

SHORT STORY

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I know she'd say she'd look after him, but she might forget. All those children—how could I expect her to remember a cat? Besides, I've spoilt him. I cook and bone his fish, and scrape his liver, and cut up his meat small—I couldn't ask her to do that.

Oh, but he's got all his teeth still. It wouldn't hurt him to eat his meat whole. And she could leave him milk. And even if she did forget him on odd days, he wouldn't starve. There're dozens of birds about with all these trees. He could hunt.

Yes. Yes. I suppose he could. Tremulously, she fingered her soft, gentle mouth, looking at her niece with troubled eyes. Yes, I suppose he could hunt. He does catch birds, you know, she said, with sudden brightness. But he never eats them, she added, vague and troubled again. Only plays with them, and then . . .

But Auntie, and the young woman was exasperated, trying to keep the old lady to the point, but Auntie, he would be all right. Why, couldn't you pay one of Mrs. Robinson's children a few shillings a week to look after him? A kiddie likes a bit of pocket money, and I'm sure that eldest girl'd be responsible, and be kind to him, too.

Yes, my dear. Yes. And she stared vaguely out the window. I've had him 14 years, you know Ruth, she went on. Fourteen years. And they get to know. He knows since I've been having these queer turns. I'm sure he does. Kind of more affectionate, and scarcely leaves my side. Oh, I know I've spoilt him, but I've had him 14 years. And they say I'm a silly old woman. Look at that silly old woman, they say—I know they say it—look at that silly old woman going to get sand for her cat. Why can't he make holes in the garden like any other cat? they say. That's what they say, I know. But why, I've had him 14 years.

And her soft, gentle mouth quivered slightly where she plucked it tremulously with one thin hand.

But Auntie—I know how fond you are of him, but the doctor said . . .

Suddenly the old lady shed her vagueness, and took on a quiet strength and dignity. She ceased looking with troubled eyes out the window, and faced her niece decidedly. Child, she said, what do I care about doctors? I can only die, and if I'm going to die, I'll die. But this house, and Samuel—they're all I've got. I won't desert them just because I'm taking dizzy turns now and then. It's good of you, Ruth, she said firmly, and I appreciate it, but child, I'm better by myself. I'm an old woman, and I have my own ways, and I'm old . . . too old to . . . she trailed off again.

The younger woman put on her coat and gathered together her bag, purse, and gloves. Gently she kissed the old lady on the forehead.

Don't forget, she half whispered, that you can always come, if you change your mind. And don't forget Claire wrote

and asked you up there, and it's warm there. Not cold in the winter like it is here, but warm. Sunny. She pressed the thin shoulder. Don't forget.

Good-bye, my dear, said the old lady brightly. Come again soon. I always like having you, you know. And bring the children. Come soon. Come soon.

Then the dim shadows began to gather again—but which was night coming and which was the grey haze that too often clouded her eyes these days, she couldn't tell. She sat on quietly in her chair by the window, looking out into her garden. Then Samuel uncurled himself from beside the heater, leapt on her knee, and pushed his crisp whiskers and wet muzzle into her lax hand.

Purring, he curled in her lap, lazily rolling over to have his belly rubbed, playfully patting at her hands with his paws, claws half out, but never pricking.

To-morrow I must clean that silver, she muttered. Must get on with my work to-morrow. Can't laze round like this. Not good for a body. Makes you want to stay in bed. No good. Must do the silver . . . and perhaps wash.

THREE weeks later the doctor spoke very firmly to Ruth Nicholls.

Your aunt must get away, he said.

She's ill mentally and physically. She must have a change. And somewhere warmer, too. Didn't you mention another niece up north?

Yes — she'd be only too pleased to take her.

Well — persuade her somehow to go. If she doesn't have a change and a complete rest, I can't answer for what might happen.

So they looked up addresses in the paper, and they made telephone calls, and they visited places.

And when they got back to the big, old house, Ruth made tea and they sat down silently to drink it. They didn't talk, for each knew what the other was thinking.

At last, after having tremblingly dabbed at her lips with her handkerchief, Miss Hutchins spoke. I couldn't. Ruthie, she said, I just couldn't.

I know.

They're dirty.

Yes.

They're all dirty. And he'd be put in a cage. He'd fret.

Yes.

You don't expect me to do it, do you?

No, Auntie.

And he'd run away from your place, I know . . . Ruth—perhaps I should . . . Perhaps I should—have him destroyed?

Oh, no Auntie! You couldn't do that!

No, I'm glad you think I shouldn't. I'm glad . . . Well then, perhaps Mrs. Robinson's little girl would be the best idea. I could clear out the tool shed and leave it open for him and . . . I suppose she'd be kind to him, although I know of children that . . . But if I paid her a few shillings a week . . . Of

(continued on next page)

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