

CHAPTER XVIII

The Wild Cat : A Highland Gentleman

By FRANCES PITT

We turn from a bird that haunts the tops of the highest mountains to a mammal that also lives on and among the hills ; but, whereas the ptarmigan does so from love of the mountains, the Wild Cat has been driven into the hills by dire necessity, by persecution that has rendered it an outlaw of the wilds, where it maintains itself despite the odds against it.

IN days gone by the wild cat was often dubbed the British tiger. This title was well bestowed, for it is one of the most savage and untamable of animals. It cannot be domesticated.

Here is no Domestic Renegade

At this dogmatic statement I must pause to point out that between *the* wild cat, and a gone-wild cat, there is a great deal of difference. A household cat that has wandered off into the woods has little in common with the fierce Highlander which is the subject of this chapter.

The placid lady, with charming manners, who condescends to sit by our fireside and to catch our mice, is no native of Europe, still less of Britain. Her origin is a matter of some mystery. The ancient Egyptians honoured her, as we know ; she has points of affinity with the Caffre cat of northern Africa, and it is possible it represents her ancestral stock. At any rate, the domestic cat was brought, by the travellers of the Middle Ages, into a Britain that had hitherto known no cat but the untamable savage which roamed its woods.

The wild cat is slightly larger than even the best-fed and biggest of household pets, and is a stouter-built animal. It is longer on the leg, and its tail, instead of tapering

to a point, ends abruptly. It is invariably of a rusty yellow-grey hue, its body being vertically striped with dark lines, while its tail is handsomely ringed with black.

The blotched type of tabby markings, so common among domestic cats, is unknown in the ranks of the wild cat, which varies remarkably little in colour and pattern. It is practically the same wherever met with, whether in the Highlands of Scotland, or the forests of central Europe. Scientists consider that the Scottish race constitutes a sub-species, but the distinctions are such as are apparent only to specialists.

Yet, despite the constancy of its characteristics, and its marked difference in behaviour and general ways, it is difficult to find any considerable structural gaps between the wild cat and the lady of the hearthrug. Some writers have alleged that the intestines of the wild cat are twice the length of those of the domestic cat ; others that the wild cat has fewer caudal vertebræ ; but neither assertion has any foundation in fact. I have most carefully compared the tail-bones of these cats, and they are precisely the same. Even in the critical characters of skull and teeth, it is impossible to say more than that wild cat skulls tend to be on a stronger and larger scale.



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THE WILD CAT—A YOUNG FEMALE.

The wild cat is ever an untamable savage, and that whether it be young or old. This picture is of a half-grown female kitten, but truly called a wild cat.

Differences in Temperament

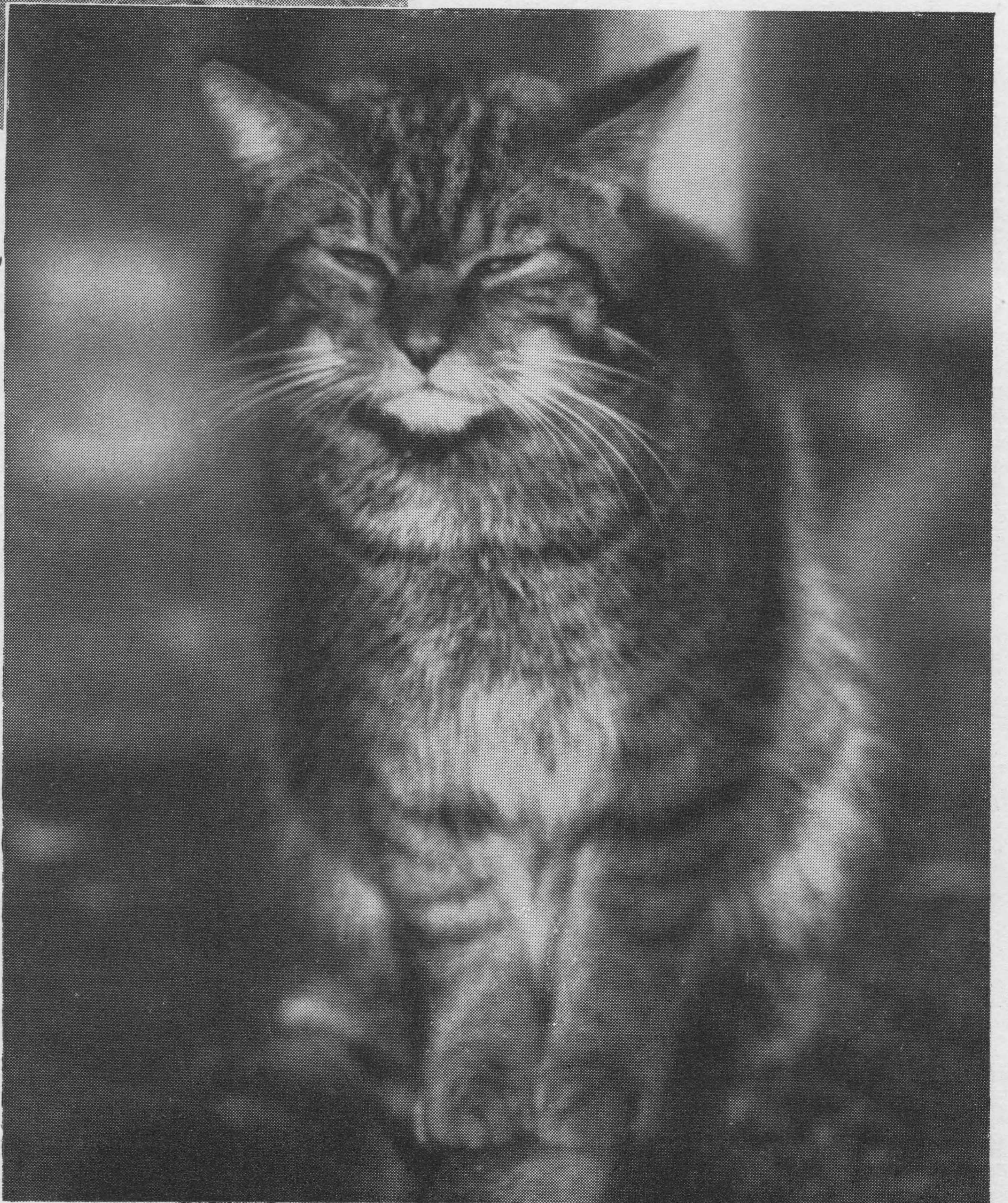
It is in the less tangible, but none the less vital, characteristics of temper, temperament, and behaviour, that we come to the true differences between the two species. Whereas the one is the most amiable and friendly of animals, the other is of all wild creatures that most irreconcilable to the human race.

It has long been stated that the European wild cat is untamable. There was a time when I did not believe this, saying that there was no beast which, if obtained young enough, would not become friendly with those who cared for it. My optimism was

daunted when I made acquaintance with Beelzebina, Princess of Devils.

She came to me from the Highlands of Scotland, a half-grown kitten that spat and scratched in fiercest resentment. Her pale green eyes glared savage hatred at human-beings, and all attempts to establish friendly relations with her failed. She grew less afraid, but as her timidity departed, her savagery increased.

I excused my failure with Beelzebina on the grounds



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THE WILD CAT—AN OLD MALE.

This is a fine old male wild cat, and a typical specimen of his untamable race. Note his broad head, surly expression and his strong limbs. The wild cat is a more strongly built animal than the domestic cat.

that she was rather too old when I got her. I must surely have succeeded with a very small kitten.

My confidence was somewhat daunted by the many records of failure, by the stories of persons who, with all due care and consideration, had tried in vain to win the good-will of this dauntless animal, a creature so proud and irreclaimable that it pined in captivity and found release in early death.

Then Satan arrived. He was but a wee scrap of yellow-grey-tabby fur, as small a kitten as I could desire ; but his name was bestowed on sight and never changed. It remained appropriate until the day, six years and nine months later, that an epi-

demic of "cat influenza" claimed him. Yet, though there was no reason to change his designation, I believe Satan became more nearly tame than any previous wild cat.

A Taste for Expectoration

With a view to reconciling him to his lot, I obtained a tiny domestic kitten, a long-haired female, whose coat was of the blotched tabby pattern, and put this baby with the wild kitten. Although he spat fiercely at all of us, the stranger accepted the tame kitten as a friend at once, and was ever afterwards deeply attached to her.

It was only so long as he was weak and small that I could handle Satan. He grew fast, and with increasing strength fought



BEELZEBINA.

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Beelzebina, Princess of Devils, whose temperament may be judged by her expression, was a young wild cat, obtained as a tiny kitten, who ever refused to make friends with any person. Like all her proud, independent race, she was quite untamable, and no efforts could win her goodwill.

like a fury, going into paroxysms of spitting and scratching when I tried to pick him up. He was soon untouchable, but with his increase of stature he gained in knowledge and confidence.

He learnt to know the members of the family and the staff, would come to the side of his cage to get food, take it from the hand and spit savagely at the same time. He became tamer than, I believe, any wild cat had been before, but not in the least less ferocious ; yet to Beauty, the kitten brought up with him, he was all gentleness and devotion.

It is said that the wild cat, unlike the domestic cat, is monogamous, and mates for life. Satan's behaviour supports this supposition. Not only was he most affectionate to Beauty, but when I introduced other female cats into his quarters he instantly attacked them. One day I brought a nice, meek little lady, and put her on the top of the old gentleman's sleeping-quarters. In an instant Satan, glaring anger, sprang at her and knocked her off, sending her tumbling head-over-heels.

Beauty was sometimes let out of the wild cat's place, to take exercise and pay a visit to the house, but this distressed him sorely. He rent the air with harsh cries, for his voice, though loud, was not lovely. It was similar to, but worse than, that of a domestic tom-cat.

Apropos of differences between the wild and domestic cats, Satan never drank milk ; but the story that the wild cat will not look at a mouse was not true of either Beelzebina or him. I have never seen any cat deal with one so promptly ; but he killed it at once, and did not play with it after the manner of a tame cat.

He Knew a Mousetrap

So efficient was he in this respect, that when we were in doubt how to dispose of trapped mice, they were always taken to Satan. He knew a mousetrap, and, when he saw me coming with one, rushed to the side of the cage to meet me.

The yarn sometimes related about the

wild cat's fear of a mouse is rubbish, and is, I suspect, misleading, because meadow-voles, bank-voles, and long-tailed mice must figure on its menu.

The wild cat is an exceedingly predatory beast, ready to attack and kill any creature in fur or feathers upon which it is able to pounce. Mountain hares, rabbits, grouse, and so on, are undoubtedly the principal items in its diet at the present day, being all that is available in the mountain country it now haunts.

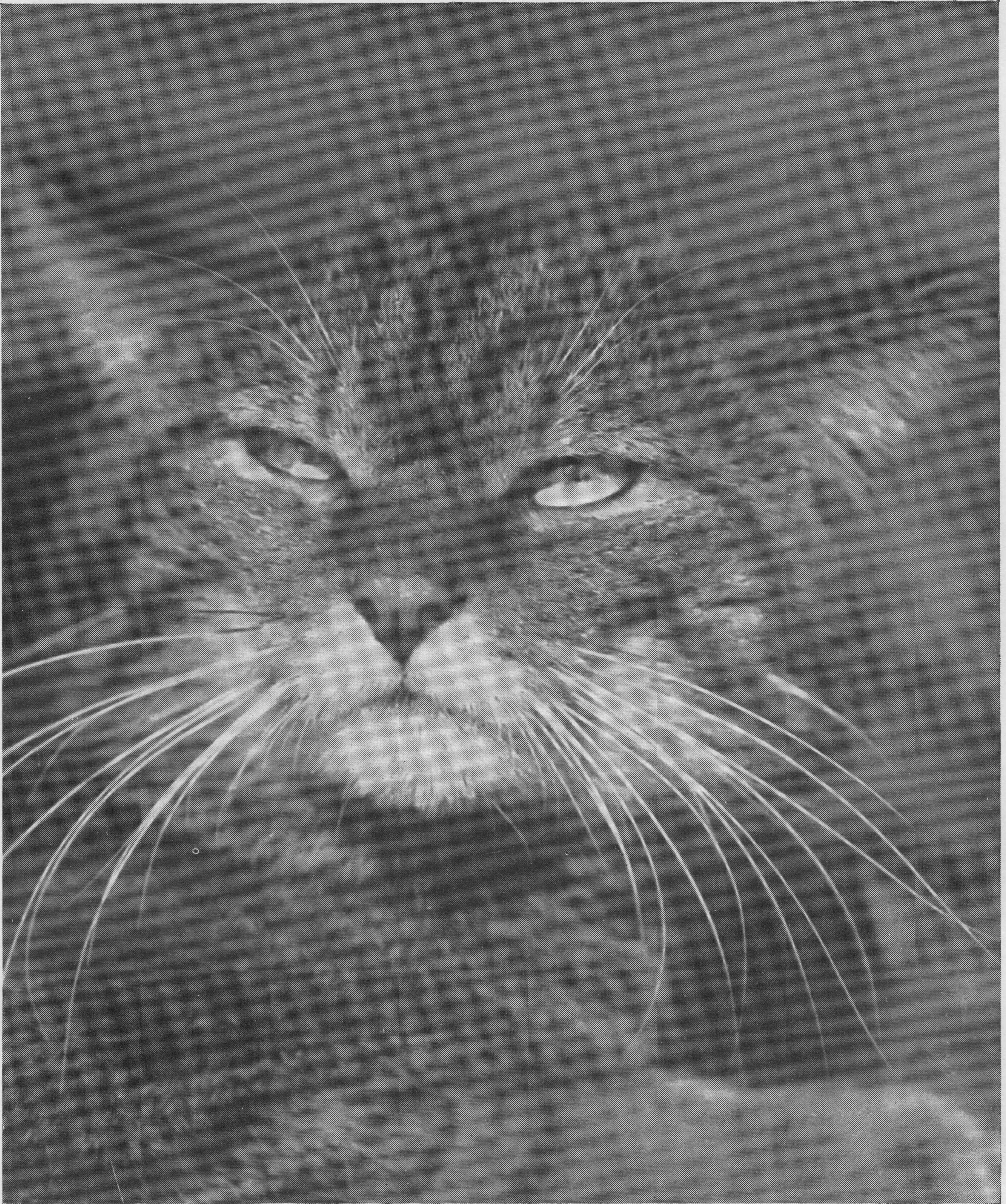
But in times gone by, when the wild cat was generally distributed throughout Great Britain—when it was found even in the environs of London—it varied its fare considerably, and did not despise poultry. The reason for its extermination in the low country, was forcibly brought home to me by the conduct of one of the " children of Satan " ; but of these hybrid cats more in a little while. Satan himself early gave me an example of what we will term the " sporting spirit " of the wild cat.

Satan's quarters were fenced with rather large-meshed wire netting ; but, despite the fact that I often saw the peafowl walking near the cage, it did not occur to me that any harm could result. One morning, however, I found a young bird, a half-grown chick, dead beside the pen. Its head was gone, and Satan was washing his face and wiping brown feathers off his nose. He had stretched a paw through the fence and grabbed the luckless peachick !

Satan became a huge cat. Beauty also flourished, and their alliance was blessed with many offspring, all of which resembled their sire in appearance, and in many traits of character.

Wild Type Dominant in Hybrids

Hybrids between the wild and domestic cats have been bred on several occasions, notably by the late Mr. A. H. Cocks and Sir Claud Alexander ; and in every case the wild type has been completely dominant. Satan and Beauty had six litters, all the kittens of which were exactly like " the old man."



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SATAN.

Satan, so-called because of his irreconcilable character and far from pleasant temper, was a wild cat who came from the Highlands of Scotland as a very young kitten. His personality is well shown in this photograph, which is also worthy of study because it depicts a typical head of an old male wild cat. The broad face and the great width between the ears are characteristic, as are the strong whiskers and tabby markings.

They should have numbered eight litters, but Beauty, alas! had no notions of constancy to a spouse, and there were two families that would have provided Satan with ample grounds for a suit for divorce!

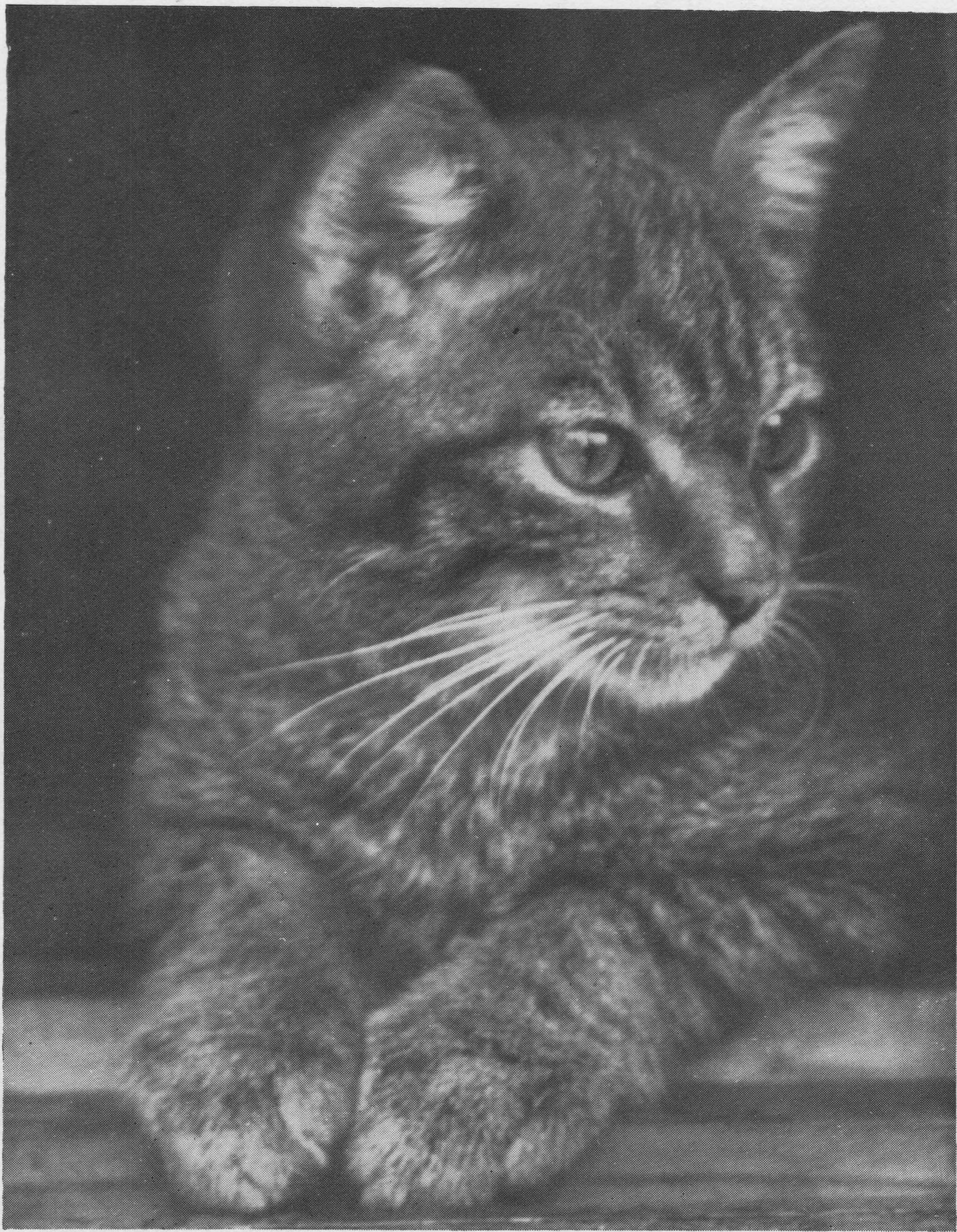
The domestic tom-cat is not always the best of fathers; he will even, at times, attack small kittens; so in the case of the

early litters, Beauty had been permitted to rear them apart from Satan. When the kittens of unknown parentage arrived, I allowed one to survive, and let Beauty keep it in Satan's quarters. Though no offspring of his, he treated it delightfully, and was ever gentle and considerate to it. From that time forward she reared her families in Satan's place, and he was always good to the kittens.

Satan might be savage towards human-beings, but he was a true Highland gentleman, and his conduct gave me a great respect for his species—he was a devoted and faithful spouse, also a gentle father.

The question whether hybrids between the wild and domestic cats occur naturally is a difficult one to answer; but I think it is doubtful, at the most a rare happening. The tendency of the wild cat to mate for life precludes stray alliances, and we have the character of the offspring to consider. I have no hesitation in saying that any cat sired by a *bona fide* wild tom would soon be off to the woods.

The first litter of kittens that Beauty produced were brought up as house pets, but soon



LOOKING QUITE PLEASANT.

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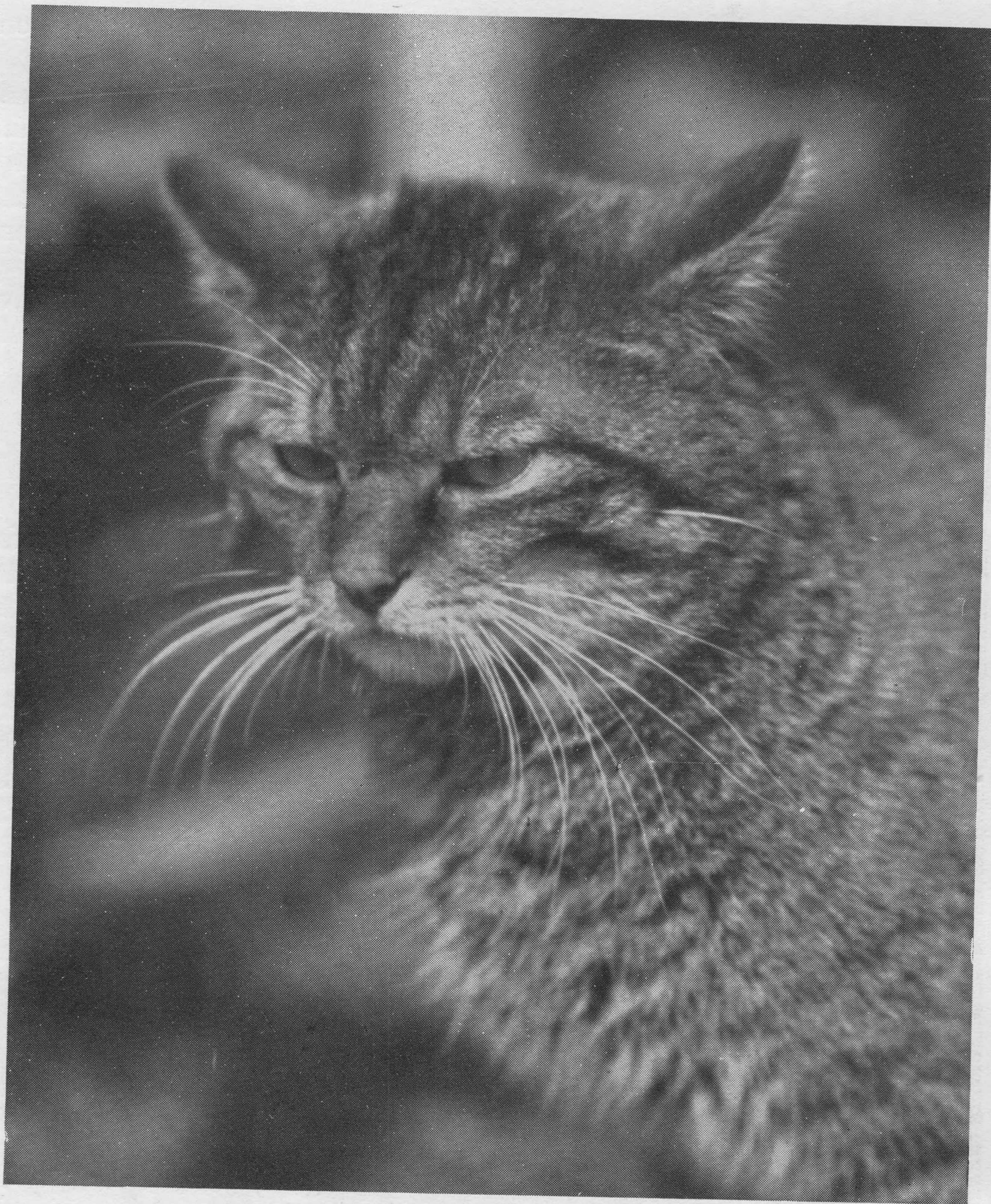
Even the savage, surly, wild cat can look pleasant sometimes, as is shown in this snapshot of Satan when a half-grown kitten. Note the big, strong paws, which are typical of his species.

proved of queer character. By the way, they were three females, and my mother, remembering that their sire was Satan and their dam Beauty, named them "the World, the Flesh, and the Devil!"

A Wicked Interest in Livestock

The second kitten, burdened with such a name, came to an untimely end. The others flourished, and soon began to display strange traits. They were for ever climbing. They spent much of their time in the creepers upon the house, and upon the house-top. Although friendly with us, they were timid with strangers, and would spit on the slightest provocation.

They early began to take an interest in other livestock, particularly the tame wild ducks (my father's pets) and the peafowl. Even as tiny kittens they studied the latter with care, but it was not until we found one of them with a duck—the duck being minus its head—that we realized how fully they had inherited the wild cat's too sporting disposition. They had no idea where to stop, and were equally ready to hunt and kill everything that moved, from a mouse



A SURLY OLD HIGHLANDER.

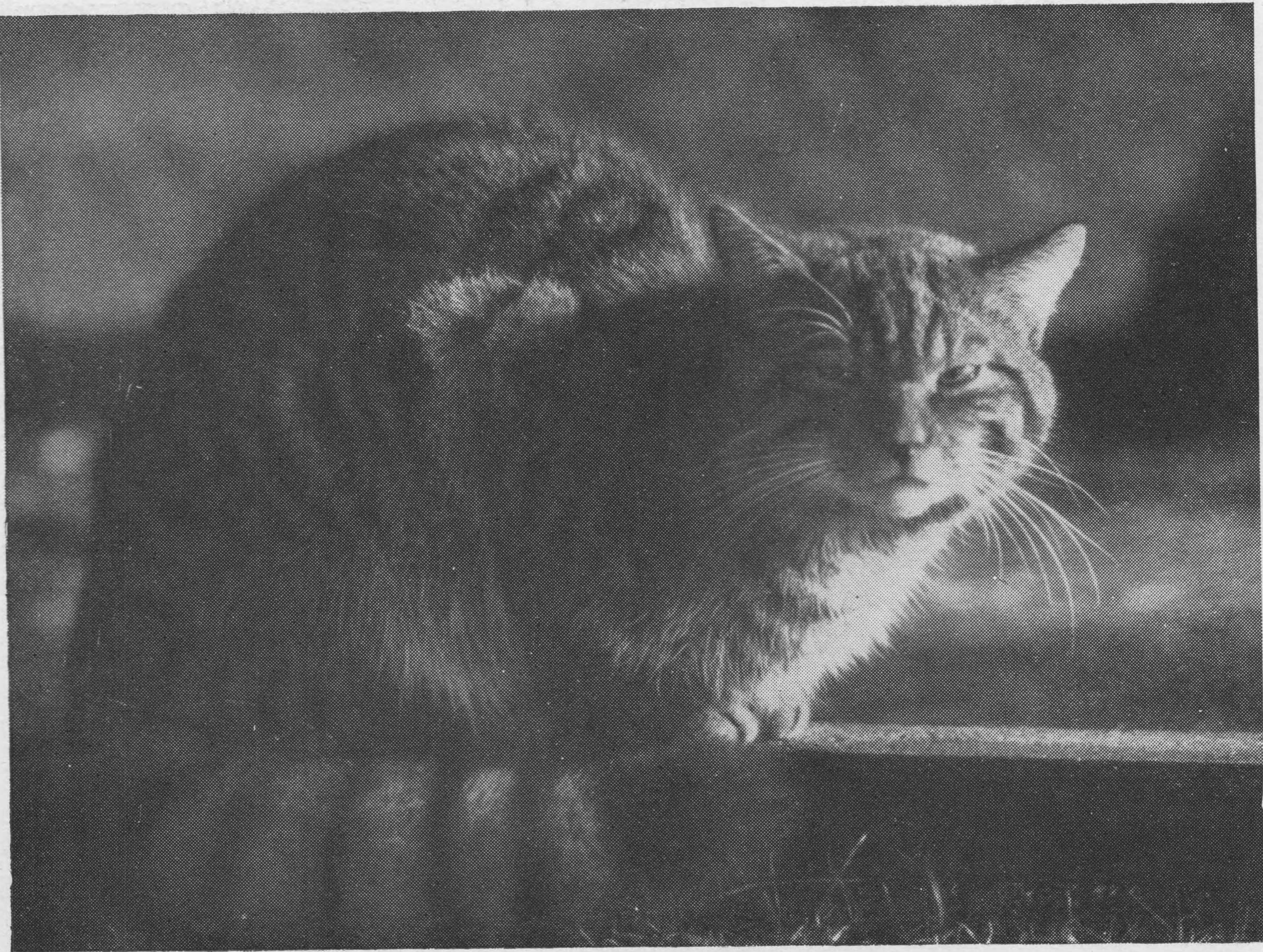
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Again we have a portrait which shows the surly, unforgiving disposition of *Felis silvestris grampia*, otherwise the wild cat of the Highlands of Scotland, which is as formidable as it looks. The rather shaggy coat, typical of this cat, is apparent in this picture.

to a peacock! Poultry they regarded as "fair game."

The young cats had to be domiciled in a wire pen, lately a pheasant aviary; as had subsequent kittens. Not one of them could be left free after it was half-grown.

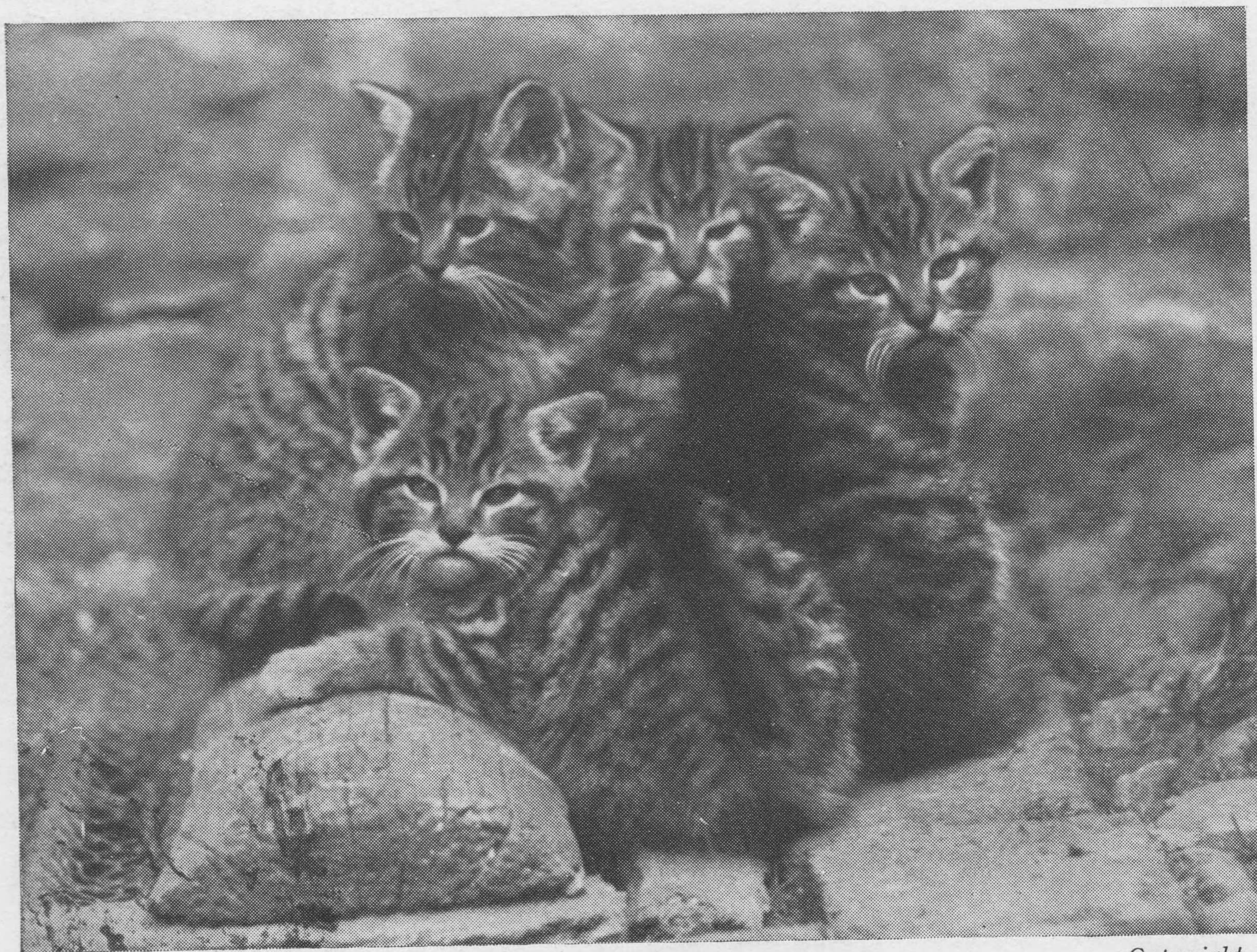
Out of the next litter I kept a tom kitten. He was named the "Imp of Satan." He grew into a very fine cat. Had one met him



SATAN IN 1936.

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This photograph shows Satan when five years old, and illustrates well the handsomely ringed tail, with black terminal band, always found in the true wild cat. Its tail, too, ends abruptly, instead of tapering to a point, as in the domestic cat.



CHILDREN OF SATAN.

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These four kittens were the hybrid offspring of Satan, the Highlander, and Beauty, a domestic cat of the Persian type. They were just like their sire as regards the length of their fur, their tabby coats and general appearance.

on a Highland mountain-side, one would never have doubted that he was a magnificent example of the true wild cat, and he was as sporting as the rest of the breed; but he had his mother's charming manners.

The Imp would follow me like a dog. We often went for walks together, and we rarely failed to bring a rabbit home with us; but one evening he ran off after a bunny and vanished into the wood. It was growing dark, and I could not find him. In vain did I call his name into the deepening twilight: no cat emerged from the shadows beneath the trees, and I had to leave him out for the night to enjoy himself wandering through the woods and getting into who knows what mischief.

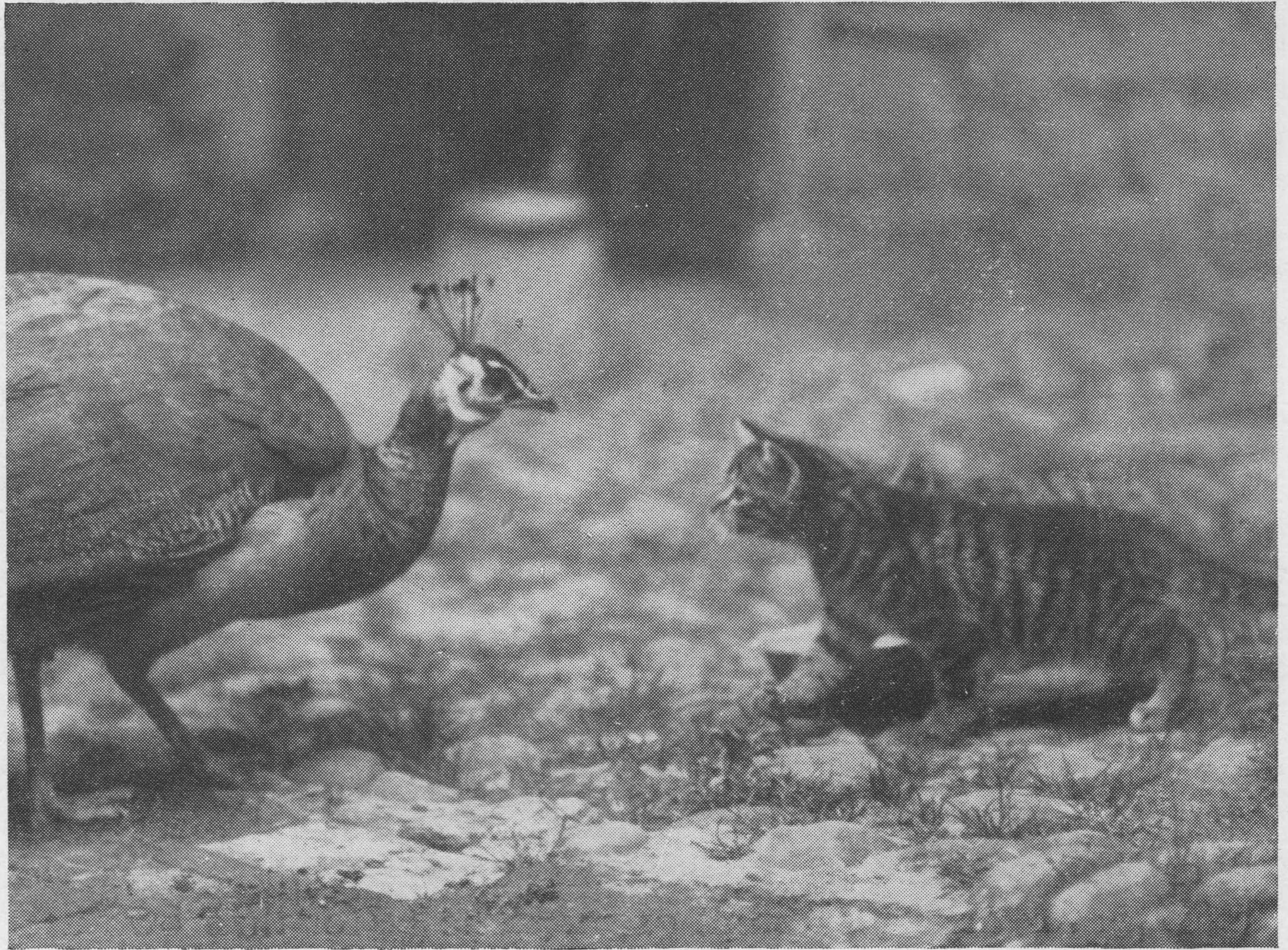
No More Walks for a Miscreant

In the morning came a report of poultry killed at a neighbouring cottage. I went at once to the place, and found my cat, likewise three fowls without heads. After that I refrained from taking the Imp of Satan out for walks.

The hybrids in their turn produced kittens, some of which looked pure wild cats, and some throw-backs to the domestic side of their ancestry. Unfortunately it is not easy to keep a number of cats under experimental conditions and make investigations into their genetics, but the indications were that coat-colour, pattern, and length of fur, were inherited on simple Mendelian lines, and, possibly, also temperament. One kitten seemed as savage as any wild cat.

With regard to differences between the wild and domestic cats, it appears that the former is much more susceptible to what we may term civilized diseases. Wild cats rarely survive long in Zoological Gardens, quickly succumbing to pneumonia, or some similar complaint; and hybrids are nearly as liable to infection. I gave sundry crossbred kittens to the Edinburgh Gardens, but not one survived for long; yet under isolated conditions they are long-lived, healthy cats.

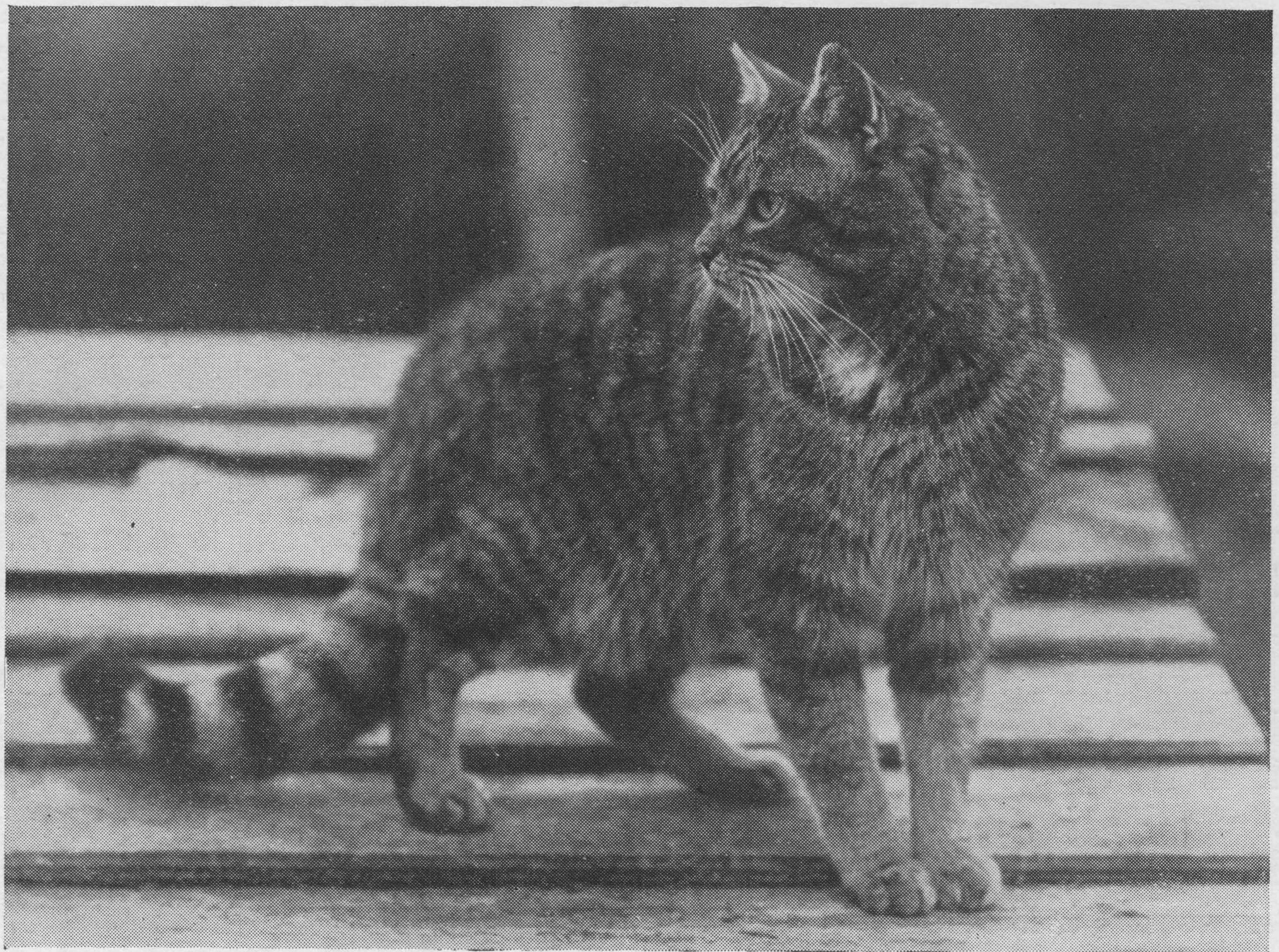
It was an epidemic of "cat influenza" that carried off Satan,



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LIKE THEIR FATHER.

The hybrid kittens took after their father in sporting disposition as well as appearance. Here is one of them advancing to meet a peahen, though she was too big a quarry for a small kitten.



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THE IMP OF SATAN.

Here is one of Satan's hybrid sons when full-grown. It will be seen how closely the Imp resembles his sire, down to the last black band on his tail.

when he had reached the age of six years and nine months—when, too, he appeared to be in the prime of life ; however, he had probably had a much longer “innings” than he would have done on his native hills.

The recent history of the wild cat in Scotland is very interesting. Prior to the War it was reduced to so low an ebb that its complete extermination seemed certain. The late Mr. J. G. Millais expressed the opinion that nothing could save it, there being only a few specimens left in west-central Inverness-shire.

Amnesty for Vermin

Then came the War and with it an amnesty for so-called vermin. The younger gamekeepers, deer-stalkers and ghillies, had to leave the pursuit of wild cats and so on for that of different game. The older men were given work of national importance, and the wild cat, the pine marten, the golden eagle, and other creatures of the Highlands, went their way, unchecked and uninterfered with, as did the polecat in Wales.

Whatever the strife between men, there was peace for the animals, which prospered amazingly. From near extermination the wild cat increased and multiplied, not only becoming numerous in its stronghold, but spreading and extending its range.

This recovery it has maintained, being aided therein by the public-spirited conduct of certain large landowners, who have instructed their gamekeepers to pursue a lenient policy towards this animal, rightly valuing the preservation of a most interesting and indigenous mammal more than a few extra brace of grouse.

The present distribution of the wild cat is difficult to define with exactitude, but it is fairly plentiful in the birch coppices along the hillsides of west-central Inverness-shire, the north of Perthshire, and in parts of Ross-shire. Stray individuals often turn up in other districts.

When making enquiries about cats, information as to their habits has come to hand, and it seems fairly certain that they

do not usually breed more than once in the twelve months, the kittens appearing as a rule in April or May, and numbering on an average from three to five.

As already remarked, these cats almost certainly pair, and probably mate for life ; but we have no evidence as to whether the tom helps to feed the family. One keeper, with a life-time's experience to draw upon, said he was sure the male hunted for the kittens and brought food to the den. I cannot say my Satan ever gave his offspring food, but there was no need for him to do so.

Bird's Nest Used as a Sleeping Place

The usual nursery is in some convenient hole among the rocks, but any warm, dry, secret place will serve. The same remark applies to the lodgings the adults choose for their own use. They will make a home of any comfortable quarters ; even an old hawk's nest aloft in a tree has been known to serve as a sleeping-place.

But wherever a wild cat lodges, wherever he goes, he is always a fine fellow. He is certainly fierce and savage, an irreconcilable outlaw of the wilds, but he is a true Highlander, and a great gentleman. There is no creature for whom I have more respect.

EDITOR'S NOTES

The British wild cat is known to scientists as *Felis silvestris grampia* Miller, and is a sub-species of *Felis silvestris* Schriber, the cat native to central and southern Europe, and which ranges into Asia Minor. The race of wild cat found in southern Spain, which is somewhat larger and darker than that of Britain or Central Europe, has been designated *F. s. tartessia* Miller ; and the wild cats of Crete and Sardinia have been accorded full specific rank under the titles of *F. sarda* Lataste, and *F. agrius* Bate, respectively.

In neither of these latter are the markings so distinct ; nevertheless, the striped tabby pattern is there. All specimens of the *F. silvestris* group show this coat-pattern, and never the blotched pattern often found in tabby cats of the domestic species, known to zoologists as *F. catus* Linn.