

CHAPTER 5

One winter evening in February of 1961, the telephone rang and a strangers voice asked if we had lost a black cat. The lady and her husband had found a cat with our name on the collar. Very worriedly, remembering only too vividly how Richard had disappeared, we looked around to find Blackie and were very relieved to find her in the house, complete with collar. I asked what made her think that the cat could be ours and she again said that the cat was definitely wearing a collar and medallion with our name on it. Unbelievably, she then said that it was an adult, smooth haired black cat with one white whisker and was drinking milk in her house at that moment! After almost two years, could it really be Richard? Naturally, we quickly got her address and onto the motorbike to her house.

We were met at the door with apologies - the cat had finished the milk while she was on the phone to us and slipped out again and was nowhere to be seen. However, we spent some time talking and were then sure that it must be Richard. She said that he had appeared two summers ago, stealing milk from her jug by dipping his paw in and licking it clean, exactly as Richard had taught himself to do. She had watched him from a distance and saw him go to a shed in the next door garden, where he seemed to be sleeping and eating, although he then continued to come back and she gave him odd scraps. Until a few days before she rang us, she had fully believed that he belonged to her neighbours and it was only by a chance conversation that they discovered simultaneously that they both had the same belief and he had more or less been living 50/50 off the both of them. She then shut the door on him next time he came in for milk and read the name, address and telephone number on his medallion and discovered, to her astonishment, that it was quite a distance away. And that was when she rang us.

We hardly knew how to thank her and were besides ourselves with anxiety that he might have disappeared from us again. She managed to reassure us that he would certainly be back again the next day and I gave her my telephone number at work so that she could call even if it was during the day.

Sure enough, the following day, early afternoon, she rang me to say that the cat was in her house, with the doors firmly shut. I rushed away to the motorcycle sheds, luckily the lab head was still a cat lover!, and away to her house where a black cat was sitting in the living room. To my astonishment, he recognised me immediately and leapt into my arms - I don't know if a cat can cry like a human, but, if not, I made up for it. The collar responsible for the miracle, although the

worst for wear, was still firmly around his neck. My lack of planning meant that I had not even thought how I would get him home, but my faith in him was so great that I just tied a piece of ribbon through that collar and to a bracket inside the sidecar to take him home. Our reunion with our family in our own home was something to remember to this day. Susie remembered her friend straight away and Blackie soon got used to the sudden arrival of a strange, adult, cat. Richard was beside himself with joy, as were we all!

We struck up a friendship with Mrs Smith and her husband, although it was not for very long as they were an elderly couple and Mr Smith died only a few years later.

Mrs Smith did not long survive him, but her son told us as he knew how much we were indebted to them. While she lived, we always sent her a Christmas card from Richard. Soon after we had Richard at home once more, we went back to see them and get the full story. As they had first told us, both they and their neighbours were firmly convinced that Richard belonged to the other. He lived up to our ideas of him as a smart cat, and managed to find a good place to sleep and food and drink from each. Their house was only two doors away from our dentists surgery, so we were then quite sure that he must have followed Myrtle all that way, almost two years before. He must have been a very sad and bewildered little cat when she disappeared from his sight and wandered around looking for her, only to miss her when she came out again almost an hour later. An hour is not long to us or a cat normally, but must have seemed an eternity to him at that time. He was quite well when I got him home, but the Smiths said that he had been ill a year or so ago. We took him to see the vet, who was as thrilled as we were, and he thought that Richard might well have had a bout of cat flu. In years to come, he did have more mild bouts of it, as if he had developed a susceptibility but with a resistance to bad attacks - almost like a human who has been vaccinated against flu.

Now that Richard was home again, life settled back into a usual family routine and we did not get another cat for a long time. Michael started school and Eric eventually decided to start talking. Eric was actually one of twins, but the other never fully developed in the womb, so, luckily for us, we only had two sons. Lucky, because it had never dawned on us and the architect that our second child might be a girl. As a result, we only built the bungalow with two bedrooms! So the boys shared theirs for many years, bunk beds being needed once Eric was old enough to sleep away from us. Tina kept Eric tidy in the same way as she did for Michael, but Eric turned out to be rather more adventurous. When he was small, we could safely leave Michael in his playpen with Tina and he would settle down

quite happily. Eric, however, quite soon discovered that if he piled his toys up in a corner, then he could climb out, leaving a sheepish looking dog stuck in the playpen by herself!

The other climbing adventure that Eric indulged in was to climb onto the model railway that we had initially built for Michael (and us!) in their bedroom. Unfortunately, the climbing did so much damage that we had to dismantle it and it was never put back together.

Soon after Richard was back with us, Dinkie, Myrtle's old cat, died. Dinkie had, of course, stayed with her parents, so it was nice for her to be now living close to them and him. They had a neighbour, a middle-aged lady and her elderly mother, who always said that they would never take on the responsibility of a cat, but were quite happy to invite Dinkie in for a snack from the tin that they kept especially for him! Myrtle's mother always got very cross about it and managed to stop it happening too much so that Dinkie always knew where his true home was. After he died, then the neighbours transferred their affection and food to Blackie. We think that she was rather put out by Richards arrival on her scene and perhaps she was not all that keen on children. Anyway, she spent more and more time down there, although usually coming home at night when called (we heard the neighbours back door being surreptitiously shut just before she turned up!) and putting on rather more weight than we thought good for her. Eventually, she just moved out permanently and we hardly saw her. About that time we got ourselves another cat, so that probably decided Blackie as to which side her bread was buttered. Jumping ahead a bit, Blackie died before she was ten and very overweight. She was happy with her changed life, but it was a pity that she became such a pampered pet.

The way that our home was built, affected many things in our lives.

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