

PAW TRACKS  
AT  
OWL COTTAGE



Denis O'Connor

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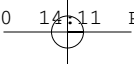
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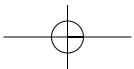
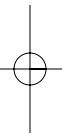
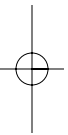
I wish to dedicate this book to the memory of my uncle, Captain John Watson of the Church Army, whose library of the classics was a reader's treasure chest for me.

This book is also for Catherine, my wife, without whose loving support it would not have been written.



The heart has its reasons which reason does  
not know.

Blaise Pascal, 1688



# CONTENTS

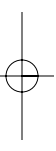
Beginnings	1
Pablo	5
Carlos	57
Luis	159
Max	189
Endings	225





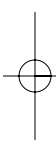


## BEGINNINGS



My extraordinary life with Toby Jug, the hybrid Maine Coon cat whose companionship and love gave me such happiness during my twenties and thirties, sadly came to an end in 1978 when he tragically died. We had enjoyed life together since I had rescued him as a tiny, sick kitten lying alongside his dying mother and brother. Owl Cottage, with its beautiful garden and rural setting, became our refuge and sanctuary over the eventful years we shared together. After his death the poignant memories of him were too sorrowful for me to carry on living there.

In 1980 I moved to Newcastle where I already had been appointed to a lectureship at the University of Newcastle upon Tyne. Later I worked at Durham University tutoring students in Educational Studies until I retired in 2000. In 1998 Catherine and I were married and since we were both contemplating early retirement we began to look for properties in rural areas because of our attachment to North Northumberland. Fate took us in hand and I was able once more, with Catherine at my side, to return to Owl Cottage and revisit the home where in my younger life I had spent such happy and memorable years with the cat called Toby Jug, whose adventures inspired *Paw Tracks in the Moonlight*.



*Paw Tracks at Owl Cottage*

Returning to live in Owl Cottage at West Thirston was for me the consummation of many years of longing to escape the city for life once more in the countryside. West Thirston is one of a group of hamlets, extending eastwards to the town of Amble and the North Sea, which lie astride a rocky ridge above the River Coquet. Owl Cottage is built on a site adjoining a minor road which leads westwards to Linden Hall, Rothbury and beyond. No doubt the area occupied by the cottage has witnessed many habitations throughout the ages but the present structure is built almost entirely of stone and dates from around the middle of the nineteenth century. The front of the cottage runs parallel to the road, leaving the back, which faces south, secluded and private.

The garden is extensive and comprises over fifty trees of various kinds including oak, beech, whitebeam and birch. There is also a small orchard of apple, pear, plum and nut trees, and a meandering swathe of grass bordered by flowering shrubs and flower beds, giving an overall effect of a woodland glade. Wildlife is welcome here and thrives in the pesticide-free environment. My wife Catherine and I refer to the garden as our 'Shangri-La' because of its beautiful tranquillity and natural appeal. There are stories from local folk who say that it is enchanted and inhabited by fairies, although we cannot confirm this from our own experience. Yet on summer nights, whilst songbirds are singing their songs and slanting sunbeams create green-grassed areas of golden meadow, there is an enraptured feeling about the garden at Owl Cottage.



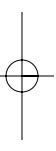
### *Beginnings*

It is certainly a wonderful place for cats and has been much loved by them, not least by our four Maine Coon cats respectively named, according to age, Pablo, Carlos, Luis and Max. These special and affectionate cats comprise our family and their unique and fascinating personalities and activities form the basis of this true to life account of our lives together with them at Owl Cottage. In many respects this book is the continuation of the story that began in *Paw Tracks in the Moonlight* because returning to the cottage and describing the adventures of our present cat family have revived the memory of some additional tales of the legendary hero of Owl Cottage. After all, Toby Jug's spirit endures in every tree and stone there.





## PABLO



Pablo was the first kitten to live in Owl Cottage since the death of Toby Jug and we welcomed him, quite literally, with open arms. He was a pedigree Maine Coon. In appearance he was surprisingly large for such a young kitten, with a pointed face and extra large ears. His front paws were enormous and he had a long fluffy tail. His eyes were golden brown and his coat a cinnamon colour like oak leaves in autumn, with some darker markings which would become more distinctive and elaborate as he matured. Pablo had the build and markings of his ancestor, the Norwegian Forest cat.

On his birth cum pedigree certificate he was formally named Pablo Picatso, son of Billyboyblue and Huffenpuff, and was officially designated a brown tabby. He was born in October 1999 and given to me as a present by Catherine, my wife, who had lived at Owl Cottage with me since we had bought it in 1998. Pablo proved to be a wonderful cat, affectionate and lovable, and he provided us with many fascinating insights into cat behaviour. But perhaps first I should relate how it happened that we acquired Pablo in the first place and how I and Catherine came to be living once more at Owl Cottage. Despite my earlier protestations – at the time deeply felt and firmly held

*Paw Tracks at Owl Cottage*

– at long last I had returned to the home where Toby Jug and I had been so happy in the past.

It all began in the spring of 1997 when Catherine and I decided to take a holiday in the north of Crete. One beautiful sun-filled morning, as we sat on the veranda of our apartment looking out over the azure blue Mediterranean, we heard a cat calling. It was not a distress call, just the kind of cat-talk that some felines make when they see something interesting or wish to express their feelings. I looked over the grey rocks and scrub that extended away from the holiday chalets. In the distance was the mountain known locally as Zorba's Rock, which reputedly was the location for the famous Greek dance sequence performed by Anthony Quinn in *Zorba the Greek*.

Suddenly, I spotted a small figure scurrying straight towards us. In a moment a neat and very petite charcoal-grey, short-haired she-cat introduced herself to us. She was obviously accustomed to people, since she immediately commenced purring and brushed herself against us in the most affectionate manner. I realized at once that she was focused on an agenda which was meant to manipulate us. No doubt she was in the habit of exploiting the charity of kind-hearted holiday-makers. This greeting display by the cat undoubtedly served her purpose which was to remind us of our obligations as hosts. And so it was that a late breakfast of corned beef and boiled ham was served up to her and very well received. I admired her social skills and wondered just how many other tourists had fallen under her spell and been cajoled into offering handouts.

*Pablo*

My assumptions about her motives were soon confirmed because she came to visit us every day for the rest of our stay and we became quite fond of this dainty little beach cat. Each time we fed her we were, of course, rewarding her friendly behaviour and so, in terms of psychological theory, reinforcing her activities. Likewise she, this clever little cat, was reinforcing my act of feeding her by jumping on my knee and purring her thanks as a reward for me. Cats are great manipulators of humans and our guest cat proved no exception to this rule. She would arrive either mid-morning or teatime and, having been fed, she would linger next to us, sometimes gracing one of our laps as we relaxed and watched the sun go down. For the moment she had adopted us.

I really liked her, but then I always find it hard to resist a friendly cat. Catherine was not so sure. She is concerned about stray cats when we are abroad in case they carry disease. I tend to fuss the cats I meet on our travels and usually they respond well to me, and so I attributed nothing out of the ordinary to our visiting cat and simply enjoyed the contact for what it was worth until something extraordinary happened on the last day of our stay which gave me pause for thought.

Since our flight departure time was at some unearthly hour during the night we spent the early morning packing and then went for one last trip around the north of Crete in our hire car. We drove first to Maleme and the site of the German War Cemetery. We found it to be a peaceful and poignant place covered in an abundance of deep-red wild flowers which

*Paw Tracks at Owl Cottage*

outlined the precisely placed granite-grey headstones stretching out of sight in regimented rows. All was kept in perfect order and obviously tended with great care and reverence for those who had given their lives in the Second World War. We then decided we would just about have time to go on to Agios Stefanos for a brief visit before returning to the apartment. We drove south through the countryside to this tiny tenth-century church which is reached by following a narrow track shaded by oak trees. En route Catherine, to her great pleasure, discovered on the bankside a rare white cyclamen for which this place is famous. *Cyclamen creticum* is found nowhere else in the world. The delicate white flower quivered slightly in the gentle breeze from the sea as we walked by. We were even more pleased we had made the decision to visit the church when we saw its thirteenth-century frescos of the Nativity and Pentecost which were still showing clearly after all this time.

Too soon we had to leave for Chania and make our final preparations for home. This last trip, however, had filled us with special memories of Crete to carry home with us and dwell on at our leisure. We were not back in our apartment until late afternoon and therefore I did not expect to see our feline friend again. But, just as evening was settling in, a frantic scratching at the balcony door roused me from a restful doze. I slid back the door and there she was, anxiously greeting me, tail up and mewing her request for a late supper. After feeding her I sat out on the balcony to keep her company. Together we watched the remains of the day, the last of the deep red sunset over the sea.

*Pablo*

Soon she showed her gratitude by slipping on to my knee from where she treated me to a resonant purring session. I was at pains to explain to her that I was leaving and would not see her ever again but I would always think of her as a friend. Since I was talking to her in English and the language of her country was Greek I couldn't be sure if she understood me at all, but then I have heard tales of cats having the ability to read minds and I suspect it might be true. As the last glow of the setting sun changed to a darkening pink, she rose and, without a backward glance, disappeared amongst the rocks. I retired inside the apartment to snatch a couple of hours of sleep.

Some few hours later as we prepared to leave I realized that I had left my sunglasses on the balcony. As I opened the glass door and walked on to the balcony I almost trod on something. In the darkness I couldn't at first see what it was. Stooping to retrieve it I was amazed to find myself holding a short length of vine on the end of which was a single, ripe, red tomato. My wife's urgent call for me to hurry up or we'd miss our flight startled me out of a whole range of emotions that suddenly surged through my mind. Covertly I placed the find inside my jacket pocket. Thinking about the incident during our flight home I felt confused and uncertain. What was this about and why had it happened?

On our local walks I had spotted miniature tomato plants in cultivation on the outside walls of some of the houses in the surrounding residential area, but there were none near our holiday apartment. Part of me felt that I had been given a coded

*Paw Tracks at Owl Cottage*

message. Had the cat put the tomato there as a goodbye gift? Why a tomato? In the subdued lighting of the aircraft, whilst most of the passengers, including my wife, were sleeping, I carefully retrieved the fruit from my pocket. The little glistening object lay in the palm of my hand, undamaged in any way. It reminded me so much of a tiny red ball. A cat I had known a long time ago had loved to play with red balls and had stolen some tomatoes from a neighbour's greenhouse to supplement his supply. His name, of course, was Toby Jug. I began to conjure up a scenario that this was a message of some kind, the significance of which was about to unfold. Weary with thinking about it I fell asleep with the thought that only time would tell.

One of the most irritating things about returning from holiday is to find the space behind the front door jammed with a bulk of mail, most of it of the junk variety. Searching through the accumulation, a postcard caught my attention. It was from Carol, one of our friends, and it simply said, 'Have you seen that Owl Cottage is up for sale?'

The feeling that raced through me at that moment was electric. Was this a coincidence? Or did it herald tidings of a change in the air? Was this related to the present of a tomato from a cat in Crete? I began to feel that somehow, in a way unclear to me, destiny was nudging me towards a reunion with the past. Such a return was not now out of the question since both Catherine and I were contemplating a move away from Newcastle upon Tyne. With this move in mind, since we both loved the countryside, we had been looking at properties for



*Pablo*

sale in Northumberland but had not searched the locality where I had previously lived. We discussed the news about my old cottage at length and then decided, on impulse, at least to have a look at the place and agreed to view Owl Cottage as soon as it could be arranged.

Then something else occurred which resonated with everything that was currently happening. One night I dreamed that I was living back at Owl Cottage as it had once been. Everything was extremely vivid and real. I was taking a walk along a path between the River Coquet and a line of oak trees where Toby Jug and I often went during a summer evening. Suddenly, he was there before me looking resplendent and radiant with glossy black-and-white fur and sparkling green eyes. 'There you are!' I exclaimed, almost as if our meeting had been arranged and I was expecting him. He ran to me and greeted me in his familiar fulsome manner by leaping on to my shoulder and rubbing his face and whiskers against my cheeks. After a short while he jumped down and ran a few yards ahead, turned and stopped to face me. Then a voice spoke clearly in my head: 'When can we be together again?' Startled, I realized the question was somehow coming from Toby Jug. Taken aback with surprise I stuttered helplessly to find an answer. 'I don't know.'

Then came the next question: 'Will it be soon?' Feeling the shock of disbelief at what was happening I groped again in my mind for an answer as best I could. 'I don't know when, Toby Jug, but whenever it is it will fill me with joy to be with you again.'

*Paw Tracks at Owl Cottage*

Finally, the voice said, 'I'll be there waiting for you.' And with a flick of his bushy tail he disappeared. I looked around searchingly but he was nowhere to be seen.

When I awoke the dream was fresh in my mind as if it had really happened. The memory of it was so surreal it bothered me all day. I couldn't dismiss the thought that perhaps the dream was somehow related to some of the other things which had recently happened, stirring up reminders of the past. A further consideration was that the dream happened to coincide with the initial launch of my book, *Paw Tracks in the Moonlight*, and overwhelming feelings of nostalgia at considering a return to Owl Cottage.

The estate agent made an appointment for us to view the cottage. As we drove back to the place that was filled with so many memories for me I could not stop wondering how the cottage had fared without me and Toby Jug. When we arrived and I gazed once more at Owl Cottage my heart missed a beat and floods of emotion and an overwhelming feeling of yearning for what had been swept through my mind.

As soon as Catherine and I stepped into the hallway I was saddened to see how neglected the place had become. Everything was in a pitiful state inside and also outside in the garden. But as we looked around my distress was suddenly lifted by a wave of good vibrations which, as we both recollected later, we felt at about the same time. Intuitively, I could feel the cottage crying out for us to take care of it and make it whole again. It was a cry from an old friend and it touched my heart.

*Pablo*

That night in a pub in Newcastle upon Tyne we talked it over and I discovered that Catherine felt as I did and we decided to sleep on it before coming to a decision. The next morning after breakfast we were still both of the same mind and determined to go ahead and make an offer which hopefully would secure Owl Cottage for us.

When at last the sale was completed and I had the keys in my hand it was October and the countryside was bathed in vivid autumnal colours. As I turned the corner into the quiet village lane I stopped the car by the thick wooded copse on the side of the road. Ahead lay Owl Cottage, bathed in bright sunlight. My eyes were drawn to the gate pillar at the entrance to the driveway where a pink floribunda rose I had planted in the 1960s still bloomed robustly. Something had brought me back here – call it nostalgia or just a longing to recapture the sentiments of happy times past. I felt my mind whirling with a multitude of images. For a moment I was overcome with blissful remembrances: I was home again at last.

One of my first duties would be to pay homage to the old apple tree where Toby Jug had been buried. I stood near his grave for a long while to tune back into the ambience of the cottage garden and how everything used to be. When I previously lived at Owl Cottage I had often sensed good feelings in the surroundings, in the very walls as well as the garden. Possibly these were emotional resonances of the lives of people who had spent fulfilling times here in the past. Now I simply longed to renew my relationship with the cottage.

*Paw Tracks at Owl Cottage*

When we took possession it was like I had never been away and I rejoiced in my heart at the homecoming. Happily for both Catherine and for me the cottage seemed the right place for us to be, although there was much to do to make it comfortable. My thoughts turned to remembered times with Toby Jug. He was by now a distant memory yet his image was always with me, couched somewhere in the back of my mind. It was because Toby was so very dear to me that the shocking experience of his death led me to have to leave the cottage. At that time I felt that I could no longer bear to live there without him. He had been such an important part of my life. Although kind friends and neighbours had offered me kittens to replace Toby I could never bring myself to accept any of them. In the light of my feelings at that time it wouldn't have been fair to the kitten, however desirable, because I would have constantly compared him to Toby Jug who was, to my mind, irreplaceable.

By the time Catherine and I were more or less settled in, with all the essential repairs and improvements to Owl Cottage having been carried out and the interior painting and decorating finished as well, it was the beginning of July the following year.

Now July is the time when the Felton and Thirston Fair is held and I must confess that going to the fair to witness all that enthusiasm for the egg-and-spoon, three-legged and running-backwards races, amongst other events like crockery-breaking and chucking-the-welly, does nothing for me. I just want to slink away and hide. In this respect I am not at all the socially

*Pablo*

minded person that, by nature, my wife is. I therefore really did not want to attend the fair at all. Catherine had other ideas. She had entered one of the flower competitions in the spirit of joining in and also because that year she was particularly proud of her roses. She thought her Rosa Remember Me with its bronze, yellowish orange petals, stood a good chance of winning a prize. So despite my protestations I was prevailed upon to go and I am indebted to Catherine for evermore for dragging me there against my will.

As my wife was enjoying herself making the rounds of the local stall-holders, I managed to slip away to a remote corner of the field to examine a vintage bus. With its elongated bonnet and bulbous headlights perched on top of huge wide mudguards which protected the wheels, it was just the type of bus Catherine and I travelled to school in during the 1940s and early 1950s. Fully occupied in having an in-depth discussion with the enthusiast who owned the bus, I failed to notice the figure of my wife tearing across the field towards me with a look of 'I told you so' on her face. She wasted no time in breathlessly telling me that there was an exhibition tent with a range of pedigree cats on show. Then she triumphantly told me that one of the booths was reserved for Maine Coon cats.

With my mind in a whirl of expectation I duly arrived at the tent. It almost defies description to give an account of the exhilaration I felt as I entered and gazed upon the most beautiful cats I had ever seen. In a corner was a bench on which lay a creamy white and red she-cat that looked to have been

*Paw Tracks at Owl Cottage*

fashioned by the Walt Disney Studios. She was the first pure-bred Maine Coon cat I had ever seen outside the pages of a book, apart from the severely injured mother cat I had rescued on the night that I found the half-dead kitten who survived to become Toby Jug. I was totally overwhelmed and entranced at the same time.

On meeting the breeders, a couple called Jane and Dave who subsequently became our friends, I immediately placed an order for a male kitten. We agreed that both Owl Cottage and ourselves had waited long enough without a cat with which to share our lives. Perhaps with a new cat in my life here at Owl Cottage I would be able to lay to rest the ghost of Toby Jug. Time has a way of healing sorrows and now I felt it was the right moment to allow another cat into my life. We decided to call our new kitten Pablo because, after an eventful short holiday in Madrid, we were imbued with an affection for things Spanish. I recall the first time we were invited to visit Jane's house and to choose a kitten from the litter of six.

Catherine was somewhat shocked as she preceded me along the hallway of Jane's house to be confronted by the largest domestic cat she had ever seen. His name was Hamish and he was the alpha male Maine Coon of the household. He was most definitely inspecting us in case we posed any threat. With his large head and intelligent eyes I thought he was marvellous. Catherine was rather more uncertain. When we knelt to peer into the cushion-lined box which housed the squirming kittens I could feel Hamish scrutinizing us and as I turned two fierce

*Pablo*

golden eyes met my gaze as if to warn us that that these kittens were under his protection. By now, much to my amusement, Hamish was circling the box housing the kittens and glaring at me for daring to handle one. 'It's alright, fellow,' I said to him affectionately. 'Your kitten will be safe and much loved by us.'

Over a cup of tea and a pleasant chat we discussed some details with Jane about caring for a pedigree Maine Coon cat. Then Catherine insisted that I do the choosing and so I hand-picked a burly kitten who appeared to be already asserting himself over the rest of the litter by standing in a biscuit tray and making unmistakable kitten growls to prevent the others from eating until he had his fill. I picked him up and had a good look at him. I was impressed by the firmness of his chunky little body. After paying a deposit to secure the sale we were told to expect him in the regulation three months' time. And that is how we chose Pablo and subsequently took him into our home and into our hearts.

Now that we had chosen a new kitten I felt that the yawning gap in my life, brought about by the demise of my exceptional Toby Jug, had been satisfactorily bridged at last. With it I felt a sense of relief, as if I was making a new start. Once again, whatever I was doing day-by-day would be enhanced by the company of a cat, just as it had been for the greater part of my life. Even as a baby I remember the silky and furry presence of a cat called Fluffy, a kitten given to my parents as a wedding present. The company of cats has always been a source of comfort to me and throughout my childhood they served as playmates and as

*Paw Tracks at Owl Cottage*

imaginary confidants who would listen to my problems and, by doing so, help me to sort out what I should do.

I have always talked to my cats and I always believed that they understood me. The Ancient Egyptians apparently ascribed divine powers to their cats in the conviction that they possessed supernatural powers and many people have noted their mysterious air of awareness of things that mere humans cannot perceive. A notable example of this was an article in the *New England Journal of Medicine* in 2005 which reported on a very special ability which a cat living in a care home for the elderly displayed. He could predict when an inmate was about to die and would visit that person and stay with them, presumably trying to comfort them, until they passed. How the cat named Oscar was able to identify in advance with remarkable accuracy the particular patient who was about to die mystified the medical and care staff at the unit.

The doctor in charge of the nursing home, David Dosa, who was not especially fond of cats, came to realize that Oscar, just an ordinary black-and-white tabby, had an almost psychic sensitivity to human beings. Dr Dosa wrote a book called *Making the Rounds with Oscar* about life at the nursing home and about how Oscar the cat helps staff and inmates there.

Most certainly, from my own experience, I have noted how sensitive my pet cats have been to my mood states, especially when I have been upset. On such occasions I have become aware that my cat has attempted to soothe and succour me by a friendly presence on my knee and the balm of a session of



*Pablo*

vibrant purring. I must admit, despite my lifelong exposure to cats, I remain at a loss to understand fully what a cat is all about.

A cat, Sigmund Freud might have said, is just a cat, but William Shakespeare might well have added: 'What a piece of work is a cat.' Coupling these two statements together highlights the ambiguities with which cats are perceived. To me, they are extra special animals, not least because, by tradition, they have the most prodigious capacity for survival against the odds. Hence the popular saying: 'Cats have nine lives.'

As the tales I tell in this book reveal, even if many cats look alike, they are not the same by any means. Just like people, each individual cat has a unique personality of its own. But this personality is only likely to reveal itself to humans where the relationship is a close one.

For instance, cats who spend most of the day resting and sleeping, and are put out at night, sometimes have only the most superficial contact with the people they live with. In this environment the cat's relationship with the people in the house might be very basic and consist merely of being fed, watered and given a place to sleep during the day. As a result the cats will tend not to show how interesting they can be because they need unconditional love and attention to bring that out. Put simply, it is necessary 'to make something of them' in the same way as one nurtures and encourages the development of a child. Given these conditions a whole new world of cat 'personality' is opened up as the cat feels secure enough to show its real self. The early days with our new Maine Coon cat reveal something of what I mean.

*Paw Tracks at Owl Cottage*

It was a bitterly cold day in March 2000 when the kitten called Pablo arrived at Owl Cottage. No kitten could have had better preparations for his coming than he did. There was a pedestal with a fur-lined tunnel, two platforms and several scratching posts. There was a large cushion-bed for him, a warm blanket, feeding and drinking bowls, and an elaborate enclosed litter box since we were advised not to let him roam freely until he had been neutered at the age of six months. We had been informed that there was a rule affecting pedigree cats involving the necessity for a special licence in order to breed from them.

When Pablo arrived at Owl Cottage we gently placed him on the top platform of the pedestal so that he could have a good look around and familiarize himself with his new home. He slowly looked about, stared hard at Catherine and then focused his huge amber eyes on me. And next, to my astonishment, he leapt up on to my left shoulder, the one always favoured by Toby Jug. I was naturally quite overwhelmed and somewhat nonplussed. I hoped that this would become a habit but regrettably it was not to be. That was the one and only time he jumped on my shoulder in all the nine years he was with us.

The rest of that first day was spent in lots of play activities of the getting-to-know-you kind. True to his cat nature, Pablo immediately set about establishing his own agenda irrespective of any arrangements that we made. This state of affairs became abundantly clear at bedtime. Our idea was that he should spend the night in the heated conservatory where he had a choice of sleeping areas and where his loo-box was conveniently situated.

*Pablo*

Since cats are nocturnal creatures by nature we drew back the conservatory blinds so that, if he so wished, he could observe any wildlife going about outside.

On that first night we put Plan A into action. We placed him on a cosy bed-cushion, gave him lots of strokes, left him biscuits and water, bade him a loving goodnight and closed the door. Hardly had we reached the upstairs landing leading to our bedroom than the whining, punctuated by howls, began. Obviously, Pablo had other ideas and was not prepared to fit in with ours. He was clearly indicating that he was not prepared to spend the night alone. Steadfastly, we decided it best to ignore these protestations as we did not wish to encourage our kitten to think that he was boss. However, as cat lovers the world over have come to realize, dogs may have masters but cats make servants of the humans with whom they live. So it was to be with Pablo. The uncertainty about the outcome was soon resolved totally in Pablo's favour.

After an agonizing twenty minutes spent trying to close our ears to the noise coming from the conservatory, we capitulated. When we opened the door we were heartily greeted by a diminutive figure who commenced a welcome dance around our legs and joyously followed us upstairs to confirm his right to sleep where he liked, which in this case was on our bed. After treading his 'I'm getting ready to snuggle down' war dance on our best duvet, he eventually lay above our heads against the headboard with his face resting on Catherine's pillow near, and sometimes on, her long hair. During the night when either of us

*Paw Tracks at Owl Cottage*

moved he began a loud husky purring sound which I referred to as the 'Donkey Serenade'.

We allowed him to sleep in our bedroom for a few weeks and then, as he grew accustomed to the house and became confident in our love, he decided that it would be more fun in the conservatory at bedtimes because he had posts to scratch and balls to chase, and sometimes there were exciting things to watch happening outside in the garden at night.

As he grew bigger and matured over the next few months we became aware of his complex and dynamic personality. Pablo's intelligence was remarkable and, short of speaking English, he had his own precise way of communicating with us through cat sounds and body language: he was, as many cat lovers will understand from their experiences, a 'Talking Cat'.

Sometimes when he was in full flow, conversing with us on some priority of his, jumping on our knees and rubbing his huge head against our legs and arms, we would wish he would shut up and give us a rest. But inevitably we would sooner or later realize what it was he wanted. Perhaps, as happened on several occasions, he had upset his water bowl and, fastidious cat as he was, wanted it put right. Or, as happened during his first encounter with springtime outside, there was a cock pheasant in HIS garden and it was bullying him. He wanted us to make it leave. In our life with Pablo we began to appreciate the wide range of sentient responses of which Maine Coon cats are capable, all of which reminded me constantly of how Toby Jug had been with me. Pablo loved our company but was suspicious

*Pablo*

and often alarmed by strangers. He would respond most enthusiastically to us whenever we focused special attention on him. At other times he liked to lie near us when we were talking together, as if listening to what was being said. I often had the impression that he was studying us as much as we were seeking to understand him. His manifest affection for us was unlimited and we grew to love him more and more as time went by.

There were many impressive characteristics about Pablo which emerged during those early days, often related directly to the special relationship developing between him and me. In late evening, after dinner and before I joined Catherine in the sitting room to read or watch television, I liked to sit alone in the conservatory with all the lights out and stretch my eyes to witness silently what was going on in the garden. I call this my private thinking time. It was winter when Pablo came to us but to my delight he made a habit of joining me, forsaking the warm fireside in the sitting room. He and I would sit together peering into the dark shadows cast by the bare branches of the mature garden trees, many of which I had planted all those years ago. Sometimes the darkness was so absolute that we spotted nothing, but if there was a moon, even if it was merely a sliver, parts of the world outside would open up to us. One night we watched a tawny owl hunting through the trees, a sight which filled me with excitement and sent Pablo into a frenzy, but then he could see in the dark much better than I could.

Since no pesticides or other poisons are used in our garden, it is a haven for wildlife and so Pablo and I shared the

*Paw Tracks at Owl Cottage*

enchantment of watching the nocturnal creatures which inhabit the nearby woods and gardens and which often chose to roam about near our trees and bushes to satisfy their needs and wants. Even better, when there is a full moon the garden assumes a fairytale silver mantle in which mysterious shapes move and are revealed as hedgehogs, rabbits and field mice going about their natural ways. They moved in a hushed, muffled manner, unaware of two rapt witnesses, a trembling young cat and a fascinated man, peering through the conservatory windows at the wildlife show outside. On some special nights our patient observation was rewarded and we were privileged to witness a variety of animals behaving naturally. Once we viewed a large mole emerging from the eruption of his tunnel exit to rummage in search of supper and to get some fresh air. One moonlit night in mid-March we saw a pair of hares boxing under the apple trees before racing off to continue their mating somewhere in the wide expanse of the farmer's fields beyond. Most wondrous of all, we once saw a huge white barn owl dismembering and eating what appeared to be a rabbit on the roof of our garage. Unfortunately, she quickly flew off as she caught a glimpse of Pablo's gyrations as he raced back and forwards on the window sill because the sight of such a large bird had sent him berserk.

Of course, on some nights we saw nothing because the sky clouded over or a neighbour's alert lights forced the creatures of the night to seek the shadows. Nevertheless, such times did not dissuade us from mounting a garden wildlife watch

*Pablo*

whenever the opportunity presented. Although I felt that it was I who was teaching my cat by sharing my interest in watching the nightlife in our garden, I eventually came to appreciate that cats come already programmed not only to know about nature but also intuitively to understand their place in it. Pablo had much that he could teach me and I had a great deal to learn from him. His natural-born skills were far superior to mine. His eyes could see much better in the darkness and his sense of smell and hearing were even more acute than his sight.

I was soon to be shown practical proof of this when I decided to train Pablo to wear a harness and accompany me on night-time walks beyond the confines of the cottage area, just as I had once done with Toby Jug. But first of all I had to persuade Pablo that wearing a harness would increase the opportunities for walks outside the vicinity of our garden and that this would contribute to his overall enjoyment of life.

This was not easy and the first few attempts were total failures. He simply lay down and refused to move. Then I decided on a plan to deny him an early breakfast. I then carried a pocketful of his favourite biscuits with which I enticed him, one at a time, to keep walking. In no time he got the message and began trotting alongside me with his harness on, as long as he received an occasional much-desired treat. Also, he began to delight in being outside in the fresh air. He was only in our garden but it did give him the chance to sniff around, startle little birds and partially climb some trees. Furthermore these garden trips helped Pablo and me to bond closer together and

*Paw Tracks at Owl Cottage*

so it was that a stubborn cat turned into a willing cat for our walks. Eventually, Pablo was able to have his breakfast at the usual time, as soon as we got up, and I didn't need to dispense so many treat cat biscuits. We were now ready to travel beyond the confines of the cottage and to experience again the man and cat affinity that I had so enjoyed all those years ago with Toby Jug.

Since I am by nature a night owl, a habit formed in student days, I am rarely in bed before three in the morning, so I was able to choose to time our first nocturnal excursion as late as possible in order to reduce the possibility of encountering any dogs. We set out at midnight. Above us was a clear sky glittering with stars and a half-moon casting a silvery gleam through the trees. To be out at night in the countryside is an exhilarating experience; it is like being in another world.

We headed along a woodland path, well-defined and much used by anglers. Pablo walked ahead of me, lead taut, sniffing the fresh night air. Soon we heard the sound, of the weir and then saw that the river was in full flow due to recent rains. It was late April and it had rained a lot that spring, which was nothing uncommon in our part of the world. Pablo was buoyant with expectation, turning his head this way and that and raising his nostrils to savour fully the exquisite scents of the riverbank. Maine Coon cats are most highly sensitive to their environment and charged with quick responses to the possibilities of any situation. By the light of the pale moon I could see his body all aquiver with the excitement of exploring and savouring this new



*Pablo*

environment. I noticed that at almost four months of age Pablo had nearly trebled the size he was when he came to us, but he still had a long way to go in that respect because his breed do not reach full size or maturity until the age of four years.

At last we reached the side of the weir where the roar of the river tended to blanket all other sounds. It presented a picturesque sight as we gradually discerned through the shadowy trunks of the trees the translucent misty vapours rising above the waterfall like ghostly apparitions in the chill night air. Water has a charm of almost universal appeal to people and animals alike. It affects the tired mind like a balm and inspires the soul to contented contemplation. I pushed open the sprung wooden gate that gave access to the path alongside the weir and Pablo pulled me along by his lead in his enthusiasm to explore the way ahead. We stepped out onto the rocks that rose high above the tumbling waters and surveyed the vista before us. Moonlight rendered the gushing streams of white water into cascades of silver spray which splashed against the rock walls above where we stood. We moved along towards a great stony outcrop above the river and I sat down on a huge flat-topped boulder. Soon Pablo, tingling with excitement, jumped up to sit at my side. We shared a midnight feast of pork pie and I drank coffee from a flask. We sat together on the rock in comfortable repose, much as I had done previously with Toby Jug such a long time ago. Time had not visibly changed the river but now I was changed from an eager young man having a fun night-time ramble with his cat to an older, more mature person who was

*Paw Tracks at Owl Cottage*

reliving the past in the company of a different cat. This experience was more mellow, but nonetheless memorable for all that.

As we made our way out of the woods I reflected that the trip had proved to be a success for both of us but especially for Pablo, who sniffed obsessively at mysterious animal tracks all the way along our path homeward. As we reached the open road I could see the snowy outline of the Cheviot Hills and in the far distance the Cheviot itself, which brought another raft of memories of a special cat, a horse called Fynn and days spent on lonely trails through the beautiful Northumberland wilderness. That night, before I turned in, Pablo treated me to an affectionate purring session with much rubbing of his body against me. His huge amber eyes conveyed a glowing appreciation for all that he had experienced during our walk. The big cat knew how to say thank you.

In the weeks that followed I took Pablo on many late night jaunts and used the time to train him to respond to my whistle by administering tasty treats. He was a fast learner and I always kept him on a short lead because I knew that there was always the unexpected to consider. How right I was to do so as subsequent events would prove. Our walks together served to give us both a welcome form of exercise since we were each housebound most of the time, Pablo because he wasn't allowed to roam freely yet and me because I was busy writing at my laptop. There was another benefit. The walks that brought us closer together as partners sharing in the raptures and the

*Pablo*

mysteries of nature also served to tune us in to each other's thoughts and feelings as we went along. But this halcyon state of affairs was not to last much longer and could well have caused the demise of one or both of us.

When Pablo was about five months old and growing larger by the day an incident occurred on one of our walks which could have resulted in serious injury for either one of us or, in the worst scenario, death. It happened during a warm spell of weather in May. We set off from the cottage around half-past-eleven and were soon deep in the woods approaching the weir. As Pablo and I wound our way along a narrow trail, flanked by banks of willow trees on one side and scattered broom on the other, we could hear the thunder of the weir coming closer. Suddenly Pablo stopped and refused to move despite my urgings. I always carried a small torch with me on these night-time excursions and I took it out now and shone it around, thinking that Pablo must have discovered something that I could not see. The torch slipped out of my hand and, just as I bent down to retrieve it, a shotgun blasted twice from very close by and I heard the whistle of the pellets as they ripped through the branches of the trees above and around us. Abruptly Pablo's lead was jerked out of my hand as the terrified cat ran for his life. If I had been standing then I surely would have been hit. Bent double for safety I threw the torch light to one side in an attempt to draw fire away from us.

Hearing men's voices approaching I raced crazily back along the path, tripped twice over tree roots and fell headlong on the

*Paw Tracks at Owl Cottage*

rough ground. Eventually, bruised and bleeding from cuts to my hands, I made it out of the woods and stopped panting with the exertion of unaccustomed running. I strained my ears over the thumping of my heart to hear if I was being pursued.

Of Pablo there was no sign. I whistled and called softly and whistled and called again and again, but there was no response. Since it was now after midnight it was really dark, too dark even by the dim light of the stars to look for where a shocked and frightened cat might be hiding. Having regained my breath, if not my composure, I headed for home in an angry and bitter state of mind. What madman would be out at night in an English wood, blasting off a shotgun so wildly? I determined to investigate the matter thoroughly with the help of the authorities but for now I desperately needed to find and comfort my cat.

Soon I reached the garden drive and, as I fumbled in my pocket for keys, a dark form moved out of the shadows and meowed. It was Pablo, unhurt, safe and sound and still trailing his lead behind him. I cradled him in my arms and the stress drained out of both of us. I murmured words of relief with my mouth pressed against the thick fur of his neck and he made little whimpers of what I understood to be sheer joy. We were alive and well, and secure on our own home territory.

The next morning I gave Catherine a modified account of what had happened and she told me off for acting so rashly, confining her sympathy to Pablo who slept, as cats do when troubled, the entire day through. Later I telephoned the police

*Pablo*

and explained what had happened. The response was unsympathetic to say the least and amounted to a verbal reprimand for my alleged stupidity in wandering the woods at midnight when licensed hunters were out shooting rabbits and foxes. Suitably chastened, I didn't dare mention that I had a cat on a leash with me or retort that neither foxes nor rabbits carried torches on their nocturnal wanderings.

Well, after that I thought, I wonder what the locals will make of it; perhaps someone could cast some light on the matter. With this in mind I joined the throng of regulars at the Northumberland Arms which nestles at the foot of the bank down the road from our cottage. Glass of wine in hand, I recounted my tale to a group of habitual drinkers at the bar whom I knew had lived in the area for most of their lives. The end of my account was greeted by a stunned silence. Then the whole group, including the barmaid whom I had expected to be more sympathetic, broke into peals and guffaws of laughter. Shocked by their reaction I demanded to know what there was to laugh about. It was several minutes before the roars and chuckles of merriment subsided sufficiently for anyone to give me an answer. Then in broad Geordie accent I was told, 'Well, you know, you go out in the middle of the night for a walk in the woods and, worse still you take your pet cat with you; it is no wonder somebody took a shot at you. They probably thought you were a lunatic or a werewolf!'

More hilarity followed. Aware that my dignity had been severely compromised I managed a rueful grin and accepted

*Paw Tracks at Owl Cottage*

several friendly slaps on the back as gracefully as I could manage. Joan the barmaid asked how big my cat was, a question that aroused another bout of hysterical laughter. Desperate not to appear a complete idiot I told them he was a Maine Coon and about as big as a Yorkshire terrier but anything I said simply made them erupt in giggles and sniggers. When I looked round at the group, some had laughed so much that their faces were tear-stained. I felt I couldn't win and made to leave but they prevailed upon me to stay. Somebody bought me a drink and gradually the mirth subsided and I was able to make my escape accompanied by jestful remarks such as 'Remember to keep your head down!'

Once outside I was joined by Derek, who had worked as a gamekeeper and water bailiff, and he explained to me that gangs from the city areas came up to the river at night using nets to poach fish, trout and salmon, which they then sold from the back of a van on the black market around the backstreets and to some restaurants in the Newcastle and Gateshead areas. It was big criminal business and in the past water bailiffs had been attacked and injured. The police had a file on it but nothing much seemed to have been done. It was probable that those people who shot at me mistook me for a game warden or bailiff and were determined to frighten me off to avoid arrest.

'Well they certainly succeeded,' I said.

'You'd best steer clear of the river at night,' Derek said. 'Sometimes they've been known to bring big dogs with them. If you want a walk at night go down to the coast; it's a lot safer!'

*Pablo*

And with that he bade me goodnight and went on his way and I reflected with horror on what he had told me. I realized that Pablo, by abruptly stopping, had saved us from a fate too terrible to contemplate.

I returned home in sober mood and indulged Pablo with lots of strokes and endearments. I informed him that there would be no more midnight walks in the woods by the river. He stared at me gravely as if to say, 'I second that!'

The experience in the woods by the river that night had given me much cause to ponder the changing world in which we now lived, so different in essence from the beloved England into which Toby Jug had been born and raised over thirty years earlier.

When he reached the age of six months we took Pablo to the vet's to be neutered. I hated to do that to him but it was regulation for pedigree cats and it also meant that he wouldn't wander miles away to pair up with female cats in heat and have to fight off other tom cats for the opportunity to mate with a she-cat. Whenever any of my cats need to be taken for veterinary procedures I find it an anxious time, whatever the treatment might be. I know it is possibly an irrational response but accidents do happen and I am always worried until my cats are back with me safe and sound. So it was with Pablo. I took him at the arranged time and left him. He looked at me nervously on leaving and I knew that he would be fretting because he had not been fed that morning on vet's orders, as he was to be given a general anaesthetic. I was told to come back

*Paw Tracks at Owl Cottage*

in two hours during which time I nervously drank coffee in a local cafe and attempted to read my newspaper.

When I went back to collect him there was a most awful din going on in the surgery, mainly caused by several dogs barking, especially one large and vicious-looking German Shepherd which appeared to be trying to escape his lead and attack some other dogs waiting there. No one appeared to be in control as I approached a harassed-looking young receptionist sitting in front of a computer. I asked her if she knew anything about my cat. She told me she didn't but she mentioned there had been several emergencies during the morning but hadn't heard whether a cat was involved. After hanging around for several more minutes I began to feel really concerned and this information from the receptionist had done nothing to mitigate my apprehensions. So without any further hesitation I charged into the inner sanctum of the surgery to be confronted by a tall gaunt woman dressed for the outdoors in muddy green wellies and smelling of cowsheds and farm animals.

'I am looking for my cat; he's in here to be neutered,' I ventured in the face of her inquisitorial stance.

'Please return to the waiting room and your cat will be returned to you!'

I was not to be so easily placated but tried to remain polite. 'My cat has been here for almost three hours; I am worried about him and want him back now!' I said forthrightly.

Just then, before the moment of confrontation could develop into a more serious exchange, the tousle-haired figure of a



*Pablo*

veterinary nurse appeared in the corridor and exclaimed: 'Oh, Dr O'Connor, your cat is now ready for collection. Please follow me and I'll show you the way.'

Avoiding the haughty and disapproving stare of the woman vet in the smelly wellies, I hurried to catch up to the nurse. 'Had a busy day?' I asked as we strode together down the passage.

'It's been like World War Two!' she said, grimacing, but later managed a smile.

We entered a cubicle where, safe in his carrying box, lay Pablo, smelling strongly of anaesthetic. He gave me a mournful look that said: 'Do you know what they've done to me?' Sighing with relief at the sight of him alive and well, I thanked the nurse and carried him out of the bedlam of the waiting room to the car. All the way home I praised him and promised to personally look after him for the rest of the day.

When we arrived at the cottage Catherine was waiting for us and gave Pablo some very gentle hugs and lots of words of welcome, but probably equally important from his point of view was that she had his dinner and bowl of biscuits ready for him. Although he appeared at first to be somewhat groggy, our growing cat, who seemed to be getting bigger every day, soon became his normal self. Sniffing and sneezing at the scents of the medication on his skin, he gave himself a thorough tongue-wash and then relaxed on a window sill in the sunlight.

During the days that followed his operation Pablo seemed to want to be closer to us than ever before, probably as a reaction to the trauma of being separated from us as well as the

*Paw Tracks at Owl Cottage*

procedure itself. Cats are capable of storing memories and the emotions aroused cause them to feel vulnerable long after the actual event. This is why Pablo needed some extra loving from us to tide him over the experience.

He loved to play with us so when he pulled himself together we played together often. We had bought him a number of cat toys which he tended to play with during the night when he was alone in the conservatory. Often we could hear him racing around and jumping about. In the morning we would find his toys strewn around, well-bitten and torn. But he preferred to play with us.

Catherine had bought a brightly coloured cloth bird which was attached to the end of a stick by a piece of elastic. When we waved it about in front of Pablo the result would be the most extraordinary display of acrobatics, including outstanding leaps, bounds and twists of his body whilst airborne. But Pablo's preferred form of play was a rough and tumble with me. This usually involved me grabbing him and rolling him about on the floor whilst trying to avoid his big sharp claws. Another thing he enjoyed was when I ran along the hallway with him in hot pursuit, grabbing and biting at a trouser belt which I trailed behind me. These activities usually escalated to the point where he would wrench the belt from my hold, tear upstairs with it in his mouth and then lie on the top landing waiting for me to mount a counter move. Usually, I was the one who ended up exhausted and, much to Pablo's disappointment, would retire hurt with several scratches requiring medication and needing a rest.

Once Pablo was allowed to roam free, I would play this game

*Pablo*

with him in a modified form out in the garden where I would run about trailing a length of rope behind me with him furiously chasing me. One day this playtime ended in a shock trauma for him when he sped off with the end of the rope in his mouth and me running after him; he made a detour over the compost heap where a cutting from a rose bush became entangled in his fluffy tail. Unable to free himself from it he panicked, dropped the rope and raced away into deep undergrowth to hide. I was convulsed with laughter at this turn of events but Catherine, who had been watching from the kitchen window, was more sympathetic and hurried to the aid of the terrified cat. Removing the offending branch from his tail she carried him into the cottage for treats and sympathy. Later, I received a deserved scolding. Following some soothing strokes from Catherine and after consuming a mouthful of tasty treats, Pablo was once again ready for action, cried to be let out and ran to join me. He didn't seem much bothered by his recent scare but for the sake of our continuing good relations I offered him my apology for laughing at him. Cats hate to be laughed at and go into a great huff when it happens, but in this case Pablo seemed more interested in resuming play. To please him we did a few more run-arounds before I called it a day and we retired indoors for tea and relaxation.

Generally, Pablo soon recovered his aplomb following situations like the one above and in a short while played as enthusiastically as ever. Because he liked both or at least one of us to join his games, he developed strategies to ensure that we did. When he became bored he resorted to a number of antics

*Paw Tracks at Owl Cottage*

to attract our attention. These included knocking the telephone off the hook; thudding his body against the sitting room door; and clinging by his claws to the top of the opening door to hitch a ride. If these tactics didn't work then he would charge up to us with a ball or piece of ribbon in his mouth. He also loved to race upstairs via the wooden banister and then hurl himself back down in leaps and bounds. None of this does any good for the furnishings and decor, of course, but Pablo was so lovable and dependent on us that we could not resist just hugging him and even encouraging him so that we could laugh at his clowning around the cottage.

But Maine Coon cats, especially the males, tend to grow very large as they mature and once they become heavier the possibility for destructive rumbustious behaviour becomes alarmingly evident. The problems caused by a kitten running helter-skelter through the house can be bad enough but a burly Maine Coon with an abundance of energy can do considerable damage to the happy home. As Pablo grew bigger he needed to learn some discipline and, since his breed is noted for its intelligence and willingness to please, it was not difficult with patience to teach him acceptable behaviour in our cottage.

It is worth describing the first day that he was old enough to be let out by himself because it illustrates the true nature of his character. At first he just stood as if rooted to the spot. Then he turned and looked at me as if to say, 'Why aren't you coming?'

'Go on, enjoy yourself. You're a big lad now and you're free!' I said to him.

*Pablo*

Eventually he moved off, if somewhat diffidently. I turned and went back inside the cottage for a cup of coffee and to hear the news on the radio. Suddenly, Catherine called me from the conservatory. 'Come and see Pablo; you must not miss this!' I hurried outside into the garden and abruptly became aware of a terrific clamour coming from a copse of tall trees at the edge of our garden. 'Can you spot him? Look, there he is!' she said pointing to the said trees.

And then I caught sight of him high in the topmost branches of an ash tree; he was swaying back and forth as he fought to maintain his balance. The clamour was being caused by a crowd of rooks who were noisily buzzing him. For his part Pablo was trying to retaliate by swiping out with his huge paws at the circling birds. 'Don't think I'm afraid of you lot!' he seemed to be saying, as far as I could make out. The sight of him swinging around in the spindly branches, his bronze and sable-coloured fur gleaming in the morning sunlight, was for me a foretaste of the way in which Pablo's personality would emerge as 'the wild cat within' and increasingly come to dominate his life. Regrettably, this would eventually result in his death but for the present we shared his joy at being free.

'Should we go and call him down?'

'No,' I said. 'He's only having fun. Let's leave him be.'

With that said we both went back into the cottage, although Catherine kept going to the window and anxiously looking into the garden to see what he was up to.

Later, Pablo gave us both a scare because he did not return

*Paw Tracks at Owl Cottage*

that night. Around midnight I took my large-beamed lantern and, at Catherine's urgent request, went to look of our missing big cat. I searched the garden, called, whistled and shone my light all around the trees and hedgerows adjacent to our property, but of Pablo there was no sign. I must admit that at this stage I wasn't worried unduly. As I explained to Catherine, it was a warm summer night and there were a lot more interesting things for a cat to investigate than thoughts of home. But we were both showing signs of parental concern at our missing child substitute.

In the morning all apprehension was relieved by the appearance at the conservatory door of a bedraggled Pablo whining loudly to be let in. As I moved to open the door, Catherine called from upstairs telling me not to do so as she could see from the window a row of rodent bodies lying on the patio. Obviously, Pablo had been hunting through the night and was the perpetrator. Catherine didn't want him carrying any of his kills inside the cottage.

'It's OK,' I called back. 'I'll grab him and lift him in.' Opening the door in one quick motion, I reached down and grasped Pablo around his middle, hauling him indoors whilst slamming the door shut. He stared up at me as if to say, 'Have you seen what I caught for you? Aren't I clever?' after which, head held high, he trotted proudly towards the kitchen for his breakfast to be followed, no doubt, by a well-deserved cat nap.

Meanwhile, there remained the problem of the line of rodent corpses outside. 'If we don't get rid of them he might start to

*Pablo*

eat them and be sick!’ said Catherine, who was surveying the dead bodies.

‘It’s alright,’ I said. ‘I know what to do. I’ve been here before.’

And memories flooded back of all the times over the years I had needed to surreptitiously dispose of dead mice and voles before my cat became aware of what I was doing. As I set to clearing away the rodent corpses another more poignant memory came back to me which involved a different cat and an earlier but happy time in my life.

I recalled an incident that took place in Owl Cottage when Toby Jug was about two years old. I was busy in the kitchen when I heard some strange noises coming from another room. When I went in to investigate I was confronted by a strange sight. Toby Jug was standing, body arched, rigid on all fours, in a hunched crouch, staring at something by the fireplace. Worse still, he was making hissing and spitting sounds which I had never heard from him before. It was February and the room, having no lights switched on, was in semi-darkness. I strained to see what was arresting Toby’s attention. Something moved in the shadows by the fireplace, eliciting a throaty growl from Toby Jug. At once I spotted it – the largest mouse I had ever seen. Surely it must be a hybrid, I thought. But what struck me as most bizarre of all was that the creature was baring its teeth and making muted snarls in the direction of Toby. I assumed that this was a developing situation which could only end one way and that was by Toby Jug killing this rather obnoxious-looking rodent. In order not to precipitate the matter I withdrew to

*Paw Tracks at Owl Cottage*

allow what my medical friends term ‘a therapeutic wait’, wherein things can change for the better without further intervention. It was after five o’clock and, since I had been working hard in the kitchen, I poured myself a glass of claret, sat down in an easy chair and awaited the outcome.

When I checked, the stalemate was still ongoing: it was what you might call a ‘Mexican Standoff’. From my vantage point beside the door I came to the conclusion that Toby was afraid to attack; he didn’t know what to do. After all, he hadn’t ever had an experience of killing anything since his mother had died before she had the opportunity to train her kitten in life skills for cats. Well, I thought, it is beyond my capabilities to emulate a female cat in respect of hunting and killing a mouse, however urgent it is for Toby to learn. He’ll have to learn some other way. With that, I charged into the room and scared the big mouse away. I noticed, in the receding daylight, as it bounded and leapt away, that it had a patch of brown fur over its black back, like a cloak, unlike most house mice, which have grey fur. This gave it a most sinister look. Furthermore, it had very pronounced ears that were roundel-shaped like those of Walt Disney’s Mickey Mouse. This thing was a monster, no doubt about that. I watched it exit through a hitherto unnoticed crevice in the stone wall of the room and told myself that I would need to give that some attention as soon as possible.

Next, I turned my focus on Toby Jug and picked him up. I got the feeling that he needed a cuddle because he’d suffered



*Pablo*

something of a shock. ‘You and me both, pal,’ I said, adding, ‘You’ve a lot to learn yet, though; don’t worry too much about it for the present.’ Several times that evening Toby went to the gap in the stone wall where the mouse had gone through and gave it a thorough investigative sniff as well as several fierce hisses. ‘Don’t distress yourself!’ I told him. ‘Tomorrow we will go to a shop I know in Rothbury where I can buy just the thing to deal with Mr Mouse.’

After breakfast the next morning I set off in my white Mini for the rural market town of Rothbury, with Toby Jug catnapping on the front passenger seat. The town was bustling with early shoppers as I parked opposite the butcher’s shop, famous throughout the area for game and special-recipe luxurious sausages. The shop I wanted was some distance up the sloping street and so, leaving Toby in the car, I crossed the road, trying to ignore the inviting smells of freshly made meat pies emanating from a home bakery, and headed for the store which had the local nickname ‘The Old Curiosity Shop’, after Dickens’. Inside the store it was gloomy and there was just one light bulb hanging above the counter for illumination.

The glum expression of the proprietor matched the dingy interior of the shop but it purported to stock every hardware item you might want.

‘What are you after, then?’ he grunted in a far from welcoming manner.

‘I would like a “live” mousetrap. Even two if you have them, please,’ I added politely. The vehemence of his response

*Paw Tracks at Owl Cottage*

surprised even me although I was aware of his irascible reputation.

‘It’s only fools that would want to keep rodents alive. What you should have are killer traps or poison,’ he said, glaring at me.

‘Do you have any humane traps for sale?’ I persisted.

He sighed, gave me another hard look, then muttered, ‘There might be a few left of the ones bought in for the nuns at Lemmington Hall. What are you wanting to do, train them to sit up and beg?’ With this last rejoinder he came as near as he could to smiling, only it wasn’t a smile; it was more of a sneering smirk. Then he disappeared into the dim interior of the store. Several minutes later he reappeared carrying two lengthy wooden boxes with wire trap-doors at each end, all covered in dust and cobwebs. ‘These will have to do for you,’ he said ungraciously. ‘That will be four shillings for the both of them.’

I paid him without further comment and with a cheerful ‘cheerio’ left the shop, stopped to buy two hot meat pies at the bakery and rejoined Toby Jug. He was sitting waiting inside the car on the shelf of the rear window and attracting curious stares, sometimes smiles, from passersby.

‘We’ll soon be home,’ I told him as he leapt to my shoulder and purred all the way on the drive back. ‘I’ve got us a pie each for lunch!’ I said. At this, his purrs resonated even more loudly. Maybe he couldn’t understand my words but he could obviously smell the pies and put two and two together. Smart cat.

When we arrived back at the cottage I examined the traps. They were rather scruffy but I thought that might be an

*Pablo*

advantage in luring the mouse into one since a clean trap with my scent all over it might make it wary and I really wanted to catch the creature. Toby, true to his nature, was full of curiosity and watched my every move. First, I rubbed the inside of the trap with a piece of cheese to awaken the mouse's interest and then I put two cubes of cheese inside the trap. I did the same with the second trap and set them ready. I placed them along the wall where the mouse had made his exit and awaited developments, although I realized that it would probably be sometime in the middle of the night before the trap would be sprung. That is, if our adversary deigned to appear.

Then, after giving my hands a good wash to clean them after handling the traps, I turned my attention to our lunch. Cutting Toby's pie in half, since a whole one would be far too much for him, I set his tray down for him. By the time I had served up a mixed salad with the pie for myself, Toby Jug had consumed his in double-quick time and was now busy licking gravy stains off his lips and preparing to give himself a tongue-wash.

In the afternoon I attended to some chores of the tidying-up variety around the garden. Toby Jug sat in his favourite old apple tree and I could tell from his expression as I glanced towards him occasionally that something was bothering him. It didn't take me long to guess that he was still worried about the mouse he should have caught yesterday. Later, while I relaxed with a book and a drink in front of the fire, Toby Jug couldn't settle and kept pacing back and forth around the traps, wondering what might be going to happen.

*Paw Tracks at Owl Cottage*

'Time for bed,' I said, and headed up to the bedroom followed by a cat who appeared to be in two minds as to whether to go to bed or stay on guard downstairs, ready to confront the mouse. After an uneventful night we rose in the morning and I set about preparing breakfast only to find that Toby Jug was nowhere in evidence. On hearing a scraping sound from the sitting room I hastened to investigate. The sight that greeted me took me by surprise even though it was half expected.

Toby was circling one of the traps, which had been sprung. Even more surprising than this quick result was the fact that the trap was being continually bounced over the floor by the creature inside. It was banging and crashing against the doors of the trap, trying to burst out. But the big mouse was well and truly captured. I picked up the trap to view the captive. The first impression I had was of a very large rodent unlike the small grey and brown creatures I was accustomed to seeing around the garden and driveways. It was a male and he looked ferocious. He glared back at me and recommenced thrusting against the trap door that had him imprisoned.

'Right,' I said. 'The sooner we get rid of you the better for all of us. Come on, Toby – we've a journey to make.'

Wasting no time I backed the car out of the garage and was quickly joined by a curious cat who was determined to see this through even though he had not yet had his breakfast, which normally would have been an immediate priority. We had a monster mouse to deal with. I placed the trap with the mouse into a shopping bag and put it on the floor of the car by the

*Pablo*

passenger seat, watched all the while by a bemused if somewhat apprehensive cat.

The informed rural advice regarding how far to take captive rodents before freeing them was about two miles; this was to ensure that they did not return to the place where they were caught. With this in mind I drove several miles down the A1 and turned off on the outskirts of Tarbrook Farm. Leaving Toby Jug in the car I took the trap to the border of a leafy lane overgrown with weeds and levered it open. After a moment's hesitation the mouse hurtled out into the coarse grass for a short distance then, amazingly, stopped, turned, raised itself upright and glared back at me, chittering like an angry squirrel before disappearing into a darkened ditch. To say the least, I was dumbfounded. I had never seen anything like it.

As I walked back to the car I smiled at the sight of Toby glued to the windscreen so he could witness proceedings. He seemed relieved to see the back of the little beast, but no more than I was. Later that day, I decided to address the problem of the hole in the wall, through which I'd seen the mouse leaving. From the greenhouse I brought a smoke bomb which was used to fumigate the place at the end of the season. Now, returning indoors, I lit the blue fuse end, pushed it into the wide crevice and then taped it into position. Next I went outside in the garden to view the other side of the wall. Sure enough a tell-tale trail of smoke was issuing forth from around a stone at the base. I chalked the spot and determined to fill the opening with cement as soon as possible. It would be a weekend job, which I

*Paw Tracks at Owl Cottage*

thought I would probably do the next day. Whilst all this was going on I was followed about by a most interested cat who kept well away from the smoke but watched attentively from a safe distance.

Watching Toby, I was reminded of his behaviour the previous evening when he had, in a perplexed manner, kept returning to the entry crack in the wall, sniffing warily and then spitting a warning at the place where the mouse had disappeared. I suppressed a smile as I looked at him still trying to work out what he should have done when he first confronted the mouse. He couldn't quite sort it out in his mind but I knew that eventually he would when he grew and matured some more. 'Never mind Toby; I'm sure you'll have other chances to deal with mice,' I said to him lovingly.

Later that week, in a conversation with Richard Morris, my illustrator, he told me that mice of this kind were to be found in some country areas around the south of England. My intruder had obviously been a migrant. I hoped he would be the last. And so, with the thought that the past is always with us, I ended my ruminations about life with Toby Jug at least for that day and turned my attention back to the present and the disposal of Pablo's kills.

Pablo rejoiced in the opportunity he was given to wander at will and with the availability of lush woodland, open fields and river banks adjacent to the cottage he was spoilt for choice. Whilst the countryside around us mainly comprises traditional farmland

*Pablo*

there are hidden areas of wooded copse and overgrown bush-covered gullies in which wildlife thrives. In one covert domain rabbits and hares, foxes and badgers, weasels and stoats, colourful cock pheasants and partridges, redshank and woodpigeon, to mention only a few, live in secluded sanctuary. Here and there in this area you can still come across a green meadow, open to the sky but surrounded by dense foliage and tree growth which may harbour an abandoned gamekeeper's wooden shack. Not far away, there may be a tumbledown barn in which owls, swifts and swallows roosted and where poachers once took refuge. Now, such an area is the province of an itinerant population of wildlife refugees who are looking for a home to raise their young and to live peaceful lives.

Sometimes in the middle of a large field wild zones can be found which the farmer has not cultivated, possibly because it contains weighty rock mounds, or simply because he is a kind man who believes in conserving animal- and bird-life. These small plantations provide precious habitats for flora and fauna which would otherwise be denied living space. Happily, more farmers are now being encouraged to set aside land for such purposes.

I know of a stretch of land nearby which is littered with scattered boulders and rock outcrops, fringed with self-setting saplings and overgrown with broom and brambles. It provides an ideal environment for numerous small species of mice and shrew, as well as ground-nesting birds such as the skylark, to breed and flourish. In a dip in the land there is a drainage ditch

*Paw Tracks at Owl Cottage*

which has been left undrained and, fed by the rains, it has grown into a pond providing suitable conditions for eels and exotic-coloured newts to thrive, as well as iridescent dragonflies and damselflies which flit and hover around the water's edge like vibrant humming birds. In time, coots and moorhens will most probably take up residence here and in a short while the area will be a thriving wildlife habitat. While wandering around such an environment, Pablo will be perfectly at home; it is, after all, his natural-born heritage as a cat.

In the early days of Pablo's life with us, like any pet owners we had to learn to accommodate him and he, us. For Pablo this involved accepting the need to treat the carpets, curtains and furniture with a certain amount of respect and to acknowledge the need for hygienic toilet practices. For our part, life with Pablo demanded a tolerant attitude to his preference for leaving animal and bird carcasses at the back door as offerings to us on a very regular basis. It also required forbearance towards a drenched presence plaintively wailing for entry after a stormy night spent hunting in the woods and fields. After his expeditions we would often have to spend time cleaning him up, drying him off and picking the burrs and thistle heads from his tangled fur. Pablo would look up at us and sigh as if to say, 'Well, you know all this is what cats have to do.' The process was a two-way track. We sought to teach him about our way of life and he encouraged us to understand and participate in the ways of the wild and the way of the cat.



*Pablo*

As the evening developed into darkness Pablo would come to me and indicate that it was time for a prowl. He would signal this by raising himself on his back legs and padding his paws up and down on the glass door of the conservatory. When I opened the door, and just before he made his exit, he would usually turn and look up at me as if inviting me to accompany him like the times in his youth when I took him for walks on his harness.

Sometimes when I am free to follow my mood I will grab my coat and torch, and tag along with him. The first time I did this was a delightful experience during which I was initiated by my Pablo into the world of the cat. I left the conservatory and found him waiting for me by the beech tree in which the ring doves build a nest each year. As I joined him he paused to give his chest a quick lick and then padded off with a purpose in mind. Excited, I followed him. Once outside the garden I couldn't see a thing. More to the point, I couldn't see Pablo.

Then I heard a familiar throaty meow and felt him brush against my leg. I got the feeling that he was intent on guiding me on a tour of his making, like a child showing a parent around his playground. He stayed behind me for some reason and then approached me from the rear as cats are wont to do. I stroked and praised him and he led me forward only for me to lose sight of him once more. I took out my torch and shone it around to see where he was. Then I spotted a startled brown furry face slightly to the side of me and suddenly realized how stupid my action had been. Artificial light at night is anathema to wild

*Paw Tracks at Owl Cottage*

creatures; it is an unnatural abomination associated only with human kind. For the nocturnal residents of the countryside improvised light is an unwelcome intrusion which deprives them of their visual acuities and frightens everything, both predators and game, away. The experience caused me to reflect. Here am I in the outdoors at night, an outsider divorced from the natural ways, by reason of being 'civilized'. My cat's senses of hearing and smell, as well as his vision, are infinitely superior to mine and without the trappings of my domesticated environment I can no longer lay claim to belong to the natural environs which initially bred humanity. This was a sobering thought. In this setting, I was inferior to my cat and just about every animal that lived out there.

I found Pablo lying some distance in front of me in a crouched pose, intent on something out there in front of us. He acknowledged my presence as I joined him with the merest flick of his tail, which is a cat's way of responding to someone without breaking concentration.

We were situated at the edge of a mown hayfield which extended a vast distance over rolling landscape. Pablo lay motionless, nose and ears twitching now and then with the scents and sounds wafting over the soft autumn breeze. This was his method of reconnoitring the ground over which he would soon be moving. At last he turned and looked at me, and made an affectionate throaty sound. 'Can you understand what I see and hear and scent?' These were his unspoken queries. His bright eyes, shining like huge emeralds in the light from the

*Pablo*

moon, implored my comprehension. I struggled mentally to appreciate what he was experiencing and the quality of it. Suddenly, in a burst of intuition I became aware of what my Pablo was thinking and feeling. I strove to fine tune the meanings flowing between us.

‘See how the grasses flow before the wind, hiding the creatures I would hunt. I can scent rabbit and partridge. There are field mice and shrews; I can hear them eating worms and scrunching beetles. Over by the fringes of the wood I hear bats fluttering and squeaking as they make ready to fly off to hunt. On a branch of the oak I can see the little owl waiting to pounce.’

Such a rush of perceptions stunned me and left me blank. I could see and hear nothing of it. To me it was just darkness and silence except for the sighing of the wind. Then the moon emerged from behind the clouds and blanched the landscape. Pablo glanced up at me in farewell and then, with innate stealth, he faded into the rippling grasses with no more than a hint of shadow. He had left to follow the call of the wild.

I felt a sense of loss at his going, a lonesome feeling that I took away with me as I retraced my steps homewards. He left me because he knew at that point of time that I was incapable of entering and sharing his world either physically or mentally. I just couldn’t tune in and match his natural-born prowess.

Later in the cottage, in a thoughtful mood, I reflected that with increasing human dependency on scientific technology we are losing contact with our natural origins and preventing

*Paw Tracks at Owl Cottage*

ourselves from accessing the vast reservoir of innate knowledge which is intuitively available to us, thus forfeiting the fund of wild wisdom which is freely available to cats and other animals. Thinking about this night's experience with Pablo I became aware, not for the first time, of the cost that civilization has imposed on us. Because of this I feel myself drawn progressively closer to the domain in which my cats live and through which they function. What happened that night triggered and re-awakened a vestige of what lay dormant within me. I retired to bed with these thoughts on my mind and with the hope that in the morning when I came downstairs and drew back the curtains the first thing I would see would be Pablo, safe and sound, waiting to be let in.

Pablo was affectionate and responsive to our overtures to tame and discipline him but yet he retained the right to fulfil his origins as a cat. He was usually quiet and withdrawn in his manner and temperament, and became more so as he matured and did his own thing. If he was a human being we would probably call him introverted. Whilst we adored Pablo and he obviously loved us, he could at times appear remote, totally engrossed in his own world.

In reading through a cat book I saw some photographs of silver-grey Maine Coon cats who were purported to be outgoing and dashing. Perhaps Pablo, I thought, was missing the company of his own kind and another cat, a playmate, would bring him out a little more satisfactorily for them both.

Pablo will return to our story later, but first I want to begin

*Pablo*

to tell the tale of our first silver-grey Maine Coon, an interesting and remarkable character, whose friendship did just what I wanted for Pablo and who initially brought chaos into our reasonably well-ordered lives.

