

Fluffy

BY THEODORE STURGEON

Cats know a good deal more than they say. . . .

RANSOME lay in the dark and smiled to himself, thinking about his hostess. Ransome was always in demand as a house-guest, purely because of his phenomenal abilities as a raconteur. Said abilities were entirely due to his being so often a house-guest, for it was the terse beauty of his word-pictures of people and their opinion that made him the figure he was. And all those clipped ironies had to do with the people he had met last week-end. Staying a while at the Joneses, he could quietly insinuate the most scandalously hilarious things about the Joneses when he week-ended with the Browns the following fortnight. You think Mr. and Mrs. Jones resented that? Ah, no. You should hear the dirt on the Browns ! And so it went, a two-dimensional spiral on the social plane.

This wasn't the Joneses or the Brown's, though. This was Mrs. Benedetto's menage; and to Ransome's somewhat jaded sense of humor, the widow Benedetto was a godsend. She lived in a world of her own, which was apparently set about with quasi-important ancestors and relatives exactly as her living-room was cluttered up with perfectly unmentionable examples of Victorian rococo.

Mrs. Benedetto did not live alone. Far from it. Her very life, to paraphrase the lady herself, was wound about, was caught up in, was owned by and dedicated to her baby. Her baby was her beloved, her little beauty, her too darling my dear, and—so help me—her boobly wutsi-wutsikins. In himself he was quite a character. He answered to the name of Bubbles, which was inaccurate and offended his dignity. He had been christened Fluffy, but you know how it is with nicknames. He was large and he was sleek, that paragon among animals, a chastened alley-rabbit.

Wonderful things, cats. A cat is the only animal which can live like a parasite and maintain to the utmost its ability to take care of itself. You've heard of little lost dogs, but you never heard of a lost cat. Cats don't get lost, because cats don't belong anywhere. You wouldn't get Mrs. Benedetto to believe that. Mrs. Benedetto never thought of putting Fluffy's devotion to the test by declaring a ten-day moratorium on the canned salmon. If she had, she would have uncovered a sense of honor comparable with that of a bedbug.

Knowing this — Ransome pardoned himself the pun—categorically, Ransome found himself vastly amused. Mrs. Benedetto's ministrations to the phlegmatic Fluffy were positively orgiastic. As he thought of it in detail, he began to feel that perhaps, after all, Fluffy was something of a feline phenomenon. A cat's ears are sensitive organisms; any living being that could abide Mrs. Benedetto's constant flow of conversation from dawn till dark, and then hear it subside in sleep only to be replaced by a nightshift of resounding snores; well that *was* phenomenal. And Fluffy had stood it for four years. Cats are not renowned for their patience. They have, however, a very fine sense of values. Fluffy was getting something out of it—worth considerably more to him than the discomforts he endured, too, for no cat likes to break even.

HELAY still, marvelling at the carrying power of the widow's snores. He knew little of the late Mr. Thnedetto, but he gathered now that he had been either a man of saintly patience, a masochist or a deaf-mute. A noise like that from just one stringy throat must be an impossibility, and yet, there it was. Ransome liked to imagine that the woman had callouses on her palate and tonsils, grown there from her conversation, and it was these rasping together that produced the curious dry-leather quality of her snores. He tucked the idea away for future reference. He might use it next week-end. The snores were hardly the gentlest of lullabys, but any sound is soothing if it is repeated often enough.

There is an old story about a lighthouse tender whose lighthouse was equipped with an automatic

cannon which fired every fifteen minutes, day and light. One night, when the old man was fast asleep, the gun failed to go off. Three seconds after its stated time, the old fellow was out of his bed and flailing around the room, shouting, "What was that?" And so it was with Ransome.

He couldn't tell whether it was an hour after he had fallen asleep, or whether he had not fallen asleep at all. But he found himself sitting on the edge of the bed, wide awake, straining every nerve for the source of the—what was it?—sound?—that had awakened him. The old house was as quiet as a city morgue after closing time, and he could see nothing in the tall, dark guest-room but the moon-silvered windows and the thick blacknesses that were drapes. Any old damn thing might be hiding behind those drapes, he thought comfortingly. He edged himself back on the bed and quickly snatched his feet off the floor. Not that anything was under the bed, but still—

A white object puffed along the floor through the moonbeams toward him. He made no sound, but tensed himself, ready to attack or defend, dodge or retreat. Ransome was by no means an admirable character, but he owed his reputation and therefore his existence to this particular trait, the ability to poise himself, invulnerable to surprise. Try arguing with a man like that sometime.

The white object paused to stare at him out of its yellow-green eyes. It was only Fluffy—Fluffy looking casual and easy-going and not at all in a mood to frighten people. In fact he looked up at Ransome's gradually relaxing bulk and raised a long-hair, quizzical eyebrow, as if he rather enjoyed the man's discomfiture.

Ransome withstood the cat's gaze with suavity, and stretched himself out on the bed with every bit of Fluffy's own easy grace. "Well," he said amusedly, "You gave me a jolt! Weren't you taught to knock before you entered a gentleman's boudoir?"

Fluffy raised a velvet paw and touched it pinkly with his tongue. "Do you take me for a barbarian?" he asked.

Ransome's lids seemed to get heavy, the only sign he ever gave of being taken aback. He didn't believe for a moment that the cat had really spoken, but there was something about the voice he had heard that was more than a little familiar. This was, of course, someone's idea of a joke.

Good God—it had to be a joke!

Well, he had to hear that voice again before he could place it. "You didn't say anything, of course," he told the cat, "but if you did, what was it?"

"You heard me the first time," said the cat, and jumped up on the foot of his bed. Ransome inched back from the animal. "Yes," he said, "I—thought I did." Where on earth had he heard that voice before? "You know," he said, with an attempt at jocularly, "You should, under these circumstances, have written me a note before you knocked."

"I refuse to be burdened with the so-called social amenities," said Fluffy. His coat was spotlessly clean, and he looked like an advertising photograph for eiderdown, but he began to wash carefully. "I don't like you, Ransome."

"Thanks," chuckled Ransome, surprised. "I don't like you either."

"Why?" asked Fluffy.

RANSOME told himself silently that he was damned. He had recognized the cat's voice, and it was a credit to his powers of observation that he had. It was his own voice. He held tight to a mind that would begin to reel on slight provocation, and, as usual when bemused, he flung out a smoke-screen of his own variety of glib chatter.

"Reasons for not liking you," he said, "Are legion. They are all included in the one phrase—'You are a cat'."

"I have heard you say that at least twice before," said Fluffy, "Except that you have now substituted 'cat' for 'woman'."

"Your attitude is offensive. Is any given truth any the less true for having been uttered more than once?"

"No," said the cat with equanimity. "But it is just that more clichéd."

Ransome laughed. "Quite aside from the fact that you can talk, I find you most refreshing. No one has ever criticized my particular variety of repartee before."

"No one was ever wise to you before," said the cat. "Why don't you like cats?"

A question like that was, to Ransome, the pressing of a button which released ordered phrases. "Cats," he said oratorically, "are without doubt the most self-centred, ungrateful, hypocritical creatures on this or any other earth. Spawned from a mesalliance between Lilith and Satan—"

Fluffy's eyes widened. "Ah! An antiquarian!" he whispered.

"—they have the worst traits of both. Their best qualities are their beauty of form and of motion, and even these breathe evil. Women are the ficklest of bipeds, but few women are as fickle as, by nature, any cat is. Cats are not true. They are impossibilities, as perfection is impossible. No other living creature moves with utterly perfect grace. Only the dead can so perfectly relax. And nothing—simply nothing at all—transcends a cat's incomparable insincerity."

Fluffy purred.

"Pussy ! Sit-by-the-fire-and-sing!" spat Ransome. "Smiling up all toadying and yellow-eyed at bearers of liver and salmon and catnip! Soft little puffball, bundle of joy, playing with a ball on a string; making children clap their soft hands to see you, while your mean little brain is viciously alight with the pictures your play calls up for you. Bite it to make it bleed; hold it till it all but throttles; lay it down and step about it daintily; prod it with a gentle silken paw until it moves again, and then pounce. Clasp it in your talons then, lift it, roll over with it, sink your cruel teeth into it while you pump out its guts with your hind feet. Ball on a string! Playactor!"

FLUFFY fawned. "To quote you, that is the prettiest piece of emotional clap-trap that these old ears have ever heard. A triumph in studied spontaneity. A symphony in cynicism. A poem in perception. The unqualified—"

Ransome grunted.

He deeply resented this flamboyant theft of all his pet phrases, but his lip twitched nevertheless. The cat was indeed an observant animal.

"—epitome of understatement," Fluffy finished smoothly. "To listen to you, one would think that you would like to slaughter earth's felinity."

"I would," gritted Ransome.

"It would be a favor to us," said the cat. "We would keep ourselves vastly amused, eluding you and laughing at the effort it cost you. Humans lack imagination."

"Superior creature," said Ransome ironically, "Why don't you do away with the human race, if you find us a bore?"

"You think we couldn't?" responded Fluffy. "We can outthink, outrun and outbreed your kind. But why should we? As long as you act as you have for these last few thousand years, feeding us, sheltering us and asking nothing from us but our presence for purposes of admiration —why then, you may remain here."

Ransome guffawed. "Nice of you! But listen—stop your bland discussion of the abstract and tell me some things I want to know. How can you talk, and why did you pick me to talk to?"

Fluffy settled himself. "I shall answer the question socratically. Socrates was a Greek, and so I shall begin with your last question. What do you do for a living?"

"Why I—I have some investments and a small capital, and the interest—" Ransome stopped, for the first time fumbling for words. Fluffy was nodding knowingly.

"All right, all right. Come clean. You can speak freely."

Ransome grinned. "Well, if you must know—and you seem to—I am a practically permanent house-guest. I have a considerable fund of stories and a flair for telling them; I look presentable and act as if I were a gentleman. I negotiate, at times, small loans—"

"A loan," said Fluffy authoritatively, "is something one intends to repay."

"We'll call them loans," said Ransome airily "Also at one time and another, I exact a reasonable fee

for certain services rendered—"

"Blackmail," said the cat.

"Don't be crude. All in all, I find life a comfortable and engrossing thing."

"Q. E. D.," said Fluffy triumphantly. "You make your living by being scintillant, beautiful to look at. So do I. You help nobody but yourself; you help yourself to anything you want. So do I. No one likes you except those you bleed; everyone admires and envys you. So with me. Get the point?"

"I think so. Cat, you draw a mean parallel. In other words, you consider my behavior catlike."

"Precisely," said Fluffy through his whiskers. "And that is both why and how I can talk with you. You're so close to the feline in everything you do and think; your whole basic philosophy is that of a cat. You have a feline aura about you so intense that it contacts mine; hence we find each other intelligible."

"I don't understand that," said Ransome.

"Neither do I," returned Fluffy. "But there it is. Do you like Mrs. Benedetto?"

"No!" said Ransome immediately and with considerable emphasis. "She is absolutely insufferable. She bores me. She irritates me. She is the only woman in the world who can do both those things to me at the same time. She talks too much. She reads too little. She thinks not at all. Her mind is mysterically hidebound. She has a face like the cover of a book that no one has ever wanted to read. She is built like a pinch-type whiskey bottle that never had any whiskey in it. Her voice is monotonous and unmusical. Her education was insufficient. Her family background is mediocre, she can't cook, and she doesn't brush her teeth often enough."

"**MY, MY,**" said the cat, raising both paws in surprise. "I detect a ring of sincerity in all that. It pleases me. That is exactly the way I have felt for some years. I have never found fault with her cooking, though; she buys special food for me. I am tired of it. I am tired of her. I am tired of her to an almost unbelievable extent. Almost as much as I hate you."

"Me?"

"Of course. You're an imitation. You're a phony. Your birth is against you, Ransome. No animal that sweats and shaves, that opens doors for women, that dresses itself in equally phony imitations of the skins of animals, can achieve the status of a cat. You are presumptuous."

"You're not?"

"I am different. I am a cat, and have a right to do as I please. I disliked you so intensely when I saw you this evening that I made up my mind to kill you."

"Why didn't you? Why—don't you?"

"I couldn't," said the cat coolly. "Not when you sleep like a cat . . . no, I thought of something far more amusing."

"Oh?"

"Oh, yes." Fluffy stretched out a foreleg, extended his claws. Ransome noticed subconsciously how long and strong they seemed. The moon had gone its way, and the room was filling with with slate-gray light.

"What woke you," said the cat, leaping to the window-sill, "just before I came in?"

"I don't know," said Ransome. "Some little noise, I imagine."

"No, indeed," said fluffy, curling his tail and grinning through his whiskers. "It was the stopping of a noise. Notice how quiet it is?"

It was indeed. There wasn't a sound in the house—oh, yes, now he could hear the plodding footsteps of the maid on her way from the kitchen to Mrs. Benedetto's bedroom, and the soft clink of a teacup. But otherwise—suddenly he had it. "The old horse stopped snoring!"

"She did," said the cat. The door across the hall opened, there was the murmur of the maid's voice, a loud crash, the most horrible scream Ransome had ever heard, pounding footsteps rushing down the hall, a more distant scream, silence. Ransome bounced out of bed. "What the hell—"

"Just the maid," said Fluffy, washing between his toes, but keeping the corners of his eyes on Ransome. "She just found Mrs. Benedetto."

"Found—"

"Yes. I tore her throat out."

"Good—God! Why?"

Fluffy poised himself on the windowsill. "So you'd be blamed for it," he said, and laughing nastily, he leaped out and disappeared in the gray morning.

On a Weird Planet

By STANTON A. COBLENTZ

They said Inferno was the planet's name,—
A waste of sprouting crimson barred with black,
Where towers and palisades were sucked by flame,
And fields erupted in the red attack.

There, in the rocket-vomiting sooty gloom,
Bewildered thousands, frail as ants upturned,
Staggered, and ran, and staggered; pitched to doom,
Or prayed and muttered while their homesteads burned,

And roar of bombs and mortars jarred the ears.
And drone of flying dragons; screams of pain;
While fiery whirlwinds tore at all frontiers,
And sane men grappled with the clawed insane.

Inferno was the planet's name, they said.
Then weird this tale: that under warm blue skies
Once children laughed, and lovers merrily wed,
And poets, moonstruck, sang of paradise.