

Portrait of Pavlo – Gerald Durrell

One day I went down to an animal dealer's shop in London, and the first thing I saw on entering the shop was a cage full of marmosets; a pathetic, scruffy group of ten. Most of them were adults, but there was one youngster who seemed to be getting rather a rough time of it. Within five minutes I had paid the price of liberation, and the smallest occupant of the cage was dragged out, screaming with alarm, and bundled into a cardboard box.

When I got him home I christened him Pavlo and introduced him to the family, who viewed him with suspicion. However, as soon as Pavlo had settled down he set about the task of winning their confidence, and in a very short time he had all of us under his minute thumb. In spite of his size (he fitted comfortably into a large teacup), he had a terrific personality, a Napoleonic air about him which was difficult to resist. His head was only the size of a large walnut, but it soon became apparent that it contained a brain of considerable power and intelligence

At first sight Pavlo resembled a curious kind of squirrel, until you noticed his very human face and his bright, shrewd, brown eyes. The fur on his head and neck was chocolate brown, and hung round his shoulders and chest in a tattered fringe. His large ears were hidden by long ear-tufts of the same chocolate colour. Across his forehead, above his eyes and the aristocratic bridge of his tiny nose, was a broad white patch.

Everyone who saw him, and who had any knowledge of animals, assured me that I would not keep him long: marmosets, they said, coming from the warm tropical forests of South America, never lived more than a year in this climate. It seemed that their cheerful prophecies were right when, after six months, Pavlo developed a form of paralysis and from the waist downwards lost all power of movement. We fought hard to save his life. Four times a day we massaged his tiny legs, his back and tail with warm cod-liver oil, and he had more codliver oil in his special diet, which included such delicacies as grapes and pears. He lay pathetically on a cushion, wrapped in cotton-wool for warmth, while the family took it in turn to minister to his wants. Sunshine was what he needed most, and plenty of it, but the English climate provided precious little. So the neighbours were treated to the sight of us carrying our tiny invalid round the garden, carefully placing his cushion in every patch of sunlight that appeared. This went on for a month, and at the end of it Pavlo could move his feet slightly and twitch his tail; two weeks later he was hobbling round the house, almost his old self again. We were delighted, even though the house did reek of cod-liver oil for months afterwards.

Instead of making him more delicate, his illness seemed to make him tougher, and at times he appeared almost indestructible. In the first warm days of spring Pavlo would venture out into the garden, where his favourite haunt was the fence; he would sit in the sun, or potter up and down catching spiders and other delicacies for himself. For many years he carried on a feud with the big white cat from next door, for this beast was obviously under the impression that Pavlo was a strange type of rat which it was her duty to kill. She would spend many painful hours stalking him, but since she was as inconspicuous as a snowball against the green leaves she never managed to catch Pavlo unawares. Until one day....

Growing by the fence, between the house and Pavlo's creeper-covered hide-out, were two young fig-trees, and round the base of their trunks we had dug deep trenches which we kept

full of water during the hot weather. Pavlo was pottering along the fence one day, chattering to himself and catching spiders, when he looked up and discovered that his arch-enemy the cat, huge and white, was sitting on the fence between him and his creeper-covered arbour. His only chance of escape was to go back along the fence and into the house, so Pavlo turned and bolted, squeaking for help as he ran. The fat white cat was not such an expert tight-rope walker as Pavlo, so her progress along the fence top was slow, but even so she was catching up on him. She was uncomfortably close behind him when he reached the fig-trees, and he became so nervous that he missed his footing and with a frantic scream of fright fell off the fence and straight into the water-filled trench below. He rose to the surface, spluttering and screaming, and splashing around in circles, while the cat watched him in amazement. Luckily, before she had recovered from her astonishment and hooked him out of the water, I arrived on the scene and she fled. I rescued Pavlo, gibbering with rage, and he spent the rest of the afternoon in front of the fire, wrapped in a piece of blanket, muttering darkly to himself.

Pavlo lived with us for eight years, and when he died, he staged his deathbed scene in the best Victorian traditions. He had been unwell for a couple of days, and had spent his time on the window-sill of my sister's room, lying in the sun on a bit of fur-coat. One morning he started to squeak frantically to my sister, who became alarmed and shouted out to the rest of us that she thought he was dying. The whole family at once dropped whatever they were doing and fled upstairs. We gathered round the window-sill and watched Pavlo carefully, but there seemed to be nothing very much the matter with him. He accepted a drink of milk and then lay back on his fur-coat and surveyed us all with bright eyes. We had just decided that it was a false alarm when he suddenly went limp. In a panic we forced open his clenched jaws and poured a little milk down his throat. Slowly he regained consciousness, lying limp in my cupped hands. He looked at us for a moment and then, summoning up his last remaining strength, poked his tongue out at us and smacked his lips in a last gesture of affection. Then he fell back and died quite quietly.

The house and garden seemed very empty without his minute strutting figure and fiery personality. No longer were there cries of: 'Where's Pavlo?' No longer were we woken up at six in the morning, feeling his cold feet on our faces. He had become one of the family in a way that no other pet had ever done, and we mourned his death. Even the white cat next door seemed moody and depressed, for without Pavlo in it our garden seemed to have lost its attraction for her.