

Kitty Cat

Orphaned soon after birth, Oscar was raised by a bevy of aunts who could not get him off their hands quickly enough. He was not wholly unattractive — looking into his deep black plaintive eyes, Aunt May could sometimes forgive him everything — but his club foot which cost the family a small fortune in medical expenses and the fact that he wet his bed well into his tenth year did not endear him to his protectors and gave cause for much merriment amongst his cousins who were born on the rosier side of health.

Cousin Ellen, Aunt Bertha's freckled red-headed daughter, was not so much the cruellest as the least imaginative. Seizing opportunity when Oscar was setting the dinner-table, she stretched out a leg and looked the other way. Oscar, whom experience should already have taught to expect mischief of any sort, teetered on the leg with the irons, toppled awkwardly and fell, the scraping, squealing and thud of his own falling drowned by the heart-clamping clatter of shattering plates which scattered like fugitive white mice to every corner of the kitchen.

Ellen was the first to leap up.

"You clumsy, clumsy, clumsy ox!" she said, giving further industry to her feet as she thrust the point of her leathered toes into his ribs. And then Aunt Bertha, too, was upon him, her face an overripe angelina plum as she belted the huddled cowering boy with a sodden tea-towel whose stiff corners stung his neck and cheeks.

Cousins Ian and Bruce, Aunt Rose's darlings, played other games. Playing cops and robbers, Oscar was always the robber; playing cowboys and Indians, he was always the Indian, roles in which, favouring his gammy leg, he would invariably find himself easy captive and tied to an oak with leather straps while the brothers ran off, laughing, to play cricket or football or to catch yabbies in the creek, leaving him to the heat or rain until Aunt Rose preparing the dinner reminded them of their absent cousin.

But cousins Mary and Edith, Aunt May's randy twins, had the most fun. Luring Oscar to the shed behind the house, they grabbed hold of him and pulled down his pants, Mary

prodding and probing with avid fingers, Edith squealing, herself reaching eagerly to feel, jeering through broad white teeth and juicy lips how such a little shrivelled sausage can at night so wet the bed. Oscar would push and pummel at their lithe elusive mobile bodies and draw up his knees as best he could. But the girls, wily and determined, their little adolescent breasts beginning to rise, would reach from behind and claw and pull so that his stomach throbbed until, satisfied and trembling, the twins would depart with tittering giggles and demurely go inside the house to attend, however abstractedly, to their homework or their piano practice, leaving Oscar doubled over to nurse his pain, whimpering with the very shame of nakedness, infinitely more acute than when Aunt Bertha in front of Ellen rubbed his nose in anger in the coarse uriniferous sheets of his bed.

His uncles had little to do with him, except when occasion presented — and between his malicious cousins and complaining aunts, occasion was found readily and often enough — to ply a heavy hand upon him, Uncle David with his leather belt, Uncle Albert with a rod and Uncle Leo with a bare massive stinging palm which they applied — for this, Oscar felt at times a sense of recompense — with equal alacrity upon their own brood as well. From them, he kept his distance, if only to avoid an admonitory clout on the head should he come too near, but knew that once they came for him, not the biggest house or the deepest yard or the highest fence could ever put paid to their determination and save him from another rancorous fervid full-blooded thrashing.

If he had no reason to be happy in his cousins' company, neither did he find contentment out of it. Left alone, the days for him were long. Unable to climb trees, scale the rugged sharp-stoned slopes of quarries, chase yabbies, do more than bowl from a standing position or play a dead bat in cricket — football was, of course, altogether out — he sat often on the stony or grassy rim of desertion, watching dully, less envious or self-pitying than abandoned unless it occurred to his cousins and their friends to make more hilarious sport. Then they remembered him, first to his delight, then to his pain. But more often, he was his own company, propped against a wall or lying on moist grass, creating ships and rockets and monsters out of the clouds, his thoughts revolving in the circus of day-dreams in which he escaped his cousins, his uncles and his aunts, to Jamaica or Mount Popocatepetl —

what wonderful exotic names! —, in which, heroically, his leg still in irons, he ran the fastest mile or walked across the Niagara on a tightrope. How they would be sorry, all of them, when they saw his picture in the newspapers or saw him on television, a hero being paraded in the streets between ten-deep rows of cheering crowds; and they would come to him bearing gifts and kneel before him and beg to be pardoned — Aunts Bertha, Rose and May, Uncles Dave, Albert and Leo, and Cousins Ellen, Ian, Bruce and the twins Edith and Mary — and he would . . . he would . . . — what *would* he do? — accept their flowing tears with all the sweetness of forgiveness?, or stand like a king, angry, lowering and firm, a rigid finger stretched forth banishing the repentant supplicants from his presence forever? But, awakened from reverie by a passing stranger, by his cousins' nearby laughter or by a cawing magpie flying low, he felt the firmness of the wall in his back or the cold moistness of the grass, and those dreams — mists before the eyes — evaporated, leaving a hollow echoing emptiness as the hard insurmountable reality of stone and tree and grass and of the irons on his leg flooded over the entire colour-filled terrain of his too short-lived fancies.

Nor did the hours at school offer relief from tedium. Seldom invited to answer a question in arithmetic or to write a sentence on the blackboard or to tell the class of some interesting happening — his speech no less than his gait was tedious and wearing of patience —, he sat at his desk in the farthest corner of the class and carved lions into its wooden top or gazed through the window with animal interest at the janitor heaping cartons, paper and garbage into the incinerator in the yard. The bell rang, he entered the class; the bell rang, he left; and sometime in between, his name was called and recorded in the day-book as having been present. As for the rest, arithmetic, reading, spelling, drawing — these passed him by in the slow empty train of oblivion.

Little wonder then that Oscar's final report card registered a chain of Fails, the only Pass being recorded against the heading "Conduct". Indeed, for sheer silence and unobtrusiveness in class, no other could have excelled. Aunts Bertha, Rose and May, learning that their nephew had to be kept down in the same grade, were distressed. They came together to confer, but new resolutions were meagre. Swallowing their scones dripping with jam and cream and

flushing them down with tea, they decided in unison that the boy "just did not have it up there" (here Aunt Bertha indicated her temple), that private lessons over summer would prove too costly (another operation on the ankle six months earlier had already cost enough, and, besides, there was their vacation in Torquay, Cowes and Queenscliff to think of), and that he was too young by far to send out to work. Ah!, they would continue to care for him as before — after all, who else could take him? — taking turns to feed him, to meet the bills, to protect him, yes, to protect him, he was really so defenceless.

And so, nothing really changed, if change was to be seen in of Oscar's circumstances.

But a change there was, if barely remarkable.

The twins, Cousins Edith and Mary, were New Year babies and for their birthday, their father Uncle Leo brought home a kitten, a plump orange furry animal with slitted green eyes, short white whiskers and a snow-white delicate patch on the very crown of its head between the ears. This, besides the splendid bicycle Uncle Leo and Aunt May had bought the previous week for Christmas. (Oscar, not forgotten, had received from the three families a set of chequers, a copy of "Treasure Island" and a pair of summer pyjamas. Looking upon these meagre gifts, he had secretly wept within, even as he kissed each of his relations upon the cheeks in thanks).

The kitten which was named Ginger — "all orange pussies are called Ginger," Aunt May had insisted — became quickly pampered. The twins Edith and Mary rolled it on its back, tickled its purring belly, let it cling to their tunics by its claws, and fed it milk, meat and fish and whatever leftovers remained of their meal, all of which the little animal accepted with obvious gluttonous delight. Where it had been plump, it very soon became fat, and if its indolence and sluggishness were pardoned, it was because its tender age, its trusting expression and its soft delicate fur still rendered it cute and loveable and worthy of the sisters' endless moist-lipped kisses. And one day Oscar kissed it, too, but only when he was out of sight of his cousins. For Edith and Mary, stroking the yielding neck of the purring, mewling animal lying languid in their arms, had cautioned him soon enough that Ginger was *their* pet and that kittens, when they grew into cats, hissed and scratched and bit at little boys who peed in their beds and wore irons on their leg. God alone help him if he

held it, fed it, touched it, for it would, as sure God made little apples, scratch out his eyes. And laughing, satisfied with themselves, they pranced away to other games, the kitten trailing after them for a distance.

Left alone one day, Oscar sat against the oak that grew behind the house and watched the little orange animal. For a time, it leapt about and chased after flies, swiping at them with a swift clawed paw, its tongue thin and crimson between its teeth, its short white whiskers dancing to the twitching of its mouth. And then, as if weary of its sport, it rooted about the foundations of the house, peered into the basin under the garden tap and sniffed at a muddied pair of sandals left outside by Edith before settling down immobile beside them, drawing under itself its paws and closing its eyes as it basked in the warmth of the afternoon sun. Oscar watched it. It sat barely ten yards away, oblivious to its surroundings, its full rib-less sides expanding and collapsing with every breath. Oscar chafed at its torpid disregard of him. He wanted to touch it, stroke it, fondle it, take it to his own chest as Cousins Edith and Mary had done. Finding a twig beside him, he tossed it at the kitten. The animal opened its small green slitted lustreless eyes, reached a languid paw towards the offending object, looked at it indolently and returned to its repose. Oscar had expected a more giving response. He tossed another twig, a bigger one, and then a stone which bounced and rolled and struck the kitten in its flank. Thus roused, it leapt up and vaulted a short distance towards the house from where it peered at Oscar and mewed squeakily at him.

Acknowledged, Oscar rose to his knees, his movements hampered and rendered awkward by his leg-iron. Remorse at have bruised the defenceless creature touched him. He held out a hand rubbed his fingers together and coaxed in a conciliatory tone, "Here, Kitty, Kitty, Kitty. Here, Kitty, Kitty, Kitty."

The kitten, at first wary, then reconciled, bounded towards him. It sniffed at the extended fingers, stroked its small round head against his thigh and placed a paw upon his arm. He brushed his free hand through its downy orange fur and felt the purling rumble of its soft plump purring body. Then, picking it up with both hands, Oscar held it close to him, held it tight and felt the coursing of a happy delicate thrilling vibration within his own body as he lowered his face towards

the yielding creature and kissed it, at first timidly, then more resolutely on the snow-white patch between its ears. His face tingled, his hands quivered with uncommon excitement, his teeth were set on edge with the very delirium of something new, a tantalising wordless emotion of closeness to a living being that clung to him with the same intensity as he to it. He wanted to play with it, and the kitten, nuzzling at his neck, seemed willing enough. But there were few ways in which to play with an animal. He grasped it tight, then held it at a distance, set it on its short hind legs, then raised it aloft by the belly so that its trunk arched above his head and its legs dangled helplessly. The kitten purred, mewed, squealed. Oscar squeezed its belly more tightly, saw its green eyes widen, and then rolled back on the grass, falling heavily as his splinted leg wrenched beneath him, the kitten rudely jolted with the sudden jagged jerking motion. He felt the animal stiffen, then felt it writhe with gathering frenzy as it snapped with its teeth and struck at the void with its sharp-clawed paws.

"Kitty, Kitty. Kitty, Kitty," Oscar placated it with sound, the while crooking his elbows, drawing it close, then raising it once more. "I'm only playing, Kitty Cat, I won't hurt you, Kitty Cat, I promise, you're my friend, Kitty Cat."

The kitten continued to wriggle, scratched at the void, hissed.

"You wouldn't scratch Oscar's eyes out, would you, Kitty Cat? Edith's lying, isn't she, and Mary too? Kitty Cat is Oscar's pet, too, and Oscar loves Kitty Cat. Does Kitty Cat love Oscar?"

Its fur bristled, its tail stood erect, its ears were rigid. Oscar, in a quiver, swung it from side to side, rocked it, jerked it, tossed it, caught it, watching with trembling agonising fascination, agitation and delight as the little animal struggled frenetically.

"Edith and Mary are naughty. Uncle Leo is a bad man. Auntie May is a witch. I hate them all. They are cruel and they hate Oscar. Kitty, Kitty, Kitty Cat, you won't hate Oscar too?"

The kitten, struggling, lashed out with a desperate claw. Oscar felt the searing pain of tearing in his wrist, but his hurt, as he let go of the animal, was of a different sort. Burying the heel of his splinted leg into the ground, he jerked himself upright, grasped his injured arm on which a thin rivulet of

blood ran down to the elbow and, suddenly remembering Aunt Bertha, hissed, "You little monster! Ungrateful creature! I hate you, I hate you, I do!"

The liberated animal had scuttled away and was hiding beneath the long verandah at the back of the house from which, quivering, shivering, panting, it stared at Oscar. Oscar, rooting about him, found a stone and hurled it at the petrified animal, but the direction was wide of the mark and the stone tore through the outer wire door to strike against the wooden one beyond.

Too late, he heard, then saw, Cousins Edith and Mary coming up the path to the back of the house. Edith was wheeling her bicycle around the corner; Mary, her freckled face a shiny crimson, was skipping, laughing, talking aloud. Running ahead of Edith, she appeared first and, rooting about her, called out, "Here, Ginger Puss, where are you?"

Oscar clambered to his feet. He tried to hide behind the oak, but the iron on his leg betrayed him. He winced with the burning rawness of the pain in his wrist. Caught, riveted to one spot, mortified into immobility, Oscar stared aghast at Mary and Edith. His breath stuck in his throat. He trembled. Cousin Mary, her face suddenly eager as well as flushed, caught sight of him, saw too the thick scarlet smudge on his forearm, heard at the same time the mewling of the kitten under the verandah.

"Whatcha' been doin'?" she shrieked at Oscar. "What's a matter with Ginger? Ya' chase her under the house?"

In vain, he tried to evade her, but Mary was upon him. Edith had dropped the bicycle to the ground and was coaxing the kitten from its retreat.

"Ginger's frightened," she said, kneeling beside the verandah so that her panties showed over her buttocks, "she's frightened to death!"

Showing square white teeth between sneering mobile lips, Mary lunged into Oscar. Her nostrils flared in the semblance of anger, but her eyes, her large circular gleaming grey eyes, in so far as Oscar could tell from eyes, betrayed a deeper wilder reckless pleasure.

"Ya' scared 'er, didn't ya', admit it, didn't ya?!" she jeered, striking his shoulder with a fist.

He retreated a step, felt the oak in his back. "It scratched me," he whimpered.

"Ya' was warned, wasn't ya?!"

"I was only playing. . ."

"Ya' 'ad no right to' play with 'er," Mary shrilled, knuckling his ribs, "She don't like little boys that pee in bed. Ya' was warned. Ya' learned yer' lesson and serves ya' right. — Ya' got 'er, Edie?"

"Yeah," Edith said, approaching, cradling the orange animal in her arms as she stroked its head. "She's frightened as 'ell, poor thing."

"Ya' hear, ya' bugger?" Mary leered, grasping Oscar by his bloodied arm. "Ya' scared Ginger out of 'er wits."

Oscar yelped in pain as her grip burned his wrist. Tears welled in his eyes; he sniffed back the watery rheum that trickled down inside his nostrils. His white lips twitched and he flailed his free arm to fend off Cousin Mary who was gripping him in a vice.

"Whatcha' say we do with 'im, Edie? Pull down 'is pants again?"

Oscar, his pained moist black eyes darting frantically between the twins, intuitively pressed his legs together.

"Cut off 'is little sausage with a knife, I say," said Edith, holding the now-placated animal to her neck and laughing lasciviously, salaciously into Oscar's ear.

"No!" Oscar cried out desperately as he flailed about with his arm and kicked with his healthy leg. "Let me go, you're hurting me, let me go!"

He heard their laughter, their shrill ugly raucous obscene laughter, and saw their faces, in their lewdness odious mirror images of each other. Edith had set down the animal and he felt their pressing closeness, felt their hands reaching between his legs, felt too their breaths in his face. He sank his back further against the oak, kicked out wildly and desperately, and heard Mary yelp and leap back, hopping howlingly on one foot and grasping the shin of the other between her hands. Edith, wrought to vengeful anger at the offence done to her sister, pounced upon Oscar, pinned him against the tree and brought up a broad blunt vicious knee into his crotch.

Oscar crumbled. Pain, intense, savage and throbbing, penetrating into the very pit of his stomach, made him writhe in a cold sweat upon the rough mound of roots at the foot of the oak. He felt the prodding of pointed shoes in his ribs, was aware of movement about him, saw the ground, the tree, the sky and the clouds spin in a violent murky turmoil of motion

and, heaving once, twice, three times, spilled himself out of all the bitter, rancid, turbid contents of his stomach.

"Ya' cripple," he heard above the ringing in his ears, "ya' bloody, bloody, bloody cripple!", followed, as the sisters receded, by a softer mellower solicitous drone, "Poor Ginger, darlin' Ginger, 'e'll never hurt ya' no more."

The pain subsided, but not the hurt. And the hurt burgeoning even more wildly, its fires fanned by the bellows of impotent fury, he retreated into the chaos of hot burning fantasy. He would show them, show them all, particularly Edith and Mary whom he would, one day, make walk the plank of his ship in the deep shark-infested waters of the Indian Ocean. They would tremble, petition him, their thick-lipped freckled faces pale with pleading, their eyes, those grey glinting lecherous eyes that but a short time before had gloated over him, mad, insane, starkly deranged with horror. And he would stand on deck, his back firm against them, his ears deaf, forever deaf to their whimpering, whining, whingeing plaints. How sorry they would be, both of them, and Aunt May, too, and Uncle Leo who would weep and wring their hands and kneel before him, begging for pity he would never give. How sweet the vengeance, how blessedly sweet in other places and circumstances to see their eyes ripped out of their sockets by vultures in the desert, to see their flesh torn off them by the sharp-toothed ravished pirahna of the Amazon, to see their bodies crushed by slithering striking pythons and swallowed whole. — Oh, revenge, joy, delight!

Throughout the remainder of the afternoon, the fever of his imagination mounted. It doubled with the very sight of Edith and Mary eating their dinner calmly and oblivious to him, yet sharing between them a sordid secret; it leapt with every word of Aunt May who, swallowing a mouthful of potato and roast beef, remarked accusingly, "There's a hole in the wire door that wasn't there this morning"; it soared as Uncle Leo, his shoulders massive and his neck bull-like and engorged, narrowed his beer-sodden blood-shot eyes in search of the culprit, causing him to quiver within with an agitation chaotic and turbulent. He hated them, hated them all, the twins, Aunt May, Uncle Leo, Ginger. He would show them; how he would show them all!

Towards evening, his mind dizzy with schemes, Oscar prepared for bed. As he switched off the light in his room,

Aunt May, as always, called out from the television room, "Have you been to the lav?", after which there followed the customary titter from the twins Edith and Mary rummaging about in their own room. His duty done and the overhead light out, he lay still in his bed and listened. He had not drawn the blind and the light from the quarter-moon that he could see between the torpid clouds shone dully into his room. His injured wrist which he had kept hidden from Aunt May and Uncle Leo throbbed. He remembered again with loathing the writhing, scratching, hissing animal and the loathesome ignominy that had followed at the hands of the twins. And his hatred for them all flared with the searing seething scalding heat of memory.

Lying alert and open-eyed in the dark, he listened and at length heard one of the twins switch off the light in their room. Only the muffled irregular voices issuing from the television set in the front room of the house disturbed the silence — the distant muffled voices and the closer immediate sound of his own excited breathing. Resolved, he rose, pulled his pullover and pants over his pyjamas, put on his shoes, fastened the iron about his leg and slowly opened his window. A sheath of cool rose-scented air wrapped him about, made him tremble and heightened his delirium. Slowly, awkwardly, he climbed out through the window, dangled several inches above the ground and let himself drop. A cluster of stones grated beneath him and he stood still, listening acutely, holding his breath. Hearing nothing but the rustle of the breeze in the neighbour's bush of chrysanthemums, he took a few steps along the narrow overgrown path between the house and the fence, found a wooden box at the further end of it and carried it back to the window where he placed it on the ground in preparation for his return.

Then, stealthily, his chest throbbing with swelling exaltation, he crept towards the back of the house. The yard was cool, silent, haunted. He watched the black moving shadows, decided they were those of trees and bushes billowing erratically in the breeze and, seeing that they held no menace, stepped softly towards the tap and basin against the back wall of the house. A yellow bucket stood there. He placed it under the tap, tilted it at an angle and filled it with water. He watched the splintered reflection of the moon flickering in its rising surface, then looked up at the quarter-moon itself and at the pale stars and black turgid clouds

above. He was struck by the immensity of space, felt afraid, yet was tremulously elated. His limbs pulsed, his fingers were numbed with the cold of the air and with his excitement. He blew at them, then seeing the bucket to be full, heaved it out of the basin with a jerking movement that caused the surface to rock and rise and splash over on to his feet. And then he set it down.

Moving towards the verandah, he was about to whisper "Kitty Cat" but changed his mind. Instead, he edged slowly along the wall, step by step, setting his splinted leg down gently, with deliberate caution upon the narrow concrete path that ran there. And then he came upon the shallow cardboard box with its matted sack as mattress upon which the orange kitten lay, its head curled inward upon its folded paws, its plump sides moving evenly with every breath. Oscar pounced upon it. "You won't scratch Oscar no more," he snarled at it, ecstatically, with sibilant harshness. "Oscar won't let you no more, no more." Too late, the animal became aware of its assailant. It rose on its hind legs, kicked, scratched, mewed and hissed, but Oscar held it firmly grasping a fat fold of flesh behind its neck. He hoisted it above him, looked into its grotesque face.

"Aunt May hates Oscar, Uncle Leo hates Oscar, and Edith and Mary — they hate Oscar too. And Kitty Cat . . . Kitty Cat. . . ? Kitty Cat loves Oscar maybe, even a tiny bit, a teeny weeny bit?"

The animal wriggled and writhed under his hand, its legs lunging, pushing, twitching in all directions. Oscar shook it, sharply, roughly, viciously, jubilantly. He carried the frantic creature towards the bucket. His cheeks burned, his eyes smarted.

"But Kitty Cat is Oscar's friend. Why did Kitty Cat scratch him today? Does Kitty Cat love Edith and Mary and says that Oscar is not its friend?"

The pads of its hind paws touching the water, the kitten screeched shrilly and lurched suddenly with a desperate frenzied upward thrust that, sending reverberations through Oscar's body, almost caused him to lose his grasp. But, recovering, Oscar seized tighter rein upon his quarry and with an ardent, swift, determined movement thrust the squealing writhing animal into the bucket where the moon fell splintered across the water's surface. The animal's screeching ceased abruptly. The water became turbulent. Waves rose

and splashed and fell with the chaotic thrashing beneath. The bucket, pelted within by convulsing feet, tottered briefly but remained erect. Oscar trembled. His body glowed, cold sweat tingled down of his back, a violent insane pulsation pounded in the pit of his stomach. He felt dizzy, his throat was constricted, a delirious refrain coursed repeatedly and madly through his brain.

“Popocapetl . . . Edith and Mary . . . Kitty Cat . . . Kitty Cat . . . Popocapetl . . . Edith and Mary . . .”

The animal became heavier under his hand. He felt it twitch. Then its movements weakened, faltered, ceased. The water lost its turbulence. The moon returned to its surface. The air was still, the shadows silent, the stars mutely limp. Oscar reeled under an onslaught of nausea, intoxication and fever and knelt light-headed and dizzily in the wet puddles around the bucket until the sensation passed. The refrain pounded in his ears: “Popocapetl . . . Popocapetl . . . Mary and Edith . . . pirahna . . . Kitty Cat . . . pirahna . . .”

The animal, when he lifted it out of the bucket, was grotesque, heavy and bloated. Its fur was matted, and dense, and dripping with water. Its legs were limp; its tail hung between its paws; one eye was open and no light shone in it.

“Kitty Cat won’t scratch Oscar no more, Kitty Cat won’t,” Oscar said into its dead unhearing ear. “And Edith and Mary won’t kiss Kitty Cat again and say ‘Poor Ginger’ and laugh at Oscar no more and hurt him and call Oscar ‘cripple’ no more. . . .”

Carrying the animal by the neck, Oscar crept back the way he had come. He turned the corner of the house, stepped cautiously along the narrow overgrown path between the wall and the side fence against which the neighbour’s chrysanthemums were gently beating and, passed his own window towards the room two windows beyond where the twins were sleeping.

Softly, even as his pulse convulsed, he laid out the turgid bloated creature upon the window-sill and watched for an entranced moment the spreading glistening tentacled rivulets being squeezed out from its coat and coursing down the face of the brick wall beneath it. But only for a moment. A rippling tantalising breeze swept down the narrow path. The chrysanthemums behind him stirred more vigorously. For the first time, he became aware of the crickets whistling hoarsely and tunelessly near his feet. He remembered Popocapetl and

Jamaica, the vultures, piranhas and pythons in the deserts and the Amazon, the gigantic crashing waterfall over Niagara and the glorious procession along the streets between row upon row of cheering, jubilant crowds. And with a rising tumultuous exhilaration too prodigious to contain, he raised a cold wet fist and rapped vigorously once, twice, three times upon the window and, dragging his splinted leg behind him, hurried away.

He was just stepping upon the box beneath his own window when the first riveting scream came. Whether it was from Edith or Mary, he couldn't tell, but he did see the sudden flood of yellow light explode across the path and the irruption of two shadows bobbing and rolling and jostling within the opalescent rectangle of light.

"Ginger! . . . It's Ginger!"

Hoisting himself up hurriedly, quiveringly, on to his window ledge, Oscar felt the box sway and totter beneath his feet. It clattered to the ground and struck the fence. He struggled to haul himself into his room but his splinted leg hampered him. He hung suspended, reaching, kicking, pulling. He heard the rasp and rattle of his cousins' window being prised open, saw to his mortification Aunt May's head emerge in the light, heard the angry hissing of his name and then a chaotic tumult of shrieking, bellowing and screaming and above the voices of Uncle Leo and Aunt May the aggrieved howling of his cousins over the animal which one of them had lifted inside.

Oscar clung to the window-ledge, kicking with his legs against the void. The refrain reverberated compulsively through his brain: Popocapetl . . . Kitty Cat . . . Pirahna . . . Kitty . . ., echoes of horror and frenzy devoid now of meaning or magic. The sharp edge of the ledge pressed against his chest, his arms ached under the tension of his struggling weight. Before him, the door of his room was thrust open and the full glare of switched-on light smote his eyes as Aunt May, livid, stiff, and grotesque with menace strode into the room. Behind her, the twins in their nightgowns jostled one another screaming: "'e did it! 'e did it!" into the night. And then too late he heard the heavier sturdier paralysing tread of Uncle Leo crushing the gravel along the side-path, saw above him the rise and descent of something massive and rigid and felt with an agony that brought his stomach to his throat and a grey mist before his

eyes a sledge-hammer thwack of a baseball-bat cracking into his back. He felt it again and once more, each blow accompanied by a roar as Uncle Leo, huge and towering, bellowed from what seemed to have become a distance: "You bugger. . .! your beast. . .! you godless piece of trash!"

Oscar struck the rough gravelled ground with a thud as his legs gave way under him and struck his head against a corner of the wooden box. Above him, he heard the remote bellowing of Uncle Leo and the shrill assaults of Aunt May and the twins and felt the riveting prostrating ache in the small of his back. He howled with the pain and tried to turn, to rise, to shield himself from his uncle towering threateningly over him, but his legs would not move. He lay crumpled on side, whimpering, sobbing, whining. Uncle Leo, standing over him, hands on hips, glared at him.

"Get up, you animal!" he commanded, "Right now if you know what's good for you!"

Oscar felt the prodding of his uncle's shoe in his ribs.

"Right away, I said!"

Aunt May shouted, "Do you hear?!" and the twins howled " 'e drowned poor Ginger what done nothin' wrong. The cripple — 'e killed, 'e drowned our Ginger!"

"Right away!" Uncle Leo repeated, his tone harsher, more menacing.

"I can't," Oscar whined.

"Stand up!"

"I can't!"

Terrified, Oscar saw Uncle Leo arch towards him, reach out for his arm and drag him up roughly. His legs would not support his trunk and he hung heavily and limply from Uncle Leo's hand, his whole body drawing back to the ground beneath him. And suddenly he felt himself fall again as the hold upon him slackened and a pall of terror consumed Uncle Leo's face.

"Oh, my God," he heard the massive form over him cry out. "Oh, no, oh, my God!"

"What is it?" Aunt May shrieked, a quaking quiver in her voice.

"His back, his legs, he can't stand. . ."

"Oh, no. . ."

"He's . . . he's. . .!"

"Oh, no. . ."

And above the alarmed horrified affirmations and denials of them both, Oscar, crumpled, whimpering, immobile, heard the raucous piercing howling of the twins as their voices rent the darkness of the night. "The cripple . . . 'e drowned poor Ginger, killed poor Ginger that never done 'im nothin' wrong!"