

1: Claws

THE VOICE came from behind me. I turned. I had just boarded the ship. Hundreds of people had come flooding on board, jostling and pushing and trying to find their cabins. In the confusion I had lost touch with my Mum and Dad. I wasn't sure what to do. I did not know our cabin number.

I saw a boy a bit older and fatter than me. He had dark hair and dark eyes. He was looking at me as if I was pudding and he wanted to eat me.

'Vant I show you propellers?' he asked.

'They are not propellers,' I said, playing for time.

'Vot are they?'

'They are screws,' I said. 'Planes have propellers. Ships have screws. That's what my Dad says. My Dad knows all about ships. He's in the Navy.'

'Screws,' said Claws. 'Vant I show you screws?' He raised his eyebrows.

There was something about this strange boy that set off alarm bells. Maybe it was the way he talked. 'What's your name?' I said, cautiously.

He brought his feet together and bowed his head briefly as if he were a pigeon in Trafalgar Square asking for a treat. 'I am Claws,' he said.

I swallowed. 'Claws?' I said. I felt weak inside. I thought: This can't be happening. Claws was the name of my cat. Before leaving our home to take ship to Australia, we had given Claws to our neighbour who loved cats. Mum had said that if we didn't give Claws away, then poor Claws would have to be shut up in a cage in the ship's hold for the whole voyage, and since the voyage was to be a long one, we didn't want that. It would hardly have been fair to the animal. But there had been no way to tell Claws why we were leaving him behind. Cats don't understand what you say to them. Was it possible that my cat had died and then taken on human form and found a way to join me on board? 'You can't be Claws,' I said faintly, but I was quite sure that he was.

'I am Claws,' the boy said again. 'And you?'
'Anthony.'

Claws smiled faintly and held out his hand.

I stared at him. What was I supposed to do? My cat had turned into a boy and wanted to shake hands.

‘Shake hand,’ said Claws.

Summoning up my courage, I took his hand.

Claws squeezed my fingers.

He squeezed so hard it hurt. He watched me like a cat watching a mouse. He squeezed harder. Yow! That really hurt. Was he ever going to let go? He must really be my cat, I thought. He is paying me back for the day I trod on his tail.

‘I’m sorry about your tail,’ I said, my eyes filling with tears. I had not trodden on his tail on purpose. I had got out of bed in a hurry and hadn’t seen Claws lying there curled up on the floor. I wished he would stop squeezing my fingers. It hurt like anything.

Claws saw the tears in my eyes. His smile broadened. He looked pleased with himself.

He let go of my hand.

I rubbed my sore hand and frowned at him. I said nothing. Cat or boy, Claws was dangerous and I was on a strange ship, and Mum and Dad were nowhere to be seen.

‘Kom, Anthony. I show you screws.’

I didn’t want Claws to show me anything. He had hurt me on purpose and I didn’t trust him. That look in his eyes was still there.

I wanted to get away. I wanted to find my parents. But I did not know where to run.

‘Lean over rail,’ Claws said. ‘Look down. Vot you see?’

I leaned over the rail to have a look. ‘Bits of weed and stuff.’ Our passenger liner was docked at Tilbury, on the lower reaches of the Thames. Looking down her steep steel side, painted the cheerful corn colour of the Orient Line fleet, I could see all the filth of the harbour bottom being churned up by the motion of the screws. It was like watching clothes tumbling in a washing machine.

‘Vant closer look?’ said Claws.

I felt Claws grab my sweater and drag me forward over the ship’s rail. My feet left the deck. My heart hammered. I was going to end up down there in the angry water. I was going to be sliced into ribbons by the ship’s screws, like the weed. It was awful.

‘Stop that!’ I said. ‘Let me go!’ I was furious. Didn’t Claws know a ship’s rail was not a safe place to monkey about?

‘See screws?’ he said, forcing my head down and my body further over the rail.

‘Yes,’ I said, lying. You can’t really see a ship’s screws from her deck. But I was willing

to say anything at all, if only what I said might make him stop. 'Yes, I see the screws. Now let me go.' And I thought: He will shove me right over the rail. I shall fall. The water will swallow me. I will never see Australia.

Then to my relief I heard a grown-up voice, the voice of the sailor I would come to know as Hobson. He was a big strong man, Hobson, friendly, but not very bright.

'Now then, lads,' said Hobson. 'You can't play 'ere. This is a working deck. On account of we're leaving harbour. So you two be good and run along.'

I felt Claws release his hold on my sweater. Quickly I wormed my way backward until my feet were once more safely on the deck where they belonged. I took a deep breath and thanked my lucky stars. I was alive. Claws's first attempt on my life had failed, but I knew he would try again. He was a bully. I wasn't quite sure what bullying was, or why people became bullies, but I was certain Claws was a bully. It was all there in his eyes. He was my cat and I was his mouse. I looked up thankfully at the towering figure of the sailor who had come to my rescue. Hobson was wearing a jersey on which, printed in the same corn colour that

decorated the sides of the ship herself, were letters spelling out her name: R.M.S. ORCADES. I knew what the letters R.M.S. stood for because Dad had told me. The letters stood for Royal Mail Ship. They meant the ship was carrying letters and parcels as well as passengers. When I saw what a kind face Hobson had, I jumped at the chance to tell him what a jam I was in.

‘He’s not a boy,’ I said, pointing an accusing finger at Claws like Sherlock Holmes unmasking a villain. I was desperate to make Hobson understand that I was in danger of my life. ‘He’s a cat. He tried to push me over the rail.’

As I spoke, Claws turned his head away as if he were not interested in me any more. I knew what he was up to. He was doing what a cat does when it corners a mouse. The cat pretends it is not watching the mouse any more. But really the cat is looking at the mouse out of the corner of its eye. It wants the mouse to try to make a run for it. Secretly, the cat is trembling with excitement and can’t wait to chase after the mouse and catch it again, and again, and again. So it was with Claws.

