

CHAPTER 2

Now, you must not think that all we had to do in the evenings and at weekends was to play with Richard. On the contrary, we led a very busy life in the evenings after work and at weekends. We had actually met by taking part in various youth activities and being asked to serve on our local Council Of Youth. Myrtle was a representative from a local youth club and I was representing a scout group. After the first or second meeting that I attended, we went to a nearby cafe for a coffee and I was fascinated by a lovely vivacious girl who I had noticed during the meeting. Somehow I managed to talk to her and then to walk her home and that was it as far as I was concerned. Apart from the girl next door who babysat my sister and I when we were younger, this was my first girl-friend and, as it happened, my last and only one. What Myrtle saw in me I did not understand, but now we were married! Between our first meeting and our marriage, Myrtle had joined in with my scouting activities as a Cub leader for the cub pack who's Akela was my mother. So we all got to know each other very quickly.

Our activities on the youth council and our scouting hobby became even more involved when, as a result of odd jobs that we took on, we started to work in amateur theatre. First of all we organised and ran a Cub concert for fund raising and then we worked on the building and fitting-out of a new theatre conversion in the local youth hall. As a result of being involved in that, we worked on lighting and sound for youth drama festivals and were eventually invited to join a local amateur dramatic society. You can see that we were not short of things to do!

In the midst of all this activity, we made many new friends and one of these was an older man who was involved with the dramatic society. He and his mother had several cats and dogs and a few months after we moved to a ground-floor flat, one of his cats had kittens. As we now had a small garden and more than one room, we thought it would be a great idea for us to have another cat for ourselves and as a companion for Richard while we were out at work. Thus Susie came into our lives. She was a lovely little tabby kitten who we named Susan after a friend of ours, but we thought that she was somewhat more scatty than a Susan, hence the more flighty, Susie. As it turned out, she was definitely one for the boys and became a pregnant Susie almost as soon as physically possible!

We had moved into this new flat in the winter. It was just the ground floor of an old terrace house with a shared front door and hallway. The stairs were enclosed with a door at the bottom so that the upstairs tenants could shut themselves away, but as the front door opened into our hallway, we did not get the same privacy. This was only one of the disadvantages! In our original room, we were at least able to shut the door on anyone we did not want to have anything to do with and the toilets and bathrooms, although shared, were at least indoors. In our new flat, there was no bathroom and the toilet was outside! Curiously, it was actually part of the house, but the door to it was in the garden and hence half the length of the house from the kitchen door. The garden itself had to be shared with the upstairs tenants. In one respect, we were lucky as they had little desire to use the garden, so we were able to lay it out as one design and mainly use it for ourselves. Most of the other houses in

the terrace were shared occupancy and many of the gardens were split between the tenants, even to the extent of having fences down the middle to keep each other out! As the only access to the gardens for the upstairs tenants was through the hallways and kitchens of the downstairs tenants, you can see that we had a better arrangement than most.

There were many other problems with that flat, but for now, our second Christmas was to be in our newly decorated home with our parents invited to a proper party and our cat to keep us company.

The following February, Susie was born and in April came to live with us. She and Richard took to each other straight away although he would not follow her as far as the garden - his dislike of the great outdoors remained as strong as ever. He was about to get a surprise! That Autumn, Susie duly gave birth to three kittens. At first, she showed all the usual care and affection for them, proudly showing them off to us in her bed. She mothered them well and fed them properly so that they grew fast and soon had their eyes open. We were all, especially Richard, fascinated to see them develop, feed and sleep, and then start to become aware of the world outside their basket. Within a few weeks they were staggering around and at that point, Susie decided that she should catch up on the latest happenings in the world outside and that Richard was quite capable of keeping an eye on them while she attended to more important things. He managed his duties very well until Susie decided that the three kittens were not getting enough out of life and that the garden would be the place to further their education. So, the moving started. One at a time they were carried by the scruff of their necks out of the living room, through the kitchen, round the back yard and dumped on the nearest part of the garden path. This got Richard very worried and he overcame his fear of the great outdoors sufficiently to follow her out and then carry the kittens back in to safety! This of course, did not suit madam and as fast as he carried them back in, so she carried them back out. The trips got shorter and shorter as she became more impatient and they ended up scattered between the kitchen door and the garden itself. Eventually Richard gave up trying to get the kittens back into the safety of the house and we were treated to the amazing spectacle of Richard sitting out in the garden, having got all three kittens gathered together on to a safe and sunny part of the garden path. From then on, Susie and Richard never looked back. She knew that she could go off on her jaunts with her family in good paws and he knew that the garden was, after all, quite a nice place to be.

He only had one mishap with his new found confidence. One evening he had strolled off into the garden and we thought no more about it until he failed to come back in for supper. We called from the house and then in the garden and over the back fence but there was no sign of him. Then, we heard a very faint "Miaow, Help, Miaaaaow", getting more desperate as we failed to spot him. After a few minutes of this, we were getting more and more worried ourselves, and listened even harder to try and locate the direction of his cries. Then we realised that the cries were faint as they must be carrying round the end of the terrace (our house was the second from one end) from the front of the houses. On going out of the front door, the cries increased dramatically in volume and there was our black cat shouting for rescue from the branches of his first tree climbing effort! We found in later years

that most kittens first attempt at tree climbing results in a cry for "Mum, come and rescue me", but this was a two year old cat! He refused to try and climb down to us, so the neighbours and passers by were treated to the sight of two people with a (too short) step ladder and a torch trying to climb up a tree overhanging the pavement to rescue a cat who was big enough and old enough to know better. Needless to say, he stayed in the back garden from then on, convinced that he had been right all along about the great outdoors, although still happy enough with the little patch of the world that he knew and understood. Only once more in his life did he manage to lose his way and that was a very sad time for us. Luckily, we can never know what life has in store for us, so the present happinesses are not affected by future sadness.

Prior to all this happening, other births were entering our lives or were imminent. We had decided it was about time to increase the human part of the family and, just for good measure, we acquired a puppy. So Myrtle became pregnant just after we got Susie and about the same time as Tina (the puppy) was born. I can give no real excuse for her name - she was a 'tiny' pup so that is about the only logical reason for it! She came into our lives just because we happened to mention to one of my aunts that we thought we might like to have a dog one day and, of course, she knew of a neighbour who just happened to have a litter to find homes for. Tina was a delightful little bundle of fun; all black like Richard and only too willing to join in all the games. To be a good bringer up of puppies, we set out from the beginning to train her properly. This involved a proper walk every night to the local park; training her to walk correctly to heel with a loose lead and teaching her to sit at the kerbs while waiting to cross the street. She was so well behaved very quickly, that we could leave her on one kerb while we crossed and then call her over only when we were ready. Tina had to have a good collar and name tag right from the start and we found that a proper dog harness was much better for the lead than the collar.

As the nights got longer, so that harness came in very useful. By the time we got to the large open areas of the park, it was too dark to see Tina when we told her she could go off for a run. What also made it difficult to keep track of her was her most astonishing turn of speed - there must have been some whippet in her ancestry. I made up a little gadget consisting of a battery and a red torch bulb. This was attached to her harness and switched on before we told her it was OK to run. There were many late night walkers in that park who were surprised to see this red light streaking around the park just nine inches off the ground! The only time that Tina really disgraced herself (normal puppy problems excluded) was when we came home one evening to find Myrtle's leather cased manicure set shredded into pieces. When we came in the door, Tina suddenly realised that she shouldn't really have done that, and hid herself from sight. With the cats and kittens there was never any trouble and they all got along quite happily. Of course, we were not able to keep all three of Susie's kittens and so decided to find homes for them. Quite soon, we were back to two cats and a dog, but, one cat was pregnant again.

While Richard was kitten-sitting, Susie had not wasted her time and within a few months of one lot going, she presented us with four more. That decided us that enough was enough and Susie visited the vet as soon as possible. The second lot of kittens were reared successfully with Richard and Tina playing their parts of minder and playmate, except for one mishap.

Most of our furniture in the living room was hand-me-down and the settee underneath was rather the worst for wear. One kitten, unknown to us, managed to climb into the interior from underneath and unfortunately had his chest through a coil spring when Tina jumped onto the settee. We heard his cries and managed to tear open the bottom canvas enough to get him out, by which time he was hardly breathing. We rang the vet for advice and he suggested trying to get some brandy into him to try and stimulate him back into life. As we don't drink alcohol, that was not so easy, but we managed to get a very little bottle from the local off-licence and get a few drops into him. (The kitten, not the vet.) After an anxious time, that seemed to work and the little body came back to life. A visit to the vet confirmed that he was now alright and that there was no real damage; it must just have been the shock. When the time came to find homes for the kittens, we kept him a little longer than the rest just to make sure that he was really strong and we often heard how well he grew into a strong, healthy, cat.

Although there were many problems with that flat and we eventually could not get out of it fast enough, it was our first real home and saw the second start of our family. Michael, our eldest son, was born in the December of the year of the kittens and the cats and the dog were fascinated by him. Michael was born at home with everyone around and with a real old-fashioned district nurse in attendance. She knew much better than doctors how to handle things and the doctor (who had also seen my birth) was only called in at the last moment as a formality. Even the freedom given to our pets did not faze her and she became quite accustomed to removing various cats from the cot and seeing a dog gravely cleaning up Michael's face after a meal. All the old wives tales about terrible diseases were given short shrift in our house!

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