

An Incident, Chekhov Anton

Morning. Through the frosty lacework which covered the window-panes a host of bright sun-rays burst into the nursery. Vanya, a boy of six, with a nose like a button, and his sister Nina, aged four, curly-headed, chubby, and small for her age, awoke, and glared angrily at one another through the bars of their cots.

"Fie!" cried nurse. "For shame, children! All the good people have finished breakfast, and you can't keep your eyes open...."

The sun-rays played merrily on the carpet, on the walls, on nurse's skirt, and begged the children to play with them. But the children took no notice. They had awakened on the wrong side of their beds. Nina pouted, made a wry face, and drawled:

"Te-ee! Nurse, te-ee!"

Vanya frowned, and looked about for an opportunity to pick a quarrel and roar. He had just blinked his eyes and opened his mouth, when out of the diningroom rang mother's voice:

"Don't forget to give the cat milk; she has got kittens."

Vanya and Nina lengthened their faces and looked questioningly at one another. Then both screamed, jumped out of bed, and, making the air ring with deafening yells, ran barefooted in their nightdresses into the kitchen.

"The cat's got kittens! The cat's got kittens!" they screamed.

In the kitchen under a bench stood a small box, a box which Stepan used for coke when he lighted the stove. Out of this box gazed the cat. Her grey face expressed extreme exhaustion, her green eyes with their little black pupils looked languishing and sentimental. ... From her face it was plain that to complete her happiness only one thing was lacking, and that was the presence of the father of her children, to whom she had given herself heart and soul. She attempted to mew, and opened her mouth wide, but only succeeded in making a hissing sound.... The kittens squealed.

The children squatted on the ground in front of the box, and, without moving, but holding their breath, looked at the cat.... They were astonished and thunderstruck, and did not hear the grumbling of the pursuing nurse. In the eyes of both shone sincere felicity.

In the up-bringing of children, domestic animals play an unnoticed but unquestionably beneficent part. Which of us cannot remember strong but magnanimous dogs, lazy lapdogs, birds who died in captivity, dull-witted but haughty turkey-cocks, kindly old-lady-cats who forgave us when we stood on their tails for a joke and caused them intense pain? It might even be argued that the patience, faithfulness, all-forgivingness and sincerity of our domestic animals act on the childish brain much more powerfully than the long lectures of dry and pale Earl Earlovitch, or the obscure explanations of the governess who tries to prove to children that water is composed of hydrogen and oxygen.

"What duckies!" cried Nina, overflowing with gay laughter. "They're exactly like mice!"

"One, two, three!" counted Vanya. "Three kittens. That is one for me, one for you, and one for somebody else."

"Murrmmm ... murrmmm," purred the mother, flattered by so much attention.  
"Murrmmm!"

When they had looked for a while at the kittens, the children took them from under the cat and began to smooth them down, and afterwards, not satisfied with this, laid them in the skirts of their nightdresses and ran from one room to another.

"Mamma, the cat's got kittens!" they cried. Mother sat in the dining-room, talking to a stranger. When she saw her children unwashed, undressed, with their nightdresses on high, she got red, and looked at them severely.

"Drop your nightdresses, shameless!" she said. "Run away at once, or you'll be punished."

But the children paid no attention either to their mother's threats or to the presence of the stranger. They put the kittens down on the carpet and raised a deafening howl. Beside them walked the old cat, and mewed imploringly. When in a few minutes the children were dragged off to the nursery to dress, say their prayers, and have their breakfast, they were full of a passionate wish to escape from these prosaic duties and return to the kitchen.

Ordinary occupations and games were quite forgotten. From the moment of their appearance in the world the kittens obscured everything, and took their place as the living novelty and heart-swelling of the day. If you had offered Vanya or Nina a bushel of sweets for each kitten, or a thousand threepenny-bits, they would have rejected the offer without a moment's hesitation. Till dinner-time, in spite of the warm protests of nurse and the cook, they sat in the kitchen and played with the kittens. Their faces were serious, concentrated, and expressive of anxiety. They had to provide not only for the present condition, but also for the future of the kittens. So they decided that one kitten would remain at home with the old cat, so as to console its mother, that the other would be sent to the country-house, and that the third would live in the cellar and eat the rats.

"But why can't they see?" asked Nina. "They have blind eyes, like beggars."

The question troubled Vanya. He did his best to open one of the kitten's eyes, for a long time puffed and snuffled, but the operation was fruitless. And another circumstance worried the children extremely—the kittens obstinately refused the proffered meat and milk. Everything that was laid before their little snouts was eaten up by their grey mother.

"Let's build houses for the kittens," proposed Vanya. "We will make them live in different houses, and the cat will pay them visits...." In three corners of the kitchen they set up old hat-boxes. But the separation of the family seemed premature; the old cat, preserving on her face her former plaintive and sentimental expression, paid visits to all the boxes and took her children home again.

"The cat is their mother," said Vanya, "but who is their father?"

"Yes, who is their father?" repeated Nina.

"They can't live without a father."

For a long time Vanya and Nina discussed the problem, who should be father of the kittens. In the end their choice fell on a big dark-red horse whose tail had been tom off. He had been cast away in the store-room under the staircase, together with the remnants of other toys that had outlived their generation. They took the horse from the store-room and stood it beside the box.

"Look out!" they warned him. "Stand there and see that they behave themselves."

All this was said and done in a serious manner, and with an expression of solicitude. Outside the box and the kittens, Vanya and Nina would recognise no other world. Their happiness had no bounds. But they were destined to endure moments of unutterable torture. Just before dinner Vanya sat in his father's study, and looked thoughtfully at the table. Near the lamp, across a packet of stamped paper, crawled a kitten. Vanya watched its movements attentively, and occasionally poked it in the snout with a pencil.... Suddenly, as if springing out of the floor, appeared his father.

"What is this?" cried an angry voice.

"It is ... it is a kitten, papa."

"I'll teach you to bring your kittens here, wretched child! Look what you've done! Ruined a whole package of paper!"

To Vanya's astonishment, his father did not share his sympathy with kittens, and, instead of going into raptures and rejoicing, pulled Vanya's ear, and cried:

"Stepan, take away this abomination!"

At dinner the scandal was repeated.... During the second course the diners suddenly heard a faint squeal. They began to search for the cause, and found a kitten under Nina's pinafore.

"Ninka! Go out of the room!" said her father angrily. "The kittens must be thrown into the sink this minute! I won't tolerate these abominations in the house!"

Vanya and Nina were terror-stricken. Death in the sink, apart from its cruelty, threatened to deprive the cat and the wooden horse of their children, to desolate the box, to destroy all their plans for the future—that beautiful future when one kitten would console its old mother, the second live in the country, and the third catch rats in the cellar.... They began to cry, and implored mercy for the kittens. Their father consented to spare them, but only on the condition that the children should not dare to go into the kitchen or touch the kittens again.

After dinner, Vanya and Nina wandered from one room to another and languished. The prohibition on going to the kitchen drove them to despair. They refused sweets; and were naughty, and rude to their mother. In the evening when Uncle Petrusha came they took him aside and complained of their father for threatening to throw the kittens into the sink.

"Uncle Petrusha," they implored, "tell mamma to put the kittens in the nursery.... Do!"

"Well ... all right!" said their uncle, tearing himself away. "Agreed!"

Uncle Petrusha seldom came alone. Along with him came Nero, a big black dog, of Danish origin, with hanging ears and a tail as hard as a stick. Nero was silent, morose, and altogether taken up with his own dignity. To the children he paid not the slightest attention; and, when he marched past them, knocked his tail against them as if they were chairs. Vanya and Nina detested him from the bottom of their hearts. But on this occasion practical considerations gained the upper hand over mere sentiment.

"Do you know what, Nina?" said Vanya, opening wide his eyes. "Let us make Nero the

father instead of the horse! The horse is dead, but Nero's alive." The whole evening they waited impatiently for their father to sit down to his game of vint, when they might take Nero to the kitchen without being observed.... At last father sat down to his cards, mother bustled around the samovar, and did not see the children.... The happy moment had come!

"Come!" whispered Vanya to his sister.

But at that very moment Stepan came into the room, and said with a grin:

"I beg your pardon, ma'am. Nero has eaten the kittens."

Nina and Vanya turned pale, and looked with horror at Stepan.

"Yes, ma'am ..." grinned the servant. "He went straight to the box and gobbled them up."

The children expected everyone in the house to rise in alarm and fly at the guilty Nero. But their parents sat calmly in their chairs, and only expressed surprise at the appetite of the big dog. Father and mother laughed.... Nero marched up to the table, flourished his tail, and licked himself complacently. ... Only the cat seemed disturbed; she stretched out her tail, and walked about the room looking suspiciously at everyone and mewling plaintively.

"Now, children, time for bed! Ten o'clock!" cried mother.

And Vanya and Nina were put to bed, where they wept over the injured cat, whose life had been desolated by cruel, nasty, unpunished Nero.