

THE CAT-KING OF ABOL

By Charles Boardman Hawes

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Early one August morning a stranger with a green canoe came up the Abol to Logan's Landing. He worked in close to the shore, and hailed McGraw, who was plugging a hole in the canvas of his own brown craft. Holding himself steady by a spooning, scooping motion of his paddle, the stranger leaned forward across the lily pads and searched McGraw's face with eyes that flickered unsteadily.

"Howdy, pard!" said he. "Will ye be tellin' me where I can find a fellow they call Barty,—Barty this or Barty that,—or maybe 'tis just plain Barty he'll be known as?"

McGraw scratched his head. "That's a queer way you have of askin' for an honest man!" he grumbled, and looked suspiciously at the stranger. "Are you sure he's livin' hereabouts?"

The man nodded. "So I've heard—and maybe he's not so honest."

McGraw scratched his head again, and scowled, for there was something he did not like in the manner of the stranger. "What sort would he be?" he asked, gruffly. The stranger grinned and tapped his forehead. "Cats!" he whispered, hoarsely.

McGraw looked up quickly. "Do you say it?" he exclaimed. "Now it may be Barty Nicneven you mean."

The stranger smiled. "The name sounds good to me. Where might this Barty Nicneven be found?"

McGraw pointed over the scattered cabins of Logan's Landing toward the lonely bulk of Russell Mountain.

When the stranger had gone on up the river, McGraw, as he daubed white lead on a newly made patch, curiously pondered many things. The stranger's hair had been close cropped; his shirt and his trousers had been little worn; he had a trick of shifting his eyes furtively and of talking in a curious monotone from one side of his mouth only. McGraw whittled a cedar plug to a point, and turned over in his mind the eagerness with which the stranger had snatched at the name of Barty Nicneven.

Barty Nicneven was an old, gray man who lived alone in the shadow of Russell Mountain, which rises high above the Abol valley. The villagers beyond the lake called him the cat-king of Abol; woodsmen who had passed his cabin at dusk, when the old man was not at home, told strange stories of seeing cats, evasive as shadows, sinuous, swift, and wild, run through the woods, and slink in and out of the tumble-down

shanty. They said Barty Nicneven had numbered and named all his cats; that he talked to them as if they were human beings, and that, with strange hissing tones, he could bring the light of understanding to their green eyes.

Cats are said to lack loyalty, and their hearts are said to be selfish; yet, according to all reports, Barty Nicneven's pets displayed the fidelity of dogs, and thereby provided an argument for those who discussed the question on winter nights at Logan's landing.

The very night before that August morning, McGraw had come down the old hauling road by Barty Nicneven's camp, and had heard a curious wailing sound. At first he thought it was the cry of a bird or a wild animal. When the sound was repeated, McGraw peered over a "blow-down" into the clearing, and there he saw old Barty Nicneven sitting in front of his door—and from the woods came cats, cats, cats. They came leaping and frolicking; they came crawling and sombre; they raced through the rustling grasses and the bending briars; they stepped along old logs with the caution of hunters. They surrounded the old man, climbed on his shoulder, snuggled in his lap. Never had McGraw seen so many cats at one time. Then Barty Nicneven's lips moved, and McGraw heard again that wailing sound, and saw more cats come bounding from every direction toward their master. The old fellow smiled on his pets and ran his hand over their soft fur; he talked to them in a low, sad voice, and fed them chunks of raw meat. When McGraw stepped into sight from the underbrush the scene changed instantly.

Barty Nicneven started to his feet with fear in his face, and the cats swarmed round him. At first they had been ominously silent; then, slinking here and there into the slashings, they began to spit and snarl at McGraw; their eyes widened and their tails fluffed large above their arched backs. Behind them stood the old man, with his gray hair rough and tousled and his long beard lying on his broad chest. McGraw hurried by the group as quickly as he could, for he could not help feeling afraid of the hermit and his beasts.

When he had gone a little way, he heard Barty Nicneven call after him, cheerily though, "Good luck to you!" He hastened on, however, and looked back only once; then in the dusk of the gathering night he saw the statuesque figure of the old man, standing straight and tall, in an attitude of mingled loneliness and fear.

In spite of his queer ways and his cats, Barty Nicneven was known to be a kind-hearted man. On a winter day he had taken Donnelly of the Pitsfen Farm into his shack, bound his sprained ankle, and kept him for three long storm-bound weeks of convalescence, while the world below thought him dead. Afterward, Donnelly said many times that the old man had nursed him and cared for him with a woman's tenderness; but even he admitted that Barty was not like other men, and that he had a

great fear of strangers. One evening, he said, Barty had spoken of a man whom he expected to come up from the river towns—a man whose arrival he dreaded; and as the hermit told of the unknown enemy, he had shrunk timidly back into the corner of the cabin, where it was so dark that the eyes of his cats shone green and ghastly beside him.

And now a stranger had come up the Abol, searching for a man named Barty.

McGraw thought of all those things as he looked after the man paddling round the bend of the river. He wondered what business the stranger could have with Barty, and, strangely enough, thought of an old story about a drunken trapper who had dropped into Barty Nicneven's camp with the avowed idea of making trouble for the hermit. Barty had talked to his cats in the whistling cat language and the creatures had charged the invader from every side, scratching him until he bled, ripping his clothes from his back, overpowering him by their very numbers, until he fled away into the woods. Probably no one believed the tale; but to men who listened to the rustling in the shadows, and heard the calling of a whippoorwill in the thicket, and watched the fireflies circling and flashing over the low meadows, it seemed real and terrifying.

When, after leaving McGraw, the stranger came to the mouth of Russell Stream, he lifted the green canoe from the water and slouched up to the camp and storehouse, where a Finnish watchman was sitting in the sun. The stranger sat down and fell into conversation with the Finn; he ate dinner and supper at the camp, and spent the evening toasting his feet before the cookstove. During the evening he managed to learn a great deal about the lay of the land round Russell Mountain.

"Near twenty years since I was in these parts," he said. "There was a time when I could travel this country with my eyes shut, but a man forgets a deal in that length of time."

"That's so," said the Finn.

"Yes. But there's things a man don't forget in all that time—no, not in all them years. There's things you don't ever forget, yes, there is." The stranger shook his fist at the stovepipe.

"You know, friend,"—the stranger went on; his voice had sunk to a whisper,— "there's a man in this world that I remember all them years, yes. He done me dirt once, so he did."

There was a suggestion of an untold story behind the stranger's easy manners that roused the Finn's curiosity; but when he showed his interest the stranger became cold and silent. They had breakfast together the next morning, and then the stranger went off through the dewy grass up the tote road.

The Finn, watching him from the cool shade of the cabin, wondered about many things as he wiped the breakfast dishes.

The stranger followed the old path, slipped off to the right on the third cut-off, and after seven miles of uphill going struck into the Russell Mountain tote road. Gradually his stilted stride swung into the natural gait of a man bred to the woods; but plainly he was not used to it, for he panted and puffed, and stopped to rest in an old lumber yard. Presently from inside his shirt he drew a revolver, examined it and carefully loaded it. Then he put it into his coat pocket, where it would be easy to reach. As his coat swung back it revealed a long sheath knife in his belt.

The tote road tops the ridge that leads up Russell Mountain, and runs along a banked terrace that drops a steep four hundred feet to a brawling stream in the valley. The stranger looked down through the cuttings, dotted with solitary hemlocks and birches, and saw the silvery gray roof of Barty Nicneven's camp. It stood beside the brook that boiled white among the rocks. Something moved below him, and at first he stared in nervous fear; then he saw that the moving object was a cat. Another creature darted across the road into the underbrush. Startled by a rustling close at hand, the stranger turned and caught a glimpse of yet another cat disappearing in the brick-red needles of dried pine stops and slashings.

"I vum!" he muttered, and rubbed his brow with his coat sleeve. "I vum!" He was strangely ill at ease.

He touched the revolver in his coat pocket and began cautiously to slip through the brush along the maze of bewildering roads that converged at the camp. He moved slowly, and stepped on bare earth and mossy rocks, in order to make no noise.

"Well, Barty, boy," he chuckled to himself, "you done me dirt, but my time is coming!"

On the valley road, in the shadow of the great ridge, where the peaked mountains slanted together and met each other by the rushing stream, he paused, awed in spite of himself by the towering height of the spruce-topped hills. His footsteps could not be heard on account of the roar of the brook; crouching low, he slipped from bush to bush. As he entered the ancient yard, he saw a man inside the old cabin.

From every side, along the brook, before and behind, cats stared at the intruder. An uneasy fear had crept into his mind; but as he became familiar with his surroundings, his awe wore away. His hand grasped the revolver in his coat pocket. He stepped into the doorway.

As the shadow fell across the room, Barty Nicneven turned. He was an old man, and he stared at the stranger as if he could not trust his sight. His face grew paler and paler; in his eyes was the despair of the haunted. He stepped back across the room.

"Go 'way!" he gasped, and thrust his hands out before his face. "Go 'way from here!"

"We-e-e-ell, Barty," drawled the stranger.

“Glad to see me, ain’t you, Barty, like I knew you’d be?” Barty leaned against the rough wall. A cruel grin twisted the stranger’s lips.

“We-e-ell, Barty,” the stranger chuckled, “it’s a long time ago we parted. Yes, a good score of years have gone by since then.” The stranger’s voice suddenly barked hoarse like the snarl of a cornered dog. “You was on the up side *then*. You swore away my freedom for twenty long years—you told all you knew, you sniveling sneak. There was you, and there was the lawyers, and there was the jury and all the people. Says the lawyer, ‘Who set fire to Long Jim’s cabin?’ Says Barty, ‘Joe Labouche,’ and not another soul in all the world knew of it. You done me dirt! But you’ll remember I said I’d come to find you out—*and here I am!*”

Barty spoke: “’Twas gospel truth,—you done it,—you set fire to Long Jim’s cabin, and him inside asleep at the time. Maybe you don’t remember that? It’s not healthy to lie to the judge with all the people round listenin’ to the story you tell. Go ’way and leave me be, Joe Labouche!”

“So-o-o-o-o! You could have turned the tables easy enough if you had wanted to; but you swore me into prison, into the black hole of a prison at Thomaston, and there have I been for twenty years. We-e-ell, Barty, that was a long time ago, and now—”

Barty’s fingers closed on a stick of cordwood.

“No-o-o ye don’t, Barty.” Joe Labouche slowly leveled his revolver, and the old man drew back into the farthest corner of the cabin.

“Ye-o-oh!” Joe Labouche laughed uproariously. “I’ll shoot your toes off, and then I’ll shoot your fingers off, and then I’ll shoot your feet so ye can’t run, and then I’ll lock the cabin door. You’ll remember Long Jim perhaps—and how the flames danced all red and angry, and how the smoke crawled round him and over him till Barty came and pulled him out, him that done me dirt. A-h-h-h, there’ll be no one to pull Barty out. Some day a man’ll come here and find a black hole in the ground and the cats all gone.”

When Joe Labouche said “cats,” Barty ran his fingers through his beard and stared strangely at the fierce figure in the door. A crafty light glinted in his blue eyes. Apparently overcome by fear he sank back into the corner with a wild wailing cry, so that the stranger first jumped and then laughed.

Something brushed by Labouche’s feet. Again, it happened, and again—swift, silent bodies that moved like darting shadows slipped into the room. A great tomcat leaped lightly to the window sill and paused, with twitching tail. A yowl that made Joe Labouche’s flesh creep rose in the yard. From the bunk a lithe, fierce creature spat at the intruder. Joe Labouche started. Leaping forms that grazed his legs as they flashed through the door, were filling the cabin. The rank smell of many cats stung Joe Labouche’s nostrils, and he fingered his revolver nervously. Again Barty Nicneven

uttered that wailing cry, and still cats came pouring in from the surrounding woods. They streamed down the hill; they swarmed to the cabin roof; they spat, and snarled, and yowled, and scratched. Their backs were bent like bows; their tails were swelled to huge brushes. Barty Nicneven was still crouching in the corner, a poor old man, but to Joe Labouche he seemed a magician of terrible power.

Joe Labouche brandished his revolver wildly. He glared at Barty in a frenzy of fear and shook his fist at the multitude of moving furry forms. "Take 'em off," he yelled, "take 'em away!"

The light of hope was in Barty Nicneven's eyes. With a quick motion he flung a stick of cordwood at Joe Labouche and at the same time gave a hiss between his teeth—a weird sound that seemed to fill with ferocity everyone of the swarming cats. Then the old man jumped forward, ducked, dodged, and swung round Joe Labouche's leveled revolver.

Barty's move threw the room into a tumult. Joe Labouche fired and missed. Turning frantically in the narrow space, he unconsciously drove the cats up into the closed end of the cabin. They had come in answer to the call that always had foretold food. They were wild and ferocious, yet, in spite of their spitting and snarls, they might not have made an attack had not Joe Labouche, wheeling clumsily, stepped on the paw of a lean Maltese. A scream of feline agony shrilled loud and the animal leaped straight at the Frenchman's face. Instantly the tomcat in the window sprang for Labouche's throat; a tawny creature ran up his back. All at once he was buried under an avalanche of cats; He yelled frantically, fired his revolver, and hurled it from him in a vain attempt to brush off the biting, scratching beasts. He flung himself on the floor and rolled over and over, howling piteously. He was buried from sight by the cats.

Barty snatched up the revolver and leaped into the midst of the fray. Flinging aside the cats, he caught Joe Labouche by the collar and dragged him toward a little cupboard behind the bunk. All the time the cats tore at the prostrate man, who was utterly benumbed by fright and pain. Pulling the cats away, Barty thrust Labouche into the little closet and slammed the door. Then he sat down on a low bench and began to fondle his wild pets.

Presently a low, pleading voice came from the cupboard. "Barty, *Barty!* What be you goin' to do?"

The old man said nothing.

"Barty," called the voice again, "tell me what be you goin' to do?" In the long hush that followed the only sound was the low humming noise made by purring cats.

Barty made no reply.

There was no latch on the cupboard door; but Barty, in ominous silence, closed the windows of the cabin, murmured unintelligible things to his cats, shut them into the room behind him, and went off down the road, and up across the ridge.

After a long, monotonous time, Labouche thrust his head out of the cupboard door. His hand emerged, and then a foot; but suddenly he drew back in abject terror, for the shifting, watchful throng that filled the cabin greeted him with spitting snarls. A weary silence settled on the cabin and all its occupants. An hour passed, and once more Joe Labouche's scratched and bloody face protruded from the cupboard door. Again he drew back, after one terrified survey of the room. The cats yawned and stretched, and sharpened their claws on wall and furniture. The long rays of the afternoon sun came in through the closed windows; dust motes danced in the slanting beams. Loneliness and solitude shrouded the yard under the ridge.

At dusk Barty came back to the cabin with McGregor and the Finn, and Scott, the constable. The cats rubbed lazily against their master's legs, and spat in quick wrath at the sight of strangers; but Barty opened the window and they sped off into the woods. Then Barty looked into the cupboard. Joe Labouche was still there, asleep on the old blankets.

When they woke him he wept, and he implored them to take him away from Russell Mountain. When Constable Scott asked about a green canoe that had been stolen at the carry three days before, Joe Labouche confessed to the theft, and to a full dozen others that he had accomplished in his few days of freedom, and besought them to carry him back to prison, or to jail, or anywhere else away from Barty Nicneven and his cats.

When they took the prisoner over the ridge, McGregor and the Finn tried to persuade Barty Nicneven to come down to the village and "be near human folks"; but Barty smiled sadly, and shook his head.

"I'm goin' to bide here with the cats," he declared. "They're company enough, and nothin' 'll do me harm with them here."

So the four climbed the hill together, and as they looked back they saw beside the cabin in the falling twilight the old gray-bearded hermit alone with his fierce, wild brood. But with the passing of Joe Labouche, Barty Nicneven's fear of men left him; often straggling lumberjacks stopped to pass the time of day with the old man of the ridge, and belated hunters spent the night at his fireside, rolled in the good old man's heavy blankets. And Joe Labouche was never seen again on Abol River.