

Queen Purrpuss & Owl



by Uncle
Tasper



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by

Uncle Jasper

Dr Bowdler approves of this book which can be read without a blush by any maiden. But he believes that Captain Wirewhiskers, the famous pirate, and his crew are not a good role model for the younger generation.

He greatly admires Owl for rescuing Daphne Feline, the cat, from various dangers and tight corners she had got herself into. He would describe him as a brave gentleman, if he were not a bird.

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{ 1 } The Island of Simplicity

'Stop fiddling with the controls,' said the cat. 'We'll land in the sea. The balloon is getting lower all the time. Just turn up the gas '.

The red and white striped balloon that carried two passengers, one a handsome ginger cat, was no longer fat, and round, it was more pear shaped, and sinking towards the water. Folds appeared in the material as the hot air inside cooled down.

'It's not my fault,' said Owl. 'There isn't any gas to turn up. It's running out fast. We will have to throw something overboard so we can stay up a little longer.'

They threw out some unopened tins of strawberry jam. That helped, but not much.

Owl looked around and saw a small case with the initials **DF** engraved on it. It belonged to his travelling companion, Daphne Feline. He threw it overboard.

'That was my make-up case,' shrieked the cat. 'Stop the balloon.'

No one can stop a balloon, it goes where the wind drives it, and the cat could only watch as her make-up case sank out of sight.

'This is going to cost you,' she said. 'Hundreds of dollars worth of makeup gone. How can I compete in the Annual Cat Show without my makeup. I should never have come on this so called holiday.'

'There's an island just ahead,' said Owl. 'Throwing out the case may have made all the difference.'

'We're sinking lower all the time. I'll never forgive you, Owl, if we land in the sea. You know I hate getting wet.'

'I'll fly the rest of the way,' said Owl, 'That may help.'

In spite of all this their balloon hit the water and sank not far from the shores of the Island of Simplicity. Owl was able to fly to safety, but the cat, Daphne, remained on the wreckage of their balloon as it slid under the waves, and called loudly for assistance.

Some islanders were on the shore, fishing. Owl hooted at them to draw their attention to the unfolding tragedy.

They dropped their fishing gear and swam out to circle the wreckage until the cat jumped on to the head of one of them and stuck in her claws, nearly driving the swimmer under the water.

'You're splashing me,' she cried, and dug in her claws even further as her rescuers swam towards the beach. 'Be more careful, I'm wet through.'

Safely on the beach Daphne spent some time licking her fur and trying to shake water off her paws.

'Where are those persons who brought me ashore?' she asked. 'They were all splashing me, I'll give them a piece of my mind. It will take hours for me to get dry, and I'll look a fright without my make-up.'

'You can't talk to any of them,' said Owl, 'It was the mayor who rescued you, And they have taken him away to treat the claw-marks on his head'.

Owl thought they might be marooned on the island for some time so he built Daphne a hut of palm fronds on the beach and covered it with the canopy of the balloon which had been washed ashore.

Daphne refused to help.

She said, 'The disaster was all your fault. You lured me on to the balloon with false promises. You didn't bring enough gas and you should have known that strawberry jam was not a suitable food for a balloon voyage, particularly one which lasted for months. If I never taste strawberry jam again it will be too soon.'

Owl said, 'I'm sorry about the jam, but I brought my life savings, for emergencies, such as this.'

'Yes, I know about your life savings, and it amounts to the grand sum of fifty cents. How are we going to live on that, pray?'

Owl pointed out that they needed no money. They would live as the Simps did and eat fruit fallen from the trees. If a change of diet was required they needed only to go to the sea shore with a frying pan, hold it out over the water and call in the sweetest tones; 'Here fishy fishy. Come, jump into my pan to start the greatest adventure of your life. The Simps did it all the time and there was never a shortage of fish eager to try something new.'

Daphne had a cold. She sniffed and said she had never heard such nonsense in her life, but if he wished to waste his time he was free to do so. She was going to lie down in the hut as soon as he had brought enough palm fronds and bracken for her bed, and he could call her when the fish was ready.

Everything went well at first, the fish behaved as expected, were cooked, and the fruit was delicious. Daphne did not like fruit but ate the fish. She said she preferred trout and advised Owl to try another spot on the shore to see if he could get trout next time.

He said that trout was a fresh water fish and they were on an island surrounded by seawater, which is salt, and she said not to bother her with details but to use his initiative.

After they had eaten Daphne went into the hut to sleep while Owl perched on a branch overhead. He wanted to keep an eye on the hut during the night.

Next morning he was awakened by the murmuring of a crowd which had gathered below his branch. There were about a hundred Simps present, perhaps all that lived on the Island of Simplicity.

One of them knocked on the door of the hut. Owl flew down to perch on the roof.

Heading the callers was the mayor. Owl knew him straight away because of the bits of sticking plaster all over his bald head.

'Good morning,' said Owl.

'Good morning,' said the mayor

'Tell them to go away,' said Daphne who was still in bed. 'I have a shocking headache, as well as a cold. I don't want to be disturbed, and I look awful because you threw my make-up case into the sea.'

'What can we do for you?' enquired Owl politely.

'Ask them if they have any kitty litter', said the cat, from within the hut. 'It is most uncivilized not to have kitty litter, and you should never have gone ballooning without it.'

'We have no kitty litter' said the mayor, but we saw this beautiful hut you have built and came to tell you that tomorrow is tree climbing day.'

'Tree climbing day, I see,' said Owl, who was puzzled, 'And why is tomorrow tree climbing day?'

'Because tomorrow is Thursday'.

'Do tell them to go away,' said Daphne. 'I refuse to climb trees on Thursdays, or any other day. This is some ignorant superstition of theirs.'

'No it is not!' said the mayor, shaking his head. 'Every Thursday we climb the highest trees on the island and stay there until we are safe. The Gum trees are the tallest, so we climb those.'

'They're mad, the lot of them,' said Daphne. 'I will never forgive you, Owl, for talking me into this foolish trip on your balloon, of which you spoke so highly, and the first ship that calls here, I'm joining it to work my way home. I would sooner be a ship's cat than trust my life to these savages.'

Owl was thinking about other things. 'Why do you climb the Gum trees every Thursday?'

'To escape the wave.'

'What wave?'

'Every Thursday a great big wave comes out of the sea and sweeps over the island. No one can remember any Thursday when it did not come. This lovely hut you have built will be swept away tomorrow, and you also, unless you are up in a Gum tree with us.'

'Did you hear that?' cried Owl. 'Tomorrow you will have to climb a tree to escape drowning.' He turned again to the mayor. 'What causes these waves, do you know, and why Thursdays?'

'Ah, I have heard several stories, and the one I think most likely is this --- In the Ocean of Infinity there swims a giant turtle, and standing on his shell are four big - big elephants who hold up the world with their trunks. However supporting the world like this is tiring work, and the gods take over for one day a week, on Thursdays. During his day off the great turtle practices diving and swimming. His swimming is excellent but his diving ability is poor, he can manage only belly-flops, and these cause the waves that sweep over the island. As far as I can see this is the most reasonable explanation of all'.

'Poppycock,' said the cat; 'Unadulterated garbage! It's a foul native plot to get us up in the trees where we would be helpless. They may fool you, Owl, but I am a civilized intelligent cat. I will stay in bed on Thursday. The only wave that is going to swamp this island is a wave of nonsense. You mark my words; I will be here safe and dry while you sit in those uncomfortable trees waiting for an imaginary wave.'

'I am an owl,' said Owl. 'Perching in trees is never uncomfortable for me.'

'And I am of the ancient race of cats. In Old Egypt they treated us as gods and now I am marooned on this wretched island at the mercy of a tribe who, for all I know, are nothing but a lot of savage cannibals.'

'Owls are as good as cats any day. The goddess Athena was our patron, she valued us for our wisdom. She was so wise and clever that the Greeks named Athens, their city, after her.'

Daphne, the cat, as usual, was not listening. She said, 'This is a dreadful come-down for any cat. Very well, go and climb trees with them, if that's what you want, leave me here, helpless and unprotected, but dinner is to be on time, and it had better be properly cooked.'

Next day, Thursday, Owl noticed that his was the only hut on the island, but there were a number of handsome houses built high in the Gum trees, which were plentiful and tall.

Everyone except the cat was looking out from their tree houses, or sitting on high branches. He flew up to join them. They sat there and waited. The cat went back to bed.

After a time the Simps all pointed to a big wave on the horizon, it was racing towards the island. 'Not long now,' said the mayor. 'When the wave has passed we will be able to get down and clean everything'.

The wave arrived and broke on the shore with a great crash. The next thing they saw was the floating remains of the hut, and Daphne who was yowling with rage as she was swept by underneath them.

Owl felt he really ought to do something. During their balloon ride he had met fishing owls, who lived on an Indonesian island. They would swoop down and snatch fish, eels, and snakes from the sea, and eat them.

Owl had never caught anything heavier than a mouse, but thought it worth trying.

He flew as hard as he could after the disappearing cat who was struggling in the water.

He caught up and Daphne sensed that he was just above her. She looked up and swore at him. 'This is the last time I go on a trip with you,' she said.

Owl had no time to argue. He sank a little lower and gripped her back with his talons.

'Ow!' she cried, 'That hurts!! Stop it, let go at once! Go away and get someone with soft claws.'

Owl refused to do so. His wings working as they had never worked before he managed to drag the wet, struggling, spitting creature out of the water and finally back to the tree branch where he perched alongside the mayor.

Daphne lay on her stomach on the branch, draped over it and hanging down either side, a bundle of wet misery.

'You'll pay for this,' she said, while coughing up some water. 'I swear there are wounds on my back from your talons. Yesterday you threw away my make-up case, and now you've dug your talons into my back. There was no need to do any of that. When I get home I'll call the Cat Protection Society and have you arrested for gross cruelty.'

'Just lie there,' advised Owl. 'When you dry off you will feel better.'

'Better!' she screeched. 'Better!! How can you make such an unfeeling, disgusting remark. I will never recover from the horrors of this trip, never!' She tried to claw at Owl but instead fell off the branch into the water, an event which was watched, with some satisfaction, by the Simps who were sitting on other branches of the tree.

The strength of the current was much less because the wave had moved on but it was still strong enough to carry her away.

Owl sighed and was about to fly off on another rescue mission when the mayor, who was sitting beside him, put a hand on his wing.

'Let her go,' he said. 'You were very brave to rescue her the first time but now you are exhausted. If you try again you may drown also.'

'But I brought her here,' cried the owl, very distressed. 'I will be responsible if she drowns.'

'She won't drown. Remember she is a cat and has used up only two of her lives; she has seven left. Just stay on the branch and recover your strength.'

Owl was so tired he followed this wise advice and sorrowfully watched the cat drift away. He stayed on the island but perched every night on a high branch in case the gods or the Great Turtle got their days mixed up.

{ 2 } Captain Wirewhiskers

Daphne did not drown but was picked up by a passing pirate ship. The commander of the ship, though short, was a fearsome man, Captain Wirewhiskers, the most dreaded pirate in those waters. He didn't much like cats but signed Daphne on as the ship's cat. He was sorry later.

Daphne was in a foul mood when dragged out of the water because she had fallen in twice on the same day, and then been swept out to sea. Her fur was wet. She was hauled aboard the ship by a boat-hook, and this added to her annoyance.

Boat hooks are wooden poles with a hard, sharp hook on the end. It hurts to be pulled out of the water with one of these, it is also undignified. Everyone who understands cats knows it is unwise to treat them disrespectfully; they resent such treatment.

Daphne had to be stopped from attacking Smawkins, the cook, and Jorkins the bosun, and Lawkins, the first mate. It was these men who had rescued her, and had the claw marks to prove it.

Captain Wirewhiskers, a man justly known as the terror of the seas, liked her spirit and decided that she could join the crew as the ship's cat because his ship *The True Lover's Knot* was troubled by rats.

This arrangement did not last long. She did not like the ship, nor the food, nor sleeping in the crew members' quarters. The captain discovered too late that she was allergic to rats and refused to catch any. So as well as a quarrelsome, bossy cat he also had a plague of rats on his ship.

He would have put her off at Panama, which was the nearest port, except that the ship had been there before, and there was no way the residents of Panama would allow them anywhere near the place again. In fact they had visited most ports in the area and had worn out their welcome at each one in a very short time.

Everyone was afraid of Captain Wirewhiskers, a villain who held his own in that fearful pantheon of sea robbers, Murgatroyd Flint, James Hook, Long John Silver, William Blackbeard, Mary Bonney, and other scoundrels too numerous to mention. Everyone that is except Daphne, the ginger cat; she feared no one. He was stuck with her.

She would not shut up and would not stop arguing. The cat followed him around drawing attention to his faults and urging him to do better. The sails needed a good

wash, and the whole ship should be cleaned from the main top to the keel with a hard scrub and plenty of soap and elbow grease. She said this would get rid of those horrible rats. It was her opinion that the entire crew should be smartened up. The men had a poor record of washing their plates after meals, in fact they did not wash up at all.

Some of the crew went to the captain and asked him to dispose of her. 'Tie her in a bag with a cannon ball for company and drop her over the side,' said Smawkins, the cook, who was still covered in scratch marks. 'She's bad luck, and should be got rid of.'

Captain Wirewhiskers was aghast at the suggestion. 'There'll be no cats put down while I'm in charge of this ship; it brings rotten bad luck to do a thing like that,' he said.

'I knew the Ancient Mariner when he was still a boy. It wasn't shooting the albatross with a cross-bow what brought the curse on him; it was because he missed with his first shot and killed the ship's cat instead. There's yer answer; anyone touch that cat and I'll fly his guts from the maintop.'

Daphne did not know about this conversation and kept on licking her gingery fur clean. She was not happy with either the appearance or behaviour of the crew. She advised the captain that, whenever he captured a merchant ship and stole other people's property, he had to make particular enquiries as to whether there was a barber on board. If there was one he should be forced to join the pirate crew so everyone could have a haircut and shave. The captain was a special case and was told that he was to buy, or steal, a pair of wire cutters to trim his beard. In fact Daphne gave him so much good advice that she drove him mad.

He made her second in command with the one purpose of shutting her up, but it did not work, she was worse than ever. One day he was climbing up to the lookout to escape the sound of her voice when he missed his footing and fell into the sea. None of the crew saw this mishap, and he was left struggling in the water while his ship sailed on.

The crew, quite rightly, blamed Daphne for this terrible loss. It has to be said that they were a very ignorant group. None of them had any trade except thieving, and they were not good sailors either. They relied all the time on having Captain Wirewhiskers there to tell them what to do, and screaming at them, and hitting them when they did it wrong. They were so helpless and so inclined to burst into tears when they thought about their unfortunate lives that Daphne had to step in and take command of *The True Lovers Knot*.

Her very first order was to take down the sails and give them a good wash; the second was to scrub every part of the ship including the masts; the third was that all dishes were to be washed after every meal and that all pots and pans were to be scrubbed until they gleamed.

The crew complained and said that shiny pots and pans had not yet been invented, and wouldn't be for at least three hundred years.

She was very hard on them and enforced her orders, by beating them mercilessly with Captain Wirewhiskers favourite length of rope.

The crew grumbled among themselves saying that the other pirates would laugh at them if they had a spotless ship. They had not run away from comfortable homes and gone to sea to wash dishes, make beds, and sweep dust over the side. If the new captain wanted a clean ship she should hire servants and leave the crew to get on with what they did best, that is attacking rich merchant ships and plundering helpless cities.

Captain Daphne faced them all down armed only with cutlass and pistols. They had to obey orders and mind their manners while she was around. Her biggest problem was that she had no idea where they were. No one on the ship could read a map. The helmsman, whose job it was to steer the ship, understood how the compass worked, but that was not much help if they did not know which way they should go. When the sails were put back after being washed they did not seem quite right; perhaps they were on the wrong way round, or upside down. Perhaps they should have been put on in front of the masts instead of behind; no one could quite remember.

They sailed round in circles for a day or two because the helmsman said Captain Wirewhiskers had always given him his orders; without them he did not know which way to turn.

On the third day they sighted land and at last managed to steer a wavery course towards it. Captain Daphne thought there might be rich pickings there, which cheered the crew up a bit.

They did not know it but they were actually approaching one of the lands where the Gum Tree grows. In other words it was The Island of Simplicity, the exact same island from which Daphne had been washed away by the Thursday tsunami. Luckily it was a Monday so the ship was not dashed ashore and wrecked.

The Simps saw the ship approaching but did not recognize it as a pirate vessel, it was so clean. The sails looked strange, they were snowy white and gleamed in the sunshine.

Even when it was closer and they saw that it was *The True Lovers Knot* they did not worry.

As the ship approached their shore the Simps sent for Owl because he was now mayor of the island and it was his job to greet visitors and ask them to go away.

Owl put on his robe and chain of office, and also a black three cornered hat with a tall feather stuck in it. He looked ridiculous of course, no owl, in fact no one, should be expected to dress like that, but it is the job of mayors, to wear this gear on important occasions, even if it does make them look silly.

When they were close enough to shore Captain Daphne ordered the sailors to drop anchor. She stopped them as they were about to do so and reminded them that it first had to be attached to the chain; even she knew that much about anchors. Then the jolly boat was swung over the side and splashed into the water.

The pirates did one thing well, at least they knew how to row. The crew of the jolly boat got in, everyone armed with guns and swords, as was their captain. She ordered them to row her to shore.

Because this was her first raiding party, and first attempt to be a real pirate captain, she had put on the best and cleanest clothes she could find in Wirewhisker's cabin; she wanted to make a good impression on her victims.

Daphne had the natural elegance of the cat family and her ginger fur had been licked all over before she came ashore so that it shone in the sun. She wore a handsome broad brimmed hat pinned back with a big mourning brooch that Wirewhiskers had stolen from somewhere. On it was carved the likeness of a young man weeping over a grave, and below were the words *Daphne my love, you are dead and gone*.

Her full length coat was not buttoned. She had left it open that so everyone could see she was carrying under her belt a sword and two pistols with silver handgrips.

The mayor stepped forward and nearly tripped over the hem of his robe, it was far too long for him. He did not recognize Daphne as the sun was in his eyes. He read out the speech. It was as follows - 'My lords, ladies and gentlemen - The residents of The Island of Simplicity welcome you. We hope your stay here will be happy, but short. We remind our honoured visitors that we have nothing worth taking; all

our money and valuables were swept out to sea long ago, and lost forever. The noble Captain Wirewhiskers was here once and if he could find nothing to steal you may be sure there is nothing here.'

The pirates were angry when they heard the mayor's speech and would have started searching at once for the treasures they still believed to be hidden on the island.

Captain Daphne acted quickly. She waved her cutlass in the air and drew a pistol from her belt.

'Avast ye lubbers,' she cried. These were words she had picked up from Captain Wirewhiskers. 'Not a man-jack of ye will stir until I say so. Now, back to the boat with you, and you'll wait there until I give me orders.'

The men shambled back to the jolly boat, all the while casting black looks at their captain. She ignored them and turned her attention to the mayor.

'I think I know you,' she said, 'take off that stupid hat and let me have a look.'

The mayor knew her too. It was her voice. How many times during the journey had her complaining, nagging, bullying voice rung in his ears? Now he was afraid she would make him join her crew of fierce sailors and spend the rest of his life as a pirate; but he took off his hat anyway.

'It is you, Owl,' she cried, 'Just the one I need. You birds have a wonderful sense of direction, you fly all round the world and never lose your way. I'll swear you in as a member of the crew and you can guide us anywhere I want to go.'

'Not me,' said Owl. 'We owls don't have a sense of direction because we never go anywhere. You look for an albatross, or a shearwater, they travel hundreds of miles across the oceans and never get lost. They always find their way home.'

'No' you'll do. You found this island alright.'

'I didn't find it, we crashed here. At home I always get lost, you should know that'.

Captain Daphne did not take it kindly if anyone argued with her; she fired her pistol in the air to show that the discussion was over.

The noise of the pistol was followed by a yell from the direction of the beach. She swung round

While her back was turned the pirates had jumped into the jolly boat and were rowing towards the ship. They thought she had shot at them.

Daphne said a terrible oath she had learned from Captain Wirewhiskers. 'Odds bobs, liver and lights, I'll drag them out and you'll be a sight' she shouted. 'Come back ye lubbers, come back or I'll give you a taste of the rope's end.'

They laughed and jeered at her. One called out, 'Yer marooned now capting, and yer can stay there. We're sailin' away, and we don't care what happens to us as long as we're rid of you. So goodbye, and bad luck to yer.'

They rowed away and left their former commander standing forlornly on the shore. No one was happy about her being left behind, except the pirate crew.

They climbed on to the ship, and after a good deal of confusion t finally unfurled the sails. raised the anchor, and sailed slowly away from the shore.

It was a long while before Daphne could believe she was truly, once again, marooned on the island.

At last she turned to Owl and said, 'This is all your fault, Owl, If you had not lured me to go on this holiday from hell I could have been sitting by the fire at home at this very moment enjoying sardines on toast. But I have decided to stay for a while. The least you can do, after all the trouble you have caused me, is to arrange for me to live in a cabin high in one of the gum trees. Pick one that has a nice veranda out front so I can sit there and watch for passing ships; and it had better be ready for me to move in before Thursday, or I'll know the reason why!'

{ 3 } Executive Head Hunters.

Daphne the cat was on the shore lecturing the Simps about something or other when even she had to stop talking because nobody was listening, at least not to her. Instead they were distracted by a distant chant that was becoming ever louder and louder, ringing across the placid waters of the ocean and the sunny glades of their island.

It was a rhythmic sound as though a number of people were engaged in an activity that required them to keep in time. The voices rang out, HOO – HA – HOO – HA – HOO – HA, accompanied by a slow drum-beat that sounded at every HOO and was silent at every HA. The noise became louder and nearer until a long black war canoe swept into view. There were ten paddlers on board, five to a side, and each wielded a paddle two handed. Near the back of the canoe was one who kept time for the paddlers by thumping on a drum.

Sitting behind the drummer, was a warrior with a huge stomach, and muscles to match. He had no paddle to wield but sat at ease covered by a feathered cloak, buttoned across the front with what appeared to be diamond studs. Behind him was a gilded throne higher, but smaller. It was decorated with colored sea shells that reflected the sun on to the waves. On closer inspection one could see that these were gems shaped and polished to look like shells. The throne was empty.

A shouted order was heard and this fearsome vessel turned opposite the landing place. High on the prow was what appeared to be the carved head of a giant cat glaring straight at the Simps who stood in a nervous group on the sand, almost unable to move. They had seen the canoe before and its appearance always meant trouble.

The drummer waited for a favourable wave to carry them the short distance to the shore, then started drumming again much faster. The crew made the extra effort needed to run their vessel, bow first, straight up on to the beach. They jumped out on either side and pulled it well up out of the water. The chief rose, walked forward and stepped out without wetting his feet.

The paddles rattled into the bottom of the canoe and spears were taken out. Every warrior was armed and they formed two ranks on the beach facing inland. The spears were held upright with the butt resting on the sand. The chief had been handed a spear with a glittering tip. He stood a little in advance of his followers and the watchers could see that he wore polished gold arm bands and had a head-band of gold, which was decorated with diamonds.

The mayor of the island was waiting to greet them. He had been dressed in a hurry. His hat was over his eyes again. The mayoral chain had been hung the wrong way round, and the robe still did not fit. He had the usual speech of welcome tucked under his wing.

He cleared his throat and was about to begin reading when he stopped, astonished. The chief roared a command and everyone, including the chief himself, fell to their knees and then forward, face-down in the sand.

Owl was accustomed to his speeches bringing on strong attacks of boredom; they even bored him. He did not remember one being received like this, not before he had even opened his beak.

He looked round. Daphne was sitting near him. She looked neat, as always, and sat with her tail curled around her. She was certainly not going to show fear in front

of a tribe of savages. Owl realized that it was not him who had had this effect on their visitors; they had thrown themselves down in the sand to worship a cat.

After a moment the chief pushed himself up from the sand but remained on his knees. 'Oh great member of the feline race,' he intoned. 'She who must be obeyed. I have come from my people of the Bling Gum Nation to bring you greetings and to ask you to become our queen. Our last ruler, King Purrcat the 85th, a handsome black tom-cat, passed to his reward on the final night of the Winter Festival. Since then we have had no one to make our laws, no one to tell us what to do, no one to make our crops grow. The Great Council of Bling Gum sent me to beg you to be crowned as Queen Purrpuss the 40th, ruler and law-giver of our nation. We will be your faithful and obedient servants unto death, because no one can remember when we were not guided by a wise and far seeing cat.'

Those on the beach gazed at each in a wild surmise. Daphne, the cat, stared in shocked silence.

The chief continued. 'You will have the rule of life and death over all your subjects, and we will obey your every wish. Your enemies will be our enemies; and you will live in state in the palace from where your laws will go out to the whole world.'

The chief stopped speaking and once again fell face down while awaiting an answer.

Daphne was so astonished she remained silent, which was unusual for her. At all other times she spoke first and was still speaking when everyone else had finished.

The former mayor, who was standing with Owl whispered, 'This is very bad, tell her not to go with them.'

'I thought you wanted to get rid of her.'

'Not that much. Tell them to go away.'

Owl did not think he could be too stern with the cat worshippers. They had the only spears on the island. Perhaps it was a time to talk rather than give orders.

'How did you know that Daphne the cat was living on this island?'

The chief turned his head sideways and spat out some sand. He said,

'We captured a pirate ship. They couldn't out sail us and they couldn't fight, so we went on board and demanded they hand over the ship's cat. They said they didn't have one but told us they had given the Simps, on Simplicity Island, a very

handsome female ginger cat as a free gift. This was most kind of the pirates so we spared their lives and let them go. We came here instead to collect our future queen.'

The cat still said nothing so Owl decided it was time to speak up; What Daphne needed at this moment was an agent.

'This is a sudden and unexpected offer from the Bling Gum Nation', he said. 'Do you have a written contract? Before my client can agree to anything she must know what terms you are offering, how long her contract is for, the rates of pay, including overtime, etc.

'Oh, shut up, Owl' said the cat, suddenly recovering. 'I'll do the talking thank you'. She looked down on the chief, where he lay face down on the sand, and addressed the top of his head. 'Now, my man, do you have trout on this island of yours?'

'Yes, your imperial majesty. Trout will be brought to your kitchen every morning fresh from the mountain streams.'

'Bacon,liver, and kidneys. I am very partial to these, are they in good supply?'

'Mountains of them your majesty; as much as anyone could hope to eat in a lifetime.'

'This sounds very satisfactory. I, of course, will be supreme ruler of the nation, and do you have a supply of kitty litter?'

'All our kings and queens demanded kitty litter, ma'am, and you can be sure there will be no shortage.'

'It's not worth it,' muttered the Simp. 'She shouldn't trust them!'

Daphne heard him. 'And will I have the power of life or death over persons who give me unwanted advice?'

'Of course, Your Imperial Majesty. We can start at this very moment, if you wish.'

Daphne dismissed the idea with a wave of her paw. 'It is not necessary, but any further insolence, or questioning of my orders will be suitably dealt with.'

The Simp had nothing more to say.

'And will there be servants to look after me and obey my every command?'

'Legions of them, your majesty, hundreds, all eager to do your bidding. Death awaits any servant who does not carry out every one of your commands, or who offends you in the slightest degree.'

'Well, this is alright up to a point, but there is one matter we haven't covered – sardines on toast. I am very partial to sardines on toast.'

'This a happy coincidence your majesty, so was our Great King Purrcat the 85th. He left behind countless tins of sardines and our cooks will supply all the toast you can eat.'

'There is another important point to be cleared up. A certain irresponsible, foolish person threw my make-up case into the sea. It had my initials on the outside and it was a great loss.'

'Say no more your majesty, I shall put the criminal to death at your command.' The chief glared at the former mayor, believing him to be responsible.

'No, don't kill anyone at the moment. The question is do you have beauty parlours on the island?'

'Any number, your majesty, hundreds. The women of the Bling Gum nation are in and out of beauty parlours all the time. They change their make up to suit the jewellery they are wearing that day. But as queen you will have your own beautician and personal trainer.'

'Then there is nothing further to discuss,' said Daphne. 'I have done the best I could for the ungrateful race of Simps. No doubt they will miss me when I go; but then it will be too late. And you, Owl, I forgive you for luring me to come on this shocking trip, I see now I should never have listened, but perhaps it has turned out for the best. Though I am the injured party, and you threw away my make up case, we shall part friends.'

Owl knew it would be useless to point out that the ride in the balloon was her idea. She had nagged him into taking her into what they thought would be a short sight-seeing trip. But they were blown off course by an unexpected gale and ended up on the Island of Simplicity. Like most cats she remembered only the things she wanted to remember.

'Don't Go!', cried the Simp. He seemed really sorry that Daphne was leaving, though they had never got on in the past.

The chief leapt to his feet, spear at the ready. 'One word, your majesty, just one command and I will silence the old croaker forever.'

Daphne raised her paw again and waved it regally. 'No, they do not deserve me, but I will not shed blood at our parting. Put up your spear. I have decided there shall be peace between my people and the race of Simps. Farewell Owl. How you will get on without my advice I cannot imagine, but a higher duty calls and I wish you well.'

She turned to the chief. 'Now, am I to understand that the throne on the back of your boat is for me?'

'Yes, your majesty, for you alone, and your successors. Your Royal Cat Guard will now escort you to the canoe and assist you into the place of honour'.

A young warrior with a head-dress in the shape of a cat skull that had shiny gold teeth and glittering jewels for eyes rose to his feet and bowed to Daphne.

'If Your Gracious Majesty would be so kind as to follow me.' He paced towards the canoe with his spear held proudly. The cat, soon to be Queen Purrruss the 40th, stopped and looked at the chief. 'Before we go any further, tell me, where did you get the ridiculous name of Bling Gum'

'It is gracious of you to ask, your majesty, and we are most grateful for your interest. We call ourselves that because, as a race, we love wearing jewellery and body ornaments. Everyone does it; look around at your faithful warriors.'

It was true, they all wore golden arm-bands, anklets, earrings, nose rings, and many had diamond belly buttons. 'Because they are warriors,' he continued, 'They dress modestly, but when you see Bling Gummer women you will see how jewellery can be worn to great effect.'

'The Gum in our name is in honour of the magnificent Gum trees that grow on our island. We don't know how many Gum trees there are because there are too many to count, so we called ourselves the Bling Gum people and let it go at that.

Daphne seemed unimpressed with this answer but leapt up to her throne without assistance. The royal cat bearer draped a robe encrusted with pearls and diamonds over her, and secured it by tying the laces into a bow under her chin.

The former mayor was distressed as the crew pushed their craft off the beach and then jumped aboard and paddled away with their new queen.

'I'm surprised you were so sorry to see her go,' said Owl.

'I'm surprised you put up with her,' said the Simp. 'She is the disagreeablest cat I have ever met.'

'I know, but I promised her father I would look after her. My parents died when I was scarcely out of the egg. Uncle Tom, her father, watched over me. Gave me mice when I was too young to hunt for myself, and treated me as one of his own. He wanted me to always look after his silly daughter, as he used to call her, to keep her out of trouble. And I promised!'

'Personally I am not sorry to see her go,' responded the Simp. 'It is what is going to happen afterwards that troubles me.'

'Whatever do you mean?'

'Well, you heard the chief say that King Purrcat passed on to his reward during the Winter Festival?'

'Yes, I heard that.'

'They always do.'

'Do what?'

'Die at the end of the Winter Festival.'

'Do you mean they all die during the festival?'

'Well, yes, they are sacrificed. The chief did not lie to her. She will lack nothing; all the food she mentioned will be given to her. He just did not tell her about the last bit when she will be taken in a lovely procession to the temple, and with the highest respect they will put her to death and sprinkle her sacred blood on the fields to make the crops grow.'

Owl was appalled at this news. He could scarcely speak.

'She is going to have a good year,' continued the Simp. 'She will have the power of life and death over every member of the tribe, even the chief, but only until the end of the carnival, then it is her turn. Her body will be embalmed and put in a temple with all the other cats that have ruled over them.'

'This is terrible,' cried Owl. 'How long have they been doing this?'

'Well, all their Kings and queens have the same names; Purrcat for males and Purrruss for females, and they all last only one year at the most. So Queen Purrruss will be number forty and Purrcat was number eighty six. I'm sorry, I never did arithmetic at school, let alone reading and writing, so I can't work it out.'

'That's over a hundred years,' said Owl, after some thought.

'Yes, before that they used to select a handsome young man to be king for a year. He had all the luxuries the island could afford, including the pick of the girls, and his children were treated with the greatest respect all their lives, but at the end of his year he was taken to the temple and slaughtered for the sake of his blood. I believe, that after a while, volunteers became hard to find, so they turned to cats instead.'

'This is shocking, we have to rescue her!'

The Simp. looked doubtful, and shook his head. 'How? She will be guarded night and day. She will live in the palace and there will be sentries at every entrance. Forget about her, none of this was your fault.'

Owl could not forget; it was not in his nature to forget a friend in trouble.

'I must help her if I can, I promised Uncle Tom.' He laid a wing on the Simp's narrow shoulder. 'I have to go, and if I never come back I will always remember you and the other Simps as the best friends an owl could have'.

He spread his wings and flew strongly in the direction taken by the war canoe that was bearing Queen Purrruss the 40th to her year of triumph, and then death.

{ 4 } Trial and punishment.

When Captain Wirewhiskers fell overboard his departure was not noticed by the crew. No one heard his cries and the ship sailed on leaving him struggling in the water.

However you cannot, as they say, keep a bad man down, and it was not long before he was spied from another ship and taken aboard. His whiskers were starting to rust because of the sea water, but this gave him a more fearsome appearance than ever.

The ship was on its way to London, which did not please Captain Wirewhiskers because he was well known to the leaders of the Royal Navy which had made many attempts to capture him, and *The True Lovers Knot*.

If recognised he would soon be picked up by the Bow Street Runners and after a short and entertaining trial he would either be hanged at Tyburn or have his head cut off on Tower Hill.

After considering the matter he decided he would try and avoid either fate but, if caught, he would ask for Tower Hill and the axe; somehow it seemed more classy than a common hanging. Dick Turpin and other ruffians were hanged; he thought he deserved something better.

He was recognized soon after the ship docked in London, arrested, and tried for piracy on the high seas.

The trial lasted a full day and, much to everyone's surprise, including his, the jury found him 'Not Guilty'.

His picture, whiskers and all was in every newspaper, and he had become as well known as anyone in the Kingdom. The way he got off from being hanged caused a sensation, and all agreed that that the verdict was due to the wonderful efforts of his defence counsel Mr Cheetham, of the famous London law firm, Cheetham and Grabbit.

His lawyer's services were expensive but the man pointed out that running a law firm is not cheap and paying jurors to return a correct verdict was becoming dearer every year, especially in famous and important trials such as that of the notorious pirate Captain Wirewhiskers.

Mr Cheetham had saved him from death but it was Mr Grabbit who offered to make his fortune.

He had the captain come to their office and sat him down with himself and Mr Cheetham. The lawyers were served with red wine and cheese, but the captain asked for grog and a pipe of tobacco. He had his first swig of grog and was puffing away on his pipe as pleased as punch, thinking how clever he had been to rise so high from starting as a mere cabin boy in Captain Flint's old ship, the Walrus.

When the two lawyers saw he was in the right mood Mr Grabbit addressed him as follows - 'Captain Wirewhiskers, it's time you made your fortune. Sailing round the world capturing ships and looting cities is all very well but there is real money to be made in public relations. Now your career as a pirate captain, your trial, and your narrow escape from the death penalty has brought you publicity that couldn't be paid for. What you need at this stage of your career are good agents.'

The captain stared at them. 'What's agents?'

'We are,' said Mr Grabbit, 'You can employ us to look after your business affairs.'

Mr Cheetham said, 'Captain Wirewhiskers we would be pleased and honoured if you were to sign up as a client of Cheetham and Grabbit and we can go ahead to

make for you all the money you will ever need. All we will take will be a modest fifty percent of your income, plus necessary expenses.'

As well as being bewildered the captain was also impressed. Both gentlemen wore beautiful clothes. They had tail-coats of shiny black. Their necks and wrists had snowy lace about them, they wore coloured waist-coats with more lace, silver buckles on their shoes, scented handkerchiefs with white powdered wigs. There was nothing strange about them, all gentlemen wore outfits like that in those days; it was the fashion.

Captain Wirewhiskers thought about the offer that had been made to him. It seemed reasonable enough. Mr Cheetham had saved his life and now he, and Mr Grabbit wanted to make his fortune. Perhaps he could retire from the sea and live the life of a gentleman. When he was rich he would ask them the name and address of their tailor.

The captain was delighted at the thought of great wealth. He could not read or write and was not sure what fifty percent meant, so his legal advisers drew up the contract for him. It was forty five pages long and a total mystery to anyone without a law degree.

At the bottom they wrote his name in full, Augustus, Basil, Clarence, Donald Enderby-Fortescue. (More commonly known as Captain Wirewhiskers - pirate) and added 'His Mark'

'His Mark' was a cross made by the Captain, because he could not write his name, but it was witnessed by the two partners and their employees who signed their names and wrote the date underneath.

This contract became famous and was studied in law schools as an example of how to bind a client in a legal web that was unbreakable, and very profitable, but Captain Wirewhiskers did not find out about that until later.

The first step was to register the name and title, 'Captain Wirewhiskers' world-wide so no one could steal it to use for their own purposes. The firm then began a franchise business which meant that if anyone wanted to set up as a pirate, he could pay a yearly fee to Cheetham and Grabbit and name his ship *The True Lovers Knot*. The most important advantage was that a young pirate captain just starting out on his new vocation could legally call himself Captain Wirewhiskers and so strike terror into the hearts of opposing ships commanders.

Cheetham and Grabbit also had sets of false wire whiskers made and bottles of glue which they sold to these young pirates to help complete the deception.

The next project was to produce an autobiography of their client. The fact that he could not read or write was not an obstacle. They merely employed hacks, such as your present writer, who were so good they could write the story of a life without even meeting or talking to the subject. The book sold in its thousands though, as with the franchise business, various expenses gobbled up most of the captain's share.

While all this was going on Captain Wirewhiskers was getting very little money because of the expenses claimed by his owners, so he had to live in a shabby bed and breakfast establishment in Cheapside. He did not get much breakfast and had to buy lunch and dinner with what little cash he could scrape together.

He thought of burgling a few houses or shops to get some money but Mr Grabbit told him that would be highly illegal because someone else had the franchise to steal property in the area.

He was wandering near the river one day, in low spirits, when he was astonished to see his own ship *The True Lovers Knot* coming upstream with the aid of the tide and a light breeze. He hardly knew it at first, the sails were so clean, but it was his ship alright.

He borrowed a telescope from an old salt standing nearby, but could not recognize any of the seamen aboard. He wondered what had happened to his crew.

'Ah!' said the Old Salt. 'That be Captain Wirewhisker's very own ship. The crew was arrested and the ship taken because they don't have no franchise.'

It was clear he did not recognize the captain.

'They'm all chained below decks and they'll be tried and then hanged at Execution Dock before the week's out. The navy be very hard on pirates what haven't paid for no franchise.'

The captain did not wait. He hurried to the offices of Cheetham and Grabbit. If ever a man was in urgent need of legal advice it was Captain Wirewhiskers.

Cheetham and Grabbit were expecting him. A clerk, who was waiting outside in the street, ushered him straight away into the inner office.

The two partners jumped up and shook him by the hand. 'Very good of you to come so quickly', said Mr Grabbit. 'You got our message alright?'

'Me ship's been seized,' said the captain, 'All me men are below in irons and they're going to be hung.'

'We know,' said Mr Cheetham, 'But we're not beaten yet. We had two documents made up and sent by special messenger. 'One is a pardon for the entire crew and it speaks of them as loyal subjects of the King who were wrongly arrested and are to be released without a stain on their characters.'

The captain would not have thought that of his crew, but was not going to argue.

'It would have reached the docks by now,' said Mr Cheetham. Along with another document that authorizes you to take your ship named, *The True Lovers Knot* from being chained to the dock and entitles you to sail her free of all taxes and navigation fees, to continue in her former service of attacking his majesty's enemies.

This was not quite true, Captain Wirewhiskers didn't mind who he attacked, as long as there was a profit in it

'And Captain, these two documents were very expensive to have forged, so the money will be deducted from your share of the proceeds.'

'Ahem!' Mr Grabbit cleared his throat loudly. The clerk who had been standing outside had entered the room. 'Gentlemen, the Bow Street Runners are coming. They've just turned the corner and they're heading this way.'

'Get out the back door, both of you,' said Mr Grabbit 'Quick as you like! I'll keep them talking. Perkins, did you get that beer?'

'Yes, Mr Grabbit, five dozen bottles, that should keep them happy for a while.'

Mr Cheetham snatched up his hat and clapped it on his head. 'Come on,' he said, 'follow me. There's no time to be lost.'

'What's this all about? Who's coming? Why should we skulk out the back way?'

'It's the Bow Street Runners coming to arrest us, and if they catch us we'll both swing. Come on, hurry!'

Puzzled and shocked by this news Captain Wirewhiskers followed his attorney through the back doorway into a dirty lane.

Mr Cheetham did not pause but hurried in the direction of the docks with the captain following.

{ 5 } Queen Purrpuss.

Daphne the cat was soon officially Queen Purrpuss the 40th of the Bling Gum Nation. She was crowned in splendour by the chief priest of the cat cult and decorated with pearls from the lagoon. She took the coronation oath that bound her to be absolute monarch over the Bling Gummers until the day of her death. The date of her death was not stated.

After she was crowned the nation had been looking forward to three days of festivities which, at the finish, would leave everyone feeling tired and emotional.

She was not told that Owl had followed the canoe which brought her to the island and crash-landed on the beach because he was utterly exhausted from flying that long distance. .

During the coronation, Owl was in jail. He had been arrested as an illegal immigrant.

He was the very first to face such a charge because no one before had ever been mad enough to try to emigrate to Bling Gum Island.

Queen Purrpuss banned the celebrations. She had been given absolute powers over her subjects and ordered that they had to keep fit by getting up the day after the coronation, at seven in the morning, to do aerobics to a loud and fast beat, and they were not to finish until eight when they could have breakfast and go to work.

A deputation came to see the queen in the royal palace. She sat on the throne to receive them dressed in her royal robes and wearing the crown that had been placed on her head at the coronation. She would not part with any of this because she thought they suited her, and so they did. Also the Royal Beautician had been skilful with her make-up. The queen looked very well.

The leader of the deputation asked boldly why wasn't she up at seven in the morning doing aerobics like everyone else.

She said they were talking nonsense because it was well known that cats were fit all the time. They did not need exercise. She could sleep all winter, so she said, and could come out on the first day of Spring and race any of her subjects to the top of the tallest Gum tree on the island.

Anyway she said she had seen a lot of overweight people at the coronation and the seven am. aerobic sessions would continue until further notice. She mentioned that the executioner was in the next room with a freshly sharpened axe, and eager to try

out his talents. She did not wish to start her reign with the execution of an entire delegation, but they must not persist in their impertinence because her patience was wearing thin.

The deputation asked her to forgive their ill considered remarks and withdrew hastily. There were no more deputations that day.

The Grand Vizier, who was her prime minister, and got around in what appeared to be a lilac coloured dressing gown with striped purple trousers underneath and silver high heels, presented himself and bowed low.

The queen, who had excellent taste, shuddered and closed her eyes,

He also wore a large, puce coloured turban and several gold chains about his neck each carrying a different design representing the high offices he held. He tended to jangle them when worried, or deep in thought.

'Your Exalted Majesty', he said, 'The Lord High Executioner, as you mentioned, is in the next room waiting for orders. He is always present at court on Mondays, Tuesdays, and Fridays, and at week-ends, if required.

'What does he do on Wednesdays and Thursdays?'

'He carries out private contracts. He tells me that he makes more money that way, but he likes working at court because of the prestige it brings. I mention the Lord High Executioner to your majesty because we have one prisoner in our island jail. He is an illegal immigrant who arrived the same day as your majesty. We did not execute him straight away because of the coronation and the party that followed but if your majesty could sign the death warrant the matter can be dealt with immediately.'

'How did he get here?'

'He flew. He was exhausted when he arrived, but he is a bird of a kind I have never seen before. Someone who knows about such things tells me that in his own country he would be called an owl.'

'Is that so? I knew an owl until quite recently. He was not very good at anything, particularly with balloons. He had to rely on me for advice all the time. Bring the prisoner here. I will see if he is any more hopeless than the owl I knew.'

The Grand Vizier withdrew to the ante-room and ordered the guards to bring the prisoner before the queen.

After a while Owl appeared in chains escorted by two guards with spears. They were led by the Sergeant at Arms who carried a gold staff decorated by a large brilliant diamond. He took his place by the queen.

'Daphne!' cried Owl when he saw the queen. 'They are going to kill you at the Winter Festival.'

'Enough, enough!!' shouted the Grand Vizier. 'Remove this insolent bird at once. Your majesty, I have the death warrant right here, sign it if you will be so good, and we will have his head off within minutes' He snapped his fingers at a servant who handed him the required piece of paper.

'Wait.' said the queen. What is this nonsense Owl, who's going to kill me, and why did you follow me all the way to my island?'

The Grand Vizier was most upset. 'Pay no attention, your majesty! He's spreading wild rumours; I will have him removed at once. Would your majesty care for sardines on toast and a saucer of warm milk, you will find them very soothing.'

Owl raised his voice again so she could hear it over the shouting of the Grand Vizier. 'On the last night of the Winter Festival you will be sacrificed and your blood sprinkled on the fields to make the spring crops grow.'

The Grand Vizier was beside himself with agitation. 'Guards! Guards! Take the prisoner away. Don't listen to him, your majesty. Would your majesty like some delicately browned trout. The cook was telling me these are the best trout he has ever had in the kitchen.'

The guards were about to obey the Grand Vizier's order but Queen Purrpuss waved them down. They fell flat on their faces and stayed there during the discussion which followed.

'On your knees, you cheeky bird' cried the Grand Vizier. 'How dare you invade the throne room and make these wild accusations in the presence of Her Imperial Majesty?'

'Owls don't have knees', retorted Owl, 'and what I am saying is the plain truth. She should leave at once before she becomes a sacrifice to the spirits of the island, which demand blood.'

'Poppycock!' said the queen, 'unadulterated garbage! My subjects adore me. I am sorry you missed the coronation, you should have seen the way the people bowed down before me, how they cheered when they saw me in my carriage. I was presented with gold, and jewels, and treasures beyond counting. With the riches I

have now I could buy that miserable little island of the Simps ten times over. And the nobles kissed my paws and swore undying loyalty as long as I should live.'

'That's it', said Owl bitterly. 'You won't live beyond the Winter Festival, afterwards they will swear loyalty to someone else.'

'Really, Owl', said the queen, 'You must allow me to be the best judge of whether or not I can trust my people. I believe the Simp, who used to be mayor must have been putting these strange ideas into your head. He always disliked me because of my superior intellect and because of the excellent advice I gave him about the better management of the island, and indeed of what improvements could be made in the Simps as a race. It was disgraceful, but he totally ignored my advice.'

'You don't understand the danger you are in.'

'The queen ignored him. 'Now, I am not one to hold grudges, but I cannot remember that you gave me any help or support when I tried to bring the Simps up to an acceptable standard of behaviour.' I must admit your treatment of me hurt, but I am prepared to forgive and forget, and I will prove it. Vizier,' she cried, 'remove the chains.'

The Grand Vizier stirred the guards with his foot; they jumped up to unlock the padlocks securing the chains in which Owl was bound.

The queen drew herself up with an air of great nobility. 'As I said to you before, Owl, I do not hold grudges. You lured me on to that silly balloon of yours and I suffered for it, but I must admit that it carried me to my destiny as beloved queen of this mighty race, the Bling Gummers. Now that I am supreme ruler I can improve their lives and make them even greater.'

'For this reason I will give you another chance. The guards will escort you to the shore and from there you must fly away and never return. We cannot have you here spreading foolish stories that will disturb my faithful and loving subjects.'

'But -- !'

'But me no buts! I have spoken. Guard, take him to the shore and let him go. I will stay here, safe with my people.'

She may have been less sure of herself had she known that many of her subjects, still sore and exhausted from the one hour fast aerobic exercise session she had decreed were busy checking their calendars to see how many sleeps there were before the last day of the Winter Festival. They knew they would have to do aerobics again the following morning at seven o'clock, and the morning after, and

the morning after that until the queen let them off; but on the morning after the Winter Festival they would all be able to sleep in.

Owl was as sad as sad when he made his way back to the Island of Simplicity. By warning Daphne of her danger he had done what he could to honour the promise made to her father, but it was in vain.

He island hopped on the return trip. It took longer but he could not repeat the wearisome non-stop flight he had made in his attempt to rescue the cat from the terrible fate that awaited her.

Even so he arrived exhausted and had to fly immediately up to a tree house because the great Thursday tsunami was on its way.

{ 6 } *The True Lovers Knot.*

Mr Cheetham walked as fast as he could without attracting attention and the captain, who was much shorter, hurried to keep up. 'What's going on?' he asked. He was almost exhausted and out of breath.

Mr Cheetham wiped his face with a silk handkerchief. 'One of the jurymen at your trial blabbed. He told the court that I had bribed the jury to bring in a not guilty verdict.'

Captain Wirewhiskers would have whistled if he had had any wind left.

'If we're caught we'll both be tried and we'll both swing, so hurry up.'

When the two men climbed the gang-plank of *The True Lovers Knot* you should have heard the crew cheer. They had been taken out of jail let back on board and now, to see their captain returning to his ship was wonderful.

He came up puffing and clutching his side, but as soon as he could speak he gave orders to get the ship out into the river and heading down stream towards the sea.

Luckily the tide was running out rapidly and the breeze was favourable. Soon they were travelling down-stream faster than a horse could gallop so no one could send a message ahead to have them stopped before they reached the open sea. Captain Wirewhiskers had never felt better than when he saw the bow of his ship lifting and responding to the waves of the English Channel; they were free of the land.

He had his favourite length of tarred rope in his hand and was beating the crew unmercifully for getting his orders wrong, for being slow in carrying out their duties, or just when they got too near.

The crew loved this familiar activity, they had never been happy since the terrible time when he fell overboard and was left behind in the water.

Smawkins the cook was whistling cheerfully in the galley while preparing a hearty dinner for the crew. Mr Cheetham, the attorney would not be eating any dinner, he was seasick, but that was his problem; no one else cared.

Far away from this jolly scene Owl perched on the veranda rail of the house he had obtained for Daphne the cat in a happier time. He looked down on the inhabitants of the island who were sitting on lower branches, or close by on other high trees, or in their tree-houses. He felt a great sadness that his friend was to be lost forever because of her silliness and obstinacy.

The wave crashed on the shore as usual and swept over the island. It seemed that the Great Turtle had not improved his diving technique, but it was no bigger than before, and those sitting on branches did not even get their toes wet.

After it had passed and the water had ebbed away he went down and found the Simps sweeping-up. As usual they were cleaning the island after the great wave.

When Owl came down from the trees his friend looked at the unhappy bird. 'I told you before, Owl, it's not your fault. She should not have listened to the chief's tales of endless supplies of trout and sardines on toast, but if it is any help we can give you a calendar'.

'A calendar?'

'Yes, it was washed up on the shore. We find a lot of stuff on the sand every Thursday. You can have the calendar if you want it.'

'What would I do with a calendar?'

'Well, the Winter Festival ends on the night of the first full moon after the winter solstice. That is the night your friend will be sacrificed'

Owl shuddered at the thought but said, 'What's a solstice?'

'The Winter solstice is the shortest day of the year, the summer solstice is the longest day.'

'But what will I do with a calendar?'

'Well, it shows the dates of the full moons, new moons, and so on. You can use it to work out the exact night Daphne is to be sacrificed and on that night we can all bow our heads in remembrance of her.'

Owl knew that his friend meant well with this gift of a calendar but it seemed as though nothing could be done but to accept the tragedy.

He said, 'We could try to rescue her.'

'We're not very good at rescues, I'm afraid. We have never tried to rescue anyone. It requires bravery, I suppose, but I am sorry to say, we're not brave at all.'

Owl was unhappy, when he remembered his promises to Daphne's father. Many wild schemes to rescue the cat passed through his mind, but it was no use. One small owl could not get her from her closely guarded palace, especially if she did not want to come.

Months passed and Owl was in despair. November came to an end and Christmas was looming. His friend had told him that the 21st of December was probably the shortest day of the year in the northern hemisphere – whatever that meant. His calendar told him that the moon would be full exactly a week later. This was to be the night of sacrifice.

On Boxing Day he was sitting on the sun-deck of his favourite house in the tree tops lost in gloomy thoughts when he saw a sail appear over the horizon, and then the vessel itself. It was Captain Wirewhisker's ship, *The True Lovers Knot*. He knew it at once, even though the sails had been taken down and put up properly. He wondered if the captain was returning to see if the Simps were any richer than when he was last on the island.

Owl thought it might be possible to appeal to the captain's better nature and save Daphne from the dreadful fate that awaited her. He clutched the calendar in his claws and flew towards the ship.

On board *The True Lovers Knot* the crew remembered Owl very well from their visit to the island. He was a bit frightened at the sight of the Captain and his tangle of rusty whiskers. Beside him was another alarming character; a much taller and bigger man with black, black whiskers. Like the captain he was armed with a cutlass and a pair of pistols. It was Mr Cheetham, now turned pirate.

The only remembrance of London fashion was a white powdered wig which he wore, and, sitting on it, a three cornered hat. Since joining the crew Mr Cheetham had been out in all weather his looks had grown wild. At times he had been

mistaken, and with good reason, for Blackbeard another pirate, nearly as bad as Captain Wirewhiskers himself.

After Owl was introduced Captain Wirewhiskers said gruffly, 'Alright Owl what's the big idea coming on to my ship without an invitation. It's still clean so I don't want no owl droppings on the deck.'

'I have come,' said Owl, 'To appeal to your better nature.'

The crew members who had been listening rolled around on the deck laughing. Mr Cheetham could not restrain his amusement and even the captain found it difficult not to crack a smile.

'Better nature!' he said, when they were all calm again. 'I don't have no better nature. You talk to me about 'better nature' and I'll have you put over the side with a lead sinker tied to your claw.'

Owl was frightened that this might happen to him but he would not give up easily.

He cried out, 'Daphne the cat became Queen Purpuss the 40th of the Bling Gum nation and they are going to sacrifice her on the night of the next full moon, which is only a few days away.'

This time the crew burst out cheering and Captain Wirewhiskers slapped his thigh. 'Dang me if this ain't the best news I've heard since we left London. I'll sleep better in me bunk at night knowing that pesky cat ain't around no more. I wonder if they'd let us come and watch?'

He calmed down and remembered that he was in business to make money. 'Well, I suppose I could save the cat. What are you offering for the job?'

'I haven't any money. You would have to take it from the wealthy Bling Gummers when you rescue Daphne.'

Everyone became quiet when he mentioned the wealth of the citizens of the Bling Gum Nation.

'Are these Bling Blonger what d'ye callums, really!, really! rich?'

'Yes, very rich. That's how they got the name Bling. Every member of the tribe wears gold bangles, gold headbands, and earrings, all inlaid with diamonds and pearls.'

'This sounds good,' said Mr Cheetham. 'We can go on the night after the full moon, when the cat's dead, and clean them out.'

The crew cheered at this, and Owl realized he might not save Daphne after all. It was hard to do but he decided to lie. .

'You will have to go on the night of the full moon,' he said, 'Because straight after the sacrifice they give their jewellery to the god of the underworld. It's all thrown into a volcano.'

'Alright, we'll go on the night before the full moon.'

'No, that's no good. It's all buried until an hour before the ceremony in a place you will never find because no one would ever lead you to it.'

'That's a funny way to handle your finances', remarked Mr Cheetham.

If he had not been so greedy and excited when thinking of cheating a volcano of all this wealth he could have cross questioned Owl; he was a lawyer after all. He would have discovered that the Bling Gummers were wealthy all the time and neither buried their valuables nor threw them into a volcano. Partly because it is would be a stupid thing to do and partly because there was no volcano on the island.

Owl did not like telling fibs, but sometimes it is good to lie, especially if you do it to save a friend from death.

'If the night of the full moon is the only night we got, then that's when we're gunna do it,' said Captain Wirewhiskers. 'Which way is it, Owl?'

'That way,' Said Owl, pointing with his wing.

Captain Wirewhiskers strode over and looked at the compass. 'Helmsman, Nor-Nor-West and hold your course.

All hands to make sail', the captain roared, lashing out with his rope and bringing yips of pain from the men as they ran past him to get to the shrouds. Soon the great sails were filling out and the ship heeled as she felt the wind.

As they sailed steadily towards the island of the Bling Gummers the captain turned on Owl. 'I'm doing this for the treasure not to rescue any danged, interfering, bossy, nasty tempered cat. She's bad luck. If you bring her aboard I'll throw her back on the island. There's a new rule on this ship – No cats!! Make sure you don't break the rule or you'll be sorry. He turned and stumped away.

{ 7 } Queen Purrpuss Reigns.

Up to the time of the Winter Festival the reign of the new queen was not a happy one. At least she had liked it so far, but not her subjects. One would have to admit that power had gone to her head and the Bling Gummers were looking forward to the end of the festival when they could all relax. The Royal Executive Head Hunters' had been told many times to take more care in selecting the next monarch.

The morning aerobics sessions continued and as well, she thought of another decree that caused great distress to some and pleased others.

She detested dogs, she thought them the most repellent, nasty, noisy and disagreeable creatures ever put on the earth.

During her coronation procession a dog ran alongside the coach and barked at her so she arched her back and hissed while the guards drove it away.

Straight after the coronation, when she was supreme ruler she decided and decreed that all dogs were to be banned from the island. The owners would have to get rid of them.

This upset numerous people and forced the cancellation of the annual dog show, which had been a feature of society for many years.

Banishing dogs from the island was more of an inconvenience than a disaster. The people living on another island offered to take the dogs in and board them at extravagant prices, and they would remain there until the end of the Winter Festival, after which the owners could have them back.

During the queen's reign she issued a number of other poorly thought out judgments. The best remembered was her reaction to a rat plague which did not really exist.

It happened when two servants were having an argument. The one who was losing the argument said, to the other servant, 'Oh, rats to you!'

The queen heard those words and became agitated. She cried, 'Rats! What rats? Where are they? Nasty horrible things!'

She wouldn't listen to explanations. She hated rats even worse than dogs. The palace had to be cleaned and fumigated from top to bottom

She decided that the island was plagued by rats and ordered that during the following fortnight every one of her adult subjects would have to produce five rats, preferably dead, or be punished; no exceptions!

Actually there were not enough rats to go round but the Grand Vizier solved the problem by having people bribe him to produce receipts for five dead rats. He then certified that the said rats had been thrown into the national incinerator, and burned.

During the fortnight he became even richer than before, but one of his enemies whispered to the queen about his little racket.

She investigated, found out what was going on, and invited him into the throne room. She said 'Grand Vizier I have noticed that there is a great gap in the services that provides comfort and help to my subjects.'

'Yes, your majesty, and what would that be?'

'What we need on this island is a Cat Protection Society. You are to start one immediately, And you will be its founder and first president.'

'An excellent idea your majesty. I will take immediate steps to raise the taxes paid by the lower classes so as to cover the costs of establishing this much needed new society.'

'No, Grand Vizier, you will not tax the poor, I intend to tax the rich instead.'

'Tax the rich, your majesty? That is a very bold plan and will lead to much unrest. It could even endanger the throne.'

'No, Grand Vizier, I will tax only one of them, and that is you. I understand you made a lot of money out of the rat plague and can afford the expense You will be widely praised for your generosity as guardian of the cats of the Bling Gum nation.'

As it happened no one praised the Grand Vizier for his generosity. They thought he had gone mad. There was only one cat on the island and she was the queen.

Public indignation grew all the time at the queen's high handed actions and everyone was looking forward with great anticipation to the last day of the Winter Festival.

Owl did not know of the unrest among the people of the Bling Gum nation, but he was terribly worried about the timing of the pirate raid. The ship seemed to crawl along on a calm sea. There was not much wind, and on the night before the full

moon they had not even sighted land. He kept flying up to the crows nest searching vainly for the island.

The crew was worried also. They had fallen for his story about all the gold and diamonds being thrown into the volcano immediately after the sacrifice of the queen. They did not want to postpone the raid for a whole year, and they would be very bitter when they discovered there was no volcano on the island.

On his fifth trip to the mast-head everyone's fears were put to rest by the Owl's joyful hoot of 'Land ho!!' There were tall mountains on the horizon. It could be no other than the island of the Bling Gummers.

When Owl returned to the deck he was met by Captain Wirewhiskers. He said, 'I know what your little game is. You want to get that danged cat on to this ship, don't you? Well, it won't wash. She gets aboard over my dead body, or yours. Don't you try and bring her with you, because I'm awake to what's going on. I wouldn't have got to be top dog pirate in these waters if I'd fallen for all the fancy tricks that have been tried on me, so watch it'.

He turned to Mr Cheetham who was standing close by. 'We'll lay off and on all day, just out of sight of land so they don't know we're here. Tomorrow night we'll go in as soon as the moon starts to rise.'

{ 8 } The Winter Festival.

Towards the end of her reign Queen Purpuss thought she detected a falling off of her popularity. She could not understand why. The morning aerobics sessions had greatly improved the health of her people, so she thought. She believed everyone must approve of clearing the island of dogs. It was a great improvement, not a nasty, ugly, savage dog to be seen anywhere. The absence of dogs made her happy, why not everyone else? And what about the great rat plague she had put a stop to? That was a wonderful thing to do for her people, but no one seemed grateful.

Still, as the Winter Festival approached, the national mood seemed to improve. She noticed that people were starting to smile at her again and there was no longer a sullen silence as her carriage passed by; once again they cheered enthusiastically.

When the Winter Festival came it was everything the Queen could have hoped for. She was told it was to finish on the night of the full moon, and when she rode to the Great Temple her carriage was so gilded and decorated it flashed in the moonlight and in the reflection of burning torches that were carried both before and behind her. All this while hundreds of people lining the route cheered and cheered, they even laughed, because they were so light-hearted. It was marvellous to see the happiness of her people.

Outside the temple was erected the giant statue of a cat; it seemed to glow in the lights and welcome her to the crowded service. Once inside the temple she got a hearty round of applause.

She came gorgeously dressed in the same cloak that she wore at her coronation.

Divers had searched the lagoon again for the most magnificent pearls and dozens more had been pierced and attached to the cloak in shimmering patterns

Before she left the palace her attendants had difficulty in getting her away from the mirror especially after the diamond encrusted crown had been placed on her head. They persuaded her by saying that the religious service that ended the Winter Festival could not possibly start or finish without her, and time was running out.

In the temple, which was packed with worshippers wearing their finest jewellery, she noticed a hole in the dome through which the moon shone brightly, otherwise the temple was in darkness.

As she walked to her place before the altar she had to pause for a moment while the cloak was removed, carefully folded, and placed in a sweet smelling sandalwood box. Her crown went into the box too.

She wondered at this but thought that perhaps during the service she would get an even more richly decorated cloak and perhaps a larger crown.

It was only when the service was part way through and the priests tried to tie her down to a flat stone directly under the dome that the trouble started. She realized something was wrong and started to fight back.

She put up a terrific fight but the priests were used to battling with cats reluctant to be sacrificed and after a while they got her spread out on the altar with her four legs tied to four pegs, one at each corner. For the first time she smelled dried blood on the stone.

Daphne, helpless, totally unable to fight anyone, and soon to be an ex queen, suddenly remembered the warning from Owl, the warning she had dismissed so scornfully. Dear Owl, he had been right all the time, and she now realised that the priests were waiting for the moon to shine through a hole in the dome and on the altar and on to her before they would do their grisly deed; it was the end.

She swore and snarled at the priests, but in return they bowed respectfully. Even though they were all badly scratched and bleeding; she was still queen.

After her death her body would be embalmed and placed in the temple to be worshipped along with all the other cats that had been king or queen in their turn.

Behind the altar, where the queen could not see it was the box which already contained her cloak and crown. It was inset with a pattern of gold silver and diamonds, and lined on the inside with silk. Her body was to be placed in it to be taken to the embalmers.

On the coffin was a golden cup that would be used to catch her blood.

The magical properties of her blood, when sprinkled on the fields would ensure a good harvest.

As the service reached its climax the altar and victim were fully illuminated in a pool of moonlight, the high priest, who was wearing a robe decorated with pictures of cats and moons circling each other, drew out a knife from under his robe. The blade had been polished and sharpened until it was as keen as a razor. He held it up so all could see and it reflected little flashes of light on to the walls of the temple. Every member of the congregation held their breath waiting for the death stroke.

At this moment there was an interruption. Owl flew in silently and landed on the priest's upraised arm. He bent down and with his powerful beak gave the arm a nip that would have cut a mouse in half.

The priest yelled out with pain and shock and dropped the knife. The congregation was appalled at this sacrilege but they soon had other things to think about because a group of pirates followed Owl and burst through the open door, or slid down on ropes. They were armed with muskets, pistols, and cutlasses. Leading this fearsome bunch were the striking figures of Captain Wirewhiskers and Mr Cheetham who waved their weapons and roared with the best of them.

The pirates had brought bags and immediately started scooping up valuable plates, ornaments, and jewels, that were scattered around the temple, and had been left there as offerings by worshippers.

A pirate found a large gold plate, and he and some others went round grinning evilly at the people in the temple and proceeded to take up a collection.

Their demands were simple, everything their victims had; hand over the lot or get stuck with a cutlass. Jewels, rings, necklaces, Glittering earrings, prized heirlooms, all rattled into the plate. After a while the mound of priceless trinkets in the plate was so heavy it required two pirates to carry it.

Members of the congregation were shrieking and crying, trying to force their way out of the temple. The exit was jammed with a press of bodies, made worse by the whacks on the behind they got from the flat of the pirate's cutlasses and reminders of the need to contribute to the pirate's retirement and superannuation fund.

Owl flew at Mr Cheetham, who was taller than everyone else, and making more noise as well. He flapped his face to wake him from his frenzy of looting and shouting. 'Cut her loose!' he cried, 'cut her loose!'

Mr Cheetham looked at the cat and laughed at the sight of her helpless and tied down on the altar.

He grinned and raised his cutlass. Owl held his breath, and then the blade swept down four times, each time slashing a cord that bound the victim to the altar. Then, laughing wickedly, he raised the cutlass for a fourth stroke that would have cut Daphne in half.

She was far too quick to be caught. As the cutlass descended she rolled away and the blade clashed down on the stone altar. He went after her again slashing vainly at the elusive cat who was leaping around the temple faster than he could wield his weapon.

Mr Cheetham gave up quickly. He knew she was too quick for him and he turned away for easier targets.

Daphne bounded back towards Owl. She said, 'Owl, you were right and I was wrong. I'll never forget you saved me tonight. Thank you!'

'Now, where's the Grand Vizier,' she asked. 'Lying hound! I'll give him something to go on with for deceiving me. I'll scratch his eyes out.'

'Get into that box, now!' said Owl. He indicated the box that was meant to be her coffin and already contained her crown and cloak.

She looked at him as though he had gone mad. 'I'm not getting in there', she said. 'Besides I owe that high priest a few as well. He was going to kill me!'

'Get in the box', hooted Owl angrily. 'If you stay here they will really kill you next time. You won't get another chance like this. I have to get you off the island.'

'You want me to climb into a coffin?'

'Yes, in a coffin. Just shut up and do what you're told. It's the only way I can save you.'

'But I have to deal with those guys first.'

'There isn't time!! Just for once do what you're told!'

Owl was so angry! He had never spoken to her like this before.

Cats can't shrug their shoulders. If she could have she would have, but instead she got meekly into the box because her friend had saved her so far and now had a plan to get her off the island. He slammed the lid shut.

Smawkins, the cook, was nearest pirate; he ignored the hubbub in the temple and was blissfully stuffing valuables into a bag.

'Mr Smawkins, look! There's a whole box of treasure here; pick it up quick and we'll take it back to the ship,' cried Owl. He showed Smawkins where the box lay behind the altar. 'No, don't open it, we'll do that on the ship. There's no time to lose. But I tell you there are diamonds and pearls inside it. Come on, quick!' he cried again.

Owl was not lying. He hated to tell lies, but he did not mention that these wondrous things belonged to the cat.

The box was quite small, having been made for Daphne, and Mr Smawkins tucked it under his arm.

It was time to go! The chief, who had been part of the procession guarding the coach, had had time to rally his men. They came racing up, spears held at the ready as the pirates, laden with plunder, ran out of the temple towards the beach where the boats waited.

The chief, in spite of his weight, was running faster than any of them, and not far behind Smawkins who was carrying a heavy bag of loot and the box. He was struggling along, after his comrades.

Owl saw the chief's arm go back as he aimed his spear towards the cook who puffed and lumbered towards the sea shore.

Just as he threw the spear which would have skewered the cook, Owl flew down, and flapped his wings in the chief's face. The spear went astray.

The chief brushed Owl aside and kept on running. The spear was stuck in the sand not far away. He grabbed it as he passed and was about to have another shot at Smawkins.

This time Owl got him in the back of the neck with a nip he would not forget in a hurry. He dropped the spear, howled, and grabbed the spot on his neck. Owl escaped just in time.

Smawkins dropped the box once when the spear whizzed by his head but he was not going to lose his treasure. He picked it up, and splashed into the water to throw the box into the last boat which was being pushed away from the shore as he arrived.

The spearmen chased them into the water but it was too late; the boats were soon out deeper where the warriors could not follow. They should have thrown their spears earlier, while the pirates were still in range, but the chief was too busy clutching the back of his neck to direct his men.

Owl perched on the stern of the last boat to make sure the box was not dropped into the sea by these clumsy pirates.

They were not to get away without pursuit, the great war canoe appeared, easily seen by moonlight, heading towards the ship. It was not fully manned but the warriors in it were intent on business. Clearly they were going to come alongside the ship and swarm on board to attack the crew.

'Alright!' roared Captain Wirewhiskers, 'number one starb'd gun, take aim and fire when she bears.'

His words were followed almost immediately by a tremendous bang and an eruption of flame and smoke which jetted out almost twenty feet from the gun's muzzle. The cannon ball rocked the canoe with a rush of wind as it passed over the heads of the paddlers, almost parting their hair, but they did not miss a stroke. It hit the sea a bit further on and bounced along the surface a few times before sinking.

'I said to aim!' roared the captain. 'This isn't the navy, and you're not firing salutes at Spithead. I hate cross-eyed misbegotten sons of gunners.'

'Number one, reload! Number two, fire when ready. Let's see what you can do!'

There was another bang and jet of flame and smoke. The cannon ball hit the water near the canoe, and this time it bounced over the heads of their pursuers. No one but Owl noticed that when number two gun recoiled it smashed into the box in which Daphne was hidden.

'This is terrific', 'stormed the captain. 'Next time I go to sea I'll sign on a ladies bowling club. They could bowl the things over and they couldn't do worse than you kak handed sons of sea cooks. Aim at the boat, not the sea. You know what a boat looks like don't you? Do you want me to call out and ask them to stop paddling for a while because you can't hit them while they're moving around like this? Number three gun, ready? This time aim at the boat. I want you to hit it between wind and water.

'Plenty o' time yet captin', said the gunner, 'It's a narrer target cos its comin' straight at us, but we'll get it.'

'Oh fine,' was the retort. 'I'll call out for them to turn it side on so you can get a better shot. I don't want a speech from you, gunner, just sink it.'

The third shot was luckier, or better aimed, because the ball struck the water right alongside the canoe which was flipped on to its side, and everyone fell out in a tangle of legs, arms, spears, and paddles.

The pirates roared their approval and jeered at the hapless warriors.

'Stop cheerin', yer stupid lubbers. This ain't no picnic. All hands to make sail,' ordered the captain as the Bling Gum warriors struggled to right the canoe, scoop out the water, and gather up their paddles and weapons.

When they were ready to paddle again it was too late; the pirate ship was under full sail and drawing steadily away, though they gamely paddled after it.

'Right,' said Captain Wirewhiskers, rubbing his hands together, 'Let's see what we got tonight.'

The tray had been tipped out on the deck where the gold, silver and diamonds glittered in the cold moonlight.

'For a start, Dawkins,' said the captain, 'You can take your foot off that diamond you found lying in the scuppers.. It came off the top of that there box that some careless lubber has smashed. Open it up and let's see what's inside.' One of the crew tore the lid off the box and Daphne jumped out looking much the worse for wear, though her diamonds and pearls glittered in the moonlight.

My, wasn't she in a temper! She was in a towering rage as she buttoned the cloak and clapped the crown on her head.

'I'm going to kill the stupid idiot that carried the box,' she screeched. 'It was very painful, he kept shaking the box and dropped it three times! There's not enough padding in there and the pearls kept digging into me; I'm bruised all over; the Cat Protection Society is going to hear about this. Whoever was carrying me deserves a thrashing.'

'You was only dropped once,' said Smawkins, standing up for himself. The second time I threw you into the boat and the third time I fell over on the deck; but apart from that I held you tight all the way.;

'Oh did you,' she said, lashing her tail in a rage. 'And who was making that shocking noise a while ago, and what was it that smashed into the box and nearly knocked me out?'

'Ah, that were us,' Captain Wirewhiskers informed her. 'We was firing at the Bling Gummers war canoe; blew them out of the water we did. A pretty piece of work even if I do say so meself.'

'Well, do it more quietly next time. The noise was deafening.'

Daphne suddenly stopped talking. Her feline senses warned her that the mood of the men about her had changed. They had recovered from the surprise of seeing her once again on their ship and noted that she was wearing a fortune in pearls and jewellery as well as a golden crown. They loosened knives in their sheaths and started to move in on her.

Daphne flew at the nearest mast and scaled it at an amazing speed with her cloak billowing out behind her. She stopped, balanced on the main yard-arm and looked down at the crew.

'These diamonds, and pearls, and the crown I'm wearing, they're mine,' she snarled. 'They're my property. I nearly died for them back there, and if any one of you characters tries to take them from me he'll be sorry; I'll cut him to ribbons.'

Mr Cheetham raised his pistol to fire but Captain Wirewhiskers struck his arm down. 'No one kills a cat on my ship,' he roared. 'She's been nothin' but bad luck since she first come aboard, but it'll get a lot worse if she's shot.'

'But she's wearing a fortune!' protested Mr Cheetham, 'and I'm entitled to a share. By the way, what is my share?'

Captain Wirewhiskers looked at him. 'Your share's fifty percent - less expenses. If you don't like it go and find a ship of yer own.'

'Mr Cheetham swore and put the pistol back in his pocket. He took no further part in the pursuit of Daphne, instead he sulked.

'Alright lads,' cried the captain, 'it'll be worth a fortune to strip her of them diamonds and pearls. Spread out now, up the shrouds. either side. Catch her and she's to be locked up until we're near an island. Then we'll throw her overboard and she can swim ashore.'

It was all very well for the captain to order her capture, but Daphne was at home in the rigging of the ship and could leap from spar to mast and from mast to rope better than any acrobat in a circus. The crew wasted a good half hour chasing her from one end of the ship to another until they all stopped in various parts of the rigging and panted in exhaustion. Daphne was not even breathing heavily; she could have kept up the chase up for hours, but she had been particular in watching one member of the crew.

It was Smawkins. She was still angry at not having had a meeting with the Grand Vizier, or the high priest, so her rage was directed at Smawkins. She felt she owed him some grief from the number of times her coffin had been dropped while she was being rescued, and also for leaving the coffin where it could be smashed into by a recoiling cannon.

Smawkins had taken part in the chase and was standing high in the shrouds on the larboard side, holding on by one hand and wiping the sweat from his face, and bald head, with a large, red handkerchief.

He did not see Daphne creeping closer until she screeched loudly, landed on top of his head and stuck her claws into his scalp. Smawkins roared loudly in pain and fright and let go of his grip on the rope.

He fell outwards because the cat had pushed him that way as she jumped safely back to the shrouds. There was a painful pause while everyone watched as Smawkins fell cartwheeling towards the water and disappeared with a huge splash. Someone threw a wooden oar into middle of the churned up water. It was to give him something to hang on to when he reappeared.

'Lower away with the boat,' ordered the captain, who seemed resigned to the confusion that reigned on his ship. Some men jumped into the boat when it was in the water, and dragged out the oars. 'We can't wait', he roared, 'That danged

canoe is still following us.' By bright moonlight they could see the canoe about a mile behind them, but still trying to catch up.

'When you get him aboard raise the mast, hoist sail and follow on. The wind's fair, you should keep ahead of the canoe alright. They can't keep up the paddling much longer so when they fall behind we'll shorten sail and take you aboard.'

It worked out as Wirewhiskers had said. The jolly boat, under sail, could not catch the ship, but neither could the canoe, and paddling stopped after a while due to the total exhaustion of the warriors.

Smawkins was brought aboard shivering with cold and suffering from a punctured scalp. They took him below for warmth and bandages.

'Will I swing the boat aboard, Captain? Asked Dawkins, the Bosun.

'No, tie it astern , we'll tow it for a while under full sail. Now I want a cask of water put aboard, and some provisions, enough for about three weeks.'

The men did not understand this order but they knew better than to argue. They rigged up a rope sling to lower the water and food into the boat.

{ 9 } Rio de Janeiro.

Owl and Daphne were watching this activity from high in the rigging. They wondered what the captain was planning.

'Cat!' bellowed Captain Wirewhiskers, 'Come down, I want to talk to you.'

The two came down cautiously to see what he had to say, but no lower than the yardarm of the mizzen lower topsail. From there they could talk easily enough with the Captain, who was standing by the steering wheel, which was at the stern of the ship.

When he saw that they would come no lower Wirewhiskers shouted, 'Cat, I want you and the bird off my ship. Alive or dead you're still bad luck. You saw the men lower food and water into the boat. I'll give you a truce. You get into the boat, cast off and take yer chances in an open boat on the sea. I'll not fire on you as long as you sail away and don't try and come back to the ship. If you turn around I'll blow you out o' the water.'

'What about the jewels and pearls?' enquired Owl. 'She takes them with her?'

'As long as she gets off my ship she can keep 'em.'

The men howled in rage when they heard that the cat's valuables were safe from their greed. Wirewhiskers lashed out with his length of tarred rope so that the men stopped howling and whimpered with pain instead.

'What do you think?' asked Owl, 'should we trust him enough to board the boat?'

'You know best' said the cat. 'What should I do?'

'Well you can't stay here, just bouncing around in the rigging whenever they try and catch you. At some time you'll be hungry and tired and have to come down, then you'll be caught.'

The cat sniffed. 'Do you have any kitty litter?' she enquired of Wirewhiskers.

'This is a pirate ship,' he retorted. 'No, we don't have no kitty litter.'

'Cushions? That boat looks most uncomfortable. Send below for some cushions and they will have to match my colouring.'

Captain Wirewhiskers sighed and sent Dawkins below to look for gold coloured cushions. The man returned after a while with a dirty pillow from the captain's bunk.

Daphne abused him roundly and ordered him to go back and find some clean pillowslips.

Captain Wirewhiskers said. 'Look, I just want you two off my ship and I'm not waitin' for clean pillowslips cos we don't have any. You either get into the boat now or I'll issue muskets to the crew and they can hunt you with them. 'We'll see how quick you are then, and I'll take my chances with the bad luck.'

Daphne saw there was no further use arguing. She raced along the yardarm and jumped on to a back stay, slid down it to the deck, leapt up on to the stern post and ran lightly down the rope to the boat trailing behind the ship. Dawkins threw the pillow into the boat and cast off the rope as soon as he heard the captain's order, which was followed by a burst of cheering.

Owl flew down and landed on the side of the boat.

'You're lucky I have such presence of mind,' said Daphne, as she appropriated the pillow for herself, 'otherwise we could have been in serious trouble'.

'We are in serious trouble,' retorted Owl grumpily. 'We're lost in an open boat in the middle of the ocean, and we don't know the direction of land.'

'What's that line all round us where you can't see beyond it?'

'That's the horizon.' Owl was right, it was the horizon. They were in a vast circle of sea in which, they could see, by the light of the setting moon, only the pirate ship and the canoe, that was now far astern.

'Well, let's sail towards the horizon, it's better than nothing.'

Such a remark may not have been the best of sailing directions but you will be pleased to know that eventually, after weeks of sailing and Owl flying over to ask passing ships if they were heading in the right direction, they came safely to Rio de Janeiro.

In Rio Daphne got a good price for her pearls, but she would never ever part with her crown, or the diamonds. She used the money from the sale of the pearls to start a night club for cats. The sign outside was as follows :

THE PUSSYCAT CLUB

For cool cats

Prop:Madame Daphne Feline

Formerly Queen Purrpuss the 40th.

No dogs admitted

Owl was her business manager.

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