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He knows. He knows, she muttered to herself, padding after him. Knows when I get my dizzy turns. Bless him, she went on, murmuring away, as she got out the toaster, the bread, plugged in the kettle, set out the cup and saucer. More affectionate than any dog, aren't you, Samuel? she went on, as he twined about her legs. Ah, I know what he wants.

She took from the safe the bottle of milk she had set there especially the night before, and poured into a saucer for him the cream that had risen to the top.

There's a good boy—there's a good boy, she murmured, stroking as he lapped.

While she ate her toast, he crouched before her on the table, delicately picking, and crunching at the heavily buttered crumbs she placed on a plate for him. All the time he purred, and all the time she talked to him, not even aware that she was speaking aloud.

That's the boy. That's the boy now! What do I care? No one else shares my table, so why not you? Let them say what they like. You're a good, clean pussy. There now—there's a nice bit for him. There's a nice bit for the sweet thing. Why shouldn't I, anyway? An old woman living by myself—why shouldn't I? Let him sit up with me and share my bits with me. He's my Samuel, and he knows. Look at the way he comes and rubs his dear old head on me—and scarcely ever leaves my side either. A real comfort to me, he is. I tell you he's my pussy, he's my . . .

Samuel ate as much as he wanted, miaowed explanatorily, and left the table to do his morning round of the garden. But he didn't stay outside long. Before she had finished washing her one or two dishes he was back, sitting golden-eyed and imperturbable, watching her unblinkingly, on the bench.

MUTTERING away to herself, she went about her little bit of work—swept the kitchen, made her bed, put the carpet sweeper over the mats, and cleaned the hand basin. That done, she stood vaguely in the middle of the kitchen, and her face puckered.

It was coming again.

Her head seemed to be expanding as if it were being pumped up, and at the same time her legs seemed to be dwindling till it was impossible that two such spindly matchsticks could support such an enormous balloon of a head. Then, simultaneous with this, the house began to sing.

All the hours, and days and nights, weeks, months, years of her solitary habitation in that house suddenly fused and became vocal. But it was no melody that was produced—no, only a high, thin, almost inaudible, screaming note. Yes—it was a scream, that's what it was. A scream. All the screams she had never uttered in those silent, empty rooms. All the immense silences of unpeopled corners absorbing shadows in the dusk, all the watchful voids of unslept-in rooms gathered about one when one woke in the mornings, all the creakings and sightings of unwalked-on timbers in the small hours of the night, all the brooding, ominous, treacherous darkness of solitude, all the muttering, tempting, whispering, suggestive, sweetly-promising delusions of sweet, irrational,

irresponsible madness. All the loneliness, the uneased, inexpressible, long-forgotten and long-accepted, heart-breaking, silent, gibbering, perilous, unconsidered aloneness.

All these things the house expressed when it sang. And although she knew it was the house and not herself making this noise, yet the high, almost soundless scream seemed to come from inside her own skull. And this was intolerable. It was bone-splitting and thought-blinding.

Now, as she stood there and it came, she reached out sightlessly for a chair.

Quick, Samuel, she muttered, gasping. Quick! The chair. Quick! Chair—quick—

And the cat leapt on the table, miaowing, shaking its head, quivering, both gold eyes fixed unblinkingly on her.

Muttering and groping, she touched the chair, then with a grunt, slumped sideways on to the floor. In a flurry the cat darted out of the room and through the bathroom window into the garden.

It's funny how she's never made any friends, they said. Living here all these years and not a soul who really knows anything about her. Of course, she's a bit queer, they said. Always talking to herself about the place, and makes a perfect fool of herself over that cat of hers. But what else can you expect, they said, from an old maid living all alone there in that big house, year after year?

Why didn't she ever take boarders? they said. Or let part of the house? Or something? Of course, they said, there are her nieces. But a niece isn't the same as a daughter, no matter how good she is. And now, they said, she'll have to go to one of them for a holiday. It's not safe her being there all alone if she's going to take these funny turns. What a lucky thing it was that Mrs. Scott went in that morning to use the phone, they said, and heard the cat miaowing, and thought it was a bit queer and investigated. Heaven knows how long the poor old thing would have lain there, they said. All alone like that.

Of course she's queer, they said. Probably she should be put in a home, they said. The way she chatters to herself, and one day if she sees you in the street she'll stop and talk to you, quite sensible and friendly, and the next day she'll look at you as if she'd never seen you before. Goodness knows if she feeds herself properly, they said. She's thin as a rake. But one thing's sure, they said, smiling knowingly at each other, she feeds that cat of hers well enough. Great fat thing! Ah, well, it's none of our business, they said. We can't look after her.

NO, Ruth. No, Ruthie, it's good of you, but I can't. Why, what'd I do about Samuel?

Bring him, too, of course.

He wouldn't be happy. He'd fret. He might run away. He's too old for a change.

Well then, Auntie, leave him here and get one of the neighbours to feed him each day.

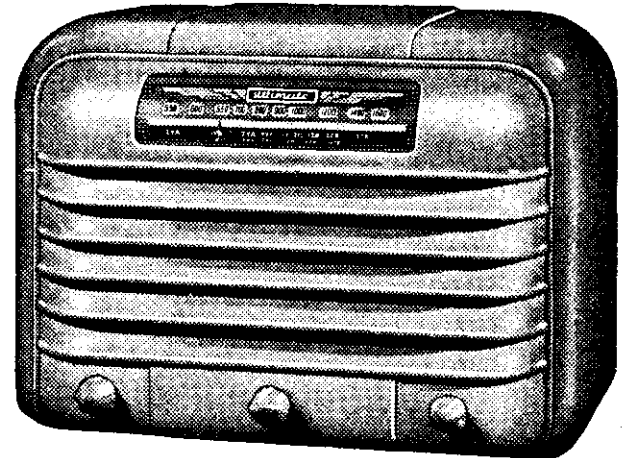
He'd fret. I know he'd fret. Besides, Mrs. Scott's sick. She's an ill woman. I wouldn't like to bother her. And then Mrs. Robinson—she's kindness itself, but she's got all those children.

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