

*Benedick - A Cat's Tale*

# **Benedick**

**Rainbow Valley Books**



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# **BENEDICK**



**by**

**Anthony Hill**

*Benedick - A Cat's Tale*

## **Rainbow Valley Books**

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## **NOTE FROM THE EDITOR**

**P**resented with the challenge of taking an unfinished book to a possibly unintended ending, while keeping the integrity of the whole, presented many challenges. With the author being deceased and much loved, it was essential to keep the style and feel of what he had written. What was presented as the last chapter was unfinished and certainly not the end of Benedick's adventures.

Either the book was to be taken as it stood and printed unfinished or the book had to be edited to bring it to a rounded conclusion - the latter route was selected.

Preparing a conclusion within the same style also meant revisiting earlier sections to make the story flow and to ensure there were no loose ends. Editing and inserting additional material, without knowledge of the author's thoughts, inevitably meant another hand. The hand had to be as hidden as possible. Minor additions, alterations and corrections were blended in, amounting to not more than a dispersed couple of hundred words, to match and inform the ending. The completion of the ending required an additional couple of thousand words, no more.

In this way, the integrity of the original was kept, and sense was made of the main body of the story so that it matched the new conclusion.

The editor is indebted to Trevor Hopkins for his guidance and thorough proofing of the final drafts, and for writing the Foreword.

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The delightful illustrations were prepared by Caroline Wheldon - the book would have been very incomplete without them.

It is hoped you will enjoy the completed story.

M.R.

**Additional Note: The Scible.**

Many of the cat words have some kind of link to the creature or machine being described. Originally the *Scible* was in italics in the manuscript, but was neither creature nor machine. There was no clue as to what was meant - 'sky-ball' - suggesting a golf course, did not quite fit because of the mention of woodlands and the sheer menace of the place. It has also been suggested the word is a contraction of 'scary' and 'horrible'. Whatever the lost meaning, 'the word' has been kept, but without italics.

M.R.

# FOREWORD

## Anthony Edward Hill

**T**he death of the author of 'Benedick' in 2007, Anthony Edward Hill, ('Bertie' to family, 'Tony' to friends), after years of ill-health, battled with great fortitude and cheerfulness was, and remains, a great loss to all who knew and loved him.

Tony was born and lived all his life in Ealing. He worked with his parents, Frank and Peggy and his sister Frances in the family business in Florence Road started by his grandfather Albert Hill - known as Bertie – the subsequent development on that site has been given the name of 'Hill's Mews' in commemoration of the family.

Theatre was Tony's great love – he initially joined the then Teddington Theatre Club (now at Hampton Hill Playhouse) as an actor under the tutelage of the innovative Iris Inglis and Eric Yardley but then became a much-respected director. He later joined Ealing's own Questor's Theatre, starting as a student taught by the dynamic Alfred Emmet but then found his forte as a director of quality drama. After completing a Voice Training course at The Central School of Speech and Drama, he was much sought-after both as a teacher of drama students and advisor to directors.

The inspiration for this book was Tony's much-loved cat, Ben, and this book was written in memory of Ben, but I am sure Tony would also have wanted a dedication to the constant companions of his latter years, Crystal and Tanya, two lovable (and naughty!) mongrel refuge dogs, now looked after so well by Graham and Enid Sawyer.

Trevor Hopkins  
October 2010

## PROLOGUE

Set in a time when coal fires were not uncommon, the season is autumn, the place somewhere west of London. This gloom time is punctuated by a weak sun, much loved by cats. The tale is set in their small world, a secret zone to which we poor humans are blind and deaf and cannot even dream of.

For example it is a little known fact that most cats refer to human beings as *hubies* and to their owners as *tendies*. The names have a childish quality because, unfortunately, humans talk to cats in a childish way and so, likewise, they are inclined to address us in childish terms. Incidentally, *tendie* derives from our word 'attendant': naturally, cats scorn the idea of 'owner', but since we provide food and shelter, and most of their comforts, 'attendant' is deemed appropriate.

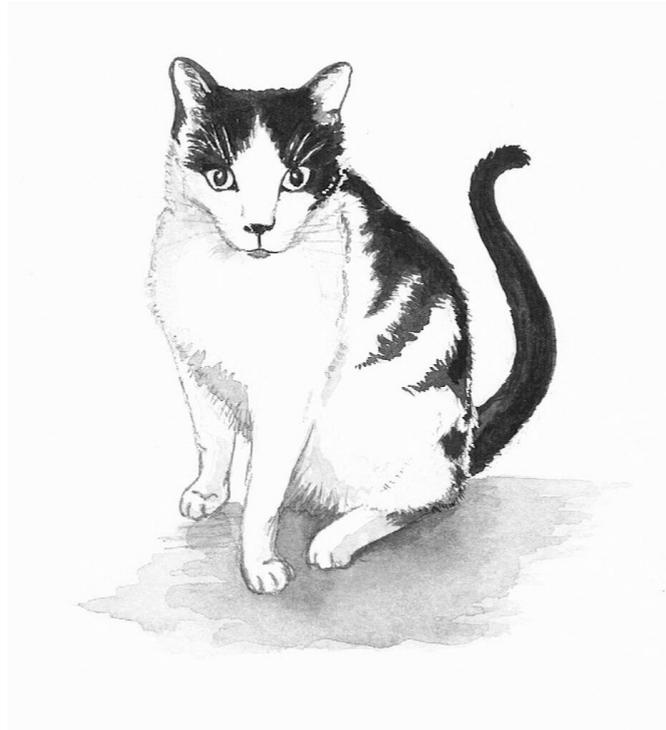
Other special names are shared by cats, names which catch the sound of the object they describe, or the effect of the object on a cat's world. Dogs are not dogs, but *barkers* - which they do too often in a cat's view. A cat's world is at once more refined and dangerous than we can imagine.

For many years cats called rats *yellow-teeth*. Rats, cunning to the last, picked up this cat-term and did not like it at all. They began to call themselves *fangs*. This greatly amused the cats who knew full well that rats were merely edible rodents - fangless! However, the cats quickly learned of this rat-nuance and they too began to call *yellow-teeth* - *fangs*. But when they did so it was in the form of a subtle insult, pure sarcasm, not unlike calling a toothless *hubie* - gummy. The rats, so far, even to this day, have not caught on to the cats' cleverness, and would be in a quandary if they did. And in any case a rat is nothing for a good cat to fear... unless... unless they come *en masse*. Now, *that* is dangerous.

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There are many dangers for cats. Most things big are a danger, but the most terrible are vehicles which they see, by and large as wheels - which kill: thus cats call them *killing-wheels*. For the rest, 'the wild' into which they can go and return with ease, unlike dogs who have great liking for belonging to the human pack, remains a place of threatening creatures, and some tasty items of food, zones of life and danger mere humans would not dare to go - even if they knew about them.

Yet though the humans were often the protectors of their cats, and still are, they were also a cat's most serious danger. You see, in those days, it was not unfashionable, came the autumn with its chill winds and icy air, for a lady, or even a man, to sport nice fur gloves. And there is nothing so soft or warm as the fur of a well-fed cat...



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# CHAPTER ONE



**B**enedick was engulfed by a sense of loneliness. On that autumn day, with a low sun scarce fighting off the chill, as he lay curled up on the window ledge outside the bedroom, Benedick just could not get Oz out of his mind.

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He shivered in the cold damp air, then got up and stretched his limbs by arching his back and holding his legs very straight. He was about to turn round and face the other way when he saw his own reflection in the bedroom window, caught in the dull, borrowed, yellow glow of the street lamps.

Staring back at him was a tall, thin, young cat. Its eyes and ears were large, too large for its rather small head. Its coat was short and mostly white, but blotched here and there with black, as if some careless painter had flicked his brush as the cat passed by. There were blotches on its back; specks on its legs, though one hind leg was almost completely black, as was its tail. Just one of its ears was black and even its pink nose had a small black speck on it.

'Am I really a *funny-looking little thing*?' he asked himself recalling the words used earlier by the young woman next door. And then the names Phoebe and Claypole called him, came to mind. He sighed and shivered again.

'If that's what they think, let them think it - I look rather good as far as I can see!'

This fine thought was interrupted...

'Hello Sippy,' said Phoebe, the cat from next door but one.

She was a pert little thing, mostly black - but her nose was white and also her feet and the tip of her tail. She was small, neat, and very self-possessed and always rude to Benedick. He didn't know why, or at least he pretended not to know.

Phoebe pitter-pattered past his front garden fence; her nose stuck forwards and her tail straight out at the back, as always very intent on going about her own business. When she got to the house on the corner, without looking into the front garden, she chirruped, 'Hello Fatty.'

Phoebe had called out to a big tabby cat who lived on the corner. His real name was Bagshot and although he was only ten years old he was certainly extremely fat.

'Can't help it,' he was prone to hiss, 'too long ashore!' For Bagshot had once been a ship's cat until his *tendie*, Captain

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Blunt R.N. (Retired) no less, had packed his ship's chest and his cat for the last time just a year ago. That was about the time his friend the admiral left the sea too and took *his* cat ashore as well - a rather arrogant young rascal of a cat named Cedric... and Bagshot's son what's more - but that is another story.

Bagshot glared after the retreating Phoebe.

She paused slightly at the kerb, then shot across the road and disappeared into the front garden of the house on the other side, where her *tendie* and most of their household had gone not an hour before. Benedick smiled to himself, 'Well at least I'm not the only one she's rude to.'

Benedick jumped down from the window sill of his house where he had been sitting and easily scaled the high fence separating his garden from next door's. He crouched on top of the fence for a few moments checking for any other cat who might be hiding below.

He knew this was unlikely as the next door garden wasn't owned by a particular cat since the young couple who occupied the house lived on their own; not even a *barker*. Benedick knew the garden well: it was nicely overgrown with a dense network of plants and bushes forming interesting tunnels and alleys, and convenient little hiding places in which you could curl up and doze safely, or crouch down out of sight and watch and listen.

A car horn sounded out in the street startling Benedick, causing him to jump down into the garden sooner than he had intended. Nevertheless he landed neatly as always, having had to skirt an old climbing rose on the way. He stood stock still for a moment sniffing the air, waving his tail cautiously and listening to make sure no other cats were present. Then he moved carefully to the first clump of bushes, crouching slightly and holding his tail very still.

'Good afternoon, young man.'

Benedick was startled and froze to the spot. Bagshot must have crept through the rose hedge that divided this garden from

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his. He was sitting on his favourite bed of sprawling ivy which had been comfortably warmed by the weak sun.

'Good afternoon, Fat... er... Bags... er... *Mister Bagshot*.'

Benedick was still unsettled and stuttered badly; he was seldom taken unawares by another cat. Old Bagshot had definitely not lost his cat-stealth.

Bagshot graciously ignored his discomposure.

'I suppose you heard that insolent little thing, Phoebe, call me a *rude* name. She took good care to make sure she was well out of my reach, you noticed?'

Bagshot watched Benedick's reaction carefully, just to make sure he didn't find 'name-calling' funny too. Bagshot could be quite formidable, apart from his enormous size, he had an air of natural authority picked up on the bridges of many a ship of war.

'Er...yes,' replied Benedick, 'I did hear her. She calls me names sometimes, too.'

Bagshot shifted his weight slightly and tucked his large



front paws under his ample chest in a comfortable fashion. Then, after some consideration, he said, not in an unkindly way, 'I'm afraid I've heard most of the cats

round here calling *you* names. I wonder you allow it.'

Benedick felt awkward because he knew it was true.

Embarrassed, Benedick looked away and pretended to be occupied by a falling leaf that was hovering near them, but he was terribly aware of Bagshot's steady gaze and knew he must say something in his own defense.

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'Oh, I don't let that sort of thing bother me,' he replied, rather feebly, continuing to stare at the leaf which seemed reluctant to touch the earth.

To cover his growing confusion Benedick jumped up and gave the leaf a hefty swipe with his paw, missing, and causing the leaf to spin, and then proceeded to leap rather skittishly round the garden, intermittently taking further swipes at the leaf and other falling cousins. In moments though, they all settled on the sad decay of the summer's finished flower beds.

'Sit down,' ordered Bagshot, 'and leave those poor dead things alone.'

Benedick couldn't resist one more biff at the closest leaf and then he sat down obediently, but still fell to watching its progress to the earth.

'And pay attention!'

Benedick turned to face Bagshot who was sitting upright now like a particularly fat, but unsmiling, Buddha. He was certainly a fine looking specimen, with his well-defined black and grey-striped tabby coat, and gleaming white expansive chest. Even the bright metal name-tag that hung from his collar seemed to be a token of his authority, with his own 'RN' at the end of his name.

'You know it simply won't do,' said Bagshot, in a serious voice.

And cats can be very serious when they want to be, and very articulate too. Their large vocabulary is made up, not just with sounds - or as we would say, 'words' - but with gesture and appearance as well. The position and movement of the head, ears, whiskers, feet and tail convey all sorts of different meanings. The eyes are very important too, and communicate various changes of tone and mood. Bagshot's were now quite round and the pupils were enlarged so that his eyes seemed almost completely black: the gaze was very intense. He meant business. His head was erect and his ears were held ever so slightly forward; the tip of his tail waved slowly and

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deliberately, a hint of dangerous irritation. Anything he said now would be of special significance and would have to be listened to.

'It simply won't do,' he repeated. 'Just saying you're not bothered, won't do at all. All the cats round here call you names and it's not only that - they come into *your* garden - yes, front and back garden as well - I've seen them - and treat it as their own. They take all kinds of liberties and *you* just put up with it.'

'I don't,' said Benedick - but even he noticed a hint of a whine in his own voice. He felt a bit ashamed, so he added, 'It's just that I don't like fighting.'

'No indeed, no sensible cat likes fighting,' and here Bagshot flicked one ear meaningfully and gave an extra shake of his tail to emphasise the point. 'But you must protect what's your own, like a shipping lane,' he added.

Benedick was not sure what that meant.

Bagshot paused and then asked, quite sharply, 'How long have you lived here now? About a year?'

'About that,' mumbled Benedick.

'Well then, that's *your* garden and no other cat must come into it whilst you're using it, do you see?'

Benedick could understand the point Bagshot was making well enough, but he genuinely was not bothered by such things as owning a bit of land and fighting other cats in order to keep them off. Why couldn't they all be friends and go where they liked? As for the name calling, that was a different matter: it made him miserable. Why call him names when all he wanted to do was be friendly and not fight?

He said as much to Bagshot, but he felt awkward, stuttering badly and was aware he wasn't explaining himself well.

He finished rather lamely, 'I just want to be friends with you all.'

Bagshot persisted, 'Yes, yes, I understand that, but you must earn the respect of other cats before you can expect to be friends

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with them. They must be taught to respect your rights, just as you respect theirs.'

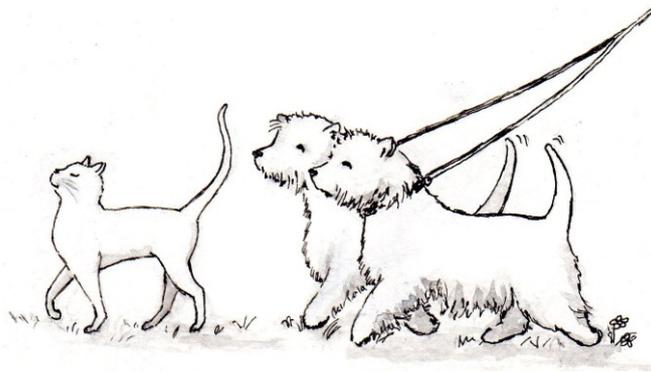
Bagshot nestled down again into his bed of ivy leaves and tucked his paws under his broad white chest so that they all but disappeared from view. He continued in a quieter, less stern tone of voice and his ears stuck out sideways.

'Now look,' he said, after a while, 'look at it this way: since no cat is resident *here*, this garden is neutral territory. We can meet here for a chat, such as we're having, or just to exchange a few mutual pleasantries and hear a little local gossip. That's because this garden doesn't belong to either one of us. But I wouldn't expect the same freedom from your patch anymore than you would from mine, we wait for an invitation or until the other one is out of the way. That's mutual respect and if anyone oversteps the mark I jolly well let them know it. I don't let...'

Bagshot stopped abruptly and cocked one ear round so it was facing almost backwards. He listened silently for a few moments, the pupils of his eyes growing larger once more and his tail starting to flick from side to side furiously; otherwise he kept perfectly still.

'Here, I'll show you what I mean,' he whispered.

He crept fairly quietly, considering his size, into the privet hedge which separated the garden from the pavement. Benedick followed him, but eased his head under the gate so he was able to see down the road.



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Phoebe was advancing towards them, attended by two little white dogs who were on leads. The leads were attached to the handle of a pram which was being pushed by a harassed-looking young woman. Phoebe was definitely in charge. She paused before crossing the road, bringing the whole party to a halt, then nipped over and waited for them on the other side. Once they had all crossed she took up her place once more at the head of the procession, her tail held high as if it were a banner. As soon as she drew alongside the privet hedge Bagshot simply extended his paw and gave her a sharp clout around the ear.

'Ouch,' cried Phoebe.

'Just to remind you, my name is Bagshot. *Mister* Bagshot to you - and don't forget it.'

'You old...'

'Yes?' said Bagshot, about to pounce.

'Alright! Sorry. Sorry!'

'Sorry, what?' insisted Bagshot.

'Sorry, *Mister* Bagshot.'

'Quite so!' he half snarled.

Phoebe was obviously furious at being shown up in front of her troops. In fact the whole altercation had caused some confusion in her household ranks. Both the little white dogs were yapping, not barking, they couldn't, and trying to jump up into the young woman's arms for protection at the same time - which had caused the baby in the pram to start squealing.

Suddenly Phoebe noticed Benedick enjoying the whole scene from under the garden gate and darted forward to try to land him a blow on his nose. 'What are you staring at, Soppo?' she hissed.

But Benedick had quickly withdrawn his head and so she had no option but to muster what little dignity she could and carry on.

'Be quiet and hurry up!' she called to the two dogs, and up went her tail and the party moved off out of view. When they reached her garden gate there was a sharp yelp of pain from the

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whitest and fluffiest of the two dogs: evidently Phoebe had needed to take her spite out on something.

Benedick and Bagshot could hear the woman saying, 'Now, now Phoebe dear, tea will be ready soon.'

Bagshot turned to Benedick, 'There you see, young man, she can boss her family about and be as badly behaved as she wants, but when she tries it on with *me* she always gets the same treatment. Now you watch, it'll be "Mister Bagshot" this and "Mister Bagshot" that for the next few weeks and as soon as she steps out of line again it'll be another clip round the ear for her. As far as I'm concerned she must learn respect.'

With that he sauntered back to his favourite patch of ivy and settled down to enjoy the remains of the afternoon sun.

Benedick joined him, but sat on the other side of the path in an overgrown flower bed. Although he had been unnerved slightly by the squabble, he admired the way Bagshot had handled himself and now felt sufficiently relaxed to prop himself up on one side and allow the rest of his body to stretch out on the warm earth. Both cats were content to remain silent for a while and then Bagshot said, 'Incidentally, where's that black fellow gone who used to live with you? What was his name?'

'Oh, Oz.'

'Ah yes, Oswald, that's it. Now you didn't have much trouble from the cats round here when he was living with you. He kept them in order pretty easily, including you I dare say. A fine fellow. What happened to him?'

'He just went off one night and didn't come back.'

'*Killing-wheels* get him?' asked Bagshot pertinently.

The traffic was not particularly heavy in their neighbourhood, but a cat had to be careful crossing the road all the same. *Killing-wheels* always come from nowhere, especially at night, blinding a cat first with bright lights.

'No, in fact I'm sure they didn't because I searched all the roads round here, even the big main road, and there was no sign

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of him anywhere. I think he went back to where he came from; he used to live in a very large mansion so he told me,' replied Benedick.

'Hm, pity, still he couldn't have been happy here and you can't expect a cat to stay where he's not happy,' observed Bagshot.

'No, of course not, but I do miss him.'

'Yes, I expect you do. How long has he been gone now?'

'Oh, weeks and weeks. He went off at the end of summer and now it will soon be winter.'

'Well, he won't be coming back then, that's certain, not after such a long time.'

'No, I suppose not,' agreed Benedick miserably.

Benedick did not hint at how much he had been thinking recently about his friend, Oswald, or Oz as he called him. Once again the memories came rushing back of that time when Oz disappeared; all the searches he had made and all the weeks of waiting, and it had all been for nothing. Oz had never returned.

At that moment his thoughts were wiped by a noise in the street, but neither of them bothered to move since it was the familiar sound of the car belonging to the young couple who owned the house. The car pulled up outside and the man got out and opened the garden gates, whilst the woman drove the car in. After getting lots of human shopping bags from the boot and closing the gates, they both walked up the path, greeting Benedick and Bagshot on the way.

'Hullo, Bagsey,' said the young woman, bending down to stroke his head.

Bagshot got up, stretched and yawned, whilst Benedick turned over on his back waving his paws in the air and giggled a sort of purr-greeting. He was always a bit shy and friendly and this was his usual form of greeting.

'Get up... at once!' ordered Bagshot. 'And act your age: rolling about like some kitten.'

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'Hullo, you funny-looking little thing,' said the young woman, approaching Benedick. She looked as if she were about to tickle his exposed tummy, so he got up swiftly and jumped on the fence. He would not allow a stranger to be quite so familiar with him.

'What a funny little chap, where's he from?' she asked the young man.

'Next door, I think,' he answered. 'Coming in for a saucer of milk, Bagsey?'

Bagshot got up almost obediently and followed them into the house with his tail held high, just as if *he* were a kitten himself who had been summoned to supper by his mother.

'Huh, and he says I should act my age,' mused Benedick. 'One word from a *hubie* and he behaves like a kitten himself and those two aren't even his *tendies*.'

In spite of being left alone and sitting rather precariously on top of the fence, Benedick did not regret forgoing the invitation to a drink of milk. On principle, he did not often accept hospitality from strangers and besides he was not all that fond of milk. It was getting chill anyway.

The low November sun was sinking fast, throwing long shadows across the gardens; it was beginning to grow colder and a slight mist was rising from the ground. Benedick sniffed the air and guessed if he were to enjoy the remains of the afternoon sun he would be better off sitting on one of the first floor window sills of his own house, still bathed in sun. The aroma of another cat was in the air, even as he began to move.

He crept along the top of the dividing fence until he was able to jump with one bound onto the roof of the bay window of his house; from there he leapt onto the porch over the front door. He was just about to make the final leap up onto the bedroom window sill when he noticed none other than Claypole curled up asleep below him.

Claypole was a very thin ginger cat who lived next door, on the other side of Benedick's house. He was old, older than

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Bagshot, and inclined to be rather spiteful and bad tempered, particularly where Benedick was concerned. He was lying asleep on the ground floor window sill on the other side of the porch.

Benedick crept to the edge of the porch roof and peeped over. His ears and whiskers eagerly facing forwards and his tail flicking from side to side. He anticipated a bit of fun. He dropped down softly onto the window sill so as not to wake Claypole, and then sneaked up behind him.

'Afternoon, Claypole, having a nice snooze?' he inquired in a very loud voice, close to giggling with excitement.

'Ugh! You clown!' hissed Claypole, a sound somewhere between a spit and a yawn.

He was obviously ruffled and spun round to face Benedick, his ears flattened back against his head, ready for action. The fur stood up along the length of his arched back. Unfortunately, the effect was more comical than frightening.

'Oh, sorry, Claypole, did I disturb you?' Benedick asked innocently, barely suppressing a laugh.

Claypole shook himself and tried to regain his composure. 'It's *Professor* Claypole as you well know, and as you should also know:

"To wake with a start  
Is bad for the heart. "'

Claypole was fond of quoting maxims such as that, and he always referred to himself as a 'professor': *tendie* influence.

Being the oldest of the local cats he was generally deferred to by the others. He liked to dispense medical advice and tips on healthy living, specifying himself as a fine example of old age. He also liked the company of kittens - to listen to his medical wisdom of course, and his local knowledge.

Benedick thought this was just an affectation assumed because his *tendie* was a doctor. However, in spite of his

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eccentricities, Benedick would like to have been friends with Claypole because he amused Benedick and he thought Claypole was probably quite wise. So, bearing in mind Bagshot's advice about standing up for his rights, Benedick said cautiously, but pointedly, 'I should find somewhere to sleep in your own garden then, perhaps you wouldn't be disturbed there.'

'Thank you, but I'm quite happy here,' retorted Claypole sarcastically. 'I used this garden before you came here and I shall continue to do so.'

He spoke in that high, whining tone of voice which cats often use when they are about to fight, however Claypole was unusual in that he always spoke like that.

Benedick thought, 'What's the point, if I really want him to go I shall have to hit him and that's no way to make a friend. Besides, I don't honestly care if he does stay.'

'Please yourself,' Benedick said finally, 'but it's cold down here, I'm going up to the top window sill to get some sun.'

'I *intend* to please myself,' said Claypole spitefully, and as Benedick turned to go, Claypole struck out at his back.

The blow only skimmed Benedick's fur and in one leap he was on top of the porch again. Another leap took him up to the bedroom window sill from where he could look down on Claypole who was sitting up now, cleaning himself, as if nothing had happened.

'Don't forget to wash behind your ears, *Professor*,' Benedick called out cheekily.

'Clown!' retorted Claypole, and then he added, profoundly:

'Cats who jump around like monkeys  
End up being other cats' flunkeys.'

But the old cat gazed up at Benedick enviously. Although still fairly agile, his days of leaping up effortlessly to first floor windows had long since gone. Realising the air had indeed grown colder and that he might find a warmer spot in his own

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garden, Claypole jumped down from the ground floor window sill and sauntered off up the garden path, muttering to himself in his strange high-pitched voice:

'Jumping and landing on all fours  
Can damage your legs and cut your paws.'

He eased himself under the front gate and then went next door into his own garden. Just inside was a privet hedge under which he could curl up again for another snooze until his *tendie* came home.

Benedick watched as Claypole circled round and round, fastidiously pawing at the earth and sniffing to ensure it was clean and dry before settling down.

Claypole looked up sharply, suddenly aware he was being watched and called out in a jeering, triumphant sort of way:

'He's not so clever since he lost his fine friend,  
Now he's always alone and at a loose end!'

Obviously pleased with himself, Claypole curled up in his selected spot under the privet whilst, for a few moments, keeping a wary eye on Benedick, just in case his jibe provoked a retaliation.

But Benedick didn't feel inclined to respond: Claypole, in his canny way, had summed up Benedick's situation exactly. Since Oswald had gone he was, indeed, 'always alone and at a loose end'.

'Now, Oz would have known how to sort Claypole out,' Benedick reflected sadly.

He remembered the time when Oz had first confronted Claypole: it was shortly after they had both moved to the little house. They had been sitting on this same window sill and Claypole had come wandering into their garden from next door. Oz had noticed him first, and his ears and whiskers had shot

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forwards. He sat up, tall and erect, ensuring that Claypole noticed him at once, but he didn't speak. His eyes had darkened and he held Claypole with a steady gaze, his tail flicking the edge of the window sill.

Claypole had been sniffing at the shrubs along the garden path and was already disconcerted and puzzled by the new smells he had found there. Now he looked up at this sleek black stranger staring down at him, with another cat behind him, rather scrawny and thin. Claypole had been taken unawares and felt a distinct loss of status, so he quickly came out with one of his peculiar proverbs, quite sure that it would impress and save the situation:

'Older residents can go where they choose  
Newcomers should mind their P's and their Q's.'

Oz had been surprised for a moment by the funny high-pitched voice, then he smiled at Benedick and called down, in a perfect imitation of Claypole's voice,

'But surely it's wiser not to linger,  
'Specially if you're thin and ginger.'

Then Oz hopped down from the bedroom window sill onto the front door porch and began to clean his fore paw.

He intentionally did not to look at Claypole again and appeared to give all his attention to his paw. First, cleaning the back, then turning it over and licking between each shiny pad, splaying the paw wide so that his long curved claws were exposed. Claypole watched as if mesmerised.

Suddenly Claypole turned and shuffled off down the garden path with his tail almost between his legs, but still swishing with irritation. Once under the gate he gathered speed and darted into the 'wilderness' garden, next door. Oz's apparent lack of interest

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had enabled him to make his retreat without too much loss of face.

Oz continued cleaning his paw, then gave as much careful attention to the other one. After a few moments he jumped down from the porch and sauntered along the path, after Claypole, into the next door garden.

From the upstairs window sill, Benedick craned his neck to try to see what would happen next, but was surprised when he spied Oz and Claypole sitting, chatting amiably amidst a pile of dried grass cuttings.

'Yes, Oz had 'Style!'' thought Benedick fondly, and once again he missed his friend, really his only friend, very much.

Although he didn't know why Oz had left so suddenly and without telling him, Benedick felt sure he was still alive. He felt it with a certainty that only cats possess; something almost tangible, that only cats can comprehend and is quite beyond the understanding of mere *hubies*. Yet, there was even something disturbing round the edges of *that* feeling; something which called for help. But at that time Benedick was too inexperienced to know what to do, so he put it down to 'a good friend missed, who might one day return'. So, he did nothing.



The sun was a huge amber ball now, suspended low in the sky and sinking fast. It had put up a brave show all day long and was making the most of its final moments, for who knows when it would be booked again? It was November, after all, and the weather had been getting colder, and greyer each day, as winter approached.

From his seat on the outside bedroom window sill Benedick had a good view over the surrounding gardens. There were five of them; they were all similar, as were the houses. They formed part of a long road which was in a fairly quiet neighbourhood of

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West London. The little houses were very old and looked like the kind of houses children draw. They had a front door in the middle with a large bay window on either side and two smaller bedroom windows above. The roofs were of grey slate and there was a chimney pot at each end. A road ran down either side of the block of little houses, separating them from the rest of the street. These roads joined up eventually to a large main thoroughfare which, after many miles, went straight into the heart of London.

All five houses had long narrow front gardens, but only little yards at the back and most of these had been filled up with rear extensions, conservatories and garden sheds. The front gardens all had a similar layout with white picket fences and a path running up the middle to the front door.

On the corner, where Phoebe lived, the garden was untidy. An old estate car was parked at the end nearest the street. There was a lawn, but the grass was overgrown and it was strewn with brightly coloured toys that belonged to, probably, the baby or the two little white dogs.

As Benedick looked across into the garden, the front door was opened and Phoebe strolled out again. She had evidently just had her tea as she sat on the door mat and proceeded to wash herself. Benedick was able to see the two little white dogs whose names, he knew, were Dottie and Lottie, hovering in the threshold. They were obviously wanting to get out, but were afraid of passing Phoebe. Her *tendie* stood behind them looking perplexed, until Phoebe, in her own good time, decided to sally forth into the garden. The two little dogs then followed meekly behind her and the situation was resolved.

Next door, of course, was Claypole's garden. It was the sort of garden Benedick did not care for at all. Along the front fence was a neatly-trimmed privet hedge, and there was a small paved area where the Doctor parked her car. There was a well-manicured lawn and lots of flower beds filled with rose bushes, also very well-cared for, though gone to sleep for the coming

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winter. The garden was looked after by a miserable old *hubie* who came twice a week, during the summer, to mow the lawn and potter around generally. Whenever Benedick went into the garden, which he seldom did because it was so uninteresting, the old *hubie* would shout at him. On one occasion he even threw a flower pot at Benedick and swore. Of course, he was much more respectful to Claypole who was the resident cat, though Claypole treated the old man with complete disdain.

Benedick noticed Claypole wake up suddenly in his bed beneath the privet hedge. He stretched and yawned, and then ran directly to his front door. Sure enough, a few minutes later, the car belonging to Claypole's *tendie* drew up outside. She got out, opened the garden gates and drove the brightly polished little car inside. As she retrieved a brief case and some papers from the back seat she spoke to Claypole in a cooing sort of voice.

'Have you missed me, my darling? Has Mummy kept you waiting then?'

In the meantime, Claypole was standing on his hind legs and pawing impatiently at the front door, emitting his peculiar high-pitched whine.

'Yes, you have missed me, haven't you?' she said, answering herself. Though in fact what Claypole was actually saying was, 'No, I haven't missed you, now pull yourself together and get my tea!'

Benedick thought what a miserable, ungrateful thing Claypole was, but he had to smile all the same. And he said to himself, 'What a good thing *hubies* don't always understand everything we say.'

Claypole and his *tendie* disappeared into their house.

Benedick looked down into his own garden, his favourite. Just as in the neighbouring gardens there was a standing space for a car. To the left of that was the garden gate with the path which ran up to the front door, but unlike the others, there was no lawn on either side. Instead, his garden had paving stones and gravel, interspersed with planting areas. These were filled with

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sprawling evergreens and herbs which, during the summer, gave off wonderful perfumes.

Benedick was particularly fond of the catmint and, in warm weather, he would make a bed of it and lie there most of the day. It wasn't a tidy garden, but he liked it all the better for that. Even now, autumn leaves were lying about and piling up beneath the shrubs, and moss had gathered between the paving stones. He eyed the last of the leaves, drifting down from the smaller branches of overhanging trees, but decided to do nothing about them.

The sun had sunk now, behind the tall houses at the end of the street. It was dark, except for a few well-lit windows opposite and the strange gathering yellow glow of the street lamps. Cars began to drive by more frequently, their headlights illuminating the ever thickening mist. 'All the *hubies* making for home,' thought Benedick, well used to this evening ritual.

The increasing mist and gloom were beginning to obscure the view, even from Benedick's sharp eyes. As he peered into the nice 'wilderness' garden next door, on the other side of his house, Benedick saw a beam of light shine down the garden path. The front door had been opened and Bagshot strolled out, having enjoyed his saucer of milk. At the same time, another beam of light appeared from the open front door of the house beyond, on the corner, where Bagshot lived. A voice called from within.

'Bagshot?...Bagsey? Where are you?'

Taking his time, Bagshot sauntered down the garden path, pausing to sniff at one or two plants on the way. He squeezed himself under the gate, then strolled round to his own front gate which was slightly ajar and eased himself through.

'Come on, Bagsey, there's a good boy,' said his old officer *tendie* as Bagshot arrived finally at the front door. When he bent down to stroke Bagshot's head, the tubby old cat made a series of little jumps on his hind legs to meet his *tendie's* hand as if to save him the trouble of bending down too far. Bagshot rubbed

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himself against the old man's legs a few times, telling him in a purring voice how pleased he was to be home on such a misty evening. Then the two of them disappeared into the house together. The front door was closed and the garden was left to itself - covered again in gloom and mist.

A slight chill wind had started up, causing the mist to swirl and move about as if the mist too had a separate life. Suddenly...

Benedick turned sharply and peered into the night, back fur raised a little.

Surely he had heard a voice calling him from out there in the dark?

He listened. Oz's voice?

He stood very still, and looked and listened; eyes wide, ears twitching for a sense of direction.

And then it seemed as if he could *see* the face of his friend through the swirling mist, and hear him softly call his name again.

*'Benedick!'*

Oz's eyes, round and full of fear or pain, shone in the darkness.

'Oz?' called Benedick. 'Where are you?'

But, even as he watched and listened, the mist circled slowly around clouding Oz from his view and the vision gradually disappeared back into the night.

Minutes passed, still the sensation of Oz's presence had not faded, but Benedick once more became aware of the street noises below him. Whereas before all had been silence except for Oz's voice, now he could hear again the traffic going by and the sounds of *hubies* chatting together, in two's and three's, as they made their way home. Then Benedick singled out a very particular, familiar sound: it was Colin's car. His *tendie* was coming home.

Before long the ramshackle little car turned the corner and pulled up outside the house. A young man got out, opened the gates and drove in. Leaving the car door open, he closed the

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garden gates and then walked back to the car. He leaned inside and withdrew, firstly an old leather hold-all, then some files, a big overcoat and two plastic shopping bags. He pushed the car door shut with his knee.

Normally Benedick would have bounded down from the window sill to greet his Colin, but his mind was still dazed. It was as if what was going on below him was only half real, and no more substantial than Oz appearing in that same mist a few minutes before.

On his way to the front door Colin looked up, saw Benedick and called out to him, 'What are you doing up there, Ben? Come on inside - its cold out here!'

And with that Benedick shook himself of mist droplets and thoughts and came down from the window sill. Colin opened the door and they both went inside together.