

Harry and the Cat

©2008 Charles R. Anderson



Never try to get the better of a Siamese cat-you will pay for it in the end. Just as Harry paid . . . and kept on paying for the rest of his life.

[Harry's Story-1]

Some people do not like cats. Harry hated cats. Each visit to his Aunt Tillie's house was a nightmare. His hatred for her cat was exceeded only by his contempt for Tillie. Aunt Tillie was the sweetest, kindest, nicest person in the world. She was quite short, barely clearing five feet and somewhat on the overweight side. Her hair was white and sparse, so she often wore an old-style lace cap. Tillie's main desire in life was to do as much good as possible. Of course, as someone once pointed out, half the evil in the world is done with the best of intentions.

Harry was a small-time thief . . . the kind who is rarely arrested because his crimes are so petty. It costs the police more to go after this type of criminal than the value of the thefts. Unlike Aunt Tillie, Harry was quite tall, a hair over six feet, and usually weighed close to two hundred pounds-a factor that had caused him considerable grief in some of his criminal endeavors, particularly since his running style favored an overweight professional wrestler more than an Olympic sprint champion.

The only reason Harry ever visited Aunt Tillie was the roughly five million dollars she had in blue-chip stocks. Harry was her only living relative. Aunt Tillie's live-in companion, Gabrielle, a Siamese cat, was no relation, and, in Harry's opinion, was just a free-loader.

Everything could have gone along nicely for many years if Harry hadn't gotten impatient. He believed he would inherit the fortune someday but was getting tired of the petty scores on which he was living.

It should have been obvious to any clear-thinking outsider that something was wrong when Harry began volunteering to do small fix-up jobs around the house. Harry barely knew one end of a hammer from the other. But there he was, offering to fix the dripping faucet one day . . . replace a loose light connection another day . . . and tinkering with the heating system the following week. However, other than Tillie, there was no one except Gabrielle to notice.

Aunt Tillie, being the dotty sort of person she was and congenitally unable to think ill of anyone, was delighted with this evidence of domesticity on Harry's part. Gabrielle was more suspicious. By nature she was devious and some early life experiences had made her leery of men in general. And so, to Harry's continuing irritation, she stayed constantly underfoot, becoming the bane of his existence every time he came to the house.

Harry took quite a while to come up with what he thought was a foolproof plan for disposing of his aunt. Actually, his idea was quite ingenious and Harry was quite pleased with himself . . . particularly since the murder device also involved Gabrielle. In fact, if all went as planned, Gabrielle would be blamed for the "accident."

Harry's aunt lived in a decrepit house. One hundred years ago it was a Victorian masterpiece. She had been born there as had her father before her. Harry's father, on the other hand, had been born on the "wrong side of the tracks." Constantly changing family fortunes forced a move for Harry's family every few years. Unfortunately, the moves tended not to be for the better. By the time Harry was born the family was living in a run-down railroad flat in a decaying area of the city.

Harry grew up in a tough neighborhood and by the time he was seven was already an accomplished petty thief. Because he was somewhat small in those days he learned early on to rely on his brain rather than strength. On a number of occasions only his quick thinking saved him from being hauled off to Juvenile Hall. However even running did not do Harry any good when he was twelve and was trapped after hours in the local mom-and-pop grocery store trying to steal a case of candy bars. His first experience with the juvenile justice system, instead of providing a moral lesson, instead taught him the art of dissembling, of appearing completely the innocent and contrite child. For the first three contacts with the law, Harry was let off with stern warnings; however at the age of fifteen the legal system realized what they had in Harry and sent him off to the reformatory until he was eighteen.

When Harry remembered the institution it was with mixed pleasure and pain. Although the staff ranged from nasty bullies to those completely oblivious to the inmates, the inmates themselves, quite a few of them even more experienced criminals than Harry, provided him some invaluable lessons which stood him in good stead in later years. For one thing Harry learned the value of a good lawyer and also how to locate and evaluate reliable fences. The decade following Harry's release from the reformatory on his 18th birthday was fairly successful for him. He was arrested and charged only three times. Through successful plea-bargaining he ended up doing time for only one of those offenses. By acting the model prisoner and volunteering in the prison library Harry earned enough good time to be released on parole six months short of the full three-year prison term.

During Harry's years in the reformatory his father vanished. His older brother had the misfortune to attempt to shoot his way out of a filling station robbery and was killed by a passing off-duty policeman. Harry's mother expired, probably from tiredness and frustration, while Harry was serving time. Aunt Tillie had never married and had no other brothers or sisters, which left her Harry's only living relative. Harry felt he had been patient long enough and finally concluded his only hope of ever enjoying any of the riches to which he felt entitled was to encourage Tillie's departure. However, in this, to be hoped, last criminal endeavor, Harry was determined not to repeat any of his previous mistakes. He knew this time any error could be fatal to him.

After plotting and discarding dozens of plans, Harry finally came up with an idea that amazed him with its brilliance. Harry particularly liked the plan because it also involved (and disposed of) the second bane of his existence-Gabrielle the Siamese cat.

On his recent visits, Harry had been observing Gabrielle's habits. He noticed she liked to sun herself and nap in a window seat from around 10:00 AM until noon. At the end of her nap, Aunt Tillie always put out a small snack for the cat. Gabrielle was getting up in years, but Harry noticed this had no effect on the alacrity with which the cat jumped from the window and ran into the kitchen when she heard the pet snack container being opened.

The window cat seat was located directly over a wall outlet into which Aunt Tillie had plugged a floor lamp. His aunt also sometimes plugged in a heating pad for her back in the same outlet. He realized if there was some way to create a short circuit in the heating pad that would give his Aunt at

least a mild shock, this might be enough, given her heart condition, to send her off to "a better place."

If he could make it seem the cat contributed to the accident, like chewing on the wires, this would be ideal. Gabrielle's taste for catnip seemed the perfect solution. Harry decided to start placing a small amount of catnip each day on the wires near the plug. He had not completely decided to go through with the plot but didn't see what harm could come of this initial experiment—at least to himself. Gabrielle would just have to take her chances.

[Gabrielle's Story-1]

I never liked that man. He had sneaky eyes and it was plain to see he hated our species. Of course, that is why I made a point of jumping up on his lap whenever he came over to see my caregiver. However, perhaps before I tell you how I overcame his evil deeds and saved my dear Tillie, I should preface my remarks with a bit of personal history. I promise not to bore you, but I do think it will be helpful if you understand "where I'm coming from" to use the sloppy vernacular favored by my arch enemy.

I could go back a number of lives if you were really interested, but, interesting as they might be, I supposed they are not really relevant to this story, so I will just concentrate on the present incarnation. I was reborn into this body on April 13, 1992 at 2:37 a.m. As all Siamese do, I immediately recalled all of my past existences, most particularly the one where I was worshipped as a queen in Middle Egypt. Of course I was well-bred; my full name was Nefertari, which translates from the Egyptian as "the most beautiful," obviously chosen by an extremely perceptive human. Now then was a time to be alive for cats—but I digress.

Apparently I had already been reserved for an elderly lady, and, after the usual three-month period during which I grew enough to take care of myself, I was transferred to the home of one Matilda (called by her friends "Tillie") Tucker. I could see from the beginning it would be an ideal environment for this incarnation. Tillie, as I decided to call her, lived in what the current generation of humans referred to as a Victorian mansion. There were three floors, plus an attic and a basement. Because of her advanced age, she seldom ascended above the second floor, so the third floor was open for undisturbed exploration and as an emergency hideout.

Tillie seemed a good soul with an excellent understanding of cat needs. She never failed to respond to my commands for fresh food, and she left a faucet dripping in the first floor "guest" bathroom for me to get fresh water whenever I pleased. She also kept a good supply of cat treats on hand. I knew I would have to watch my weight this time, because living in such luxurious surroundings with total care would tend to put on the pounds. But, fortunately, we Siamese are seldom plagued with overweight the way lesser breeds are.

So, for some years my days passed in a very relaxed and comfortable fashion, undisturbed by the kinds of bad experiences which I had been through in some past lives. This was an idyllic lifestyle—until my nemesis appeared one day. Harry! I can hardly think of the name without spitting!

[Harry's Story-2]

Harry's first visit to a Pet store was an eye-opener. He could hardly believe people would spend the kind of money that obviously was spent on pets, given the incredible variety of pet foods, litter, toys, pet houses even! After wandering around for a few minutes, a young clerk approached him, asking if she could help.

"I'm looking for some catnip, some really special brand that cats love," Harry said.

The clerk led Harry over to a section, as he said, "We have lots of different varieties, both in cans and in toys. I should tell you, though, not all cats are affected by catnip."

This surprised Harry a bit. "I'll bet that repulsive cat of hers is one of the exceptions," he thought to himself. Still, with nothing to lose, he decided to give it a try. At least the cost was minimal. He bought both a small felt mouse stuffed with the stuff and also a small can.

The next time Harry visited his aunt, he took along the mouse. He told Tillie he'd been passing by a pet store and decided to buy a little present for Gabrielle. Tillie was very pleased when he showed her the catnip mouse.

"Gabrielle just adores catnip, but she gets so silly I don't let her have any very often. But I'm so glad you brought this because I've been out of it for quite some time. Now you go ahead, Harry, and give it to her. You need to get to know Gabrielle better."

Harry wasn't at all sure that if he approached the animal bearing a gift, she wouldn't assume his finger was part of the gift. He knew, though, the only way he could test his plan was to pretend to like Gabrielle and win her confidence. He knelt down cautiously next to where Gabrielle was lying in her cat bed.

"Look what I brought you, kitty," Harry said, dangling the catnip mouse by its tail in front of Gabrielle's nose.

The cat raised its head slightly, and then took one paw and swatted the mouse out of Harry's hand.

Tillie cried, "Oh, look how much she loves it!"

Harry, meanwhile, had jumped back with a small shriek and was examining his fingers for scratches. "Fetch it for her, and do that again, Harry," Tillie said.

Harry muttered an obscenity but walked over and picked up the mouse. This time he held it by the very last fraction of an inch of the tail and swung it in front of Gabrielle. This time the cat reached up with both paws and grabbed the mouse away from him. Harry watched, with a smile starting on his face, as the Siamese curled up in a ball, inhaling the odors from the mouse. Harry almost could swear he could see a goofy grin on Gabrielle's face.

He went on with some meaningless conversation with Aunt Tillie for another thirty minutes while they both watched Gabrielle roll around and over the mouse, obviously off on some sort of drugged cat trip.

When Harry got up to leave, Tillie said, "I'm so glad to see you finally making friends with Gabrielle. For a while there, I was afraid she wasn't going to accept you."

"I'm glad too, Aunt Tillie, Harry said, "She's such a sweet cat, and I really would like to be friends."

Harry left then, already thinking about the next steps in his plan.

[Gabrielle's story-2]

Of course, all of his remarks were transparently false to me. Although I didn't know yet what the point of his sudden concern for my wellbeing was, it was immediately obvious to someone with my intelligence something was going on-something that could only cause me trouble. I resolved to be extra vigilant in the coming days.

Sure enough, Harry was back the next day with more treats. I decided it would not be safe for me to eat anything he provided, but there couldn't be any harm in pretending. It was simple enough to make it appear I nibbled on his offerings but hold it in my mouth for a later spit just the way all cats deal with "pilling" attempts by their deluded caretakers. I trusted my highly developed sense of smell to detect any poisons that might have an immediate effect even in my mouth.

It seemed advisable as well to appear to be very friendly, so, conquering distaste that almost made me nauseous, I managed to produce some half-hearted purrs and finally, to complete the act, jumped onto Harry's lap and settled there. I could feel his tension in his muscles, which of course pleased me and produced even more satisfactory purrs. The whole act had an unexpected benefit, since Harry, no doubt realizing that before long his innate hatred of me might involuntarily be revealed, decided to take an early departure.

[Harry's Story-3]

Harry could have sworn the damned animal was trying to torment him. First it accepted his offering of a very expensive treat. Then, she jumped onto his lap, settled down there, and began to produce a rumbling noise, which grated on Harry's ears. She even burrowed her head in between his legs. After enduring this for a few minutes, Harry couldn't stand it anymore and, apologizing to his aunt, made up an excuse about a forgotten appointment. It wasn't until he got out to the car that he noticed the cat, instead of swallowing a perfectly good cat cookie, had somehow managed to bring it up and deposit the moistened bit on his pants!

This was the final straw for Harry, who immediately drove to the closest drugstore to buy-for cash of course-two heating pads similar to the one Tillie used.

Taking them home, Harry began fiddling with the plug on one until he got it apart. By picking at the white grounding wire with a needle, he created some frayed wire that would create a short-circuit when the switch was turned on. If there were some way then to ensure Tillie's body wasn't grounded, then perhaps the shock would set damage her weakened heart. Since Tillie had some foot problems and Harry had seen her occasionally soaking her feet, the solution seemed obvious. All he had to do was a) replace her pad with the altered one, and b) convince her to soak her feet at the same time she was using the pad. Harry relied on his powers of persuasion to accomplish this.

[Gabrielle's Story-3]

When I saw Harry arrive the next day, I could tell in my bones he had nothing good in mind. He was carrying a shopping bag, and I hoped it didn't include some tasteless treats for me. Instead, I heard him tell Tillie he had a present for her—a new heating pad with better safety controls.

"I read an article in the paper yesterday about possible dangers with heating pads," he said. "I know you've had yours for quite a while, so I thought I should get you a replacement with Underwriter Labs approval."

"Why Harry, that is so sweet of you," Tillie said as she smiled at him.

"How's your back today?" Harry asked.

"Actually, it's been bothering me a bit, and I was going to get my pad anyway."

Now Harry started on the tricky part of his plan. "I also read in a different article that sometimes it really helps if you're also soaking your feet in warm water. Something about nerve connections from the back to the feet, I think."

"I guess that makes sense," Tillie answered. "And my feet have been troubling me more than usual anyway. Would you please get me a pan from the kitchen with hot water, and we can give the theory a try."

Harry grinned, feeling how smart he was, and went off to complete his plan.

I just knew this over-concern of Harry's boded no good for my caretaker.

While Harry was off in the kitchen heating water, I resolved to take a closer look at the new heating pad. Sure enough, it was apparent to me from small scratches on the plug that Harry had done something to tamper with the mechanism. Being an avid reader, albeit over Tillie's shoulder, of her favorite form of literature, mystery stories, it was but the work of a second for me to see the connection between electrical heating pad, pan of water, and a tragic end for Tillie. I knew I had to move quickly.

I took a firm hold on the edge of the pad with my teeth and scampered out of the room.

"Gabrielle," Tillie shouted. "You naughty cat!" "Come back at once with my new heating pad!"

I paid no attention to her and ran as fast as I could up the stairs to the third floor. I dropped the pad in the hallway about six feet from the top of the stairs.

Harry heard Tillie cry out. He rushed into the living room saying, "What has the damned animal done now?"

"Harry!" Tillie exclaimed. "Don't use that language in my house, especially about dear Gabrielle. She's just being playful."

"I'm sorry, Aunt Tillie. It just surprised me."

"All right, but will you please go get the pad back from her. And apologize to Gabrielle while you're at it."

"Just let me turn off the water in the kitchen and I'll get. Did you see where she went?"

"I believe she went upstairs," Tillie answered.

[Harry's Story-4]

Harry resolved to make his first action after finishing with Tillie the final disposition of her cat. Meanwhile, he needed to get the pan of hot water under his aunt's feet, retrieve the doctored heating pad, put it behind her, and plug it in. Then he would have plenty of time to deal with his nemesis, Gabrielle.

The step with the water was simple, and he put it under Tillie's feet.

She smiled, and said, "You are a dear boy, Harry. I do wish you would become better friends with Gabrielle, though. You know, she is quite the little lady."

It took all the self-control Harry had at this point, but he managed a grin, and said, "I'm sure she is, Aunt Tillie, and I will make certain she gets all she deserves."

Finding the pad took Harry a little while. He searched the second floor, and then moved on to the third. There was no sign of the cat, but he saw the pad laying a short way down the hallway. He retrieved it and turned to go back downstairs for the final act in his little drama.

[Gabrielle's Story-4]

I hid behind the chest standing against the wall, just to the left of the stairs. When Harry picked up the heating pad and walked back to the top of the stairs, I got ready. At the very last second, just before he put his foot on the first step, I dashed out from my hiding place and in between his feet. Harry didn't see me but he certainly felt me!

He tripped and began tumbling over and over down the steep stairs. At the bottom, he lay quietly. I knew his foot, which caught me in my lower ribs, would cause a bruise, but nothing seemed to be broken and a little pain was well worth saving Tillie's life.

I went down the stairs to where he lay and put my ear next to his mouth. He didn't seem to be breathing. With a feeling of self-satisfaction, I left him alone, although I did worry about the effect on Tillie when she found him. After a bit of thought, I decided it would be better to give her some warning to prepare her.

So, with all the histrionics of which I was capable, I rushed into the living room, mewing loudly. I could have screamed, but I felt the possible fright might be more dangerous than the sight of Harry lying at the bottom of her stairs.

After getting her attention, I turned and rushed out of the room. This was enough. She followed me into the hallway, saw Harry, and, after briefly looking at him, immediately called an ambulance.

I sincerely hoped the medical people who came would pronounce him, "Dead on Arrival."

Epilogue

Tillie lived for many years in excellent health. Harry didn't die after all, but he was permanently paralyzed from neck down-a quadriplegic. Tillie promised Harry she would take care of him for the rest of his life.

Gabrielle promised herself she also would care for Harry in her own way, but she didn't expect him to have that long of a life, given all of the things that she had planned for Harry.