Total Loss

by Sylvia Townsend Warner

When Charlotte woke, it was raining. Rain hid the view of the downs and blurred the neat row of trees and the neat row of houses opposite which the trees had been planted to screen. This was the third wet morning since her birthday a week ago. There would be rain all through the holidays, just like last year. On her birthday, Charlotte was ten. 'Now you are in double figures,' said Professor Bayer. 'And you will stay in them till you are a hundred years old. Think of that, my Lottchen.' 'Yes, think of that,' said Mother. Charlotte could see that Mother did not really wish to think of it. She was being polite, because Professer Bayer was a very important person at the Research Station, so it was a real honour that he should like Father and come to the house to borrow *The New Statesman.*

Charlotte's cat Moodie was awake already. He lay on the chair in the corner, on top of her clothes, and was staring at her with a thirsty expression. She jumped out of bed, went to the kitchen, breaking into its early morning tidiness and seclusion, and came back with a saucer of milk. 'Look, Moodie! Nice milk.' He would not drink, though he still had that thirsty expression. 'You silly old Moodles, you don't know what you want,' she said, kneeling before the chair with the saucer in her hand. Moodie had come as a wedding present to Mother. His birthday was unknown, but he was certainly two years older than Charlotte. Ever since she could remember, there had been Moodie, and Moodie had been hers—to be slept on, talked to, hauled about, wheeled in a doll's perambulator, read aloud to, confided in, wept on, trodden on, loved and taken for granted. He stared at her, ignoring the milk, and forgetting the milk she stared back, fascinated as ever by the way the fur grew on his nose, the mysterious smooth conflict between two currents of growth. At last she put down the saucer, seized him in her arms and got back into bed. 'We understand each other, don't we?' she said, curling

his tail round his flank. 'Don't we, Moodie?' He trod with his front paws, purring under his breath, and relaxed, his head on her breast. But at the smell of his bad teeth she turned her face away, pretending it was to look out of the window. 'It's raining, Moodie. It's going to be another horrible wet day. You mustn't be a silly cat, sitting in the garden and getting wet through, like you did on Tuesday.' He was still purring when she fell asleep, though when her mother came to wake her he had gone. Sure enough, when she looked for him after breakfast he was sitting hunched and motionless on the lawn, his grey fur silvered with moisture and fluffed out like a coat of eiderdown. She picked him up, and the bloom vanished; the eiderdown coat, suddenly dark and lank, clung to his bony haunches. 'Mother, I'm going to put Moodie in the airing cupboard.'

'Yes, do, my pet. That's the best plan! But hurry, because Mr. and Mrs. Flaxman will be here to fetch you at any moment. They've just rung up. They want you to spend the day with them.'

'And see the horses?'

The cat in the child's arms broke into a purr, as though her thrill of pleasure communicated itself to him. Though of course it was really the warmth of the kitchen, thought Meg.

'Yes, the horses. And the bantams. And the lovely old toy theatre that belonged to Mrs. Flaxman's grandmother. You'll love it. It's an absolutely storybook house.'

'Shall I wear my new mac?'

'Yes. But hurry, Charlotte. Put Moodie in the airing cupboard, and wash your hands. I'll be up in a moment to brush your hair.'

She had made one false step. The Flaxmans lived twenty miles away, and if they had just rung up they could not be arriving immediately. Luckily Charlotte, though brought up to use her reason, was not a very deductive child; the discrepancy between the prompt arriving of the Flaxmans and the long drive back to Hood House was not likely to catch her attention. But perhaps a private word to Adela Flaxman—just to be on the safe side.

'Mother! Mother!'

At the threatening woe of the cry, Meg left everything and ran.

'Mother! There's a button off.'

The Flaxmans arrived, both talking at once, and saying what a horrible day it was, and Oh, the wretched farmers, who would be a farmer? in loud gay voices. Mrs. Flaxman was Mother's particular friend, but today Mother didn't seem to like her so much, and was laughing obligingly, just as she did with Professor Bayer. As Charlotte stood on the outskirts of this conversation she began to feel less sure of a happy successful day out. She would be treated like a child and probably given milk instead of tea. Moodie hadn't drunk that milk. 'Mother! Don't forget to feed Moodie.'

'Charlotte! As if I would——' At the same moment Mr. Flaxman said, 'Come on, Charlotte! Come on, Adela! The car will catch cold if you don't hurry,' and swept them out of the house.

Meg went slowly upstairs, noticing that the sound of the rain was more insistent in the upper storey of the house. The airing cupboard was in the bathroom. She glanced in quickly and closed the door. She gave the room a rapid tidy, went down, and turned on the wireless.

Meg believed in method. Every morning of the week had its programme; and this was Thursday, when she defrosted the refrigerator, polished the silver and turned out her bedroom—a full morning's work. But today she did none of it, wandering about with a desultory, fidgeting tidiness, taking things up and putting them down again, straightening books on their shelves, nipping dead leaves off the houseplants, while the wireless went on with the Daily Service. There was bound to be a *mauvais quart d'heure*. In fact, everything was well in hand; Charlotte was safely disposed of with the Flaxmans, Moodie was asleep in the airing cupboard and the vet had promised to arrive before midday. It would be quite painless and over in a few minutes. But it was, for all that, a *mauvais quart d'heure*. There are some women, Meg was one of them, in whom conscience is so strongly developed that it leaves little room for anything else. Love is scarcely felt before duty rushes to encase it, anger is impossible because one must always be calm and see both sides, pity evaporates in expedients, even grief is felt as a sort of bruised sense of injury, a resentment that one should have grief forced upon one when one has always acted for the best. Meg's conscience told her that

she was acting for the best: Moodie would be spared inevitable suffering, Charlotte protected from a possibly quite serious trauma, Alan undisturbed in his work. Her own distress—and she was fond of poor old Moodie, no other cat could quite replace him because of his associations—was a small price to pay for all these satisfactory arrangements, and she was ready to pay it, sacrificing her own feelings as duty bid, and as common sense also bid. Besides, it would soon be over. The trouble about an active, strongly developed conscience is that it requires to be constantly fed with good works, a routine shovelling of meritorious activities. And when you have done everything for the best, and are waiting about for the vet to come and kill your old cat and can't therefore begin to defrost a refrigerator or turn out a bedroom, a good conscience soon leaves off being a support and becomes a liability, demanding to be supported itself.

The bad quarter of an hour stretched into half an hour, into an hour, into an hour and a quarter, while Meg, stiffening at the noise of every approaching car and fancying with every gust of a fitful rising wind that Moodie was demanding with yowls to be let out of the airing cupboard, tried to read but could not, looked for cobwebs but found none and wondered if for this once she would break her rule of not drinking spirits before lunchtime. She was in the kitchen, devouring lumps of sugar, when the vet arrived. She took him to the bathroom, opened the cupboard door, heard him say, 'Well, old man?'

'Is there anything I can do to help?'

'If you could let me have an old towel.'

She produced the towel, and went to her bedroom where she opened the window and looked out on the rain and the tossing trees and remembered that everyone must die. At last she heard the basin tap turned on, the vet washing his hands, the water running away.

'Mrs. Atwood. Have you got a box?'

'A box?'

He stood in the passage, a tall, red-faced young man, the picture of health.

'Any sort of carton. To take it away in. A sack would do.'

She had not remembered that Moodie would require a coffin. In a flurry of guilt she began to search. There was a brown paper carrier; but this would not do, Moodie could not be borne away swinging from the vet's hand. There was the carton the groceries had come in; but it was too small, and had Pan Yan Pickles printed on it. At last she found a plain oblong carton, kept because it was solid and serviceable. Deciding that this would do, she glanced inside and realized that it would not do like that. Moodie could not be put straight into an empty box: there must be some sort of lining, of padding. She tore old newspaper into strips and crumpled the strips to form a mattress; and then, remembering that flowers are given to the dead, she snatched a couple of dahlias from a vase and scattered the petals on top of the newspaper. The vet was standing in the bathroom, averting his eyes from the bidet, the towel neatly folded was balanced on the edge of the basin, and on the bathroom stool was Moodie's unrecognizably shabby, degraded, dead body. Before she realized what she was saying, she had said, 'If you'll hold the box, I'd like to put him in.'

Yet what else could she say? She owed it to Moodie. She lifted him on her two hands, as she had lifted him so often. The unsupported head fell horribly to one side, lolling like the clapper of a bell. She got the body in somehow, and the vet closed the lid of the carton and carried it away. She knew she ought to have thanked him, but she could not speak. She had never seen a dead body before—except on food counters, of course.

She went downstairs and drank a stiffish whisky. Her sense of proportion reasserted itself. One cannot expect to be perfect in any first performance. She had not behaved at all as she had meant to when Charlotte was born. It was a pity about the makeshift box; it was a pity not to have thanked the vet; but the essentials had been secured, Charlotte was safe and happy at Hood House, Alan was happy and busy in his laboratory; neither of them need ever know what agony is involved in the process of rationally, mercifully, putting an end to an old pet. She would make a quick lunch of bread and cheese, and then be very busy. She heard a distant peal of thunder, and welcomed the thought of a good rousing thunderstorm. Something elemental would be releasing. After a few more long, grumbling reverberations the

storm moved away, but when she went to defrost the refrigerator she found it darkened and cavervous, and the current off throughout the house. The power lines on Ram Down were always getting struck. She left the refrigerator to natural forces, and as she couldn't use the Hoover either, she polished the silver and sat down to do some mending. She was a bad needlewoman; mending kept her mind occupied till a burst of sunlight surprised her by its slant. She had no idea it was so late. Charlotte would be back at any moment.

Just as the current had gone off, leaving the refrigerator darkened and cavernous, the support of a good conscience now withdrew its aid. Charlotte would be back at any moment. Charlotte would have to be told. Time went on. Suppose there had been a car smash? Charlotte mangled and dying at the roadside, and all because she had been got out of the house while the vet was mercifully releasing Moodie? Meg's doing—how could one ever get over such a thing and lead a normal life again?

She was sitting motionless and frantic when Alan came in, switching on the light in the hall.

'Well, Meg—Why are you looking so wrought up? Didn't the vet come? Couldn't he do his stuff?'

'Oh, yes, that was all right. But Charlotte's not back.'

'When did they say they'd bring her?'

'Adela didn't say exactly. She said, a good long day. But it's long over that—Adela knows how particular I am about bedtime.'

'Why not ring up?'

'But I am sure they must have started by now.'

'Well, someone would be about. They've got that cook. What's their number?'

She heard him in the hall, dialling. Then he came back saying the line seemed to be dead. Ten minutes later, a car drew up and Charlotte rushed into the house, followed by Mrs. Flaxman.

'Mother, Mother! It's been so marvellous, it's been so thrilling. We were struck by lightning. There was a huge flash, bright blue, and the telephone shot across the room and broke ever so much china, and there was an

awful noise of horses screaming their heads off and Mr. Flaxman tore out to see if the stables had been struck too, and then ran back saying, "They're all right but our bloody roof's on fire." And there were great bits of burning thatch flying about everywhere, and Mr. Flaxman went up a ladder and I and Mrs. Flaxman got buckets and buckets of water and handed them up to him. And I was ever so useful, Adela said so, wasn't I, Mrs. Flaxman?'

'I don't know what we'd have done without you, my pet,' said Mrs. Flaxman to Charlotte, and to Meg, 'She got very wet, but we've dried her.'

'And then people came rushing up from the village and trod on the bantams.'

'No, nothing's insured except the portraits and the horses. Giles won't, on principle. Yes, calamitous—but it could have been worse. No, no, not at all, it's been a pleasure having her.'

Adela was gone, leaving the impression of someone from a higher sphere in a hurry to return to its empyrean.

For the present, there was nothing to be done but listen to Charlotte and try not to blame the Flaxmans for having let her get so over-excited. Both parents lit cigarettes and prepared themselves for a spell of entering into their child's world; after all, fifteen minutes earlier, they had been fearing for her life. They smoked and smiled and made appropriate interjections. Suddenly her narrative ran out, and she said, 'Where's Moodie?'

For by the time one is ten one knows when one's parents are only pretending to be interested. Back again in a home that had no horses, no bantams, no curly golden armchairs, no portraits of gentlemen in armour and low-necked ladies, was never struck by lightning and gave her no opportunities to be brave and indispensable, Charlotte concentrated on the one faithful satisfaction it afforded and said, 'Where's Moodie?'

Mastering a feeling like stage-fright, Meg said with composure, 'Darling. Moodie's not here.'

'Why isn't he? Has he run away? Has anything happened to him?'

'Not exactly that. But he's dead.'

'Why? Why is he dead? He was quite well this morning. Why is he dead?'

'You know, darling, poor Moodie hasn't really been feeling well for a long time. He was an old cat. He had an illness.'

Charlotte saw Moodie's broad face, and his eyes staring at her with that thirsty expression. Moodie was dead. Mother had explained to her about death, making it seem very ordinary.

'You remember how horrid his breath smelled?'

'Yes. That was his teeth.'

'It wasn't only his teeth. It was something inside that was bound to kill him sooner or later. And he would have suffered a great deal. So the vet came and gave him an injection and put him to sleep. It was all over in a minute.'

Moodie had gone out and sat in the rain. The child's glance moved to the window and remained fixed on the lawn—so green in the sunset that it was almost golden. It was a french window. Without a word, she opened it and went out.

'Poor Charlotte!' said Alan. 'She's taking it very well. I must say, I think you rubbed it in a bit too much. You needn't have said he stank.'

Meg repressed the retort that if Alan could have done it so much better he might perfectly well have done so. In silence, they watched Charlotte walking about in the garden. It was a very small garden, and newly-planted, and the gardens on either side of it were small and newly-planted too, and only marked off by light railings. To Meg, whose childhood had known a garden with overgrown shrubs, laurel hedges, a disused greenhouse and a toad, it seemed an inadequate place to grieve in; but from the 18th century onwards people have turned for comfort to the bosom of nature, and Charlotte was doing so now, among the standard roses and the begonias. She walked up and down, round and round, pausing, walking on again. 'Going round his old haunts ' said Alan. Moodie, as Meg knew, shared her opinion of the garden; he used it to scratch in, but for any serious haunting went to Mopson's Garage where he and the neighbourhood cats clubbed among the derelict cars. A sense of loss pierced her; knowing Moodie's ways had been a kind of illicit Bohemianism in her exemplary, rather lonely life. But it was Charlotte's loss she must think of—and Char-

lotte's supper, which was long overdue.

'I wish she'd come in—but we mustn't hurry her.'

Alan said, 'She's coming now.'

Charlotte was walking towards the house, walking with a firm tread. Her face was still pale with shock, but her expression was composed, resolved, even excited. I must give her a sedative, thought Meg. Charlotte entered, saying, 'I've chosen the place for his grave.'

After the bungled explanations that one couldn't, that the lawn would never be the same again, that it wasn't their garden, that the lease expressly forbade burying animals had broken down under the child's cross-examination into an admission that there was no body to bury, that the vet had taken it away, that it could not be got back, that it had been disposed of, that in all probability it had been burned to ashes as her parents' bodies would in due course be burned; after Charlotte, declaring that she would never forgive them, never, that they were liars and murderers, that she hated them and hoped they would soon be burned to ashes themselves, had somehow been got to bed, they sat down, exhausted, not looking at each other.

'That damned cat!'

As though Alan's words had unloosed it, a wailing cry came from overhead.

'O Moodie, Moodie, Moodie!

'O Moodie, Moodie, Moodie!'

Implacable as the iteration of waves breaking on a beach, the wailing cries rang through the house. Twice Meg started to her feet, was told not to be weak-minded, and sat down again. Alan ought to be fed. Something ought to be done. The mere thought of food made her feel sick. Alan was filling his pipe. Staring in front of her, lost in a final imbecility of patience, she found she was looking at the two dahlia stalks whose petals she had torn away.

'O Moodie, Moodie, Moodie!'

The thought of something to be done emerged. 'We must put off that new kitten,' she said.

'Why?'

Completing her husband's exasperation, Meg buried her face in her hands and began to cry.

'O Moodie,' she lamented. 'Oh, my kind cat!'