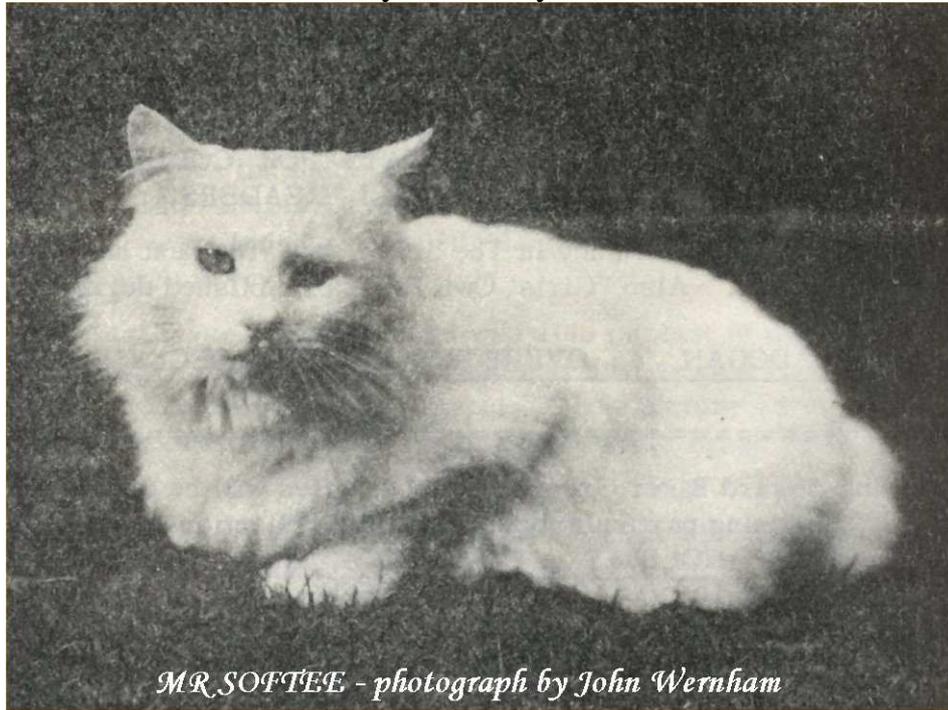


MR. SOFTEE

By "Eric Fayne"



If you are not owned by a cat, then this item is not for you. For one thing you won't understand it. You will think it utter bilge. You will regard it as a waste of space. But if you are fond of cats, read on.

Mr. Softee is our editorial mascot at Excelsior House. Our office boy, if you like. Our Philpott Bottles, though he declines to write "Mi Kollum. "

One question we have been asked dozens of times. "Is he deaf?" For Mr. Softee is all white, and white cats seem to have the reputation of being deaf. Not Mr. Softee, though. He's sharp as a needle - always on the "qui vive" at the slightest sound.

Mr. Softee came from the Animal Welfare Centre, several miles outside the little town of Wokingham. It was quite a journey to get there, by bus and taxi and Shanks's pony.

We actually went to pick a tabby kitten. When we lost our dearly-loved Mr. Chips, we decided never to have another pet. The pinch is too great, when the time comes for them to go to the cats' heaven. Never again, we said resolutely. The resolution lasted a day or two. Then we decided that life wasn't worth living without a clever puss - even though our hearts still ached for Mr. Tail and Mr. Chips. Mr. Tail had been run over. Mr. Chips died of cancer. Chippy had been delicate for several years, and was well known to the local vet. We wanted a tabby like Mr. Chips, if we could find one.

At Wokingham, they had plenty of tabbies, but none much like Mr. Chips. While we were giving them the once over, the lady in charge mentioned casually: "We have a lovely white cat, just under a year old. His first owner has gone abroad."

"Oh, yes." we said politely, and went on inspecting the tabbies.

The lady sighed.

She said sadly: "Nobody will have a cat which is fully grown. Everybody wants a kitten. "

I picked up a little tabby and fondled it. And then another. And another.

The lady had left us. In a few minutes she came back, this time carrying a white cat. He eyed us balefully.

And you know what happened. For one thing, we were reminded of Diana Dors. No, not the actress.

At Surbiton, for a year or more, Mr. Chips's great pal had been a white cat, a sweet, nervous, and gentle creature, who adored him, and whom he treated with the utmost disdain. Mr. Chips would take his afternoon nap on my bed, while Diana would sit and watch him patiently until he woke up. In the garden they would play together, and the two of them looked really beautiful on the lawn. In all my life, I never knew a cat so deeply adoring of another as Diana was of Mr. Chips.

For a long time we did not know to whom Diana belonged, though it obviously came from a good home. We called the white cat "Diana Dors", assuming it was a lady because it was so gentle and devoted. It was not until Diana had long become a regular visitor that we found out to whom she belonged, and learned that Diana was, in fact, a gentleman. But that gentleman was always "Diana" to us.

Diana was run over. One morning a caller told us that a white cat was lying in the gutter, up the road, We dashed there. It was Diana, lying in a pool of blood. Dozens of people must have passed by, indifferent. Later, one of our own young fellows, who had set off to work two hours before we found Diana, said he had seen her hit by a vehicle and crawling into the gutter after it happened. He had passed on. If only he had come back to us and told us. We would have gone to "her" at once, and we might have saved her life, for Diana had bled to death. Sadly we picked her up, and took the poor little body to her owner, who was heartbroken. And so were we, for we had grown to love our gentle, white visitor.

But I have wandered too far from Wokingham. Possibly with fond memories of "Diana Dors", possibly because we were sorry that "nobody wanted a fully grown cat", we said that we would have the white cat. We made a donation to the excellent

Welfare Centre, signed a form to register the fact that he was now going to own us, and they promised to send our new acquisition over to us the next day.

And the next day, a Saturday I think, the new acquisition - he turned out to be the new boss - arrived at Excelsior House. He became "Mr. Softee".

"Mr. Softee" was suspicious and restless, not unnaturally. In his early days he swore like a trooper. His language was so bad at times, when he was crossed in any way, that I wondered whether he had been watching television plays. If annoyed, he would hit out. Clearly, like the Bounder of Greyfriars, he needed understanding. Of course, we made the mistake of thinking that he would have the same tastes and habits as Mr. Chips, forgetting that every cat is an individual, and runs the household in his own way.

For the first night he was all right, apart from being restless and knocking things over to wake the house and draw attention to himself. On the second night, in my innocence, I decided to take him to my own room. He had a meal and then went to sleep on my bed.

About three in the morning, I was awakened by Mr. Softee patting me on the face. I said "Go to sleep, Softee. " There was a crash as he knocked my clock flying. Then something else went down. As I switched on my bedside light, my spectacles went sailing. And Softee cried appealingly.

I thought that he probably wanted to answer a call of nature, so, clad in pyjamas, I trailed downstairs with him, and carried him through the back door into the garden. I put him down on the lawn. Suddenly, to my consternation, he was away like a streak, over the 6-foot fence, and out of sight. For ten minutes, I went all round the house outside, calling gently, and searching. The chill night air penetrated my pajamas, and it occurred to me that if I carried on like that the editor of C. D. would end up with pneumonia. So I hoped for the best, and went to bed.

Next morning there was no sign of Softee. We searched all over the place. Even along the canal banks some distance away. No success. Houses aren't thick around, but we enquired at them all. Nobody had seen a white cat. We put a big notice on our front gate, and on a fence down the lane. "Lost - big white cat."

No good. It struck me as remarkable that nobody had seen him, for white cats are not all that common, and there is, in fact, no other within miles, so far as I know.

When we went to bed that night, we had seen nothing of Mr. Softee since he took his sudden departure from me in the middle of the previous night. We decided sorrowfully that Mr. Softee was lost, or, possibly, stolen. That he had gone for good. The next morning he was still missing. We have, at the side of the house, a covered piece of the garden, which we call, rather grandiloquently, "the patio". It looks rather pleasant in summer, with baskets of fuchsias and the like, hanging in it.

Adjoining the "patio" is a small outhouse -cum -cloakroom. In the middle of the morning his Mum came to me to say that she thought some cats were fighting in the patio toilet. We went together to investigate. The door wouldn't open. A ladder standing inside had fallen across the door, effectively barring it. Forcing and straining at it, I managed to open it a little way, and his Mum managed to push her head round the narrow opening.

"It is:" she said excitedly. "It's Softee:"

And it was. We got the door open, and he came out pretty quickly, though he was limping. He had fairly obviously gone in there some time during the second night - he had not been there all the time, of course, for we had searched everywhere in the garden more than once - and the ladder had then fallen across the doorway blocking his way out. More than likely he had thought it an entrance to the house.

What delighted us most, I think, was that, though he had been with us such a very short time, he knew where his new home was and where people loved him. Until then, I would not have thought it possible for an animal to have realised so quickly where he belonged.

He had an enormous meal, toddled off, selected an armchair, and fell asleep.

Within a day or so we had his cat door installed, and now he comes and goes just as he pleases.

Normally, he sleeps most of the day, sometimes indoors, sometimes in a chair in the garden in summer. In the evening, he sets off on his jaunts. We are not sorry that this is so. During the day there is a good deal of traffic roaring past in the lane in front of the house, but in the evening the traffic becomes a mere trickle and by ten o'clock there is none at all. So we are happy that Mr. Softee stays in his home all day and does not ramble till eventide. Even at night I don't think he goes very far, though at one time he would come in with a mouse from the fields, bringing it through his cat door and dumping it on the carpet in front of us, much to our consternation. Once or twice he has brought in a bird, though we tell him that nice cats don't go after birds. However, it is quite a long time now (touch wood) since he brought us an unwelcome visitor. Perhaps, like the Bounder, he has reformed.

Though he is probably the least amenable of all our "misters" he is a wonderful patient when he is ill. Yes, strong though he is, even he has at times cost us a packet for vets. On two or three occasions he has been bitten, though whether the bite came from another cat or from a squirrel or from a dog we have never known. But on each occasion the bite turned to an abscess, and then Softee is gentle as a lamb. The way he lets his Mum bathe and attend to the wound, which must be painful, has to be seen to be believed. Mr. Softee, like almost all cats, is scrupulously and fastidiously clean. Once the vet told us to keep him in for 24 hours, so we provided a litter tray. A waste of time. Softee wouldn't make use of anything of the sort and

made it clear that he had no intention of doing so. We told the vet who said: "You'll have to let him out, and hope for the best. " I daresay Softee knows what's good for him. He will come in grubby from rolling in the dirt somewhere outside, and then he'll wash and wash till his old pristine whiter than white is restored.

When he came to us his fur was straight and sleek. As months went by it thickened and fluffed out, and now he is a giant ball of white fluff.

He has his own dish of toys, kept on a small shelf under a little table near the TV set. He walks to the table, knocks down the dish of toys with one big sweep of his paw, and then selects the items he wants.

Mr. Softee is easier to feed than his predecessors were. Mr. Tail would touch nothing but English pigs' liver. It had to be English. It seems incredible that a cat should know the difference, but Mr. Tail did. Mr. Chips ate nothing but fresh fish. He wouldn't touch meat. Mr. Tail wouldn't touch fish. Neither would dream of even looking at any tinned foods. Both, however, loved the little yeast tablets known as "Kitzymes". In fact, when Chippy was hiding from us and we wanted him in for the night, we could usually lure him from his hiding place by rattling his Kitzyne tin.

Softee has three meals a day. (We have a friend who just gives her cat one meal a day. Goodness knows how she gets away with it.) Softee prefers fresh fish, which he has morning and evenings. But he has a meal of tinned meat (Whiskas) about lunch time, though he has made it clear that he doesn't expect meat more than once a day. He likes Purina cat biscuits, and we always have to spread a handful of these over his fish and meat before he will even start a meal. These Purina biscuits we have in two flavours - sea food and dairy. He has the sea food biscuits over his second and third meals of the day, and dairy biscuits over his first meal. I will explain why.

He likes his first meal at about 3 o'clock in the morning. This, as you will agree, is inconvenient. For a long time his Mum got accustomed to being roused about 3 a.m., by Softee wanting his "brekker". He taps you gently on the head and purrs loudly in your ear to wake you up. Nowadays his Mum places his breakfast in the bedroom doorway when she goes to bed. About 3 a. m. Softee eats it without rousing anyone. He has dairy Purina at this meal, scattered over his fish, because it is softer and he eats it quietly. The sea food Purina is crisp, and he crunches it loudly. Hence the dairy in the night, and the sea food crunchiness in the day time. In passing, Softee won't even look at the Kitzymes, which both Mr. Tail and Mr. Chips loved so much.

Today, 21 years after Mr. Softee came to Excelsior House, he is gentle and 2 affectionate and lovable, He seldom swears now, though he still likes his own way. He doesn't like visitors, and when they arrive he takes himself off upstairs to show his disapproval. Gentle though he has become, he is a sound disciplinarian, and runs the house with a paw of iron.

We asked him what he thought of Mr. Wernham's picture of him. "Purr, purr," said Mr. Softee. "He's made me look like a Manx cat. What's he done with my lovely tail? Purr-purr:"

We explained to him that cats are very, very difficult to photograph, and we thought the picture was lovely. He washed himself all over, said "purr-purr" again, covered his face with his paws, rolled over on his back, and went to sleep. Lying on his back with his paws over his face is a favourite position of his. We call it "Softee posing for September Morn".

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