

THE CAT WHO CHEATED DEATH

Once upon a time, a long, long time ago, there lived a very rich old man. Everything he did turned to gold, his businesses flourished, his flocks and fields brought rich harvests year after year, and his children brought him honor. Yet, with all his riches and good fortune, the old man had no love in his heart for anything and anyone.

One day, the old man fell ill, and his doctors told him that the Angel of Death would soon be coming to call for him.

"Everything and everyone can be bought," the old man scoffed from his bed, "even the Angel of Death." And he sent the doctors away, and called for the greatest wizard in the land, for it was said this wizard was the only man who could charm the Angel of Death.

"Tell the Angel of Death I am not ready," the old man said to the wizard, "I will come along in good time, but not today."

"The Angel of Death will not go away empty-handed," the wizard warned, "you must offer him a soul in your place. Any soul will do, but it must be someone who lives in your house."

Well, who shall it be? the old man said to himself. Not his wife and children, for they were precious to him. Not his servants or his hunting dogs or the cows and horses on his farms, for they were useful to him. "I know!" the old man said, "take the cat who lives in the kitchen! He is lazy. He will not hunt, or catch mice, or make himself useful in any way. All he does is sleep by the stove,

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and drink cream from a dish, while the mice nibble my good bread and cheese under his very nose! Yes, take the cat, he does me no good and I am better off without him!"

"Done!" cried the wizard. He wrote the cat's name on a piece of paper, and with many incantations and strange gestures, made the paper vanish in a puff of green smoke. "Set the cat on the doorstep tonight," the wizard instructed, "and the Angel of Death will take him in your place."

Now, the cat was not at all happy to learn that he was to die for his master. He was a young cat, a small, gray, extremely handsome young cat with no cares in the world, no family to support and worry about. He had planned to have a long, carefree life before meeting the Angel of Death.

"You do not catch mice. You are no good to me at all," the rich old man told the cat, as he set him on the doorstep.

"Why should I catch mice?" the cat said reasonably. "They eat so very little, and there is plenty for all of us. Why grudge them a crust of bread and the rind of a cheese?"

"Because it is mine," the old man said, and slammed the door shut, leaving the cat all alone, sitting on the cold doorstep. Presently, a little mouse crept up to the cat. "I am the King of the Mice," he announced grandly. He didn't look like a King. He looked like a very ordinary, small, gray-brown mouse, with quivering whiskers and tiny dark eyes. "Friend cat," he said, "you have always been kind and generous to me and my family. I have come to tell you, that if ever you need my help, just call for me, and I will do all I can for you."

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"Well," said the cat, "I can't see what a bunch of mice can every do for me, but it's very kind of you to offer. Thank you very much."

No sooner were the words out of the cat's mouth, when the mouse vanished, and the cat saw, across the deserted village square, a little girl walking. The cat knew her. Although she was poor and ragged, she was always kind to the cat. She hugged and petted him and shared whatever scraps of food she begged with him. In return, the cat purred and rubbed his face against her ankle, washed her hands with his rough tongue.

"Little cat," the girl called, "why are you out all alone on such a cold night?"

"I might ask you the same question."

"I have nowhere to go," she answered, "and I don't mind the cold. Why are you out tonight and not asleep by the kitchen fire?"

"My master has arranged that I should die in his place," the cat said, "so I am waiting here for the Angel of Death."

"I will wait with you," the girl said. She sat down and put her arm around the cat and stroked his fur. Although the cat would never have admitted it, he was glad of the company.

As the great clock in the square struck midnight, the Angel of Death appeared. He drove up in a cart pulled by a shaggy pony, like any ordinary peddler, his cart laden with bright ribbons and shiny things.

"You're not what I expected," the cat said.

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"Well, neither are you," the Angel replied, "but I do as I am told and ask no questions. Hop in."

"Wait!" cried the little girl. "Take me, instead. If a cat can die for his master, then I can die for a cat."

"Little girl," the Angel said sternly, "what business is this of yours? Go home. It is late and your family will be worried."

"I have no home and no family," the girl answered. "I have known more kindness from this cat than anyone else in this whole village. Should I not give my life for someone who has been kind to me, even if he is only a cat?"

The Angel felt his heart move with pity. "Come, I will make you an offer, one that isn't made every day, I assure you. If you will both serve my aged parents, who live in the land of shadows, for three days, then I will spare you, and you will not see me again until you are both very, very old."

"Agreed", said the girl, and climbed into the Angel's cart. "Agreed," said the little cat and jumped lightly into the Angel's cart. Although there was no fear in his heart for his own safety, the cat was determined that no harm should come to the girl who had been so kind to him.

They had traveled only a short while, when the cat began to sense, the way cats do, that there might be something of interest or value nearby. He began to meow loudly. "Stop!" he told the Angel. "I must get out and stretch my legs."

Grumbling, the Angel halted the cart, but try as he might, the cat found nothing but a brown, fuzzy caterpillar crawling across the road. Rather than see it

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crushed by a passing wagon, the cat said, "Hold on to my fur, little caterpillar, and I will carry you to safety."

When he had been safely put down on the broad leaf of a mulberry bush, the grateful caterpillar said, "Friend cat, if ever I can help you, you have only to call for me."

"I cannot see how can you help me, but I thank you for your kind offer," the cat said politely. He returned to the cart, where the girl petted his soft fur gently. The cat felt badly that he had not been able to find anything of value, but said to himself, well, another chance may come, and then I will do better.

Not much later, the cat began to meow again for the Angel to stop. "Very well," the Angel said, "but this is the last time I will stop, no matter what."

Again the cat jumped down and began to search. This time, all he found was an egg which had just rolled out of a nest on the ground alongside the road. Fearing it would come to harm, the cat picked the egg up very carefully in his mouth and placed it in the nest.

"I am sure if you were hatched," the cat said to the egg, "you would call me friend and offer me your help if I should need it, so I will thank you now, although I certainly don't know how on earth an egg can possibly help me."

True to his word, the Angel did not stop again until they reached the Land of Shadows. It was a curious place, neither bright as the day, or dark as the night, but somewhere in-between. Everything looked gray and still. The cat and the

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girl saw a gray farmhouse with a meadow behind it, covered with a thin, gray, frost.

From the house came an old man and an old woman, she is a gray apron, he in a gray jacket. They came up to the wagon, smiling pleasantly, but the cat knew they were up to no good. They reached into the wagon and took the girl and the cat down.

"If you succeed, I will come back for you in three days," the Angel reminded them, and drove away.

"Come, come," the old couple said to the girl, "don't be afraid. You have only to do three tasks, simple things! which we shall name. Succeed at each one, and we'll send you home again with your pockets stuffed with treasure and a good story to tell! Only give us your shoes, you've no need for them here." And off came the shoes to vanish into the apron pocket of the old woman. The cat's fine red leather collar soon joined the shoes, and he and the little girl were lead to a shelter at the edge of the frozen meadow. There, they were to spend the night.

Cold and miserable, the cat and the girl huddled together, both too afraid to think what the morning might bring. They did not sleep at all.

In the morning, the old man came to assign them their first task. "You must go into my meadow," he said, giving the girl a small garden trowel, "and bring me a sign of life from that frozen field. Anything will do, a twig with a leaf or a bud, a bit of moss, anything alive. I will come back at nightfall to see how you've done."

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The little girl and the cat went out into the field. They scraped away the sparkling snow, and though the cat scratched away with his claws, and the girl dug with her trowel, they soon learned that the ground beneath the snow was frozen hard and there was not so much as a blade of grass alive. Still, they worked as hard as they could for hours. Without her shoes, the little girl was freezing. The cat curled himself around her toes, but he, too, was cold, and feared they would both soon freeze.

"Oh, how beautiful!" the girl said, looking at the sky. The cat looked and saw a beautiful, bright-colored cloud, moving towards them, glittering like jewels in the gray sky. When the cloud was just over their heads, it began to descend over them.

"Butterflies!" the cat said.

"You were kind to one of our children today," one of the butterflies, the largest and most beautiful one, said, "so we have come to repay the favor. Sleep now, both of you, we will weave you a coverlet of silk to warm you, and silken shoes to cover your feet. When you wake, your work will be done."

When the cat and the girl woke, they found themselves warm and safe in a cocoon of bright silk, and their feet well-covered in soft, silk shoes. The butterflies were gone, but there was still no sign of life in the frozen field, not so much as a speck of something green, just a dead, dry stick with cottony lumps on it at every turn.

"Well," said the old man, "have you done as I told you?" "This is all we have," the girl said, and held out the stick. The cottony lumps began to twitch,

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and one by one, a hundred butterflies, each more beautiful than the next, began to emerge from their cocoons. They perched, trembling, upon the stick, drying their wings, until the stick was completely covered, as if it had suddenly bloomed with a hundred flowers.

"What is this?" The old man took the stick and the butterflies all flew away. "Do you think you can trick me? Those butterflies did not grow in my meadow."

"They were born here," the girl answered, "and you asked only for a sign of life. We have done as you asked us."

The old man was not at all pleased. He took them back to the shelter and said, "My wife will have a job for you tomorrow. She is not so easy to fool, and not half as kind-hearted as I!"

After the old man had left them to pass another sleepless night, the largest and the most beautiful butterfly flew into the shelter. He accepted the girl's and the cat's thanks, and then told them, "We will help you again if we can, so long as you do not go inside the house. There, no one can help you but yourself."

The next day, the old woman came to fetch the girl and the cat, and took them out to the barn. "You must milk my cows," she said, "and fill all these pails with sweet milk." There were pails stacked up in horse stalls, hay racks, every spare inch of the barn, it seemed, was claimed. "I will come back tonight and see how your work goes." And she left.

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"I've never milked a cow," the girl said, "but I don't suppose it will be too hard."

"These cows are very old," the cat said, looking over the cows with a practiced eye. "These are grandmother cows, maybe even great-grandmothers! Their children have grown up and all gone away. You would have to be a very great wizard to get milk out of these cows." And he and the little girl felt very sad.

A little brown bird appeared and chirped as she settled on the edge of a stall door. She was soon joined by a small flock of birds. "You were kind to one of my children yesterday," she said, "and we have come to repay the favor. Sleep now, and we will build a warm nest of straw and twigs around you. When you wake, your work will be done."

And while the cat and the girl slept, the birds began to sing so sweetly, that the very old cows forgot that they were old and thought they heard their calves calling, and they gave so much milk that every bucket and every pail was filled to the brim with sweet milk and rich yellow cream.

The birds woke them gently. "We will help you again if we can," the little brown bird said, "so long as you do not set foot in the house. Once you are inside the house, no creature that flies, swims, or walks, no force of nature, can save you. Nothing can save you there, but yourself."

When the old woman came that evening and saw all the milk, she was furious. She kicked over the buckets, until the milk soaked into the ground and the cows wept to see it go to waste. She sent the cat and the girl back to their

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shelter. "Tomorrow, you will be guests in our house and sit by our fire. My husband is fond of riddles. He will ask you a riddle, and then you will ask him one. If you can answer, and he cannot, you are free to go, but if you cannot guess, then you must stay here forever, and serve us until time itself ends."

The cat and the girl spent a very long sleepless night wondering what riddle they would have to answer, and what riddle they knew that would stump the old man. To make matters worse, the girl didn't even know any riddles, and the cat knew only one, and it was so ridiculously easy a kitten with its eyes barely open would know the answer.

"We'll do the best we can," the girl said, but they were both very afraid when the old woman came to fetch them the next morning. She would not speak to them but ushered them both into the house. Then, she sat on the porch in a rocking chair that creaked as she rocked back and forth.

The old man was sitting by the fire, waiting. "Come in, come in," he said eagerly, "I will go first. Here is my riddle.

"It closes in anger, opens in love, stretches, reaches, below and above, makes music, but cannot sing, writes words, but cannot read, this precious gift belongs only to man, can you guess the answer? See if you can!"

"What on earth can it be?" the cat wondered to himself. He knew there were flowers that could open and close their petals, but what kind of flower could make music or write? Birds sing, he thought, but they do not write, and they certainly do not open and close. The cat was at a complete loss, when the girl said, excitedly-

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"Oh! I know! It's hands!" she said. "They open and close, they can make music," she clapped her hands to demonstrate," and they can write, but can't read! Yes, it's hands, I'm sure of it!"

"Yes, that is the answer," the old man said angrily, "but you are not free yet. You still have to ask me your riddle, and I know every riddle known to man!"

At that, the girl and the cat felt very sad, for between them, they only knew the one riddle, and the cat knew it was not a hard riddle at all. Still, he was a cat of some courage, and there was nothing else to do, so he asked the old man his riddle.

"They shiver and quiver alongside your face, stand up, lie smooth, but stay in their place, mostly they're straight, but sometimes they curl, without them I'm sure I'd be lost in the world."

The old man thought and thought. He looked puzzled, then bewildered, and then he looked very, very angry. "Ears!" he cried out, and then, very quickly, "Or earrings!" which, of course, is cheating, because you can only answer once.

"Ha!" said the cat. "It's whiskers! Every cat knows that one, even kittens!"

With a roar of rage, the old man rose from his chair by the fire and tried to grab the girl and the cat, but they quickly ran out the door. The old woman saw them from her rocker on the porch and reached her arm out, fast as anything, and caught hold of the girl's tattered dress.

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"Mice, help!" the cat called, and the yard was soon swarming with mice. They ran into the old woman's apron pockets and swarmed up her stockings. They pulled the old man's thin little beard and ran across his shoulders so that he twitched and jumped. While the old man and the old woman danced and shrieked, trying to rid themselves of the mice, the girl and the cat ran as fast as they could until they could no longer see the farm.

They did not stop until they were far, far away and could just barely see the top of the highest, grandest house in their own village, which happened to be the house of the rich man who had started all the trouble in the first place.

"There, we are almost home again!" the girl said, smiling at the cat. "Whiskers!" she said admiringly, "I would never have thought of that."

"Well, you would if you were a cat," he said, being a generous, and gracious sort. "But hands! Now, that is something I never would have thought of," looking down at his paws.

"Little cat," the girl said, "we have been through a lot together. May I kiss you?"

"You may," the cat said.

The girl picked him up, very gently, and kissed his broad, gray-furred forehead. Looking a bit puzzled, she set him down again. "I thought you would turn into a handsome prince or something," she said.

The cat pulled himself up to his full height and looked up at her proudly. "I am a cat," he said, "isn't that enough?" And so it was.

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The old merchant soon had another visit from the Angel of Death and this time, there was no wizard who came to his aid. As for the girl, good fortune soon came to her and she lived a long and happy life. The cat also had a good life. He never wanted for anything, and despite being thought rather odd by the cat community at large, he never, ever, in the whole of his very long life, caught a single mouse.

Ever.