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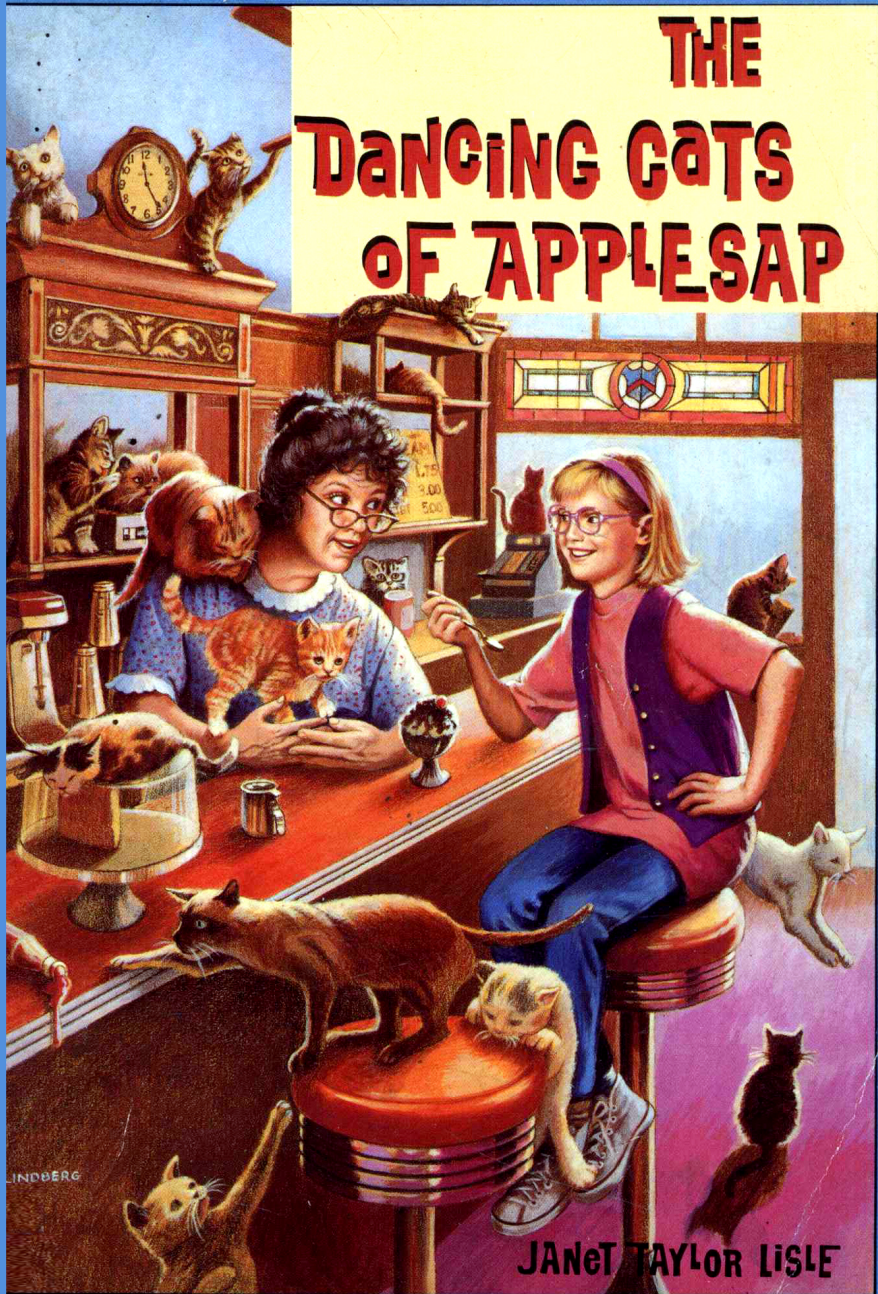
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CAN 100 STRAY CATS SAVE THE DAY?

THE Dancing Cats OF APPLESAP

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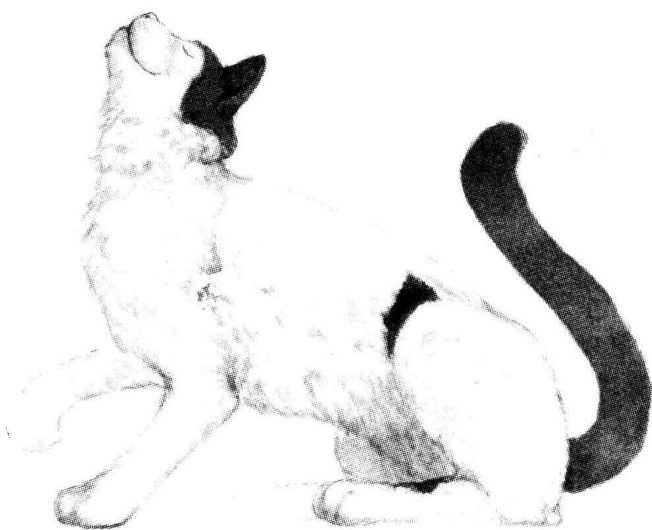
JANET TAYLOR Lisle



The Dancing Cats of Applesap

By Janet Taylor Lisle

Illustrated by Joelle Shefts



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"You tell the story," says Melba Morris, sitting down in a living room chair by the Morris family telephone.

"No. You tell it," say I, a friend of the Morris family, more or less, and otherwise not someone who was involved. "If I tell the story, you'll just end up interrupting me all the time," I point out. "You're the one who's in it."

"You tell it anyway," answers Melba. "I'm not very good at telling stories in front of people. You start and I'll listen. I promise."

"Well, all right," I say. "I guess I've heard enough about those cats by now to begin, anyhow. How about this?"

"Once upon a time there was a girl who . . ."

"Not that way!" interrupts Melba immediately.

"See?" I say, somewhat resentfully. "There you go interrupting."

"But you've got to tell people how to get here first!" exclaims Melba. "Tell them what I always say whenever anyone asks me how to get to Applesap, New York."

"Okay. Okay." I prepare to start off again.

But I know I won't get far with Melba sitting over there waiting to catch me up. Not that I mind, really. The best stories are built that way. One person starts talking and then another person decides that something was left out and has to speak up and change things. Then another person says: "No! It happened like this." And so, slowly, the story gets beaten into shape.

I guess this story is going to be that sort, with Melba doing the beating into shape.

"Right," says Melba from her chair. "Now go on and start telling. Don't pay any attention to me. I've got a phone call to make."



Chapter —1—

WHENEVER ANYONE ASKS MELBA MORRIS WHERE Applesap, New York, is, this is what she says:

“If you’ve got a pin, it’s easy. Have you got one? A thumbtack is okay too. My brother, Victor, did it once with a jackknife from all the way across the kitchen. He’s a wild man. See, all you do is take your pin, or thumbtack or jackknife, squint your eyes a little, and stick it, pow, in the very middle of the map of New York State. That’s where Applesap is, right at dead center. You can’t miss it.”

Applesap is the town where Melba Morris

lives. Lately, plenty of people have been asking for it. Word has got out about the pin too. Now folks from Tennessee and Nebraska and Texas and all over everywhere are sticking pins in and finding out how to get there.

Why, just last week a family came all the way from Alaska.

("California!" Melba interrupts. "They were from California.")

Well then, California. Just last week, a family came all the way from California. Melba was proud of that. She had a right to be proud. It wasn't so long ago that nobody ever asked where Applesap was. Nobody knew there was an Applesap to ask for, and even if they had known, they wouldn't have cared.

Applesap is the kind of small town that is all right if you live smack in it, but otherwise doesn't amount to very much. It isn't the capitol of anything. No presidents or beauty queens were ever born there. The only theater in town plays old Walt Disney movies that change about twice a year.

Applesap is a quiet town, a shy town, a town that feels its smallness and doesn't like to speak up because there are so many bigger

and louder towns around. When there is a shopping mall up for grabs, or a roller rink, something big like that, it gets built in Glowville to the north or in Hopsburg to the south. They've got weight and throw it around. Applesap has a couple of schools, a library, a grocery store, a ladies' dress shop, and two drug stores . . . Not what you would call weight in this day and age.

Recently, though, there has been a run on Applesap. More people, tourist types, come by in one weekend than used to pass through in an entire year.

"And they're not coming all this way to get hot fudge sundaes at the Super Queen Drugs," Melba pipes up from her chair across the room. "No, sir. They're coming straight to Jiggs' Drug Store. Why, we're killing the Super Queen these days. I heard the owners are thinking of selling out and moving to Glowville where the competition isn't so rough.

"Miss Toonie's dancing cats are the main attraction, of course. There was a lady here yesterday from Hartford, Connecticut, who said those cats ought to be in the *Guinness Book of World Records*. And that we (that's

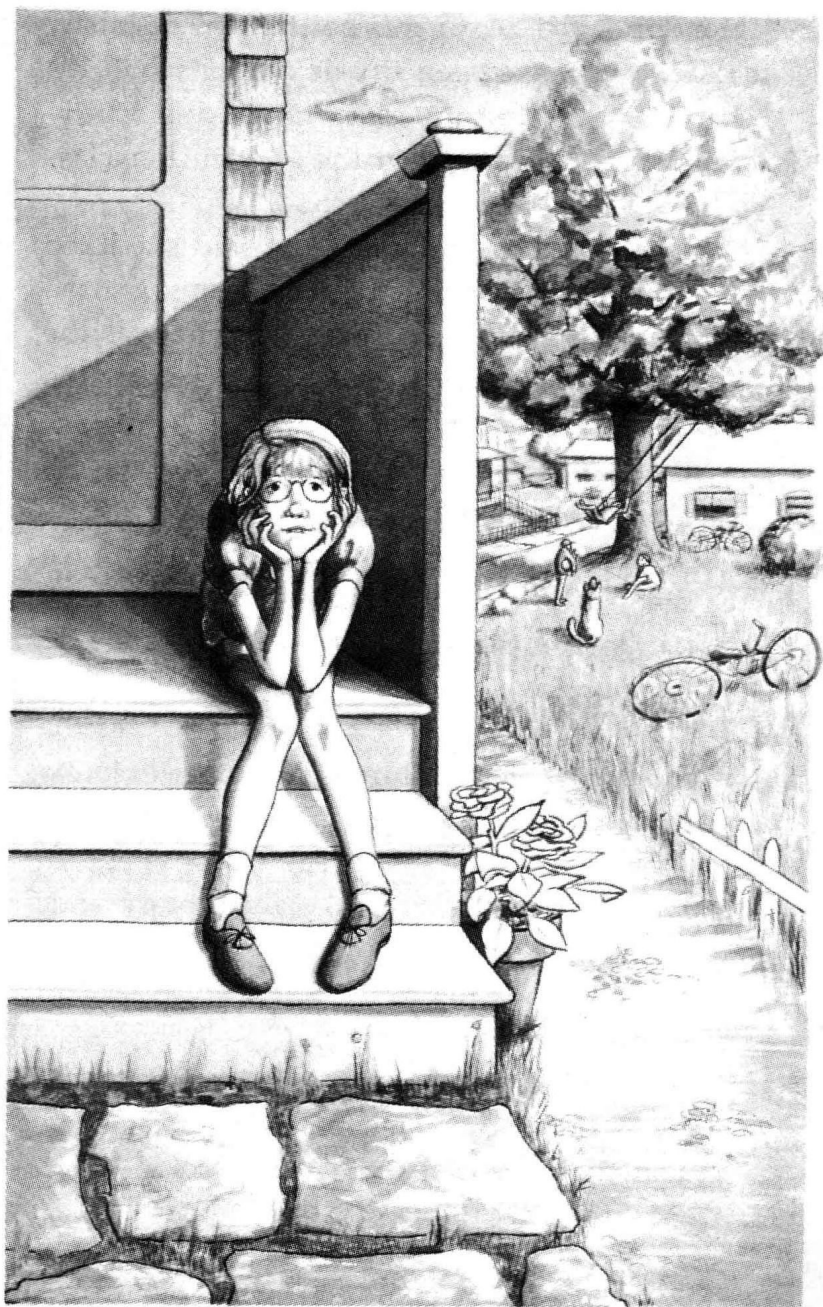
Miss Toonie, Mr. Jiggs, and I) ought to be in, too, for getting the act in shape.

"I thought that was a good idea, so I'm calling up the Guinness place this very morning. That's why I'm on the phone. I do things like that all the time now."

Melba Morris is ten years old, and she used to be just as shy and small and afraid to speak up as Applesap itself. At school, she was the one in the thick tortoise-shell glasses sitting farthest back from the teacher. On the playground, you would see her off by herself poking sticks through the fence or something equally dumb. She didn't like to walk up and say hello to anybody, even someone smaller than she was.

Melba looked at her feet a lot, and rubbed her skinny elbow a lot, and if anyone, by mistake, said hello to her, she would run to the ladies' room to polish her glasses. All her life she had been that way. It could have come from having an older brother who was a wild man.

Some people say if there is one child in a family who talks big and shows off and keeps a party jumping, there is bound to be another one who does the opposite. Maybe Melba was



the opposite one, or maybe she was born shy and would have been shy no matter what. It's hard to say. In any case, most kids hardly knew she existed, even the kids in her class at Applesap Elementary School.

Melba didn't complain. She said she liked being alone. She said she liked being ignored and didn't mind in the least that she was the only girl in the class who didn't get invited to Irma Herring's Easter party.

"It's okay," Melba told her mother. "I don't like Irma Herring anyway."

Even when it turned out that she had been invited, but that the invitation had somehow gotten lost in the mail, Melba said she would rather not go.

"Why not?" said Melba's mother. "Maybe if you went those children would get to know you better."

"Everybody has a streak of shyness in them," Melba's father said. "Everybody finds it hard to get to know people."

Melba shook her head. She went up to her room and closed the door.

In those days, Melba spent a good deal of time in her room. Heaven knows what she did in there. Perhaps she read books—excit-

ing adventures of ancient princesses or of children marooned on desert islands.

("No, I didn't," interrupts Melba. "I didn't like stories. Nobody I know of was ever marooned on a desert island.")

Maybe she built scale models of rocket ships and blasted them out her window.

("Absolutely not," she declares. "Victor would have done something like that.")

Well, then perhaps she was teaching herself to knit. But whatever it was, she was doing a lot of it in her room. The only other place she ever went was to Jiggs' Drug Store, which, under normal circumstances, wouldn't have gotten her very far. Under normal circumstances she might have kept on going to Jiggs' and kept on being as shy as Applesap, New York, until both of them turned into dust. But, of course, circumstances at Jiggs' were not normal.

"They sure weren't," says Melba now, sitting down to make her phone call to the *Guinness Book*. "Jiggs' Drug Store didn't look like much on the surface, I know. But underneath, it had potential. And by the way," she adds, "I was *not* knitting in my room. I was thinking."

Chapter —2—

JIGGS' DRUG STORE IS LOCATED AROUND THE corner from the elementary school, on Dunn Street. No one in those days before the dancing cats would have guessed it had potential. When Melba started going there, it was a run-down place and people didn't much go into it anymore.

On rainy days at Jiggs' the roof leaked into buckets set out on the floor. And on sunny days the air turned hot and buggy. And on any day the candy was stale. Furthermore, there were the cats. Not one or two cats curled up in out-of-the-way corners. Not even five

or six scampering after a ball of string. No. Jiggs' had cats in the worst possible way: all over everything by the dozen.

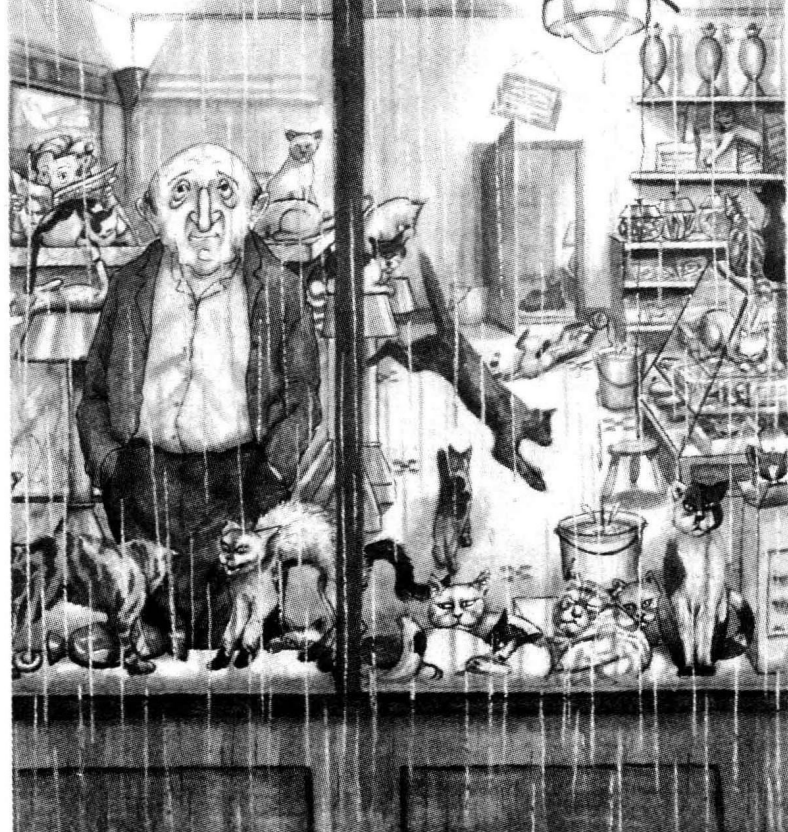
They slept in piles, dangling their tails down the cosmetic cases. They prowled in droves around the bottoms of the cigar and candy racks. They licked their nails on top of the comic books and cleaned their ears behind the cash register. Whenever a customer came into the store, cat faces looked out from every crook and cranny to see who it was. And cat eyes blinked and stared. And a hundred cat tails twitched. It was unnerving, to say the least.

Most children who wanted a soda or a candy bar after school went over to the Super Queen Drugs two streets down. The Super Queen was new, and fresh, and didn't have any cats at all. The Super Queen had two spotless, curving counters, flanked by rows of comfortable stools. It was the best place in town to meet up with people, and that, of course, was why Melba started going to Jiggs', where she could order a hot fudge sundae without having to polish her glasses all the time.

Jiggs' had only four battered chrome

Ice cream - candy - soda

JIGGS' DRUGSTORE



stools, and flies. They stuck onto the counter where Miss Toonie hadn't sponged off. Miss Toonie was the dried-up old scrap of a lady who ran the soda fountain. She had worked in Jiggs' for years and looked half cat herself.

Miss Toonie's mouth was edged with whiskers. Her hair fuzzed up the slope of her forehead like fur. On top of this, she was extremely ill-tempered. You couldn't say two words to Miss Toonie without getting your head snapped off. She was a grouch, everybody in town said so, and all on account of some man who had asked her to marry him forty years ago and then had run off and left her flat-footed, without even an engagement ring to show for it.

After that, Miss Toonie wouldn't have anything to do with men. Eventually, she put women on her blacklist too. Children, being the natural result of both men and women, made her cross just to look at. The only creatures Miss Toonie could stand were cats, and that is why so many had come to live at Jiggs' Drug Store.

They were a beat-up, cringing crowd, every one of which she'd found out on the Applesap streets. From the brink of starva-

tion she had nursed them back to health, or from half freezing to death, or from mutilation by cars. Every monstrous thing that had ever been done to a cat had been done to the cats in Jiggs' Drug Store, and this made Miss Toonie crosser than ever.

"Cast out upon the world by people who call themselves human beings!" Melba heard her growl more than once under her breath.

Miss Toonie was so furious at the way the world was treating cats that by the time Melba started going to Jiggs' she wasn't talking to anyone, especially not to Mr. Jiggs, owner of the store and a sad specimen in his own right.

"Spineless," Miss Toonie called him, although privately Melba considered this a bit harsh. For once, as everyone in town knew, he had been a bright young man with dreams of running a bright and profitable business. Once he'd had hopes of expanding into branch stores in Glowville and Hopsburg, and of being named "Druggist of the Year" by the grateful citizens of New York State.

But, after all, Mr. Jiggs knew as little about expanding and growing up big as the soft-spoken town in which he had chosen to set