



Donald Hankin

# Cat Island

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# The STORM

Allen sat still. He was watching the storm as it moved toward them. It was moving quickly, churning the sea and blasting the sails with a frightful fury. This was the 23<sup>rd</sup> day since they left England with a crew of twelve, twenty-eight passengers and nine cats. Allen was in charge of the cats, though no official election had occurred. It was just more or less understood. The cats were there to chase the rats until they arrived in Virginia. For that service, they had plenty of food and kindnesses from the humans. So far, things had gone well. They had enjoyed wonderful weather and the rats had finally learned their place. But now, Allen thought, *this approaching storm looks rather bad.*

He sat up in the rigging of the mast, crouching low with his tail wrapped tightly around, to best see what was going on. It was obvious, the humans were scared. They were dashing about trying to ready the ship for the storm. Orders were given then ignored. They bumped into one another. Boats were lowered only to be taken up again. Sails were furled only to break loose again. Seawater splashed over the bow and some of the humans slipped and fell. The ship was plunging deeper and deeper into the waves.

Reverend Stiles, with a large Bible tucked under his arm, his face upturned toward the sky, prayed in a loud voice, beseeching the Lord to take mercy upon them. Allen liked Reverend Stiles, for often he brought the cats sweetbreads and delicacies, stroking their fur gently as they purred. Sometimes, Allen sat in on his Sunday sermon. On this day though, the pending storm drew everyone's attention.

First Mate Tommy Bright paused in front of the Reverend, shaking his head then continued what he was doing.

Allen was becoming increasingly nervous. In fact, his fur was standing on end. He decided it was time to climb down and go looking for the others.

He got as far as the forward hatch over the galley, when he turned to watch Mrs. Reynolds bailing seawater with a bucket. For every bucket thrown overboard, a mountain of water washed back on her. He was so distracted by this he failed to notice the wave shoot over the bow, sending him tumbling head over tail. Then he struck something hard and it was all he remembered.

In an instant, a scene from his kittenhood appeared. He was in the pantry playing with a mouse, batting it across the floor against the wall. He was just a little kitten and he was in the pantry of the vicarage of St. John's in the care of the kindly Vicar Washburn. Then, suddenly, the scene shifted to the park. There

he was with his friend William Whiskers, running through the park and around the Serpentine. Then he began to choke. The waves were coming faster now and he was swallowing gulps of seawater.

Another wave, as big if not bigger than the last, swept him across the deck. He was tossed onto the canvas covering of the cook's hole. He dug his claws into the canvas and began to pray. He prayed in a voice hardly his own feeling terrible for all of the awful things he had done. He was seeing the face of every mouse he had ever squooshed. He saw the dogs he and Bull Gibbs had led on a merry chase. Then there was the time he fell asleep in the pipe organ and poor Vicar Washburn had to apologize all around.

Then he began a list of impossible promises he would keep, if only he was given one more chance. It was a terrible list; one that would surely take all of the fun out of his life. Then something hit him on the head. Everything went dark. He was certain he had died.

# THE SEA

In the dark of the night, the storm passed. Off in the distance, lightning scratched the sky followed by muffled thunder but it was far enough away so as not to be scary. What time it was, exactly, was impossible to say for only the humans had time pieces and they were gone. For that matter, so was the ship.

Allen came to, wearing a nasty glob of seaweed on his head. He was in the water next to Scooter McGee. All around them was debris from the ship; boxes, boards, lengths of torn canvas, a picture frame without the picture and some jars from the galley, bobbing in the water.

“Hello, Allen,” Scooter said. He was looking at the seaweed on Allen’s head. Allen reached up and removed the seaweed. It made a plurp sound, as it dropped into the water.

“No, I wouldn’t go around wearing it,” Scooter added.

Scooter was an all right cat, as cats go and, most of the time, he meant well but he definitely wasn’t the sharpest knife in the drawer. At times, he could be downright irritating. Allen liked to say he never met a cat he didn’t like but Scooter had a way of stretching that idea to its farthest limit. “Scooter,” Allen said, “where are the others?” “Well, that’s hard to say but I saw Bull swim by. I never knew he could swim that fast. Maybe a sea monster was chasing him. He was over there just a moment ago. Do you believe in sea monsters, Allen?”

“What of the others?”

Scooter shook his head. “Just you, me and Bull, though he might be back in England by now.” Allen was able to secure a piece of wood as it drifted close to them. Scooter swam over and they helped each other out of the water. It was not an especially large piece of wood but they were small and huddled together. When they were out of the water, the night air made them cold. They curled together as tightly as they could and were soon fast asleep.

In the morning light, they were awakened by a noise. Allen sat up first. Then he nudged Scooter with his paw. “Ssh, listen,” he said.

They sat still. It was not quite bright enough to see anything clearly, for a fog hung low on the water. Allen looked hard to where he thought he had heard something. Then he made out a boat or a raft. On it sat six figures. It appeared to be all of the other cats save one.

Scooter followed Allen’s gaze, the raft was drifting toward them. Now they could see they were all there except Mr. Stubbs.

“Oh, how awfully glad we are to find you,” Allen meowed, as they were brought alongside the raft. Immediately, he saw Old Puddy was ailing. He looked terrible.

“What’s become of Mr. Stubbs?” Allen asked. “Does anyone know?”

They all shook their heads. Then Scooter said, “Probably drowned by now or he’s a sea monster’s breakfast.”

As tired and wet as they all were, nevertheless, he got a good hissing from them all.

## OLD PUDDY

Valentine, Lady Anne and Missy did their best to make Old Puddy comfortable, though there really wasn’t much they could do. The day was long, cold and dreary and, by night, it was even worse. The sun stayed hidden by thick clouds so they remained miserably wet. Fortunately, the sea remained calm. All through the night they cuddled close to retain warmth. Once in a while, they meowed loudly for Mr. Stubbs but there was no answer.

It seemed Old Puddy was down with a terrible cold. When he wasn’t coughing into one paw he was sneezing into the other one. Then, especially at night, he would begin to shiver, violently. He was a very old cat, though no one knew how old, exactly. Perhaps, to have come on this voyage was a mistake.

He was raised in a library, the librarian’s cat. In fact it was said he loved books. He told a story about how one time he even slept in a packing crate. He told Allen he was quite fond of the smell of a good book.

At one time, he said, he read most of an entire set of encyclopedias, though volume P was missing. As a result such things as Peru, piranhas, peonies, and the like remained a mystery to him. He said his favorite was volume M. Consequently, he became well-versed in subjects, such as melons, Morocco, meteors, mice, muffins and especially, Mesopotamia.

His favorite books were *A Tale of Two Cats*, *Cats of the Round Table*, *A Midsummer Night’s Cat* and a small book by Alice Miles-Bennet called *Acceptable Feline Behavior*. She was also the author of *An Evening with Your Cat*, volumes I and II, although several of its pages were missing.

Imagine, when word got out, here was a cat who could read. The humans took notice and it wasn’t long before a newspaper reporter and sketch artist

arrived, though Old Puddy wasn't cooperative at all, choosing, instead, to curl up in his book crate and ignore them both.

He could hardly believe the silly questions: "Are you house-broken? Are you really reading, or just looking at the pictures? What is your favorite breakfast food? What are your feelings concerning mice?" When the sketch artist got close trying to make a drawing, Old Puddy hissed him soundly; but, when the opportunity came to sail to America Old Puddy jumped at the chance immediately. Travel was a wonderful education he said and he told Allen he had a strong desire to visit a faraway place before he died. Up until then, he had hardly ever ventured beyond London but, now, he was ill and their ship was lost.

Missy was trying to do all she could for Old Puddy. It seemed her path in life lay in the service to others. In London, she had been a hospital cat. She had gained a great knowledge of medicine. She understood many illnesses and their treatment. Allen once told her she possessed a gift for helping others. It was a nice thing to say and, knowing Allen as she did, she knew he meant it.

Her reason for coming on the voyage was, primarily, to look after Mr. Stubbs. Mr. Stubbs was very old and he was, perhaps, all the family she had left. He could be difficult at times and often he would forget where he was. Old Puddy would say, "The light has gone out in his attic."

When he was just a kitten, Mr. Stubbs had been run over by a horse-drawn trolley in the middle of East India Road. Oliver Tibbs, a green-grocer across the road, saw the accident and left his business to rescue poor Stubbs from near death; but he was to suffer the loss of his tail and his right eye. From then on, he was called Mr. Stubbs.

It happened that, from that day on, Mr. Stubbs suffered an inability to navigate properly. Walking a straight line from here to there proved to be a challenge. His tendency was to walk in ever-widening circles to his left following the direction of his good eye; however, as any cat will tell you, it isn't so much the loss of an eye as it is the loss of a tail for a cat without a tail is as a boat without a rudder.

As he grew older and his thinking became impaired, he began to imagine he was visiting exotic foreign lands on his walks. An afternoon in Parson's Green became a trek across the Himalayas. Or a stroll around the Serpentine was actually a hike around Lake Titicaca, complete with alpacas and Peruvians wearing Derbies. To try and convince him otherwise was hopeless.

Old Puddy sneezed again as their raft drifted on the calm sea. In the middle of the night, the clouds parted to reveal occasional moonlight.

"I wonder, who can say they last saw old Stubbs?" Old Puddy asked. Valentine shrugged and turned to Allen. William Whiskers began to say

something but thought better of it. Then Scooter stood up. Bull frowned and shook his head. He was doing his best to steer the raft with the lid of a cigar box he pulled from the water.

“Well,” Scooter said, “as regards to Mr. Stubbs, I believe I did. I believe I saw him last.” He smiled at the others then sat down again.

“Scooter,” Allen meowed, angrily. “You haven’t told us anything. Where is Mr. Stubbs?” There was, clearly, impatience in his meow.

“Oh, I guess I can’t say, exactly. Of course, if you would want me to guess then I’d say he’s sunk to the bottom as a lead anchor...but that’s just my guess.”

“Stop it.” Missy said. “That’s quite enough.”

Bull Gibbs glared at Scooter. Scooter removed himself to the edge of the raft and curled up in a ball. Allen regarded him coolly, out of the corner of his eye.

“A penny for your thoughts, Allen,” Bull said, finally.

“I’m just worried about old Stubbs,” Allen replied.

He studied the horizon in the moonlight but saw nothing. Their raft rolled gently with the current. The water made soft lapping sounds and Old Puddy sneezed once again.

# BULL GIBBS

Bull Gibbs met Allen one day in the spring. It was a beautiful day and everyone was out in the park. The sky was a deep blue with puffy white clouds and a pleasant breeze. The humans strolled along the pathways. There was ice cream and candy for sale and you could hear music from the bandstand. Allen was walking with his tail held high, for he was in a very fine mood.

Bull Gibbs was unusually large for a cat. In fact, he was about two sizes too big. He said his unusual size related to his growing up next door to a vitamin factory. It was in a not so nice part of town and, to survive, you had to know every alley and narrow lane. You had to have escape routes, just in case you got in trouble.

The alley behind Bull's owner's house met with another alley behind the vitamin factory where there were piles of wooden crates. In the crates were small brown bottles. Some of the bottles were broken and their contents spilled all over the alley. They were brightly-colored capsules, thousands of them and Bull discovered they tasted good. The blue ones tasted like raspberry. The red ones had a cinnamon flavor. The brown ones, by far his favorite, were definitely chocolate. Also he liked the yellow ones. They reminded him of licorice. He thought the white ones were curious. They kind of tasted like milk and honey poured over oatmeal. It wasn't until much later, when he got to be much too big, that he was told what they really were.

Being the unusual size that he was meant he was constantly being challenged to a fight. Every tough kitty from Battersea Park to the King's Road wanted to test his mettle. It wasn't long before his reputation preceded him. The word was out...You didn't mess with Bull Gibbs.

It was said, woodland creatures in the park quickly got out of his way. Small lapdogs gave him a wide berth. He especially disliked Chihuahuas with their scrawny chicken legs and squeaky, sissy bark. He was fond of saying to chase at least one of them every week kept him in shape.

But Allen was to change all of that. That particular day in the park Allen had just gotten into stride, his tail straight up with just the slightest bend at the tip for style, his fuzzy chin held high to accent his good looks when, all of a sudden, out of nowhere, Bull stepped up and blocked his path.

"Well, you're a pretty little kitty, aren't ya," he hissed. Allen stopped short. "S'pose you be one o' 'em special little kitties from the rich neighborhood, what? Might we say?"

“Well um,” Allen started to reply.

“Put ‘em up, put up your paws, I sez,” Bull meowed. He was prancing back and forth across the path. His fur was up and he was hissing loudly. At first, Allen wasn’t sure what to do but then, something came over him and all he could do was to sit back laughing. He was laughing so hard his sides hurt. He knew he was being rude but he just couldn’t help it. The more Bull pranced about the funnier it seemed.

“I’m terribly sorry,” Allen said. “Where are my manners?”

Now Bull was confused. This had never happened before. Usually a fight ensued or, at least, a good chase but now, he was embarrassed.

When a cat is embarrassed the natural thing to do is lick. Whip out your paw and lick away. Maybe you forgot to clean your face that morning or clean your ears. Then Allen was licking too. It was becoming a good old cat lick fest. Humans passed by with hardly a notice but the little children were amused. Bull kept a wary eye on Allen wondering where this was all going.

Finally, Bull said, “Why don’t ya put up your paws and fight like a cat?”

“Why? What’s the reason? It’s a fine day and I’m very near to purring my head off. So what’s the point? I mean, I just met you. Are we fighting over something?”

Logic put Bull into a confused state. The last thing he wanted was to have to think something all the way through. It made his fur hurt. So, for what seemed a long time, they sat opposite each other on the footpath and, by the time the sun was setting, they had become friends. Bull was to serve as Allen’s bodyguard, a service which proved valuable on many occasions. While, for his part, Allen encouraged Bull to seek a higher plane in life than just alley brawls but, of course, there were setbacks. One occurred when Bull got frustrated and tied two squirrels in a knot and Allen was obliged to apologize all around; but now, having set sail for the New World and suffering the loss of the human’s ship, they were left in dire straits. Pulling together meant everything, if they were to survive.

## MR. STUBBS

Nighttime on the raft was the worst. They were cold and wet. They tried to sleep as best as they could but it was difficult. They snuggled together for warmth. Only Bull stayed apart at his rudder.

Clouds occasionally blotted out the moonlight and, in the darkness, it was so dark you could hardly see your paw in front of your face. Strange noises in the sea beneath them seized them with fear. They hid their faces in their paws and curled their tails tightly around. Old Puddy sneezed again and then tried to sleep, though his breathing was labored.

It occurred to them there were giant sea monsters lurking about with an appetite for warm furry pussycats. Such a thought was nearly unbearable and set their muscles to shivering. These were surely times to try a cat's soul.

Allen thought they should sing a few verses of their favorite songs to pass the time but they weren't interested. Instead, they preferred to huddle together listening to the sea and Old Puddy's breathing.

Very early the next morning, at the break of dawn, Mr. Stubbs appeared. He was swimming toward them in narrowing circles until Allen and William Whiskers managed to pull him onto the raft. Missy meowed a loud sigh of relief.

"We had all given up," she said. "I couldn't sleep. None of us could sleep."

"There was some kind of sea monster under us all night," Bull said.

"And anyway, we figured you for dead," Scooter added. Sitting Mr. Stubbs on the raft, they removed gobs of seaweed as he began to tell them what had happened.

"Every one of the beggars had spears, you know," he said.

"Who had spears, Mr. Stubbs?" Allen asked.

"Why the bloody natives, that's who. Who did you think I was talking about?"

Allen looked around at the others.

"Of course, I swam as fast as I could, you see but they kept right after me, the buggers. Then they started throwing those spears. Lucky, I was able to dodge them. Maybe they thought I was some kind of fish."

Allen sat up studying the horizon. Then, turning back to Mr. Stubbs, he asked, "Were they in boats? Did you see any boats?"

"I don't know. I don't recall. I was too busy swimming for my life. Anyway, finally, it was the king who saved me. Then he let me go. Nice chap, really. Though lots of hair."

“The king?” Missy asked.

Old Puddy shook his head. “You ought to be getting some rest, Stubbs,” Allen said. “Sounds as though you’ve been through quite a lot.”

Later that morning, the sun reappeared. It turned into a beautiful day. The sky was deep blue with occasional white clouds. Even the sea looked inviting. They spent the day licking their fur in the warm sunshine. Their fur was crusted with salt and they suffered more than one fur ball. As the day wore on, they became aware, increasingly, of their thirst. There was not a drop of water to drink.

Allen said he thought they were drifting toward land but really he had no idea.

“We’re going to be fine,” he told them. “We’re following a strong current so it’s only a matter of time until we see land. We’re going to be OK.” He looked at Old Puddy. Old Puddy tried to smile.

When they were on the ship with the humans, he watched them using instruments and charts to navigate. He knew they used the sun and the stars but he didn’t know how they did it.

They waited through the day and another bitterly cold night and still there was no sign of land. Hunger gnawed at their stomachs and thirst pinched their throats until they could no longer lick and meowed only when absolutely necessary. They were tired, cranky and discouraged. Tempers flared and tails flicked and arguments ensued over the littlest of things. They were beginning to think they might never purr again.

Scooter amused himself by regarding his reflection in the water. Mr. Stubbs went on about natives and spears. Missy cried softly under her breath. Allen thought things couldn’t get much worse.

That night, no one slept. Once again, strange noises haunted them. Once, Allen thought he saw something in the dark but it was probably nothing. Darkness can be deceiving. His anxiety pained him greatly, for he knew he was responsible for their welfare.

# CAT ISLAND

Very early the next morning, they were startled by a loud roar. Then, suddenly, without warning, their raft was upended and they were tumbled into the sea. Waves crashed over them as they swallowed gulps of seawater. They lost all sense of up or down. They were being tossed about like corks. Allen tried to meow but nothing came out. They had no idea what was happening.

They did not know it then but they were caught in the surf. Their raft had gone out from under them and they were being pushed ashore by the waves.

Allen landed on a rock and thought he had broken his nose. The wave receded and he tried to hold on until another wave hit him, picked him up then tossed him back on the rock. Bull shot past him on another wave and disappeared. Scooter landed on the same rock with Allen, smiled then he too disappeared. There was no end to the waves or the confusion. Yet, pushed ashore by the waves, they, one by one, managed to grab ahold of a rock and remain there. William Whiskers landed on a rock next to Allen and was able to not only hang on but to help Allen, as well. Together they climbed to a higher rock where the waves were not so powerful. Then they were able to make it up to a rock beyond the reach of the waves, altogether. Looking back, they saw the others were right behind them. Allen saw there was a sandy hill and palm trees above the rocks and, to their left, a wide sandy beach. From where they were, the waves seemed less menacing. They were fifteen or twenty feet below the crest of the hill. It appeared to be an easy climb. *First priority*, he thought, *is to get off the rocks and up to the top of the hill.*

“Take my tail,” he yelled. “Everyone grab a tail. We’ve got to climb up there.” He was pointing to the hill above them. “We must get off these rocks and get up to that hill.”

One-by-one, they linked up and began to climb, though they were wet and exhausted. They worked their way, carefully, from one rock to another. It was slippery going and they sometimes lost their footing but, when they reached the sand, they found it to be cool and pleasant, with a gentle breeze. They collapsed in the shade of the palm trees. For a while, they dared not to look back down on the rocks.

Finally, after a decent interval, Allen spoke first. “Well, we made it. I mean, here we are and nobody died. That’s a lot to be grateful for.”

“I don’t think I’ll ever get my fur to shine again,” Lady Anne said. She was Valentine’s best friend and the two were inseparable.

“Allen, please don’t make us sing, all right?” Valentine said. “Maybe some other time but, for now, we’re much too tired.”

“You know what would be awfully nice, just now?” Lady Anne purred. “A nice saucer of warm milk.”

“I’d say a pipin’ hot bowl of Gloucester puddin’ would hit the spot,” Bull added. The very thought made him purr loudly.

“All right, enough of that,” Allen said, finally. “We’ll all go truly bonkers with that kind of talk. We’re not in England anymore. We’re here, wherever here is and we’d better set about to make the best of it. Dreaming about what we’d like and what we can’t get won’t serve any purpose. Bull? William? Come to me, please.” He motioned to them with his paw. Bull and William Whiskers got up. Scooter followed them to where Allen was seated.

Drawing them closer into his confidence, he said, “We can’t just sit here or we’ll all be sick. A storm as bad as the last could be upon us without warning. Old Puddy’s in a bad way and we must find food and water. Also, we need shelter. Forget about the humans. They aren’t here and, for that matter, forget about England. We’re on our own now.

“I know you are tired and so am I but, I fear, we must act quickly to secure proper living conditions for ourselves.” He was getting fired up. His tail was flicking wildly. Something was coming over him, though he wasn’t sure what. Sometime later, he would know.

Allen directed the others to gather palm leaves, which were in abundance on the ground. Using twigs and branches they built a lean-to against the base of one of the palms. The sun was higher and the sand became comfortably warm. The rocks below them, which, at first, seemed menacing, now took on a loveliness in the sunshine. They began to share a feeling of excitement, of anticipation and, looking back, it was said Allen came ‘into his own’ that day.

That evening, Allen addressed them, “We’re English, after all, and, by George, there’s nothing we can’t do, if we set our minds to it.”

“Hear, hear,” William Whiskers meowed. It was the best they had felt in days. Old Puddy regarded Allen through fevered, watery eyes.

“We’re not quitters, Allen continued. “Look at what we’ve been through.”

“Hear, hear,” Bull chimed in. “No spilt milk on the pantry floor for us.” Everyone turned to him, wondering what exactly that meant.

As evening turned to darkness, plans were made to search for food and water and to find sturdier wood for the shelter. Their spirits were running high for, after all, it had been a wonderfully warm day; yet, perhaps more importantly, Allen had rallied them to believe in a better tomorrow. He had won their hearts.

# THE PALM GROVE

What they found in the next several days astonished them; a fresh water spring bubbling up out of the ground, coconuts full of delicious milk, Old Puddy told them how to open the coconuts and extract the milk, palm dates in abundance, fresh mangoes and so many kinds of berries they had to take them to Old Puddy for identification. Some were edible but others were not to be eaten.

The weather continued to be warm and pleasant. There was a cool sea breeze off the water. Gradually their fur regained its softness and luster. They made beds of ferns found near the spring and thick layers of palm leaves and drew saplings overhead with palm leaves for shelter. Finally, they were able to sleep soundly at night.

During the afternoons they set aside time to play on the beach. They had fun bothering the crabs who sidled out of the surf to see what was happening. They invented games of hide and seek among the rocks, which were now less forbidding.

Scooter was badly bitten by an angry crab and had to be helped up the hill, meowing loudly when Missy applied a soothing salve to the wound. They judged the crab to have little sense of humor.

Bull chased crabs all afternoon and yet, somehow, managed to avoid getting a single drop of water on him. Allen enjoyed watching all of this from up on the hill. It was a welcome relief from all of the misery they had endured. Now, his thoughts were centering on their whereabouts. He knew they would eventually have to move on. Each day he held conference with Old Puddy. The two talked at great length, sometimes William sat in with them.

Old Puddy referred to the latitude and longitude, two words that baffled Allen. He said they were definitely in the tropics by the looks of the plant life and, he added, they had sailed far enough to be in the Americas. If they had landed in the north, they would be on either French or English soil, he said. On the other hand, if they had landed farther south it would be Spanish lands.

“What if it was neither?” Allen asked.

“Well then, it would be the Indians and they like to eat cats. Bit of a delicacy, you see, for them.”

That thought made Allen shudder. “You mean English cats?” he asked.

“Cats are cats,” Old Puddy replied.

One day, as they were talking, Mr. Stubbs happened by. “Morocco,” he said smiling at them.

“Hello, what?” Allen asked.

“What do you mean, what? Just came from there, that’s what. Lovely people. Very good manners. They like pussycats immensely. Treated me like I was family and, you know what?”

“What?” Allen said.

“Camels are nasty creatures. They spit on you, you know. Vile creatures.” With that, Mr. Stubbs bade them good day and departed.

They remained in the palm grove for eight days. The sunlight had done wonders to their fur and their disposition. The coconut milk and the variety of fruits nourished them. They even managed to catch some fish trapped between the rocks at low tide. Old Puddy showed them how to clean the fish and remove the bones.

One day Bull, along with Scooter, took Allen aside. “Allen, seems we got ourselves a path,” Bull said. “Don’t know where it goes but it goes somewhere.”

William Whiskers joined them and nodded in agreement. “Most definitely a well-worn path,” he said, “and, I’d say, by its appearance, it’s been traveled recently.”

That night, by the light of a small fire, they gathered around Old Puddy as he spoke. Unwilling to get up, he leaned heavily on one paw, lying back on a bed of ferns Missy and Lady Anne had prepared for him.

He spoke to them of their future, speaking deliberately, pausing to catch his breath. While he spoke, he lapped milk from a coconut half Missy held for him. His meow was hoarse and labored and twice he fell into a fit of coughing.

“We should be very humbled and thankful for the Lord’s mercy, allowing us to survive,” he said. “We’ve cheated death, you know. Odds are, we shouldn’t be here at all. Nevertheless, we are here and, I believe, it is for a reason, as yet undiscovered. I do not believe things happen without a reason. We are on the threshold of a great adventure and you are fortunate to have a cat like Allen. I have absolute confidence in him.”

All eyes fell on Allen, until he was obliged to sit back and lick furiously.

“Far be it for me to paint you a rosy picture,” Old Puddy continued. “It would be foolish to assume our future is going to be easy. What lies beyond these woods is anyone’s guess. As nothing worthwhile in life ever comes easily, no doubt we will have to travail. We’re up to the test, I believe. We have the right attitude. We’re English so that’s what we’re all about.”

“There is a path,” Allen said. “Though to where, I don’t know.”

“Then we will soon find out,” Old Puddy said.

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