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opening extract from

Mrs Cockle's Cat

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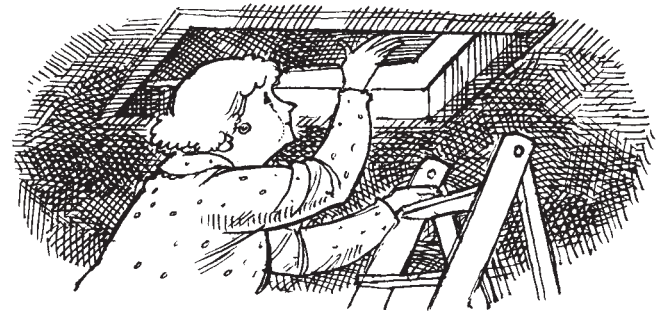
Old Mrs Cockle lived at the top of a very tall house in London. Most of the people who knew her were sorry for her, because she had to climb eighty-four stairs before she reached her own front-door; but she did not mind. It is true that all that climbing made the backs of her knees ache, but then there

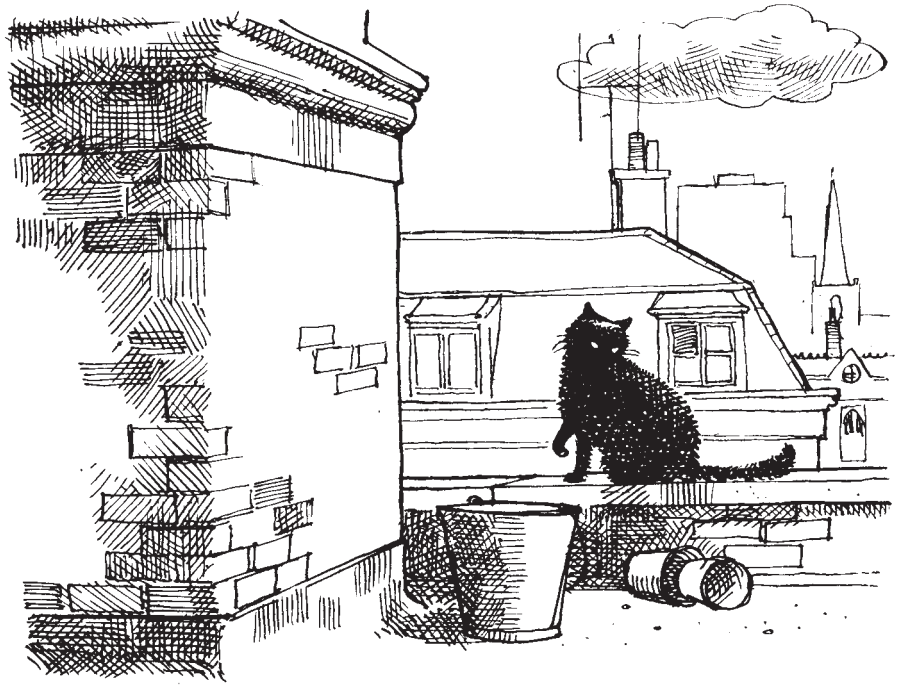


were advantages. Mrs Cockle lived so high that, from her window, she had a view of the sky over the top of the tall house opposite – which was more than

most people had. In the mornings she could look out and think, The sky is blue all over – I'll wear my straw bonnet today; or, The sky is white with snow coming – I'll wear my woollen shawl today; or, The sky has clouded right over – I'll take my biggest umbrella. Mrs Cockle had three umbrellas for different weathers, and the biggest of the three was larger than umbrellas are ever made nowadays.

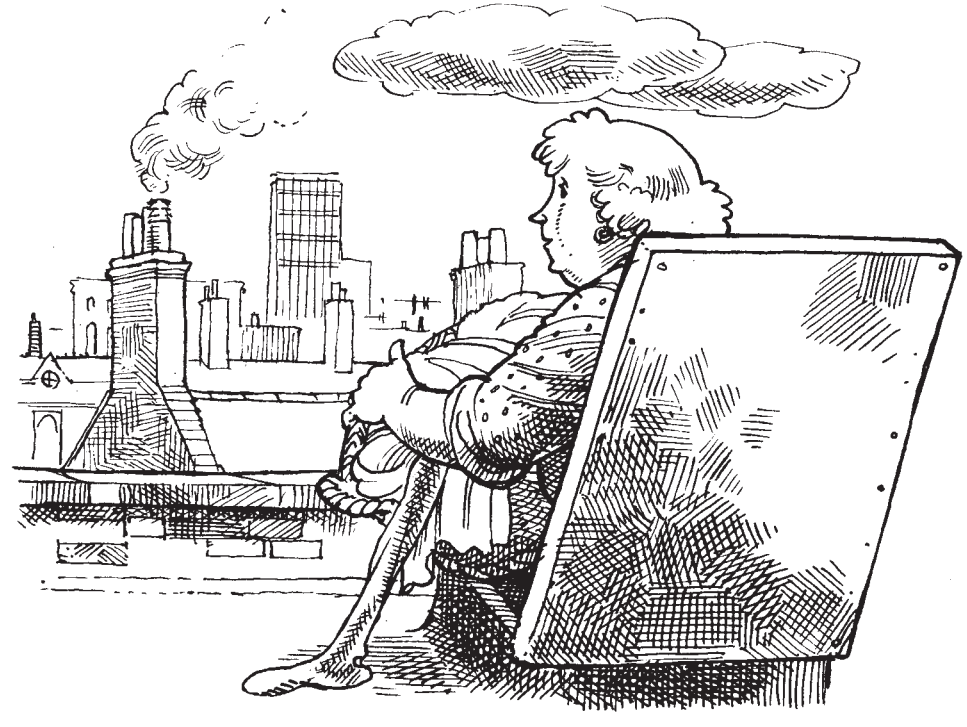
There was another advantage for Mrs Cockle in living at the very top of the house. In the middle of her ceiling there was a trapdoor, and, if she set up her step-ladder underneath it, she could climb up, open the trapdoor, and climb through on to the roof itself.





From the roof she could look round over the buildings of London, and see the factory chimneys and church-spires, and, more than anything else, the chimney-pots – more chimney-pots than you could ever have counted – rows upon rows of chimney-pots that seemed to melt away into the smoky distances of London.

This was a fine view, but Mrs



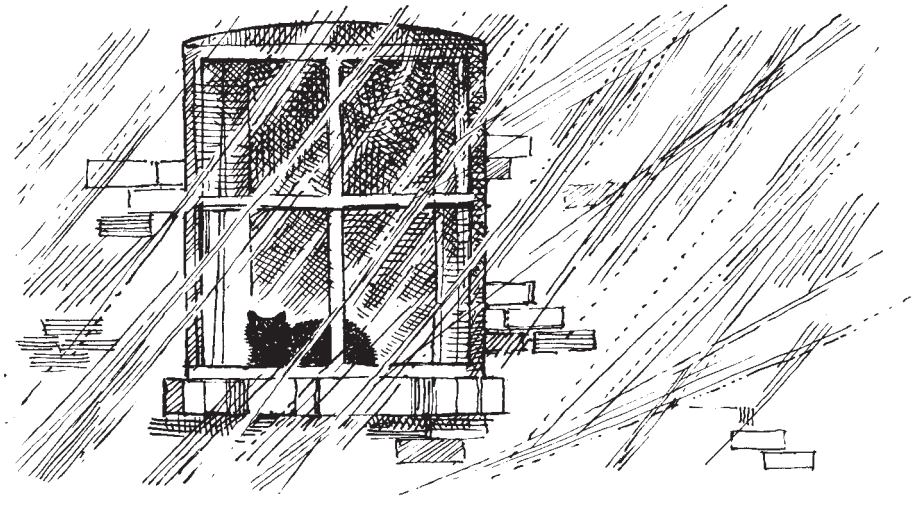
Cockle, with the backs of her knees already aching from the eighty-four stairs, would never have bothered about the roof but for Peter. Peter, who was a cat and lived with Mrs Cockle, was very fond of the roof on a sunny day, or sometimes at night when the moon was full. It was one of the three things that Peter Cockle loved most.

The other two things were a little fresh fish for his tea and Mrs Cockle's company. Mrs Cockle, in her turn, was very fond of Peter – more fond of him than of anybody else, for she had no relations, and Mr Cockle had died long before.

Old Mrs Cockle and her cat lived together very contentedly. Every fine day, early, Mrs Cockle opened the trapdoor for Peter to climb on to the roof. Then she set out for her day's work, which was selling coloured balloons at the corner of one of the great London streets. There are plenty of people who sell balloons at street corners in the summer-time or at Christmas; Mrs Cockle was the only person in London who could be counted upon to be selling balloons at



her corner, all the year round, day in, day out, and whatever the weather. And, as she said, she did just comfortably enough out of it for herself and Peter.



Late one summer the weather had been particularly wet and blowy, without making any difference to Mrs Cockle; but it had made a difference to Peter. In the first place, he had not cared to venture out on to the roof as usual: that meant that he missed his fresh air and exercise, and felt stuffy and cross, as people do. Besides, he really had something to be cross about. The weather was so bad that the fishermen could not put out to sea as often as usual; there was less fish

caught and taken to London and so what little there was in the shops was very dear – too dear for Mrs Cockle to buy. Instead of having fresh fish for his tea every day, Peter had to put up with now a saucer of milk, now some dried haddock, now milk again, now half a tin of herrings in tomato sauce, and so on.

Peter Cockle longed and longed for a mouthful of fresh fish. He knew at last that he loved fresh fish more than a breath of air on the roof, and more even than Mrs Cockle's company. In





his own mind, he even blamed Mrs Cockle for the lack of fresh fish, although it was hardly her fault. Nowadays, in the evening, when he

and Mrs Cockle sat on either side of the fire with the high wind outside rattling at the windows, they were not as cosy as they used to be. Mrs Cockle sat rocking herself, and knitting, and glancing fondly at Peter. But Peter had given up looking back at her at all: he gazed moodily into the flames of the fire, and saw there nothing but the glittering, slithering shapes of Fresh Fish. And while Mrs Cockle was thinking proudly what a handsome cat he was, Peter was thinking deeply of Fresh Fish until his head seemed to swim with them. And when Mrs Cockle dozed off, Peter was kept awake by the remembrance of Fresh Fish that seemed to be felt now in his stomach, now on his tongue, and now between his paws.



It was not only in the long quiet evenings that Peter Cockle suffered. One night he could not get to sleep at all for thinking of Fresh Fish. It was then that he took his resolution. Next morning, instead of either mewing to be let out on to the roof, or staying curled up on his cushion, he was falsely purring around Mrs Cockle's ankles as she prepared to set out. When she went to the door, he was already there, waiting to say goodbye. But when she

opened the door he was out of it ahead of her, and, like a black streak, leaping down the eighty-four steps to the street below.

'Peter! Peter!' called Mrs Cockle distractedly, but there was no sign of his coming back. She climbed down the stairs, hoping to find him waiting for her out in the street. Outside, there was not a cat in sight, except the tabby from next door, and he disliked Mrs Cockle and would not show by as much as a quiver of a whisker which way he had seen Peter go.



'Peter! Peter!' called Mrs Cockle, but softly, because she did not want to start the neighbours talking. No cat came.

Mrs Cockle was naturally upset, but there was nothing to be done, so she went off to her street-corner as usual. She said to herself that the wilful cat would certainly be waiting outside the front door when she went home in the evening. She was only worried about what might happen to him in the





meantime. Just suppose, Mrs Cockle thought, he tried to sneak a piece of nice fresh fish from somebody's larder, and they set a dog after him? Or worse, supposing he tried to steal something from the fish shop, and a policeman caught him at it?



That evening Mrs Cockle hurried home a little earlier than usual. There was no Peter in the street outside, and the tabby cat seemed to be sneering. She paid no attention, but hurried up the eighty-four stairs, hoping that, in spite of the tabby cat's expression, Peter might be waiting at the top. But at the very top, there was still no Peter, and poor Mrs Cockle suddenly felt, for

the first time in her life, that eighty-four stairs had been too much for her. She sat down on the top one and cried.

There was no Peter Cockle that day, nor the next, nor the next. Mrs Cockle tried to go on as usual without him – going to her street-corner, selling balloons, coming home to supper, and going to bed. But her day did not seem the same without a cat: she could not eat properly at mealtimes, nor sleep properly at nights. As time went by she grew thinner and thinner from worry and lack of sleep and lack of food. At last, from being the plumpest balloon-seller in London, she became – so many believed – by far the thinnest. She looked as thin and light as an autumn leaf as she hurried to work along the windy pavements.