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The Animal at the Door

THE story of Judy, who won the animals' V.C., is printed in this issue because most people who heard the broadcast will want to read the text, and those who missed it will still be able to share a moving experience. It happens also that publication coincides with an animal welfare week organised by a section of the S.P.C.A. Suggestion is better than precept or homily, and people who know about Judy may need no further reminders that dogs are among our best companions. There is, however, something to be said of our general attitude towards animals. The subject can lead us easily into hypocrisy or sentimentality. We may give kindness and affection to dogs and cats, but outside a narrow range the animals in our midst are fattened and killed, or trapped and hunted. A carnivorous people must kill if it is to stay alive, and there are other reasons why some creatures must be destroyed. Rats, for instance, would inherit the earth if we ceased to make war on them. It is in the middle region where necessity no longer drives us, and where the farmer is replaced by the sportsman, that we begin to think of humane behaviour. Some of us, like our remote ancestors, are hunters by instinct, and it is never hard to convince ourselves that we hunt for the good of the country—even when we bring down a swan with broken wings upon an estuary. We allow certain animals to live in safety on condition that they work for us. One of them, the thoroughbred horse, has risen so high in our esteem that many of us give him a costly and devotional attention. It is possible that the sacred cows of India or the cats which were once revered in Egypt have not been so much in the thoughts of men as these proud creatures, though the emotions they arouse may be less religious. The treatment of animals has a history which is probably as old and curious as the history of the human race. Some animals have been worshipped, some have been tamed; and it is in parts of the earth where animals could be domesticated that civilisation has advanced most rapidly. Our feelings towards them are therefore an odd mixture from which it is impossible to take a consistent or logical attitude. And indeed, if we still find it necessary to kill our enemies in war, it may not be surprising if we are somewhat arbitrary in our selection of friends and victims among the animals. Our relations with them are after all no more mixed and inconsistent than are our relations with our own kind. Nevertheless, it is salutary to remember that man is the most feared of all creatures, for he may kill when he is not driven by hunger, and the higher development of his brain commits him (in the meantime) to the lordship of the earth. The more intelligent animals may be trained to find themselves a place in his strange and difficult world, but they live among us anxiously, and they are much at our mercy. Dogs learn to identify themselves with our ways and habits; they give their devotion freely and without reserve. Cats are more independent, and in their fastidious way will insist on living with us at least partly on their own terms. Yet after thousands of years they are studying us with the old and puzzled intentness. It is their own pertinacity, as well as our interest in them, which allows them to keep their foothold in our homes. Sometimes, as when we read of Judy, and of the man who swam to a burning ship to save her before the magazine exploded, we see that devotion can be on both sides. And then we forget the servant and the slave, and remember only the companion who shares our fondness for a warm hearth, while the darkness outside reminds us of our unexplained situation in time and space.