

A SAMPLE FROM SOUTH OF SERENITY

Almost all domesticated animals love to ride in a car, and in this respect Mischief was no different from other pets. Nothing gave her greater pleasure. She was always an interesting and active passenger.

With Ruby and Shelby, our bay lynx, as fellow companions, our excursions to and from the farm each week were anything but dull. Sometimes the three got into a heated tussle over a coveted meat morsel one of them had pilfered from our food supply, and plenty of excitement reigned for a moment in the interior of the sedan.

Many times my father had been forced to pull over to the side of the road and take a hand in these frays. I was generally entrusted with the welfare of the three in the rear of the car but during these exciting moments, I was not equal to the occasion. It was up to Father to go over the top and restore order.

This meant that Father would stop the car and scramble back over the front seat and plunge into the thick of the battle. We usually knew to whom the coveted morsel belonged, for the rule followed with our animals was, finding is keeping. It was my task to see that justice was done, and render

peace to all.

Sometimes it was Shelby who had found the prize; sometimes it was Ruby who committed the theft; but, most often, it was Mischief who finally ate the tidbit, for she was by far the greatest snooper.

I always performed my duty to the three by rewarding the discoverer - much to the disgust of the two disappointed losers. I did not always come out of the melee unscathed. Our protégés were growing rapidly these days, and I was made to realize their prowess and increasing combativeness on each succeeding occasion.

These were merry times, as I think back upon them now. I often recall what a comical sight we must have been to passing motorists, this moving menagerie, in the full tilt of a many-sided battle - a raccoon, a fox, a bobcat, a boy and a man, thrashing about in the interior of a sedan loaded down with provisions and what not.

One occasion, in particular, left a lasting impression upon me. Mischief was just under three months of age at the time. She had a peculiar quirk of wanting to ride upon my shoulder as I rode in the car. I did not mind this, for she was quite small and cute, and it kept her out of trouble in the rear of the sedan.

We had just entered the canyon, and Father was taking the grade at a good speed, when Mischief was seized by one of her temperamental moods. These spells would come on periodically, without any apparent reason; but, on this occasion, the cause was hunger. We were late in starting, and had put off feeding our wild family their evening meal until we should arrive at the farm. Suddenly, without warning, Mischief caught me by the lobe of the left ear and began to chew on it in a savage manner, as if she were munching on a piece of beefsteak.

The attack was so sudden and the effect so painful that I gave a yell and caught at her with my hand. My move only served to increase Mischief's carnivorous instinct, and likewise the pain she was inflicting upon me.

At the moment, we were spinning around sharp curves on a narrow and steep canyon road. Whether or not we should topple over into the canyon below, Father nevertheless applied the brakes and came to a stop on the brink of the precipice.

Now you can force a raccoon to go hungry, but you cannot destroy its instinct to eat when something gets between its jaws. The lotor is an animal of a

one-track mind. So the more I labored to relieve my misery, the more persistent Mischief became in feasting upon my ear.

Then a happy thought occurred to me. I talked to that coon in the sweetest of tones, and tenderly stroked her behind the ears -a raccoon's one weak spot. It was a moment before my change in tactics had its effect. Then, suddenly, Mischief began to purr, and I heaved a sigh of relief. She had let go!

It was several days before the hurt entirely vanished from my injured ear. However, this was the only instance in which Mischief ever showed any taste for human flesh.

We were spending the greater portion of our time at our home in the city, and Mischief had become quite a little lady. That is, she had as much dignity as a raccoon is capable of acquiring. In town, Mischief and Ruby occupied a room of their own in the servant quarters, which relieved us of considerable worry, because we knew where we could always find them.

Necessity forced us to go to all this trouble, for there is a limit to the education of a wild animal. Our raccoon pet never fully understood why man should desire property rights. A baby grand piano and a common dry-goods box were the same to

her, as far as her treatment of either was concerned. Sharp claws and growing teeth have a way of craving exercise upon such objects.

Mischief also possessed a mania for the chewing of cloth. It made no difference to her whether it were old or new, cotton or wool.

Any old rag was welcome when these spells seized her.

At the farm, I had fallen into the bad habit of leaving my clothing, on retiring, in the first chair handy, instead of in the closet. I had been warned on this score several times, but I was at the tender age of ten, when a boy may not take much pride in his habits. The lesson was due me, so I was told no more. I knew what would happen, sooner or later, if I waited long enough.

It did; and just as I had foreseen. On arising early one morning, I hastily sought my wearing apparel, but there was no clothing to be seen. In the chair, where I had left my clothes, lay Mischief, sprawled on her back, sound asleep, all four feet ludicrously extended in the air. The clothing was scattered all over the place.

Grumbling sleepily to myself, I began to gather up piece by piece. As I did so, I awakened by degrees.

The seat of my knickers was completely eaten out; both feet of my socks were torn into shreds; and a sleeve of my shirt was strangely missing. Mischief had had one of her teething spells.

For services rendered, Father rewarded the good-habit teacher with an ample breakfast of fried crisp bacon and raisins, her two favorite dishes. Mischief seemed to enjoy immensely the favor bestowed upon her, even though she didn't understand the reason for all this kindness. Nor did she trouble to wash her food before eating it, as is the age-old custom of the lotor. That was an instinct which she seemed never to have had.

Nevertheless, Mischief was a water enthusiast. Bathing was her one extravagance. Every day she took her bath. She required no assistance in the matter after the water had once been turned on. On the contrary, she resented interference.

Always, as soon as Mischief had eaten her breakfast, she went into the bath off the animal room, and, as droll as a monkey, climbed into the tub. Then she began to chirr, and we would turn on the faucet for her.

Now that the water was running, Mischief placed the drain stopple in the bottom of the tub of her own accord, as accurately as a human being could

perform the feat. The sight and sound of flowing water always seemed to pep her up a bit, and a spirit of hilarity would seize her.

Lowering her head, snorting and chirring, Mischief rushed the water as if it were something alive. Time and again she repeated this ruse, seemingly having the time of her life. Then, as the water rose about her body, she reared and tried to grasp the spurting stream with her tiny hands to prevent its flow.

The fun was just beginning. Because of the obstruction of Mischief's hands, the water sprayed in all directions, drenching the four walls from ceiling to tile-covered floor. If there were any onlookers, they got a soaking, and a good one, as this stage of her ablution generally lasted for several minutes; or until the water had risen so high that she became afloat.

Drifting from one end of the tub to the other, droll and unconcerned, Mischief swam about until the water began to splash over on the floor. Then she caught the chain of the stopple and pulled it up. When her feet again touched the bottom of the tub, she replaced the stopple. It seemed to be her greatest delight to feel her body lifted by the buoyancy of the rising water.

Often, on a hot morning, for a quarter of an hour or so, Mischief enjoyed herself in this manner. Then, having had enough, she chirred for us to turn off the faucet. As the last of the water went gurgling down the drain pipe, she always tried to catch it and hold it back with her little active hands.

If one were still in the room, it was time to make a hasty exit; for invariably Mischief went into a spasm of ecstasy, and came charging up over the side of the tub in one of her impish moods. There was nothing to do now but get her out of the house as quickly as possible, to where she could dry in the sun.



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