

**LIVES OF  
TWO CATS**

*Pierre Loti*



**“AND FROM THAT HOUR THEY WERE FAST FRIENDS”**

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• (I) •

I HAVE often seen, with a questioning restlessness infinitely sad, the soul of animals meet mine from the depths of their eyes: the soul of a cat, the soul of a dog, the soul of a monkey, as pathetically, for an instant, as a human soul, revealing itself suddenly in a glance and seeking my own soul with tenderness, supplication, or terror; and I have felt perhaps more pity for these souls of animals than for those of my own brethren, because they are speechless, incapable of emerging from their semi-intelligence; above all, because they are more humble and despised.

## • (II) •

THE two cats whose histories I am about to write are associated in memory with comparatively happy years of my life,—years scarce past by the dates they bear, but years already seeming in the remote past, borne away by the frightfully accelerating speed of time, and which, placed beside the gray to-day, bear tints of early dawn or last rosy light of morning. So fast our days hasten to the twilight, so fast our fall to the night.

### • (III) •

PARDON me that I call each of my cats Pussy. At first I had no idea of giving names to my pets. A cat was “Pussy,” a kitten “Kitty;” and surely no names could be more expressive and tender than these. I shall call the poor little personages of my story by the names they bore in their real lives, Pussy White and Pussy Gray; the latter often known as Pussy Chinese.

## • (IV) •

AS the oldest, allow me first to present the Angora, Pussy White. Her visiting card, by her desire, was thus inscribed—

MADAME MOUMOUTTE BLANCHE  
PREMIÈRE CHATTE  
Chez M. Pierre Loti.

On a memorable evening nearly twelve years ago, I saw her for the first time. It was a winter's evening, on one of my returns home at the close of some Eastern campaign. I had been in the house but a few moments, and was warming myself before a blazing wood fire, seated between my mother and my aunt Clara. Suddenly something appeared on the scene, bounding like a panther, and then rolling itself wildly on the hearth rug like a live snowball on its crimson ground. "Ah!" said aunt Clara, "you don't know her; I will introduce her; this is our new inmate, Pussy White! We thought we would have another cat, for a mouse had found our closet in the saloon below."

The house had been catless for a long time; succeeding the mourning for a certain African cat that I had brought home from my first voyage and worshiped for two years, but who one fine morning, after a short illness, breathed out her little foreign soul, giving me her last conscious glance, and whom I had afterward buried beneath a tree in the garden.

I lifted for a closer view the roll of fur which lay so white on the crimson mat. I held her carefully with both hands, in a position cats

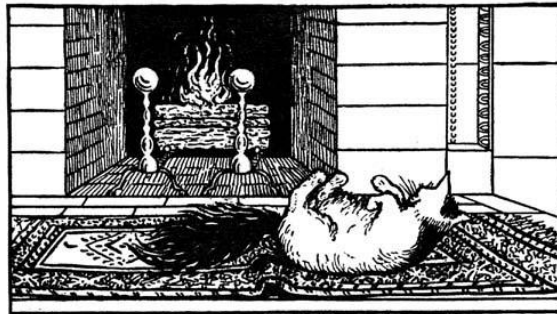


immediately comprehend, and say to themselves, "Here is a man who understands us; his caresses we can gratefully condescend to receive."

The face of the new cat was very prepossessing. The young, brilliant eyes, the tip of a pink nose, and all else lost in a mass of silken Angora fur; white, warm, clean, exquisite to fondle and caress. Besides, she was marked nearly like her predecessor from Senegal, which fact probably decided the selection of my mother and aunt Clara,—to the end that I might finally regard the two as one, in my somewhat fickle affections. Above the cat's ears, a capote shaped spot, jet black in color, was set straight, forming a band over the bright eyes; another and larger spot, shaped like a cape, lay over her shoulders; a plummy black tail, moving like a superb train or an animated fly-brush, completed the costume. Her breast, belly, and paws were white as the down of a swan; her "total" gave me the impression of a ball of animated fur; light, soft, and moved by some capricious hidden spring. After making my acquaintance, Pussy White left my arms to recommence her play. And in these first moments of arrival, inevitably melancholy, because they marked another epoch in my life, the new black and white cat obliged me to busy my thoughts with her, jumping on my knee to reiterate my welcome, or stretching herself with feigned weariness on the floor, that I might better admire the silken whiteness of her belly and neck. So she gambolled, the new cat, while my eyes rested with tender remembrances on the two dear faces which smiled on me, somewhat aged and framed in grayer curls; upon the family portraits which preserved their expression and age in their frames upon the walls; upon the thousand objects seen in their accustomed places; upon the well known furniture of

this hereditary dwelling immovably fixed there, while my unquiet, restless, changing being had roamed over a changing world.

And this is the persistent, distinct image of our Pussy White, with me still, long after her death: an embodied frolic in fur, snowy white and bounding or rolling on the crimson rug between the sombre black robes of my mother and aunt Clara, in the evening of one of my great returns.



### “ROLLING ON THE CRIMSON RUG”

Poor Pussy! During the first winter of her life she was usually the familiar demon, the hearthstone imp, who enlivened the loneliness of the blessed guardians of my home, my mother and aunt Clara. While I sailed over distant seas, when the house resumed its grand emptiness, in sombre twilights and interminable December nights, she was their constant attendant, though often their tormentor; leaving upon their immaculate black gowns, precisely alike, tufts of her white fur. With reckless indiscretion she took forcible possession of a place on their laps, their work table, or in the centre of their workbaskets, tangling beyond rearrangement their skeins of wool, their reels of silk. Then they would say with great pretense of anger, meanwhile longing to laugh, “Oh! that cat, that

bad cat, she will never learn how to behave herself! Get out, miss! Get out! Were there ever such actions as these!” They busied themselves inventing methods for her amusement, even to keeping a jumping-jack, a ludicrous wooden toy, for her special edification.

She loved them cattishly, with indocility, but added thereto a touching constancy, for which alone her little incomplete and fantastic existence merits my lasting remembrance.

In springtime, when the March sun began to brighten our courtyard, she experienced new and endless surprises in seeing, awake and crawling from his winter retreat, our tortoise Suleïma, her fellow resident and friend.

During the beautiful month of May she seemed seized by yearnings for space and freedom; then she made excursions on the walls, the roof, through the lanes, in the neighboring gardens, and even nocturnal absences, which I should here state were unaccountable in the austere circle where fate had placed her.

In summer she was languid as a creole. For entire days she lay lazily in the sunshine on the old wall top among the honeysuckles and roses, or, extended on the tiled walks, turned her white belly to the sun amidst the pots of red or golden cacti.

Extremely careful of her little person, always neat, correct, aristocratic, even to the ends of her toes, she was haughtily disdainful of other cats, and conducted herself as if ill bred if any neighbor cat called on her. In this courtyard, which she considered her own domain, she conceded no right of entry. If, above the adjoining garden wall, two ear tips, a cat’s nose, rose timidly, or if something stirred in the vines or moss, she upsprang like a young fury, bristling angrily to the tip of her tail, impossible to restrain,

quite beside herself! Cries in harsh tones and bad taste followed, struggles, blows, and savage clawings.

In fact, our pet was ferociously independent. She was also extremely affectionate when so inclined, caressing, cajoling, uttering so gentle a cry of joy, a tremulous “miaou” every time she returned from one of her vagabond tramps in the vicinity.

She was then five years old, in the mature beauty of an Angora, with superb attitudes of dignity and the graces of a queen. I had become much attached to her in the course of my absences and returns, considering her one of our home treasures, when there appeared on the scene—three thousand miles afar in the Gulf of Peking, and of a far less distinguished family than the Angoras—the kitten destined to become her inseparable friend, the most unique little personage I have yet known, “Pussy Gray” or “Pussy Chinese.”

• (V) •

MADAME MOUMOUTTE CHINOISE  
DEUXIÈME CHATTE  
Chez M. Pierre Loti.

**M**OST singular was the destiny which united to me this cat of the yellow race, progeny of obscure parentage and destitute of all beauty.

It was at the close of our last foreign war, one of those evenings of revelry which often occurred at that time. I know not how the little distraught creature, driven from some wrecked junk or sampan, came on board our warship, in great terror, seeking a refuge in my cabin beneath my berth. She was young, not half grown, thin and melancholy, having doubtless, like her relatives and masters, subsisted meanly on fishes' heads with a bit of cooked rice. I pitied her much and bade my servant give her food and drink.

With an unmistakable air of humility and gratitude she accepted my kindness,—and I can see her now, creeping slowly toward the un hoped-for repast, advancing first one foot, then another, her clear eyes fixed on mine to assure herself that she was not deceived, that it was really intended for her.

In the morning I wished to turn her away. After giving her a farewell breakfast, I clapped my hands loudly, and stamping both feet together by way of emphasis, I said in a harsh tone, "Get out, go away, little Kitty!"



**“ADVANCING ... HER CLEAR EYES FIXED ON MINE”**

But no, she did not go, the little pagan. Evidently she felt no fear of me, intuitively certain that all this angry noise was a pretense. With an air that seemed to say, “I know very well that you will not harm me,” she crouched silently in the corner, lying close to the floor in a supplicating attitude, fixing upon me two dilated eyes, alight with a human look that I have never seen except in hers.

What could I do? Impossible to domicile a cat in the contracted cabin of a warship. Besides, she was such a distressingly homely little creature, what an encumbrance by and by!

Then I lifted her carefully to my neck, saying to her, “I am very sorry, Kitty;” but I carried her resolutely the length of the deck, to the further end of the battery, to the sailors’ quarters, who usually are both fond of and kind to cats of whatever age or pedigree.

Flattened close to the deck, her head imploringly turned towards me, she gave me one beseeching look; then rose and fled with a queer and swift gait in the direction of my cabin, where she arrived first in the race between us; when I entered I found her crouched obstinately in the corner from which I had taken her, with an

expression, a remonstrance in her golden eyes, that deprived me of all courage to again take her away. And this is the way by which Pussy Chinese chose me for her owner and protector.

My servant, evidently on her side from the début of the contest, completed immediate preparations for her installment in my cabin, by placing beneath my bed a lined basket for her bed, and one of my large Chinese bowls, very practically filled with sand; an arrangement which froze me with fright.

## • (VI) •

DAY and night she lived for seven months in the dim light and unceasing movement of my cabin, and gradually an intimacy was established between us, simultaneously with a faculty of mutual comprehension very rare between man and animal.

I recall the first day when our relations became truly affectionate. We were far out in the Yellow Sea, in gloomy September weather. The first autumnal fogs had gathered over the suddenly cooled and restless waters. In these latitudes cold and cloud come suddenly, bringing to us European voyagers a sadness whose intensity is proportioned to our distance from home. We were steaming eastward against a long swell which had arisen, and rocked in dismal monotony to the plaintive groans and creakings of the ship. It had become necessary to close my port, and the cabin received its sole light through the thick bull's-eye, past which the crests of the waves swept in green translucency, making intermittent obscurity. I had seated myself to write at the little sliding table, the same in all our cabins on board,—during one of those rare moments, when our service allows a complete freedom and peace, and when the longing comes to be alone as in a cloister.

Pussy Gray had lived under my berth for nearly two weeks. She had behaved with great circumspection; melancholy, showing herself seldom, keeping in darkest corners as if suffering from homesickness and pining for the land to which there was no return.



Suddenly she came forth from the shadows, stretched herself leisurely, as if giving time for farther reflection, then moved towards me, still hesitating with abrupt stops; at times affecting a peculiarly Chinese gesture, she raised a fore paw, holding it in the air some seconds before deciding to make another advancing step; and all this time her eyes were fixed on mine with infinite solicitude.

What did she want of me? She was evidently not hungry: suitable food was given her by my servant twice daily. What then could it be?

When she was sufficiently near to touch my leg, she sat down, curled her tail about her, and uttered a very low mew; and still looked directly in my eyes, as if they could communicate with hers, which showed a world of intelligent conception in her little brain. She must first have learned, like other superior animals, that I was not a thing, but a thinking being, capable of pity and influenced by the mute appeal of a look; besides, she felt that my eyes were for her eyes, that they were mirrors, where her little soul sought anxiously to seize a reflection of mine. Truly they are startlingly near us, when we reflect upon it, animals capable of such inferences.

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