

How the Cats Came to Strongsville

By M. QUAD

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It was not Hezekiah King's fault that he was born a half wit and with a twisted leg besides. His parents died when he was ten years old, and Hez became a sort of child outlaw. He wandered here and there till he finally settled in Strongsville.

Hez found the farming class much more sympathetic than the villagers, but he was imposed on by them to a certain degree. When he had got to be a youth of fourteen or fifteen he could hoe corn or potatoes or chop and split wood as well as almost any man. They would hire him by the week and give him such food and lodgings as they saw fit, and when he was through with his week he was given some old clothes or a few cents in money.

The years passed on until Hezekiah was twenty, and he was more of an outlaw than ever. A man named Brooks went to work in the sawmill at Strongsville. He was an old bachelor, and he rented a small house and lived alone. In passing the boy on the street one day he must have given the victim a look of sympathy, for when he got back to his house again he found Hezekiah seated on his doorstep. He invited him in and gave him a meal and a good bed. From that day the unfortunate had a home.

To make clear what followed the reader must know that Strongsville had a strong antipathy to cats. It was founded on sanitary principles. There had once been an epidemic of scarlet fever and again an epidemic of measles, and the doctors had agreed that the germs of both were carried from house to house by the feline population. Thus it came about that the cats were exterminated to the last one and the mice had a play day every day in the year. The old bachelor learned this fact as soon as he talked of renting a house in the village. He was told that if he brought a cat along with him she would certainly be poisoned off in short order.

One day after Hezekiah had had a home for six months he went to work for a certain farmer at wages set by Mr. Brooks, who had become a guardian to him. After working for three or four days Hezekiah unearthed a box of gold coin amounting to \$5,000. They were English coins and had been buried in the long ago—so long ago that the box had become mere punk. He carried the money home with him wrapped in his old coat, and it sent forth metallic clinks as it was thrown on the table. He was smiling almost for the first time in a year, and after an effort he managed to say:

"I dug it out of the ground."

"Did you tell the farmer?" asked Mr. Brooks when he had recovered from his astonishment.

"Not a word," was replied.

"Well," continued the old bachelor after the money had been counted, "this find has made you rich, but don't say anything about it to any one. The people of this town have used you shamefully, and I want to see you get even with them. You know what I mean, don't you?"

In reply Hezekiah's face lighted up, and he nodded his head. He had been aware for a long time that no one had played him fair, but he felt his helplessness to resent it.

In thinking how he might revenge the young man's wrongs the old bachelor brought up the cat question, and he soon had his plans laid. The next tin peddler that came along was stopped and held in private conversation

for half an hour, and then he winked and laughed and drove away. He stored his tinware temporarily and loaded up 200 felines in its place.

That wagon re-entered the village at 11 o'clock at night, when every man, woman and child was sleeping his first sleep. It paused in front of the town hall, and the door was opened, and the cats came bouncing out.

Two hundred cats might have been exterminated in time, but the tin peddler returned next evening with 200 more re-enforcements and again the third night. The town had now been turned into a cat town. It had more cats walking the fences or seated around the back doors than any town of four times its size in this state. By night it was a constant serenade that prevented sleep except at brief intervals. There were enough cats to carry the germs of a dozen epidemics. It is a cat town today. Men were hired by the week to shoot or trap them, but kittens were born about as fast as old cats were killed off, and at last the people gave up and settled down to bear the infliction with what pains they could.

After the cat invasion was a month old the bachelor said to the half wit:

"Hezekiah, you know what a cat is, don't you?"

Hezekiah nodded and grinned.

"After paying all expenses of dumping 600 cats into Strongsville I have \$4,500 of your gold left. I am going to put it in the bank for you and send you to New York city to see if the surgeons can make you over. I hope they will be able to help you. If they can't, you can come back home and live with me the rest of your life. Do you understand what I mean?"

The surgeons helped him some—enough so that when he caught sight of twelve or fifteen cats sunning themselves on some householder's veranda he could appreciate the situation and go home and say to Mr. Brooks:

"There were just three barrels of cats on Brown's veranda—just three barrels—and Brown was out there looking at them, and looking very sad."

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