

The Cat's Cradle.

(By Edward J. Baillie, in 'The Daisy Basket'.)

There was consternation in the household at Rose Cottage. John Burton, who was the head of the house, had said positively at last that action which had often before been threatened was now certain to be carried into effect. In his own words, he said, with a directness not to be misunderstood:—

'You must tak' them kitlings down to the river o' Tuesday morning. They're nowt but rubbish. We've no mice and nowt t'feed 'em if we had, and what with the meowin and the tinkle, tinkle of them bells there's no gett'n any queeatt—tha needna whimper, Bobby—come, wipe your face, Mary, and 'member, tak' them ribbins and tinklers off, and let's see th' end on 'em o' Tuesday.'

That was the trouble.

Bobby and Mary had two playful kittens which they had begged from a neighbor, and they had gained a place in the children's affections, and had really become in so short a time as members of the family circle. Mrs. Burton, a hard-working, tidy woman, who had a tender regard for her two children, and who was always kind and helpful, so far as her very limited means would allow, rather liked the kittens as companions when Robert and Mary were away at school. But father was the law-maker. He was not a more than usually hard man, but people of his class are often so sternly practical—as they choose to call it—that everything must be measured by its capacity for profit, or its value to some department of the household economy from a usable point of view. That is to say, a thing must be fit to eat, or wear, or use; otherwise it is in the way.

The kittens required food, and John Burton thought they added a certain amount to the weekly expenditure, and after the grind of the working day—John was a teamsman and so had to leave home early and return late—his idea of his rights and his comforts, from a home point of view, was perhaps a trifle severe as bearing upon those about him who made up the family circle. He considered that the children ought to be ready for bed, that the home should be clean as a new pin, that quiet should reign, and

that neither kittens nor other intruders upon the domestic hearth should make themselves heard, or their presence felt, after he had drawn up his big chair to the fire and his wife had brought out her knitting, to talk over the affairs of the day or the plans of the future.

The children went to bed with heavy hearts. Topsy and Tabby were to meet the fate with which they had been threatened in an earlier period of their history and which they had barely escaped by the successful pleadings of the children who came upon the scene when Tommy Williams had just got the bucket ready and the stones. The little cats, all unconscious, lay contentedly and snugly in the soap-box which served for their bed and stood by the fire in a cosy corner.

'My dears,' said the mother, as she put the little ones in bed, 'you must do what father tells you. I am very sorry, but we cannot help it. The cats bother him sometimes. We must remember that he works hard and works long in the cold for us. When we are warm he is cold and wet, often. We must do what we can to make him happy. It was no harm for you to say in your prayers to-night that you wanted Topsy and Tabby to be saved, but doing what's tell't you, my dears, is your duty. God bless you. Good night.'

And so the good mother tried to smooth both sides, as she often had to do, and tried to make the children see the straight path upon which their little feet had been placed and which she was certain was the right way for children to travel, whether the life of a cat were in the question or no. Children, obey.

The children thought and cried and slept and dreamed; and thought and cried and dreamed again; for they could not forget that in a few short days their precious little playmates were to be consigned to the cruel cold waters of the river, which ran at the foot of the village hill, on past the suburbs of the town—on and on to the great sea itself. And Topsy and Tabby were to be taken to the cold waters and would never be seen more!

The little cats had always seemed so full of fun. They had such pretty playfulness and such quaint little ways with them, that the chil-

dren felt them to be almost human. They would curl themselves up and roll over and over after a tiny reel tied to a piece of string and dangled about them or trailed before them. They would put themselves in hiding and wait until their little playmates passed the spot where they were concealed so well and they would then rush out and with mock ferocity seem savagely to attack feet and legs, then dart away again to some fresh hiding place and peep and wriggle for some new venture. They would roll themselves up upon the knees of the children and blink and purr in the firelight, and at last snooze contentedly and happily so long as they were allowed to possess their place in comfort. But now, alas! all was to be changed. The kittens were to be committed to the cold waters and would never be seen more!

'I know what we will do,' said Bobby in the morning. 'Mary, don't you remember when Moses' mother had to take the little lad and chuck him in the river 'cos babies weren't let live, his mother put him in a little cradle thing and he was kept alive till the daughter of the king found him safe. She couldn't drown him—think she could? I'll ask mother to let us have the soap box and we'll do just as they did in the Egypt river.'

Mary was delighted. Children have, you know, quite a delightful mixture of trust and of imagination on lines not altogether logical and worldly-wise, but somehow or other their little plans and projects do seem to succeed and come out just as they need them. So mother was approached and she allowed the children their way. She weighted the box cunningly for ballast and it was lined with hay. Bobby and Mary with effort wrote a card:—

'If you please these are our little cats as father says must be drowned. We are very sorry and have cried to part with them; they have never done no harm. Would you kind lady or gentleman as finds them in this cradle please take care of them, and God will bless you for us we are sure. The black one is Topsy, and the other is Tabby. Robert and Mary Burton, of Rose Cottage at the Ford, writ this on Tuesday.'

(To be continued.)

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