

CHAPTER 9

During the time that Podge was still alive, Richard died. That was in March 1966. He had been back with us for a few weeks longer than five years and was twelve and a half years old. At that time, we thought that that was a good life span for a cat, especially as he still had mild recurrences of the flu. It was obvious for some days that he was gradually running down and once his appetite had finally gone, we expected the end quite soon. Mr Amsden agreed with us, so we just kept him comfortable and well loved for the last few days and he died lying on my lap. That was the first cat death in our family and he left us the happier for having known him but the sadder for losing him. (I will have to break off typing for a while and have a quiet weep - quite unexpected after all this time since then. Our latest kitten, grown into a cat while I write this, is in her usual spot on my papers, so I will have a cuddle with her for a while.)

Later the same year, in October, Tina also died. She had been getting thinner for some time since the puppies were born and eventually got a leg ulcer than would not clear up. She simply wore out at the age of 10 years - we found that despite the late arrival of her puppies, dogs seldom live as long as cats anyway. So now, suddenly, we were facing what seemed in comparison to be quite an empty home! It was time, we felt, to think about another cat. Susie was more or less Eric's cat; Chalky was Michael's favourite; Sara was more or less ours, but a terrible fidget in bed - she usually started at night in the bed by Myrtle's feet until she couldn't breathe and then woke Myrtle every morning by nibbling her chin; the dogs were anybody's as usual but spent the day in their run and the night in the kitchen. I seemed to be without anyone!

We looked around and found an announcement for kittens quite near by. I went to have a look and found an Indian couple who had moved to England not long before, and with their new status of house owners had also thought they needed a cat. They did in fact get a brother and sister but were woefully ignorant of the facts of (cat) life and so the pair mated and produced two kittens. The kittens were very similar - both red and white but one semi-longhaired and the other long-haired. The little female had one eye - the left - that had not opened even though they were old enough to leave their mother, so, of course, I fell for her. Their owners told me that she had been weaned just that morning as she had shared their breakfast egg - they really did *not* know much about cat care! Luckily she was quite happy to move over to proper kitten food. My mother and father liked the look of her as well, so a few days later, they had her brother. We thought hard about a name so as to have an entirely suitable one. As she was beautiful and had a beautiful little voice and we were, and are, great admirers of Cleo Laine, the singer, we called her Cleo. Just to be a little more fanciful, we gave her the full name of Cleopatra. We once sent a photo of her to Cleo Laine with an explanation, but don't know if she ever received it or understood it amongst all her fan mail!

We took Cleo to Mr Amsden to see if her eye could be properly opened, but he said that he knew about the mating and had explained some cat things to her ex-owners, particularly that in-bred cats were rarely fully healthy. So he was only able to cut cleanly both those eyelids so that she could open it properly, but the eyeball was not

properly formed as an actual functioning eye, so was just a pinkish blank. He said that if he removed the eyeball, it would take a lot more care and attention to prevent continuous infection, so if we did not mind the look of it, he would leave it as it was and I would just have to make sure it kept clean. Her tear duct on that side was not completely under control, so it weeped a little, but a touch of antiseptic on my handkerchief from time to time made sure that her fur stayed dry and her eyeball clean. Later, when she was sterilised, Mr Amsden said that it was just in time, as she had ovarian cysts that would soon have killed her - again due to the in-breeding.

As Cleo was so small and young, we gave her special attention over the next few weeks. She had a shoe box for her bed to start with and even a small saucer for her food was bigger than she was! She travelled to visit my parents, and also a long distance with us in her shoe box only a few days after we got her. While I was at work, Myrtle found that she liked go around the house with her and so she tucked her into the big collar of a sweater that she had then. Myrtle even took her to meet the boys from school, still tucked into the collar and Cleo went around with her like that for quite a long time. She never grew into a big cat, so was still small enough for that sort of attention for a long time. But, like Richard, the shoe box at night was rapidly left in favour of our bed.

My parents had moved to Bexhill-on-Sea the year before when my father retired at 65, so we visited them there quite frequently. We took Cleo to see them within a few days of getting her, so had to go back again a few days later with her brother, who they named Nicky. They both loved him very much but he was less than a year old when he was hit and killed by a passing car. It was a great pity, as he had grown into a perfectly healthy and very handsome cat. They did not think that they could stand another loss like that, so never had another cat. Shortly after that, Podge was killed by a car and six months after that, we acquired another cat. This happened a year after we got Cleo, in a rather involved way, but I first must tell you some more about Cleo.

Within a few days of getting her, we had to go to a Drama Festival at Folkestone. By then, we had moved from working at Youth Hall to working with a local amateur dramatics society called The Lourdes Players and then to another group called the Tavistock Repertory Company. The Lourdes Players was a catholic youth group who invited us, despite not being catholics ourselves, to work with them. We started at the Youth Hall where they performed three times a year, but soon were involved in an exciting project of designing a proper stage in the new church hall that was soon to be built. The church committee was very keen to have the society move in to the hall when it was finished, but the society's committee said that they would only do so if the stage facilities were at least as good, if not better, than Youth Hall. As we had been part of the construction crew for the Youth Hall stage, we were in a good position to advise and help and most of the requirements for good stage and technical needs were agreed by the committees and the architects in time to get all we needed incorporated in the new building. We worked for several years with the Lourdes Players, mostly on lighting, sound and costumes but with side trips into scenery, acting and directing. Even I got involved in the acting, playing the pianist in a spoof amateur pageant (I can actually play!), the methodist preacher in Arsenic and Old Lace and a rabbi in an Albert Hall pageant! My acting was rather unkindly summed up by a local reviewer for Arsenic in that he felt that "Tony Batchelor's beard was

perhaps a mistake as he seemed rather uncomfortable with it." Did anyone have the heart to tell him that it was my own of at least ten years standing?

Some years later, in 1966, the year Cleo came to us (and the year that Koshka was born) we left the LP's to join the Tavistock Repertory Company who have the only licensed amateur theatre in London - actually in Canonbury. The TRC gave us many more opportunities to use our talents and we worked there for many years until the travelling on the more and more crowded London roads became too much for us. As for most amateur theatre groups, the TRC took part in festivals and had been invited to go to Folkestone. By then, our Jaguar had given way to a Bedford 30 cwt van, so we laid some mattresses on the floor and took the costumes, half the cast and Cleo in a shoe box, with us. She enjoyed the attention and long kitten type sleeps in her cosy box both in the van and in the dressing room. It set her up for life to the idea of travelling and she always thereafter looked forward to all our trips, which naturally always included her.

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