproach against cats that they are more fond of their home than of the people in it. Naturally, the cat doesn't like to leave his country, the land where all his friends are, and where he knows every landmark. Exiled in a strange land, he would have to learn a new geography, to exploit another tribe of dogs, to fight and make love to an entirely

new nation of cats. Life isn't long enough for that sort of thing. So, when the family moves, the cat, if allowed, will stay at the old house and attach himself to the new tenants. He will give them the privilege of boarding him while he enjoys life in his own way. He is not going to sacrifice his whole career for the doubtful reward which fidelity to his old master or mistress might bring.

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