'CORBAN'

"'Tis a question which to drown," said Mr. Sage.

He smoked his churchwarden and looked down between his knees where a mother cat was gazing up at him with green eyes. She purred, rolled half on her back and opened and contracted her fore-paws with pleasure, while she suckled two kittens.

Mr. Sage's daughter — a maiden of twelve — begged him to spare both squeaking dabs of life.

"They'm so like as two peas, faither — braave li'l chets both. Doan't 'e drown wan of 'em," she said.

"Thicky cat's been very generous of chets in her time," declared Mr. Sage. "If such things had ghostesses, you might see a whole regiment of 'em — black an' white, tabby an' tortoiseshell — down-along by the river come dark."

"Even I shouldn't be feared of a chet's ghostie," declared little Milly Sage.

But she had her way. One kitten, when it could face the world alone, was given to a friend who dwelt some miles distant at Princetown; the other grew into a noble tom of bold tabby design and genial disposition. His mother, feeling him to be

her masterpiece, passed gently out of life soon after her son reached cat's estate. She had done her duty to the feline community, and Milly mourned for her a whole week. But Mr. Sage did not mourn. He much preferred the young tom, and between the cat and the old man, as years passed by, there waxed a friendship of remarkable character.

"I call un 'Corban,'" said Mr. Sage, "'cause he was a gift — a gift from my little girl when she was a little 'un. 'Twas her own ram cat, you mind, but as the creature growed up, it took that tender to me that Milly said as it must be mine; an' mine 'tis; an' what he'd do wi'out me, or what I'd do wi'out he, be blessed if I know."

He spoke to his next-door neighbour and personal crony, Amos Oldreive, a gamekeeper and river-watcher for many years. Now this man was honourably retired, with a small pension and a great rheumatism, the reward of many a damp night on behalf of the salmon in Dart's ancient stream.

At Postbridge these old people dwelt — a hamlet in the heart of Dartmoor — a cluster of straggling cots beside the name-river of that region, where its eastern branch comes tumbling through the shaggy fens beneath Cut Hill. Here an elderly, disused, packhorse bridge crosses Dart, but the main road spans its stream upon a modern arch

hard by. The lives of Sage and Oldreive had passed within twenty miles of this spot. The keeper knew every tor of the waste, together with the phases of the seasons, and the natural history of each bird and beast and fish sacred to sporting. His friend's days were also spent in this desolate region, and both ancients, when necessity or occasion drove them into towns, felt the houses pressing upon their eyes and crushing their foreheads and the air choking them. At such times they did their business with all speed, and so returned in thankfulness to the beech-tree grove, the cottages and those meadowlands of Postbridge by Dart, all circled and cradled in the hills.

Noah Sage and his next-door neighbour quarrelled thrice daily, and once daily made up their differences over a glass of spirit and water, sometimes consumed in one cottage, sometimes in the other. Their conditions were very similar. Noah had an only daughter; Amos, an only son; and each old man, though both had married late in life, was a widower.

The lad and lass, thus thrown together, came naturally to courtship, and it was a matter understood and accepted that they should marry when young Ted Oldreive could show a pound a week. The course of true love progressed uneventfully. Milly was plain, if good health, good temper and

happy, honest eyes can be plain; while Ted, a sand-coloured and steady youth of a humble nature, leaning naturally upon distinction of classes for his peace of mind, had not a rival or an enemy in the world. Mr. Sage held him a promising husband for Milly, and Ted's master, appreciating the man's steadfast qualities, gave promise of the desired number of shillings weekly when Ted should have laboured for another six months at the Vitifer tin mines near his home.

Little of a sort to set down concerning these admirable folks had arisen but for the circumstance of the cat 'Corban.' Yet, when that beast had reached the ripe age of eight years and was still a thing of beauty and a cat of mark at Postbridge, he sowed the seeds of strife, wrecked two homes, and threatened seriously to interfere with the foundation of a third.

It happened thus: gaffer Oldreive, by reason of increasing infirmities, found it necessary to abandon those tramps on the high Moor that he loved, and to occupy his time and energies nearer home. Therefore he started the rearing of young pheasants upon half an acre of land pertaining to his lease-hold cottage. The old man built his own coops and bred his own hens, as he proudly declared. Good money was to be made by one who knew how to solve the difficulties of the business, and with greatly revived

interest in life, Amos bought pheasants' eggs and henceforth spent his time among his coops and foster mothers. The occupation rendered him egotistical, and his friend secretly regretted it; nor would he do likewise when urged to make a similar experiment.

"Doan't want no birds my side the wall," he said. "I've got a brave pig or two as'll goody into near so much money as your phaysants; an' theer's 'Corban,' he'd make short work of any such things as chicks."

Oldreive nodded over the party wall and glanced, not without suspicion, at 'Corban,' who chanced to be present.

"Let 'em taste game an' it grows 'pon 'em like drink 'pon a human," he said.

'Corban' stretched his thighs, cleaned his claws on a block of firewood, and feigned indifference. As a matter of fact, this big tabby tom knew all about the young pheasants; and Mr. Oldreive knew that he knew.

Sage, on the other hand, with an experience of the beast extending from infancy, through green youth to ripe prime, took it upon him to say that this cat was trustworthy, high-minded and actuated by motives he had never seen equalled for loftiness, even in a dog.

The old keeper snorted from his side of the wall.

"A dog! You wouldn't compare thicky, green-eyed snake wi' a dog, would 'e?"

"Not me," answered the other. "No dog ever I knawed was worthy to wash his face for un. An' he'm no more a green-eyed snake than your spaniel, though a good deal more of a gen'leman."

"Us won't argue it then, for I never knawed any use for cats myself but to plant at the root of a fruit-bearin' tree," said Mr. Oldreive, cynically.

"An' I never seed no use for dogs, 'cept to keep gen'lefolks out of mischief," answered Sage, who was a radical and no sportsman. He puffed, and grew a little red as he spoke.

Here, and thus, arose a cloud no bigger than a man's hand. Noah Sage stumped indoors to his daughter, while 'Corban' followed with pensive step and a general air as though one should say, "I forgive, but I can't forget."

Three days later Mr. Oldreive looked over the wall, and his neighbour saw him, and put a hasty foot on some feathers.

"Marnin', Sage. Look here — what I wants to knaw be, whether your blasted cat have took wan o' my phaysants, or whether he haven't?"

"Might have, might not, Amos. Better ax un. Here he be."

Green-eyed innocence marked the fat round face of 'Corban.' He leapt upon the wall and saluted

the breeder of pheasants with open-hearted friendship.

"What be onder your heel, neighbour?"

"Why — a bit of rabbit's flax 'twas, I think. My sight ban't so good as of old nowadays."

"Rabbit's flax! 'Tis a phaysant's feathers! Get away, you hookem-snivey Judas, or I'll hit 'e over the chops!"

This last threat concerned 'Corban,' who was rubbing his whiskers against Mr. Oldreive's waistcoat.

The ancient Sage puffed out his cheeks and grew as red as a rose.

"Ban't the way to speak to any respectable, well-thought-upon domestic animal, an' you knaw it, Amos."

"Domestic!" echoed Mr. Oldreive, bitterly. "About so domestic as a auld red fox I sent off wi' a flea in his ear two nights since. Domestic! He pretends to be to gain his private ends. Just a savage, cruel, awnself[1] beast of prey, an' no better. Can't shutt foxes, 'cause they'm the backbone of England; but I can shutt cats an' — an' —"

"Stop theer!" roared the other ancient. He trembled with passion; his under jaw chattered; he lifted his legs up and down and cracked the joints of his fingers.

"To think I've knawed 'e all these years an' never

[1] *Awnself.* Selfish.

seed through to the devilish nature of 'e! 'Tis sporting as makes men all the same — no better'n heathen savages."

The other kept calm before this shattering criticism.

"Whether or no, I doan't breed these here phaysants for fun, nor yet for your cat's eatin'. No call to quarrel, I should hope. But keep un his own side the wall if you please, else he's like to have an onrestful time. I give 'e fair warning."

"Perhaps you'd wish for me to chain un up?"

"Might be better — for him if you did."

"I doan't want you in my house to-night," said the owner of 'Corban' suddenly. "You've shook me. You've shook a friendship of more'n fifty year standing, Amos Oldreive, an' I can't abear to look upon your face again to-day."

"More shame to you, Noah Sage! If you reckon your mangy cat be more to you than a gude Christian neighbour, say so. But I ban't gwaine to fall down an' worship thicky varmint — no, not for twenty men, so now you knaw."

"So much for friendship then," answered Noah Sage, wagging his head.

"So much for a silly auld fool," replied Amos Oldreive, rather rudely; and they left it at that, and each turned his back upon his neighbour.

Not a word was exchanged between them for three days; then the keeper sent in a message by

Milly, who trembled before her parent as she delivered it.

"Mr. Oldreive sez that 'Corban' have killed two more of his li'l game-birds, faither. An' he sez that if so be as he goes for to catch puss in theer again, he'll shutt un! Doan't 'e look so grievous gallied, dear faither! I'm sure he never could do it after bein' your friend fifty year, though certainly he was cleanin' his gun when he spoke to me."

"Shutt the cat! If he do, the world shall ring with it, God's my judge! Shutt my cat — red-handed, blood-sucking ruffian! Shutt my cat; an' then think to marry his ginger-headed son to my darter! Never! the bald pelican. You tell him that if a hair o' my cat be singed by his beastly fowling-piece, I'll blaze it from here to Moretonhampstead — ess fay, I will, an' lock him up, an' you shan't marry his Ted neither. Shutt my — Lord! to think as that man have been trusted by me for half a century! I cream all down my spine to picture his black heart. Guy Fawkes be a Christian gen'leman to un. Here! 'Corban'! 'Corban'! 'Corban'! Wheer be you to, cat? Come here, caan't 'e, my purty auld dear?"

He stormed off, and Milly, her small eyes grown troubled and her lips drawn down somewhat, hastened to tell Ted Oldreive the nature of this dreadful discourse.