



THE MASTER CAT

Charles Perrault

A miller died, leaving as sole riches to his three sons his mill, his donkey, and his cat. The estate was easily shared out; neither the lawyer nor the notary was called in. They would soon have gobbled up the meager inheritance. The eldest son had the mill, the second the donkey, and the youngest only the cat.

The last was inconsolable at having such a poor share.

“My brothers,” he said, “can earn a decent living if they combine together. But when I have eaten my cat and made myself a muff from its skin, I shall just have to starve.”

The Cat, who heard these words but pretended not to, said in calm, confident tones:

“Do not worry, master. Just give me a sack and have a pair of boots made so that I can go in the brambles, and you will find that you are not so badly off after all.”

Although the Cat’s master did not put much faith in this suggestion, he had seen him perform such ingenious tricks to catch rats and mice, such as hanging upside down by his feet, or lying in the flour bin pretending to be dead, that he decided that it might be worth trying.

When the Cat had the things he had asked for, he buckled the boots on smartly, slung the sack over his shoulder and, holding the cords with his forepaws, went off to a warren where there were large numbers of rabbits.

He placed some bran and sow thistles in his sack and, stretching himself out on the ground as though he were dead, waited for some young rabbit, still unused to the wiles of this world, to hop into the sack to get what was in it.

He had hardly lain down when his trick worked. A silly young rabbit jumped into the sack, and the Master Cat quickly pulled the cords and caught and killed him without mercy.

Swelling with pride in this achievement, he went to the palace and asked to speak to the King. He was taken up to His Majesty's apartments and, as he came in, he made a low bow and said:

“Sire, here is a rabbit which My Lord the Marquis of Carabas” (that was the name which he had decided to give his master) “has instructed me to offer you on his behalf.”

“Tell your master,” said the King, “that We thank him and that he gives Us great pleasure.”

Another day he went and hid in a cornfield, again with his open sack, and when two partridges flew in, he pulled the cords and caught them both. He presented these to the King, as he had done with the rabbit. The King again accepted the gift with pleasure and gave him some drinking money.

The Cat went on in this way for two or three months, taking game to the King every so often “from his master’s hunting grounds.” One day he heard that the King was to go for a drive along the riverbank with his daughter, the loveliest princess in the world, so he said to his master:

“If you will follow my advice, your fortune is made. All you have to do is to bathe in the river at the spot which I will show you, and leave the rest to me.”

The Marquis of Carabas did as his Cat told him, without knowing what would come of it. While he was bathing, the King came by and the Cat began to cry at the top of his voice:

“Help! Help! My Lord the Marquis of Carabas is drowning!”

The King looked out of the carriage window and, recognizing the Cat which had so often brought him game, he order his guards to go quickly to the help of My Lord the Marquis of Carabas.

As the poor Marquis was being pulled out of the river, the Cat went up to the carriage and told the King that, while his master was bathing, some thieves had made off with his clothes, although he had shouted “Stop thief!” at the top of his voice. The rascal had really hidden them under a big stone.

The King immediately ordered the officers of his wardrobe to go and fetch one of his finest suits for My Lord the Marquis of Carabas. The King was kindness itself to him and, since the fine clothes which he had been given set off his good looks—for he was handsome and well built—the King’s daughter took an immediate liking to him; and,

by the time he had thrown her a few appreciative but most respectful glances, she had fallen madly in love.

The King insisted that he should get into the carriage and accompany them on the drive. Delighted to see that his plan was beginning to succeed, the Cat ran ahead until he came to some peasants who were mowing a meadow.

“Dear good mowers,” he said, “if you do not tell the King that the meadow you are mowing belongs to My Lord the Marquis of Carabas, I will have you all chopped up into mincemeat.”

The King did not fail to ask them whose meadow they were mowing.

“It belongs to My Lord the Marquis of Carabas,” they answered in chorus, for the Cat’s threat had terrified them.

“You have a fine piece of land there,” said the King to the Marquis of Carabas.

“As you see, Sire,” answered the Marquis. “It gives a wonderful crop every year.”

The Master Cat, still running ahead, came to some harvesters and said to them:

“Dear good harvesters, if you do not say that these cornfields belong to My Lord the Marquis of Carabas, I will have you all chopped up into mincemeat.”

The King, coming up a moment later, asked who was the owner of all these cornfields which he saw.

“They belong to My Lord the Marquis of Carabas,” cried the harvesters, and the King again congratulated the Marquis. The Cat,

keeping ahead of the carriage, said the same thing to all the people whom he met, and the King was astonished at the vast estates of the Marquis of Carabas.

At last the Cat reached a fine castle whose master was an ogre. He was the richest ogre of them all, for all the land through which the King had passed belonged to him. The Cat, having first found out who this ogre was and what he could do, asked to speak to him, saying that he could not pass so near to his castle without having the honor of calling in to pay his respects.

The ogre received him as civilly as an ogre can and told him to take a seat.

“I have heard,” said the Cat, “that you have the power of changing yourself into all kinds of animals; for example, that you can turn into a lion, or an elephant.”

“That is so,” said the ogre gruffly, “and to show you, I will turn into a lion.”

The Cat was so scared at seeing a lion before him that he sprang up onto the roof, not without some danger and difficulty, because his boots were not suitable for walking on the tiles.

After some time, the Cat saw that the ogre had gone back to his original shape, so he came down, admitting that he had had quite a fright.

“I have also heard,” he went on, “that you have the power to take on the shape of the smallest animals, for instance to turn into a rat or a mouse. I must admit that I think that is quite impossible.”

“Impossible!” roared the ogre. “You shall see!”

And he immediately turned into a mouse, which began to scurry across the floor. As soon as the cat saw it, he sprang upon it and ate it.

Meanwhile the King came in sight of the ogre’s fine castle and said that he would like to go in. The Cat, hearing the sound of the carriage on the drawbridge, ran out and said to the King:

“Welcome, Your Majesty, to the castle of the Marquis of Carabas.”

“What, My Lord Marquis,” said the King, “this castle is yours, too? Nothing could be finer than this courtyard and these buildings round it. Let Us see inside, please.”

The Marquis offered his hand to the young Princess and, following the King, they went up the steps to the great hall. There they found a magnificent feast which the ogre had prepared for some of his friends who had been invited for that same day, but had not dared to come in when they heard that the King was there.

The King was delighted with all the virtues of My Lord the Marquis of Carabas, while as for his daughter, she was in raptures about him. Seeing his vast possessions and having drunk a few draughts of wine, the King said:

“You have only to say the word, my Lord Marquis, and you can become Our son-in-law.”

With a low bow the Marquis accepted the honor which the King proposed, and he was married to the Princess on that same day. The Cat became a great lord and from then on only hunted mice as relaxation.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

Is the Cat really confident, or does he just pretend to be?

- Why does the Cat pretend not to hear his master's plans to turn him into a muff?
- Why does the Cat risk talking to the ogre even though the ogre could harm him?
- Why does the Cat admit that the ogre gave him a fright?
- Why does everyone in the story do what the Cat says?