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WINNER OF A SECOND PRIZE

MISS PAISLEY'S CAT

by ROY VICKERS

THERE ARE THOSE WHO HAVE A special affection for cats, and there are those who hold them in physical and even moral abhorrence. The belief lingers that cats have been known to influence a human being — generally an old maid, and generally for evil. It is true that Miss Paisley's cat was the immediate cause of that emotionally emaciated old maid reaching a level of perverted greatness — or stark infamy, according to one's point of view. But this can be explained without resort to mysticism. The cat's behavior was catlike throughout.

Miss Paisley's cat leaped into her life when she was 54 and the cat itself was probably about two. Miss Paisley was physically healthy and active — an inoffensive, neatly dressed, self-contained spinster. The daughter of a prosperous businessman — her mother had died while the child was a toddler — she had passed her early years in the golden age of the middle classes, when every detached suburban villa had many of the attributes of a baronial hall: if there was no tenantry there was always a handful of traditionally obsequious tradesmen — to say nothing of a resident domestic staff.

She was eighteen, at a "finishing school" in Paris, when her father contracted pneumonia and died while in the course of reorganizing his business. Miss Paisley inherited the furniture of the house, a couple of hundred in cash, and an annuity of £120.

Her relations, in different parts of the country, rose to the occasion. Without expert advice they pronounced her unfit for further education or training and decided that, among them, they must marry her off — which ought not to be difficult. Miss Paisley was never the belle of a ball of any size, but she was a good-looking girl, with the usual graces and accomplishments.

In the first round of visits she accepted the warm assurances of welcome at their face value — yet she was not an unduly conceited girl. It was her father who had given her the belief that her company was a boon in itself. The technique of the finishing school, too, had been based on a similar assumption.

During the second round of visits — in units of some six months — she made the discovery that her company was tolerated rather than desired — a harsh truth from which she sought immediate escape.

There followed an era of nursery

governessing and the companioning of old ladies. The children were hard work and the old ladies were very disappointing.

Penuriousness and old ladies were turning her into a humble creature, thankful for the crumbs of life. In her early twenties she obtained permanent employment as a "female clerk" in a government office. She made her home in Rumbold Chambers, Marpleton, about fifteen miles out of London, and about a mile from the house that had once been her father's. The Chambers — in this sense a genteel, Edwardian word meaning flatlets — had already seen better days, and were to see worse.

The rent would absorb nearly half her annuity; but the Chambers, she believed, had tone. The available flatlet looked over the old cemetery to the Seventeenth-Century bridge across the river. She signed a life lease. Thus, she was in that flatlet when the cat came, 32 years later.

She had taken out of the warehouse as much furniture as would go into the flatlet. The walls were adorned with six enlarged photographs, somewhat pompously framed, of the house and garden that had been her father's.

The radio came into general use; the talkies appeared and civil aviation was getting into its stride — events which touched her life not at all. Light industry invaded Marpleton and district. Every three months or so she would walk past her old home, until it was demolished to make room for a factory.

If she made no enemies, she certainly made no friends. The finishing school had effectively crippled her natural sociability. At the end of her working day she would step back 30-odd years into her past.

When the cat appeared, Miss Paisley was talking vivaciously to herself, as is the habit of the solitary.

"I sometimes think father made a mistake in keeping it as a croquet lawn. Croquet is so old-fashioned . . . *Oh!* How on earth did you get here!"

The cat had apparently strolled on to the windowsill — a whole story plus some four feet above ground level. "Animals aren't allowed in the Chambers, so you must go . . . Go, please. *Whooosh!*"

The cat blinked and descended, somewhat awkwardly, into the room.

"What an ugly cat! I shall never forget Aunt Lisa's Persian. It looked beautiful, and everybody made an absurd fuss of it. I don't suppose anybody ever wants to stroke *you*. People tolerate you, rather wishing you didn't exist, poor thing!" The cat was sitting on its haunches, staring at Miss Paisley. "Oh, well, I suppose you can stay to tea. I've no fish, but there's some bloater paste I forgot to throw away — and some milk left over from yesterday."

Miss Paisley set about preparing tea for herself. It was Saturday afternoon. Chocolate biscuits and two cream eclairs for today, and chocolate biscuits and two meringues for Sunday. When the kettle had

boiled and she had made the tea, she scraped out a nearly empty tin of bloater paste, spreading it on a thin slice of dry bread. She laid a newspaper on the floor — the carpet had been cut out of the drawing-room carpet of 34 years ago. The cat, watching these preparations, purred its approval.

"Poor thing! It's pathetically grateful," said Miss Paisley, placing the bloater paste and a saucer of yesterday's milk on the newspaper.

The cat lowered its head, sniffed the bloater paste, but did not touch it. It tried the milk, lapped once, then again sat back on its haunches and stared at Miss Paisley.

The stare of Miss Paisley's cat was not pleasing to humanity. It was, of course, a normal cat's stare from eyes that were also normal, though they appeared not to be, owing to a streak of white fur that ran from one eyelid to the opposite ear, then splashed over the spine. A wound from an airgun made one cheek slightly shorter than the other, revealing a glimpse of teeth and giving the face the suggestion of a human sneer. Add that it had a stiff left foreleg, which made its walk ungainly, and you have a very ugly cat — a standing challenge to juvenile marksmanship.

"You're a stupid cat, too," said Miss Paisley. "You don't seem to make the most of your opportunities."

Miss Paisley sat down to tea. The cat leaped onto the table, seized one of the eclairs, descended cautiously, and devoured the eclair on the carpet, several inches from the newspaper.

This time it was Miss Paisley who stared at the cat.

"That is most extraordinary behavior!" she exclaimed. "You thrust yourself upon me when I don't want you. I treat you with every kindness —"

The cat had finished the eclair. Miss Paisley continued to stare. Then her gaze shifted to her own hand which seemed to her to be moving independently of her will. She watched herself pick up the second eclair and lower it to the cat, who tugged it from her fingers.

She removed the saucer under her still empty tea cup, poured today's milk into it, and placed the saucer on the floor. She listened, fascinated, while the cat lapped it all. Her pulse was thudding with the excitement of a profound discovery.

Then, for the first time in 30-odd years, Miss Paisley burst into tears.

"Go away!" she sobbed. "I don't want you. It's too late — *I'm 54!*"

By the time her breath was coming easily again, the cat had curled up on the Chesterfield that was really Miss Paisley's bed.

It was a month or more before Miss Paisley knew for certain that she hoped the cat would make its home with her. Her attitude was free

from the kind of sentimentality which one associates with an old maid and a cat. She respected its cathood, attributed to it no human qualities. The relationship was too subtle to have need of pretense. Admittedly, she talked to it a great deal. But she talked as if to a room-mate, who might or might not be attending. In this respect, the cat's role could be compared with that of a paid companion.

"Excuse me, madam!" Jenkins, the watchdog and rent-collector, who had replaced the porter of palmier days, had stopped her in the narrow hall. "Would that cat with the black-and-white muzzle be yours by any chance?"

A month ago, Miss Paisley would have dithered with apology for breaking the rules and would have promised instant compliance.

"It is my cat, Jenkins. And I would be very glad to pay you half a crown a week for any trouble it may be to you."

"That's very kind of you, madam, and thank you. What I was goin' to say was that I saw it jump out o' Mr. Rinditch's window with a bit o' fish in its mouth what Mr. Rinditch had left from his breakfast." He glanced down the passage to make sure that Mr. Rinditch's door was shut. "You know what Mr. Rinditch is!"

Miss Paisley knew that he was a street bookmaker, with a number of runners who took the actual bets, and that Jenkins stood in awe of him as the only tenant of any financial substance. Mr. Rinditch was a stocky, thickset man with a large sullen face and a very large neck. Miss Paisley thought he looked vulgar, which was a matter of character, whereas the other tenants only looked common, which they couldn't help.

"I'll give it proper cat's-meat, then it won't steal."

"Thank you, madam."

The "madam" cost Miss Paisley about £4 a year. None of the other women were "madam," and none of the men were "sir" — not even Mr. Rinditch. Two pounds at Christmas and odd half crowns for small, mainly superfluous services. For Miss Paisley it was a sound investment. In her dream life she was an emigrée awaiting recall to a style of living which, did she but know it, had virtually ceased to exist in England. It was as if the 30-odd years of unskilled clerical labor were a merely temporary expedient. Through the cat she was acquiring a new philosophy, but the dream was untouched.

"I have to cut your meat," she explained that evening, "and I'm rather dreading it. You see, I've never actually handled raw meat before. It was *not* considered a necessary item in my education. Though I remember once — we were on a river picnic — two of the servants with the hamper were being driven over . . ."

She had to ask Jenkins's advice. He lent her a knife — a formidable object with a black handle and a

blade tapering to a point. A French knife, he told her, and she could buy one like it at any ironmonger's — which she did on the following day. There remained the shuddery business of handling the meat. She sacrificed a memento — a pair of leather driving gloves, which she had worn for horse-riding during her holidays from school.

On the third day of the fourth month the cat failed to appear at its meal-time. Miss Paisley was disturbed. She went to bed an hour later than usual, to lie awake until dawn, struggling against the now inescapable fact that the cat had become necessary to her, though she was unable to guess why this should be true. She tried to prove it was not true. She knew how some old maids doted upon a particular cat, perpetually fondling it and talking baby-talk to it. For her cat she felt nothing at all of that kind of emotion. She knew that her cat was rather dirty, and she never really liked touching it. Indeed, she did not like cats, as such. But there was something about this particular cat . . .

The cat came through the open window shortly after dawn. Miss Paisley got out of bed and uncovered the meat. The cat yawned, stretched, and ignored it, then jumped onto the foot of her bed, circled, and settled down, asleep before Miss Paisley's own head returned to her pillow. Miss Paisley was now cat-wise enough to know that it must have fed elsewhere, from which she drew the alarming inference that a cat which had strayed once might stray again.

The next day she bought a collar, had it engraved with her name and address and, in brackets, £1 *Reward for Return.* She could contemplate expenditure of this kind without unease because, in the 30-odd years, she had saved more than £500.

That evening she fastened the collar in position. The cat pulled it off. Miss Paisley unfastened the special safety buckle and tried again — tried five times before postponing further effort.

"Actually, you yourself have taught me how to handle this situation," she said the following evening. "You refused the bloater paste and the not very fresh milk. You were right! Now, it will be a great pity if we have to quarrel and see no more of each other, but — no collar — no meat!"

After small initial misunderstandings the cat accepted the collar for the duration of the meal. On the third evening the cat forgot to scratch it off after the meal. In a week, painstaking observation revealed that the cat had become unconscious of the collar. Even when it scratched the collar in the course of scratching itself, it made no effort to remove the collar. It wore the collar for the rest of its life.

After the collar incident, their relationship was established on a firmer footing. She bought herself

new clothes — including a hat that was too young for her and a lumber jacket in suede as green as a cat's eyes. There followed a month of tranquillity, shadowed only by a warning from Jenkins that the cat had failed to shake off its habit of visiting Mr. Rinditch's room. She noticed something smarmy in the way Jenkins told her about it — as if he enjoyed telling her. For the first time, there came to her the suspicion that the "madam" was ironic and a source of amusement to Jenkins.

On the following Saturday came evidence that, in this matter at least, Jenkins had spoken truly. She would reach home shortly after 1 on Saturdays. While she was on her way across the hall to the staircase, the door of Mr. Rinditch's room opened. Mr. Rinditch's foot was visible, as was Miss Paisley's cat. The cat was projected some four feet across the corridor. As it struck the paneling of the staircase, Miss Paisley felt a violent pain in her own ribs. She rushed forward, tried to pick up her cat. The cat spat at her and hobbled away. For a moment she stared after it, surprised and hurt by its behavior. Then, suddenly, she brightened.

"You won't accept pity!" she murmured. She tossed her head, and her eyes sparkled with a kind of happiness that was new to her. She knocked on Mr. Rinditch's door. When the large, sullen face appeared, she met it with a catlike stare.

"You kicked my cat!"

"Your cat, is it! Then I'll thank you to keep it out o' my room."

"I regret the trespass —"

"So do I. If I catch 'im in 'ere again, he'll swing for it, and it's me tellin' yer." Mr. Rinditch slammed his door.

Miss Paisley, who affected an ignorance of cockney idiom, asked herself what the words meant. As they would bear an interpretation which she would not allow her imagination to accept, she assured herself they meant nothing. She began to wonder at her own audacity in bearding a coarse, tough man like Mr. Rinditch, who might well have started a brawl.

In the meantime, the cat had gone up the stairs and was waiting for her at the door of her apartment. It still did not wish to be touched. But when Miss Paisley rested in her easy chair before preparing her lunch, the cat, for the first time, jumped onto her lap. It growled and changed its position, steadying itself with its claws, which penetrated Miss Paisley's dress and pricked her. Then it settled down, purred a little, and went to sleep. The one-time dining-room clock chimed 2 o'clock: Miss Paisley discovered that she was not hungry.

On Sunday the cat resumed its routine, and seemed none the worse. It tackled its meat ration with avidity, and wound up with Miss Paisley's other meringue. But that did not excuse the gross brutality of Mr. Rinditch. On Monday morning Miss Paisley stopped Jenkins on the first-floor landing and asked for Mr. Rinditch's full name, explaining that

she intended to apply for a summons for cruelty to animals.

"If you'll excuse me putting in a word, madam, you won't get your own back on *him* by gettin' him fined ten bob. Why, he pays somethink like £50 a month in fines for 'is runners — thinks no more of it than you think o' your train fare."

Miss Paisley was somewhat dashed. Jenkins enlarged.

"You'd be surprised, madam, at the cash that comes his way. The night before a big race, he'll be home at 6 with more'n a couple o' hundred pound in that bag o' his; then he'll go out at a quarter to 8, do his round of the pubs, and be back at 10:30 with as much cash again."

The amount of the fine, Miss Paisley told herself, was irrelevant. This was a matter of principle. The lawyer, whom she consulted during her lunch hour, failed to perceive the principle. He told her that she could not prove her statements: that, as the cat admittedly bore no sign of the attack, the case would be "laughed out of court."

She had never heard that phrase before, and she resented it, the resentment being tinged with fear.

When she reached home, she found the cat crouching on the far side of the escritoire. It took no notice of her, but she could wait no longer to unburden herself.

"We should be laughed out of court," she said. "In other words, Mr. Rinditch can kick us, and the Law will laugh at us for being kicked. I expect we look very funny when we are in pain!"

In the whole of Miss Paisley's life that was the unluckiest moment for that particular remark. If her eyes had not been turned inward, she could have interpreted the behavior of the cat, could not have failed to recognize that its position by the escritoire was strategic. She was still talking about her interview with the lawyer when the cat pounced, then turned in her direction, a live mouse kicking in its jaws.

"Oh, dear!" She accepted the situation with a sigh. She was without the physiological fear of mice — thought them pretty little things and would have encouraged them but for their unsanitary habits.

Now, Miss Paisley knew — certainly from the cliche, if not from experience — the way of a cat with a mouse. Yet it took her by surprise, creating an unmanageable conflict.

"Don't — oh, *don't!* Stop! Can't you see? . . . We're no better than Mr. Rinditch! Oh, God, please make him stop! I can't endure it. I *mustn't* endure it! Isn't it any use praying? Are You laughing, too?"

Physical movement was not at Miss Paisley's command, just then. The feeling of cold in her spine turned to heat, and spread outwards over her body, tingling as it spread. In her ears was the sound of crackling, like the burning of dried weeds.

Her breathing ceased to be painful. The immemorial ritual claimed first her attention, then her interest.

After some minutes, Miss Paisley tittered. Then she giggled. The cat, which can create in humanity so many illusions about itself, seemed to be playing its mouse to a gallery, and playing hard for a laugh.

Miss Paisley laughed.

There were periods of normality, of uneventful months in which one day was indistinguishable from another, and Miss Paisley thought of herself as an elderly lady who happened to keep a cat.

She deduced that the cat wandered a good deal, and sometimes begged or stole food from unknown persons. She had almost persuaded herself that it had abandoned its perilous habit of visiting Mr. Rinditch's flatlet. One evening in early summer, about a fortnight before the end came, this hope was dashed.

At about half-past 8 the cat had gone out, after its evening meal. Miss Paisley was looking out of her window, idly awaiting its return. Presently she saw it on top of the wall that divided the yard from the old burial ground. She waved to it; it stared at her, then proceeded to wash itself, making a ten-minute job of it. Then it slithered down via the tool shed, but instead of making straight for the drainpipe that led past Miss Paisley's windowsill, it changed direction. By leaning out of the window, she could obtain an oblique view of Mr. Rinditch's rear window.

She hurried downstairs along the corridor, past Mr. Rinditch's door to the door that gave onto the yard, skirted a group of six ashcans, and came to Mr. Rinditch's window, which was open about eighteen inches at the bottom. She could see the cat on Mr. Rinditch's bed. She knew she could not tempt it with food so soon after its main meal. She called coaxingly, then desperately.

"We are in great danger," she whispered. "Don't you care?"

The cat stared at her, then closed its eyes. Miss Paisley took stock of the room. It was sparsely but not inexpensively furnished. The paneling was disfigured with calendars and metal coat-hooks.

The sill was more than four feet from the ground. She put her shoulders in the gap, and insinuated herself. She grasped the cat by its scruff, with one finger under its collar, and retained her hold while she scrambled to the safety of the yard, neglecting to lower the window to its usual position. They both reached her apartment without meeting anyone.

During that last fortnight which remained to them, Miss Paisley received — as she would have expressed it — a final lesson from the cat. She was returning from work on a warm evening. When some 50 yards from the chambers, she saw the cat sunning itself on the pavement. From the opposite direction came a man with a Labrador dog on a leash. Suddenly the dog bounded, snatching the leash from the man's hand.

"*Danger!* Run a-way!" screamed Miss Paisley.

The cat saw its enemy a second too late. Moreover, its stiff leg put flight out of the question. While Miss Paisley ran forward, feeling the dog's hot breath on the back of her neck, she nerved herself for the breaking of her bones. And then, as it seemed to her, the incredible happened. The dog sprang away from the cat, ran round in a circle, yelping with pain, while the cat clambered to the top of a nearby gatepost.

The man had recovered the leash and was soothing the dog. Again Miss Paisley extemporized a prayer, this time of thankfulness. Then the habit of years asserted itself over the teaching she believed she had received from the cat.

"I am afraid, sir, my cat has injured your dog. I am very sorry. If there is anything I can do —"

"That's all right, miss," a genial cockney voice answered. "He asked for it, an' he got it." The dog was bleeding under the throat, and there were two long weals on its chest. "That's the way cats ought to fight — get in under and strike *UP*, I say!"

"I have some iodine in my flat —"

"Cor, he don't want none o' that! Maybe your cat has saved 'im from losing an eye to the next one. Don't you give it another thought, miss!"

Miss Paisley bowed, sadly confused in her social values, which were also her moral values. The man's cockney accent was as inescapable as the excellence of his manners. Miss Paisley's world was changing too fast for her.

She enjoyed another six days and nights of the cat's company, which included four and a half days at the office. But these can be counted in, because the attention she gave to her work had become automatic and did not disturb her inner awareness of the relationship. She never defined that relationship, had not even observed the oddity that she had given the cat no name . . .

It was a Tuesday evening. The cat was not at home when she arrived.

"You've started being late for meals again," she grumbled. "Tonight, as it so happens, you can have ten minutes' grace." Her subscription to an illustrated social weekly was overdue. She filled up the renewal form, went out to buy a money order.

In the hall, Mr. Rinditch's voice reached her through the closed door of his apartment — apparently swearing to himself. There followed a muffled, whistling sound, as of cord being drawn sharply over metal. Then she heard a queer kind of growling cough and a scratching on woodwork — the kind of scratching sound that could be made by a cat's claws on a wooden panel, if the cat's body were suspended above the floor.

She stood, holding her breath, paralyzed by a sense of urgency which her imagination refused to define. She seemed to be imprisoned within herself, unable to desire escape. The sound of scratching grew thinner

until it was so thin that she could doubt whether she heard it at all.

"You are imagining things!" she said to herself.

She smiled and went on her way to the post office. The smile became fixed. One must, she told herself, be circumspect in all things. If she were to start brawling with her neighbors every time she fancied — well, this-that-and-the-other — and without a shred of evidence — people would soon be saying she was an eccentric old maid. She wished she could stop smiling.

She bought the money order, posted it, and returned to her apartment, assuring herself that nothing at all had happened. That being agreed, everything could proceed as usual.

"Not home yet! Very well, I sha'n't wait for you. I shall cut up your meat now, and if it gets dry you've only yourself to blame." She put on the gloves with which she had held reins 37 years ago. "Just over a year! I must have used them to cut up your meat more than 300 times, and they're none the worse for wear. You couldn't buy gloves like this nowadays. I don't fancy tinned salmon. I think I'll make myself an omelette. I remember Cook was always a little uncertain with her omelettes."

She made the omelette carefully, but ate it quickly. When she had finished her coffee, she went to the bookcase above the escritoire. She had not opened the glass doors for more than ten years. She took out *Ivanhoe*, which her father had given to her mother before they were married.

At a quarter past ten, she closed the book.

"You know I've never waited up for you! And I'm not going to begin now."

The routine was to leave the curtains parted a little — about the width of a cat. Tonight she closed them. When she got into bed, she could soon see moonlight through the chinks by the rings . . . and then the daylight.

In the morning, she took some trouble to avoid meeting Jenkins. As if he had lain in wait for her, he popped out from the service cupboard under the staircase.

"Good morning, madam. I haven't seen your pussy cat this morning."

Pussy cat! What a nauseating way to speak of her cat!

"I'm not worrying, Jenkins. He often goes off on his own for a couple of days. I'm a little late this morning."

She was not late — she caught her usual train to London with the usual margin. At the office, her colleagues seemed more animated than usual. A fragment of their chatter penetrated. "If *Lone Lass* doesn't win tomorrow, I shall be going to London for my summer holiday." A racehorse, of course. One of the so-called classic races tomorrow, but she could not remember which. It reminded her of Mr. Rinditch. A very low, coarse man! Her thought shifted to

that very nice man who owned the dog. One of nature's gentlemen! "*Get in under and strike UP!*"

She did not go out at lunch hour, so did not buy any cat's-meat.

That evening, at a few minutes to 8, she heard Jenkins's footstep on the landing. He knocked at her door.

"Good evening, madam. I hope I'm not disturbing you. There's something I'd like to show you, if you can spare a couple o' minutes."

On the way downstairs there broke upon Miss Paisley the full truth about herself and Jenkins. Madam! She could hear now the contempt in his voice, could even hear the innumerable guffaws that had greeted his anecdotes of the female clerk who gave herself the airs of a lady in temporarily distressed circumstances. But her dignity had now passed into her own keeping.

He led her along the corridor, through the door giving onto the yard, to the six ashcans. He lifted a lid. On top of the garbage was the carcass of her cat. Attached to the neck was a length of green blind cord.

"Well, Jenkins?" Her fixed smile was unnerving him.

"He was in Mr. Rinditch's room again, soon after you came 'ome last night. You can't really complain, knowin' what he said he'd do. And hangin' an animal isn't torture if it's done properly, like this was. I don't suppose your poor little pussy cat felt any pain, Just pulled the string over the top of the coat-hook, and it was all over."

"That is immaterial." She knew that her cold indifference was robbing this jackal of the sadistic treat he had promised himself. "How do we know that Mr. Rinditch is responsible? It might have been anybody in the building, Jenkins."

"I tell you, it was him! Last night, when my missus went in with his evenin' meal, same as usual, she saw a length o' that blind cord stickin' out from under his bed. And there was a bit o' green fluff on the coat-hook, where the cord had frayed. The missus did a bit more nosing while she was clearing away, an' she spotted the cat's collar in the wastepaper basket. You couldn't hang a cat properly with that collar on, 'cause o' the metal. She said the strap part had been cut — like as it might be with a razor."

Miss Paisley gazed a second time into the ashcan. The collar had certainly been removed. Jenkins, watching her, thought she was still unwilling to believe him. Like most habitual liars, he was always excessively anxious to prove his word when he happened to be telling the truth.

"Come to think of it, the collar will still be in that basket," he said, mainly to himself. "Listen! He keeps it near enough to the front window. Come round to the front and maybe you'll be able to see it for yourself."

The basket was of plaited wicker. Through the interstices Miss Paisley could see enough of the collar to banish all doubt.

She could listen to herself talking to Jenkins, just as she had been able to see herself standing at the ashcan, knowing what was under the lid before Jenkins removed it. How easy it was to be calm when you had made up your mind!

When she returned to her room it was only five minutes past 8. Never mind. The calm would last as long as she needed it. In two hours and twenty-five minutes, Mr. Rinditch would come home. She was shivering. She put on the green suede lumber jacket, then she sat in her armchair, erect, her outstretched fingers in the folds of the upholstery.

"Before Mr. Rinditch comes back, I want you to know that I heard you scratching on his wall. You were alive then. We have already faced the fact that if I had hammered on the door and — brawled — you would be alive now. We won't argue about it. There's a lot to be said on both sides, so we will not indulge in recriminations."

Miss Paisley was silent until twenty-five minutes past 10, when she got up and put on the riding gloves, as if she were about to cut meat for her cat. The knife lay on the shelf in its usual place. Her hand snatched at the handle, as if someone were trying to take it away from her.

" '*Get in under and strike UP!*' " she whispered — and then Miss Paisley's physical movements again became unmanageable. She was gripping the handle of the knife, but she could not raise it from the shelf. She had the illusion of exerting her muscles, of pulling with all the strength of her arm against an impossibly heavy weight. Dimly she could hear Mr. Rinditch come home and slam his door.

"I've let myself become excited! I must get back my calm."

Still wearing the gloves and the lumber jacket, she went back to her chair.

"At my age I can't alter the habits of a lifetime — and when I try, I am pulled two ways at once. I told you in the first place that you had come too late. You oughtn't to have gone into Mr. Rinditch's room. He killed you in malice, and I betrayed you — oh, yes, I did! — and now I can't even pray."

Miss Paisley's thoughts propounded riddles and postulated nightmares with which her genteel education was unable to cope. When she came to full consciousness of her surroundings it was a quarter to 3 in the morning. The electric light was burning and she was wearing neither the gloves nor the green suede jacket.

"I don't remember turning on the light — I'm too tired to remember anything." She would sleep on in the morning, take a day off. She undressed and got into bed. For the first time for more than a year, she fell asleep without thought of the cat.

She was awakened shortly after 7 by a number of unusual sounds — of a clatter in the hall and voices raised, of a coming and going on the

stairs. She sat up and listened. On the ground floor Mrs. Jenkins was shouting while she cried — a working-class habit which Miss Paisley deplored. A voice she recognized as that of the boilermaker who lived on the top floor shouted up the stairs to his wife.

"Oh, Emma! They've taken 'im away. Hangcuffs an' all! Cor!"

Miss Paisley put on her long winter coat, pulled the collar up to her chin, and opened her door.

"What is all the noise about?" she asked the boilermaker.

"That bookie on the ground floor, miss. Someone cut 'is throat for 'im in the night. The pleece've pinched Jenkins." He added: "Hangcuffs an' all!"

"Oh!" said Miss Paisley. "I see!"

Miss Paisley shut the door. She dressed and prinked with more care than usual. She remembered trying to pick up the knife, remembered sitting down in an ecstasy of self-contempt, then groping in a mental fog that enveloped time and place. But there were beacons in the fog. "*Get in under and strike UP!*" was one beacon, the slogan accompanied by a feeling of intense pride. And wasn't there another beacon? A vague memory of slinking, like a cat, in the shadows — to the river. Why the river? Of rinsing her hands in cold water. Of returning to her chair. Return. £1 *Reward for Return.* Her head was spinning. Anyhow, "someone cut 'is throat for 'im in the night."

So far from feeling crushed, Miss Paisley found that she had recovered the power to pray.

"I have committed murder, so I quite see that it's absurd to ask for anything. But I really must keep calm for the next few hours. If I may be helped to keep calm, please, I can manage the rest myself."

At the local police station Miss Paisley gave an able summary of events leading to the destruction of her cat, and her own subsequent actions, "while in a state of trance."

The desk sergeant stifled a yawn. He produced a form and asked her a number of questions concerning her identity and occupation, but no questions at all about the murder. When he had finished writing down the answers, he read them aloud.

"And your statement is, Miss Paisley, that it was you who killed William Rinditch, in — in a state of trance you said, didn't you?"

Miss Paisley assented, and signed her statement.

"Just at present the inspector is very busy," explained the sergeant, "so I must ask you to take a seat in the waiting room."

Miss Paisley, who had expected the interview to end with "hangcuffs," clung to her calm and sat in the waiting room, insultingly unguarded, for more than an hour. Then she was grudgingly invited to enter a police car, which took her to county headquarters.

Chief Inspector Green, who had

served his apprenticeship at Scotland Yard, had dealt with a score or more of self-accusing hysterics. He knew that about one in four would claim to have committed the murder while in a trance — knew, too, that this kind could be the most troublesome if they fancied they were treated frivolously.

"Then you believe Rinditch killed your cat, Miss Paisley, because Jenkins told you so?"

"By no means!" She described the cat's collar and the method of killing, which necessitated the removal of the collar. She added details about the wastepaper basket.

"Then the collar is still in that basket, if Jenkins was telling the truth?"

But investigation on the spot established that there was no cat's collar in the wastepaper basket, nor anywhere else in the apartment. Miss Paisley was astonished — she knew she had seen it in that basket.

The interview was resumed in her flatlet, where she asserted that she had intended to kill Mr. Rinditch when he returned at 10:30, but was insufficiently prepared at that time. She did not know what time it was when she killed him, but knew that it was not later than a quarter to three in the morning. The weapon had been the knife which she used exclusively for cutting the cat's special meat.

"I have no memory at all of the act itself, Inspector. I can only say that it was fixed in my mind that I must get in close and strike upwards."

The inspector blinked, hesitated, then tried another line.

"It was after 10:30, anyhow, you said — after he had locked up for the night. How did you get in?"

"Again, I can't tell. I can't have hammered on his door, or someone would have heard me. I might have — I must have — got in by his window. I regret to confess that on one occasion I did enter his apartment that way in order to remove my cat, which would not come out when I called it."

"How did you get into the yard? That door is locked at night."

"Probably Jenkins left the key in it — he is very negligent."

"So you have no memory at all of the crime itself? You are working out what you think you must have done?"

Miss Paisley remembered that she had prayed for calm.

"I appreciate the force of your remark, Inspector. But I suggest that it would be a little unusual, to say the least, for a woman of my antecedents and habits to accuse herself falsely for the sake of notoriety. I ask you to believe that I sat in that chair at about 10:30, that my next clear memory is of being in the chair at a quarter to 3. Also, there were other signs —"

"Right! We accept that you got out of that chair — though you don't remember it. You may have done other things, too, but I'll show you that you *didn't* kill Rinditch. To

begin with, let's have a look at the murder knife."

Miss Paisley went to the cupboard.

"It isn't here!" she exclaimed. "Oh, but of course! I must have — I mean, didn't you *find* the knife?"

Inspector Green was disappointed. He could have settled the matter at once if she had produced the knife — which had indeed been found in the body of the deceased. A knife that could be bought at any ironmonger's in the country, unidentifiable in itself.

"If you had entered Rinditch's room, you'd have left fingerprints all over the place —"

"But I was wearing leather riding gloves —"

"Let's have a look at 'em, Miss Paisley."

Miss Paisley went back to the cupboard. They should be on the top shelf. They were not.

"I can't think where I must have put them!" she faltered.

"It doesn't matter!" sighed Green. "Let me tell you this, Miss Paisley. The man — or, if you like, woman — who killed Rinditch couldn't have got away without some pretty large stains on his — or her — clothes."

"It wouldn't have soaked through the lumber jacket," murmured Miss Paisley.

"What lumber jacket?"

"Oh! I forgot to mention it — or rather, I didn't get a chance. When I sat down in that chair at 10:30 I was wearing a green suede lumber jacket. When I came to myself in the small hours, I was not wearing it."

"Then somewhere in this flatlet we ought to find a ladies' lumber jacket, heavily bloodstained. I'll look under everything and you look inside."

When the search had proved fruitless, Miss Paisley turned at bay.

"You don't believe me!"

"I believe you believe it all, Miss Paisley. You felt you had to kill the man who had killed your cat. You knew you couldn't face up to a job like murder, especially with a knife. So you had a brainstorm, or whatever they call it, in which you kidded yourself you had committed the murder."

"Then my meat knife, my old riding gloves, and my lumber jacket have been hidden in order to deceive you?" shrilled Miss Paisley.

"Not to deceive me, Miss Paisley. To deceive yourself! If you want my opinion, you hid the knife and the gloves and the jacket because they were *not* bloodstained."

Miss Paisley felt a little giddy.

"You don't need to feel too badly about *not* killing him," he said, smiling to himself. "At 7 o'clock this morning a constable found Jenkins trying to sink a bag in the river. That bag was Rinditch's, which was kept under the bed o' nights. And Jenkins had 230-odd quid in cash which he can't account for."

Miss Paisley made no answer.

"Maybe you still sort of feel you killed Rinditch?" Miss Paisley nodded assent. "Then remember this. If the brain can play one sort of trick

on you, it can play another — same as it's doing now."

Inspector Green had been very understanding and very kind, Miss Paisley told herself. It was her duty to abide by his decision — especially as there was no means of doing otherwise — and loyally accept his interpretation of her own acts. The wretched Jenkins — an abominable man — would presumably be hanged. Things, reflected Miss Paisley, had a way of coming right. . . .

After a single appearance before the magistrate, Jenkins was committed on the charge of murder and would come up for trial in the autumn at the Old Bailey. Miss Paisley removed her interest.

One evening in early autumn Miss Paisley was sitting in her armchair, reviving the controversy as to whether her father had made a mistake about the croquet lawn. In her eagerness she thrust her hands between the folds of the upholstery. Her fingers encountered a hard object. She hooked it with her finger and pulled up her dead cat's collar.

She held it in both hands while there came a vivid memory of her peering through Mr. Rinditch's window, Jenkins beside her, and seeing the collar in the wastepaper basket . . . The buckle was still fastened. The leather had been cut, as if with a razor. She read the inscription: her own name and address and — *£1 Reward for Return.*

"I took it out of that basket — *afterwards!*" She relived the ecstatic moment in which she had killed Rinditch. Every detail was now clear-cut. Strike *UP!* — as the cat had struck — then leap to safety. She had pulled off a glove, to snatch the collar from the basket and thrust the collar under the neck of her jumper; then she had put the glove on again before leaving the room and making her way to the river. Back in her chair she had retrieved the collar.

Gone was the exaltation which had sustained her in her first approach to the police. She stood up, rigid, as she had stood in the hall while listening to the scratching on the panel, refusing to accept an unbearable truth. Once again she had the illusion of being locked up, aware now that there could be no escape from herself.

There remained the collar — evidence irrefutable, but escapable.

"If I keep this as a memento, I shall soon get muddled and accuse myself of murder all over again! What was it that nice inspector said — 'if the brain can play one trick on you it can play another'."

She smiled as she put the collar in her handbag, slipped on a coat and walked — by the most direct route, this time — to the Seventeenth-Century bridge. She dropped the collar into the river, knowing that it would sink under the weight of its metal — unlike the bloodstained lumber jacket and the riding gloves which, Miss Paisley suddenly remembered, she had weighted with stones scratched from the soil of the old cemetery . . .