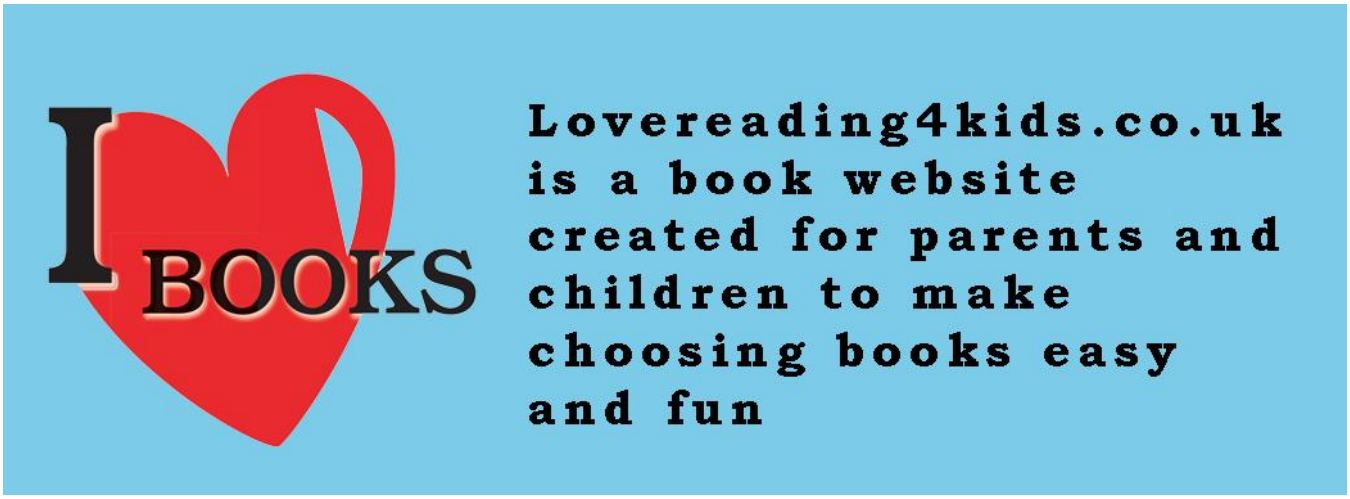


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Chapter One

How It Began

PETER GUESSED THAT he must have been hurt in the accident although he could not remember very much from the time he had left the safety of Scotch Nanny's side and run out across the street to get to the garden in the square, where the tabby striped kitten was warming herself by the railing and washing in the early spring sunshine.

He had wanted to hold and stroke the kitten. Nanny had screamed and there had been a kind of an awful bump, after which it seemed to have turned from day to night as though the sun were gone and it had become quite dark. He ached and somewhere it hurt him, as it had when he had fallen running after a football near a gravel pile and scraped nearly all the skin from the side of one leg.

He seemed to be in bed now, and Nanny was there peering at him in an odd way, that is, first she would be quite close to him, so close that he could see how white her face was, instead of its usual wrinkled pink colour, and then it would seem to fade and become very small like seen through the wrong end of a telescope.

His father and mother were not there, but this did not

surprise Peter. His father was a Colonel in the Army, and his mother was always busy and having to dress up to go out, leaving him with Nanny.

Peter might have resented Nanny if he had not been so fond of her, for he knew that at eight he was much too old to be having a nurse who babied him and wanted always to lead him around by the hand as though he were not capable of looking after himself. But he was used by now to his mother being busy and having no time to look after him, or stay in and sit with him at night until he went to sleep. She had come to rely more and more upon Nanny to take her place, and when his father, Colonel Brown, once suggested that it might perhaps be time for Nanny to be leaving, his mother could not bear to think of sending her away, and so of course she had stayed.

If he was in bed, then perhaps he was sick, and if he was sick, perhaps his mother would be with him more when she came home and found out. Maybe now they would even give him the wish he had had for so long and let him have a cat all of his own to keep in his room and sleep curled up at the foot of his bed, and perhaps even crawl under the covers with him and snuggle in his arms on nights that were cold.

He had wanted a cat ever since he could remember, which was many years ago at the age of four – when he had gone to stay on a farm near Gerrards Cross, and had been taken into the kitchen and shown a basketful of kittens, orange and white balls of fluff, and the ginger-coloured

mother who beamed with pride until her face was quite as broad as it was long, and licked them over with her tongue one after the other. He was allowed to put his hand on her. She was soft and warm, and a queer kind of throbbing was going on inside of her, which later he learned was called purring, and meant that she was comfortable and happy.

From then on he dearly wished for a cat of his own.

However, he was not allowed to have one.

They lived in a small flat in a Mews off Cavendish Square. Peter's father, Colonel Brown, who came home occasionally on leave, did not mind if Peter had a cat, but his mother said that there was enough dust and dirt from the street in a small place, and not enough room to move around without having a cat in, and besides, Scotch Nanny didn't like cats and was afraid of them. It was important to Peter's mother that Nanny be humoured in the matter of cats, so that she would stay and look after Peter.

All of these things Peter knew and understood and put up with because that was how it was in his world. However, this did not stop his heart from being heavy, because his mother, who was young and beautiful, never seemed to have much time for him, or prevent him yearning hungrily for a cat of his own.

He was friends with all or most of the cats on the Square, the big black one with the white patch on his chest and green eyes as large around as shilling pieces, who belonged to the caretaker of the little garden in Cavendish Square

close to the Mews, the two greys who sat unblinking in the window of Number 5 throughout most of the day, the ginger cat with the green eyes who belonged to Mrs Bobbit, the caretaker who lived down in the basement of Number 11, the tortoiseshell cat with the drooping ear next door, and the Boie de Rose Persian who slept on a cushion in the window of Number 27 most of the time, but who was brought into the Square for an airing on clear warm days.

And then of course there were the countless strays who inhabited the alley and the bombed-out house behind the Mews, or squeezed through the railings into the park, tigers and tabbies, black and whites and lemon yellows, tawnies and brindles, slipping in and out behind the dustbins, packets of waste paper, and garbage containers, fighters, yowlers, slinkers, scavengers, homeless waifs, old 'uns, and kittens, going nervously about the difficult business of gaining a living from the harsh and heedless city.

These were the ones that Peter was always dragging home, sometimes kicking and clawing in terror under his arm, or limp and more than willing to go where it was warm and there might be a meal and the friendly touch of a human hand.

Once in a while, when he evaded Nanny, he managed to smuggle one into the cupboard of the nursery and keep it for as much as two whole days and nights before it was discovered.

Then Nanny, who had her orders from Mrs Brown as to what she was to do when a cat was found on the premises,

would open the door on to the Mews and cry – "Out! Scat, you dirty thing!" or fetch a broom with which to chase it. Or if that did not work and the stowaway merely cowered in a corner, she would pick it up by the scruff of the neck, hold it away from her, and fling it out into the street. After that, she would punish Peter, though he could not be worse hurt than he was through losing his new friend and remembering how happy it had been safe in his arms.

Peter had even learned not to cry any more when this happened. One could cry inside of one without making a sound, he had found out.

He was feeling that way now that he was sick, only this was different because he seemed to want to cry out this time, but found that he could not utter a sound. He did not know why this should be except it was a part of the queer way things had been since whatever it was had happened to him when he had darted away from Nanny who was talking to the postman, and run across the road after the striped kitten.

Actually, it was a coal lorry that had come speeding around the corner of the Square that had struck Peter and knocked him down just as he had stepped off the kerb without looking and had run in front of it, but what happened after that, the hue and cry, the people that gathered after the accident, Nanny's crying and wailing, the policeman who picked him up and carried him into the house, the sending for the doctor and the trying to find his mother,

and later, the trip to the hospital, Peter was not to know for a long, long time. So many strange things were to happen to him first.

For, unquestionably, events seemed to be taking an odd turn what with night appearing to follow day at such rapid intervals that it was almost like being at the cinema with the screen going all dark and light and Nanny's face seeming to be on top of him first and then sliding away into the distance only to return once more with the lenses of her spectacles shining like the headlamps of an approaching motor-car.

But that something really queer was about to take place Peter knew when after Nanny had faded into the distance and his bed had seemed to rock like a little boat in the waves and when she had begun to return again, it was no longer the face of Nanny, but that of the tabby striped kitten that had been washing itself by the park railings and that he had wanted to catch and hug.

Indeed, it was this dear little cat now grown to enormous size, sitting at his bedside smiling at him in a friendly manner, its eyes as large as soup tureens, large, luminous, and shiny, and resembling Nanny's spectacles in that he could see himself mirrored in them.

But what was puzzling to him was that although he knew it to be himself reflected therein, still it did not seem to look like him at all as he was accustomed to seeing himself when he passed the tall cheval mirror in the hallway, or even in Nanny's glasses in which he could frequently

catch a reflection of his curly head of close-cropped auburn hair, round eyes, upturned button nose, stubborn chin, and cheeks as red-and-white and rounded as two crab-apples.

At first Peter did not try to make out exactly who or what he looked like because it was pleasant and soothing just to lose himself in the cool green pools of the kitten's eyes, so calm and deep and clear that it seemed like swimming about in an emerald lake. It felt delightful to be there bathed in the beautiful colour and surrounded by the warmth of the smile of the kitten.

But then soon he began to notice the effect it was beginning to have upon him.

Sometimes the picture would be hazy and then for a moment it would grow quite clear so that he could see how the shape of his head had altered and not only the shape but the colour. For whereas he was familiar with the reddish-brown curly hair and apple cheeks, his fur now seemed to be quite short, straight and snow white.

"Why," said Peter to himself, "I said 'fur' instead of hair. What a strange thing to do. It must be looking into the cat's eyes that is changing me into a cat, if that is what is happening."

But he continued to look there because he found that for the moment he could not take his gaze elsewhere, and when it grew hazy, his image seemed to quiver as though things were happening to it from inside, and each time it grew clear he noted new details, the queerly slanted eyes that were now no longer grey but a light blue, the nose

that had changed from an uptilted little sixpenny-bit into a rose-pink triangle leading to a mouth that was no more like his than anything he could think of. It now curved downwards over long, sharp white teeth, and from either side sprouted sets of enormous, bristly white whiskers.

The head was square, the slant-set eyes large and staring, and the sharp-pointed ears stood up like dormers. "Oh," thought Peter, "that is how I would look if I were a cat. How I wish I were one." And then he closed his eyes, because this queer, unusual image of himself was now so clear and unmistakable that it was a little frightening. To wish to be a cat was one thing. To seem very much to be one was quite another.

When he opened them, it seemed for a moment as if he had broken the spell of the cat's-eye mirror, for he was able to avoid staring into it and instead managed to look down at his paws. They were pure white, large and furred, with quaint, soft pinkish pads on the underside and claws curved like Turkish swords and needle-sharp at the end.

To his astonishment, Peter saw that he was no longer lying in the bed, but on top of it. His whole body, now long and slender, was just as soft and white as the ermine muff his mother used to carry when she dressed up and went out in the winter, and what seemed to be a blank and eyeless snake curving, moving, twitching and lashing at the end of it was his own tail. From ear-tip to tail-tip he was clad in spotless white fur.

The tiger-striped kitten, who with his smile and staring

eyes had apparently worked this mischief on him, had vanished and was nowhere to be seen. Instead there was only Nanny, ten times larger than she had ever appeared before, standing over the bed shouting in a voice so loud that it hurt his ears –

"Drat the child! He's dragged in anither stray off the street! Shoo! Scat! Get out!"

Peter cried out – "But, Nanny! I'm Peter. I'm not a cat. Nanny, don't, please!"

"Rail at me, will ye?" Nanny bellowed. "'Tis the broom I'll take to ye then." She ran down the hall, and returned carrying the broom. "Now then. Out ye go!"

Peter was cold with fright. He could only cower down at the end of the bed while Nanny beat at him with the broom, and cry: "Nanny, Nanny, no, no! Oh, Nanny!"

"I'll miaow you!" Nanny stormed, dropped the broom, and picked Peter up by the scruff of the neck so that he hung there from her hand, front and hind legs kicking, while he cried miserably.

Holding him as far away from her as she could, Nanny ran down the hallway muttering, "And it's to bed without any supper for Peter when I find him. How often have I told him he's no' to bring in any more cats!" until she reached the ground floor entrance to the flat from the Mews.

Then she pitched Peter out into the street and slammed the door shut.