

The Spanish Cat

It was not until I heard a voice in the small street below my window that I turned to look down from my terrace to see who was causing the commotion. There was an old man with a beret and rosy face pointing upwards and calling in a quavery voice. I looked up to the next terrace but I half knew that there was nobody there. It was early in the season and I was the only guest staying in the small hotel. The proprietor was away so I realised it must be to me that the old man was calling.

As I went to speak to him, a ball of beige fur streaked past me into my bedroom and under the bed. Then gradually a small face appeared, wide pale green eyes in a pale fawn body, almost white paws and a tail striped like a tiger's. It was obviously a very young cat and when I turned again to speak to the old man I realised how the little animal had got onto my terrace. In the pavement below was an old tree, well pruned with no leaves but with a branch almost touching the metal bars of the terrace. Somehow the cat had climbed the tree and jumped through the bars.

I motioned to the old man to go around to the front door of the hotel and I would bring his cat down to him. Easier said than done! It seemed frightened and although I moved slowly and quietly it dashed from under one bed to another, in and out of the bathroom and behind an easy chair. Eventually I opened my door and it ran out quickly and down the one flight of stairs. The old man was too slow to catch it so we played hide and seek for the next ten minutes, through the lounge, up to the top floor and back until it was cornered in the kitchen. The old man picked it up gently talking to it all the time and it gradually seemed to calm down. We laughed and I was thanked with a toothless smile and the episode was over, or so I thought.

A little later I went for a long walk, then a late lunch in a nearby restaurant and returned to my hotel. I had been there nearly a week and although I knew my husband would be arriving in a few days I felt lonely and longing for company. Since I arrived the weather had been cold and damp but suddenly the sun broke through and was shining on the easy chair by the window of my room and I could feel the warmth which had been so lacking of late.

Throwing off my coat I sat down before the window which the maid had left open, prepared to close my eyes and relax. A sudden movement made me turn my head and there on the nearest bed was my friend of the morning looking at me with his green eyes. I spoke to him softly and he seemed more willing to become friendly.

I swished my foot on the tiled floor and he came quickly and rubbed his head on my shoe. He then explored the room, jumping from bed to bed, even walking along the narrow headboard and down to the bedside table. Suddenly he touched my small clock and the alarm sounded. He took flight in great surprise across the room and into the bathroom where the chain and stoppers provided much interest, bath and bidet were examined with great twistings and turnings of his mobile body.

I found a small roll of paper which he chased all around the room, carried it upon the bed and gave me many minutes of amusement and pleasure. Soon he tired and curled up on the bedspread with closed eyes. After a few minutes I went gently to him and picked him up. He did not seem to mind and soon lay on my lap purring happily, now and again he stretched his long pale front paws, tapping my face with his sheathed claws. I felt his trust – could it be affection?

I kept looking across the road to see if the old man was there but the shutters on his house were firmly closed. Time passed and eventually my little friend stretched and went on to the terrace, head between the bars, watching events below. The occasional dog passing caused much excitement, wriggings and trembling but knowing that he was out of harm's way.

The sun went down and I began to wonder what to do with my playmate when suddenly round the corner came the old man wobbling dangerously on an old bicycle with a basket of flowers in front of him. I called to him and picked up his little animal to show to him. After propping up his bicycle he threw up his hands and shook his head with amusement. I said I would meet him downstairs, so carrying my furry warm friend I went down to hand him over.

There the old man greeted me with a beautiful bunch of freesias, thanking me for looking after his pet. Now they scent my room and are a lovely souvenir of those happy hours in the sunshine.

Marie Crowley