

SOOTY, THE GREEN-EYED KITTEN

Virginia Frances Voight

Sooty, leaping for a mouse, undershot and landed in a large crock of jam instead—and that started the wild events that followed.

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In the faraway days when the land was young, and still very sparsely settled, domestic cats were very rare in America. They were quite unknown in the backwoods settlement where the Alden family lived in their snug log cabin. So when Mr. Alden returned home from a trip to the distant trading post with a tiny, fat kitten in his saddlebag, the twins, Makepeace and Prudence, were astonished as well as delighted at the sight of the lively little creature.

Sooty, as they called the kitten, was an intense, lustrous black from the tips of his furry ears to the end of his spiky little tail. Out of his round baby face peered two eyes, like fiery green moons. The children adored him, and Sooty was very happy in his new home. All day long he romped over the uneven puncheon floor of the kitchen, playing gaily with a ball of wool that Prudence wound for him. When he grew weary he would sit, purring contentedly, and with his paws tucked neatly in, on the settle beside the fireplace. But at the very first rustle of what might be a mouse's tiny feet upon the floor, down he would jump, his green eyes blazing, his tail waving aloft like a battle flag.

That autumn when the frosts began to touch the maple leaves with scarlet and turn the meadow grasses to gold, the Aldens were sore beset by myriads of little field mice that flocked in to make their winter quarters in the cabin. They wrought great havoc with the precious store of corn that was kept in the lean-to behind the kitchen, but with the coming of Sooty, hard times fell upon the little mice. The black kitten soon showed that he had the instincts of a true mouser, and Mrs. Alden, delighted by his prowess in the hunt, plied him bountifully with milk and finely chopped meat of bear and venison, so that he might wax strong and swift and have muscles as resilient as steel springs. For the corn that was to feed the family through the lean, hard days of winter was more precious than gold to the Aldens, and Sooty, as its official guardian, was now a very important member of the household.

One autumn day, Mr. and Mrs. Alden went to visit their nearest neighbor, who lived ten miles away through the forest. The twins were given strict instructions to remain in the cabin with the door and windows closed and barred. But this did not trouble Makepeace and Prudence, who thought that the time would pass very swiftly with Sooty for company.

Soon after his parents rode away, Makepeace, armed with a bit of cornbread, went into the lean-to and helped himself liberally from the big crock of wild strawberry jam that stood on the shelf. Sooty scampered gaily after him, but at the door the kitten froze—and then made a flying leap to the shelf in fierce pursuit of a little mouse that had been creeping behind the crocks and firkins in an effort to escape Makepeace’s notice.

Spying Sooty while he was still in midair, the mouse gave a squeak of terror and fled away along the shelf, with Sooty bounding only a handbreadth behind. The open jam crock barred the way, but the frantic mouse leaped clean over it and disappeared, with a triumphant flirt of its tail, into a tiny hole in the wall. Sooty, too, tried to take the jam pot in his stride, but alas, his baby muscles were not yet equal to that effort. He leaped gamely, but fell short and landed with a sickening plop right in the middle of the strawberry jam!

Makepeace, who had watched the chase with popping eyes and with a bit of bread and jam suspended midway on its journey to his mouth, hastily swallowed the tidbit and then roared for Prudence to come to the rescue. Sooty was mewling wildly for help as he struggled to climb the slippery sides of the jam crock. Gingerly, Makepeace fished him out and held him at arm’s length as Prudence came running from the kitchen.

“Oh! What a sight he is!” she cried in horror.

“He’s ruined the whole crock of jam,” groaned Makepeace.

Sooty mewed plaintively and tried to reach his sticky coat with his small pink tongue.

“You’ll never get yourself clean that way, Sooty,” sighed Prudence. “I suppose we’ll have to give you a bath.”

She whipped off her snowy apron and wrapped the miserable kitten in it, and they marched back to the kitchen.

The wash bench stood beneath one of the windows, and on it was a shallow wooden bucket that did duty as a basin. Forgetful of his father’s stern order that they keep the windows closed, Makepeace opened the wooden shutter wide, admitting a flood of autumn sunlight. Then he filled the basin with warm water from the copper kettle that hung on the lug pole in the fireplace, testing it with his finger and adding a dipperful of cold water lest it be too hot for Sooty. Next he fetched a bar of his mother’s best homemade bayberry soap, because he felt that the ordinary soft soap would be too harsh to use on the little kitten. Finally, he told Prudence to put Sooty into the basin, and to hold him fast while he worked up a lively lather with the sweet-scented soap.

But Sooty, like all cats, loathed the water and felt that he could cleanse himself quite well enough with his own rough tongue and skillful paw. So he struggled to escape with all his might, keeping the children so fully occupied that they never once glanced out of the open window.

Now it happened that Two Panthers, a Mohican brave, had been spearing fish in a woodland pool close by the cabin and, himself unseen, had watched Mr. Alden ride by with his wife on a pillion behind him. Two Panthers smiled to himself. The Aldens would not be on horseback if they were not traveling far—and he knew that they must have left the cabin unguarded save for the two paleface children, and they were scarcely out of their papoose lacings.

Two Panthers was, I am sorry to say, a light-fingered Indian, and for a long time his heart had been set on possessing the copper kettle that hung in Mrs. Alden’s fireplace. Many times he had prowled about the cabin, peering in at the windows, admiring the way in which the gleaming copper reflected the red firelight. And now that wonderful, shining thing was his for the taking!

Grinning with delight over his good luck, he ran swiftly through the forest to the cabin and then crept stealthily up to the window, which was, to his surprise, wide open.

In the meantime, Makepeace and Prudence were having their hands full as they worked the foaming suds into their pet’s sticky coat. The indignant Sooty kept



struggling and shrieking his protests, and finally he succeeded in slipping out of their soapy hands. With a screech of triumph, he leaped for the window sill, but this time his violent spring carried him too far and he sailed right through the window. Something which looked like a shining red stone loomed up before him, and he put out his little paws and clutched it, digging in every sharp claw in his effort to hold on. As he did so, the stone rose up beneath him and a shriek of anguish rang out upon the clear, autumn air. Sooty's landing place was no stone at all but the shiny bald pate of Two Panthers who, having wriggled across the clearing on his stomach, was just raising himself cautiously for a peek in at the window when Sooty had come hurtling against his head, and he felt a pain as if a score of needles were being driven into his skull.

He put up his hand to investigate, but withdrew it swiftly as Sooty promptly raked it with his razorlike claws. Two Panthers yelled again and began to dance about. And Prudence screamed too—in terror of the Indian. Both she and Makepeace were too astonished by his sudden appearance to do more than stare open-mouthed, Prudence still clutching the bayberry soap.

As Two Panthers hopped about in an effort to dislodge whatever was clinging to his bald head, Sooty, in disgust, made a flying leap to the low roof of the cabin. Landing safely, he whirled to face the Indian, arching his little back and spitting fiercely.

He was an amazing and dreadful looking object. His black fur was stuck into points with frothy suds, and his green eyes were shooting sparks of rage and defiance. Two Panthers stared aghast. Never had he beheld such a creature as this! Fierce as a panther, yet scarcely larger than a chipmunk. Shaped like a wildcat, yet black as the night and with white foam upon his fur! And no wildcat ever inhabited the cabins of men! This must be a spirit set to guard the copper kettle! Yes, that must be it. That was why the paleface and his squaw dared ride away. They had left this little goblin to guard their cabin and he, Two Panthers, had had the misfortune to anger this powerful spirit! He took a hasty step backward, and Sooty, mistaking the sudden move for one of hostility, began to yowl his battle cry while his little tail swelled and bristled until it was more than twice its normal size. This was too much for Two Panthers, who took to his heels.

The children watched in trembling amazement while the Indian sprinted across the clearing to vanish into the gloom of the forest. Then they hastily opened the door and called the now shivering and wretched kitten into the cabin. Sooty returned to them gladly, and Prudence rinsed him well in lukewarm water and then held him on the settle beside the warm fire while Makepeace rubbed him gently with a soft linen towel, rubbed him until his fur fluffed out like a ball of gleaming black silk.

The twins feared that Two Panthers might return, but they saw him no more. Indians firmly believed in good and evil spirits, and the Mohican was certain that the tiny green-eyed cat was a powerful goblin, and he trembled lest it should decide to haunt him as a punishment for his attempt to steal the kettle. But he would do what he could to avert its wrath!

At sunset, when Mr. and Mrs. Alden came clop-clopping back along the forest trail on their horse, the tall form of the Mohican loomed up suddenly before them in the shadow of the trees. He raised his arm in the sign of peace and then pointed to the carcass of a fine deer that he had laid on the trail at their feet.

“Two Panthers makes offering to the wondrous little spirit who guards the copper kettle,” he grunted solemnly.

With that he vanished into the forest, and the Aldens never saw him again. But often after that day mysterious gifts of game and berries, and even valuable furs, were left at the cabin door. And the twins and their parents realized that they were offerings made by Two Panthers to the green-eyed goblin with the swelling tail who guarded the shining copper kettle.

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Virginia Voight wrote for popular magazines during the first half of the twentieth century.