

## THE BOOTED CAT; OR PUSS IN BOOTS

Retold and adapted by Sophie Masson

*Appears here with the kind permission of the author.*

A MILLER died leaving his three sons only three things: his mill, his donkey, and his cat. The mill was only small; the donkey wasn't very young; and the cat, well, the cat was a good mouser, but just a cat, or so it seemed.

The boys quickly agreed on a split without fighting; no lawyer or magistrate was required, and just as well, you might say, for as everyone knows, their fees would have soon swallowed up the meagre inheritance and left only debts in its place. The eldest son, as was the custom, got the most valuable bit of property, the mill; the second son the next most valuable thing, the donkey, and the youngest son--well, the youngest son just got the cat.

Unfair, unfair, thought the youngest son to himself, my brothers can at least join forces and continue on the milling business, but there won't be room for me, I will have to leave. 'And what good will you be to me then?' he said, aloud, to the cat who was regarding him with unblinking green eyes. 'I could kill you, eat you and make a muff of your fur but you are a good creature, and I would not want to do it. And even if I did, after that, what? I have no way of earning a living and will soon starve to death.'

What was not his surprise when the cat spoke, saying, 'No need to be anxious, dear master, or to do anything you might regret and I certainly would! Just get me some boots and a sack and you'll see that maybe you weren't so hard done by as you thought.'

Now the youngest son was a simple soul and although he'd been shocked at first when the cat spoke, he quickly got over it. The world was full of wonders and miracles after all, or so he'd heard, so why not this? He had no idea why the cat wanted boots and a sack, but had often seen him at clever tricks, ambushing mice in the most ingenious ways. And what did he have to lose, anyway? So he agreed.

It was easy to find a sack in a mill, but cat-sized boots took a bit more doing, and in the end they came off an old doll owned by the cobbler's wife, who took pity

on the young man. And if she thought it was an odd thing, to want boots for a cat, she made no comment on it, but also gave him the doll's felt hat as a bonus. Thus proudly equipped with boots and sack and the bonus hat, the cat set off, telling his master to stay home and wait for him. 'But what shall I do while I wait?' asked the young man. 'Think good thoughts, or twiddle your thumbs, it little matters,' answered the cat, 'just know the wait will be worth it.'

Off went the cat to a nearby hillside where there was a large rabbit warren. He'd put some leftover grain from the mill in the sack, and some carrot tops from the garden, and laying the sack down on the ground near one of the entrances to the warren, he left it slightly open to show the tempting meal inside. Then he lay down himself not far away, lying so still with his eyes closed that he looked dead. It wouldn't have fooled a wily old rabbit of course; but a silly curious young one with not much knowledge of the world and a liking for free food—that was quite another question! And sure enough within a few minutes, out from the warren came a fat young rabbit, sniffing at the delicious food so temptingly in reach and apparently undefended...

As soon as the rabbit had nosed into the sack, up like lightning the cat sprang on it and quickly shut the sack, tying its mouth up neatly with cord (he really was a clever cat!). With the sack slung on his back, away he trudged to the King's palace, some distance from there. You can imagine the surprise of the King's guards when a booted hatted cat with a sack on his back strode up to them and demanded to speak to the King himself. Perhaps it was surprise indeed that made them meekly let him in to the chamber where the King sat in council with his ministers, a couple of ambassadors, and any number of other important persons, who stared just as much as the guards had done at a sight very seldom seen in those days—or indeed any days, you might say.

Not at all put out by so many eyes on him, the cat took off his hat and bowed with a flourish. 'Your Majesty,' he said, 'allow me to present a gift from my master, the Marquis of Carabas. He knows how much Your Majesty loves a good stew of wild rabbit, fragrant with herbs from the hills, and in this sack is one of the best rabbits your cooks will have ever seen, with my master's most respectful compliments.' (He was not only a most clever cat, but a very well-informed one.)

'Well,' said the King, beaming, 'that is very kind indeed of your master, he is quite right, I do love a good dish of wild rabbit, for the ones bred in the palace farms

just don't have the same taste at all, much too bland for my liking! Please tell your master the Marquis of Carabas that I am most pleased by his thoughtfulness and I hope to hear from him again.'

'I am sure you will, Your Majesty,' said the cat, bowing low, and left the room followed by the goggling stares of all those most important people who up till now had had no idea of the King's liking for wild rabbit stew, and privately decided they must give him many such gifts in the future. And who was this Marquis of Carabas fellow? None of them had ever heard of him, but if he was the cat's master, he must surely be the most extraordinary fellow.

On the way home the cat caught another rabbit which he took home to his master to roast for both their dinners. He recounted what had happened to the miller's youngest son whose eyes were as round as those of those important Court persons, even though he humbly thought of himself as not important at all. As to being the Marquis of Carabas, well, he laughed loud and long at that, it felt like a good joke to him, a title that did not exist except in the quick mind of his cat. 'And in that of the King and all his Court now,' corrected the cat, with a grin.

Next day, the cat repeated the procedure, except this time it was two plump partridges he caught in his sack. This time no-one was surprised to see him arrive at the gates of the castle, but the important persons who had already urged their gamekeepers to come up with as much wild rabbits as they could were quite put out by the fact that the King was now more interested in partridges than rabbits. The next day, the same thing happened, except with a brace of quail, and the next with a hare, and so on and on over some time. By now the cat was an honoured visitor to the palace, invited to sit by the side of the King and his daughter, the Princess, who was the most beautiful girl in the world, so said all the world, or at least that part of it that mattered to important persons. The castle cooks were instructed to give him the best meals a cat's heart might hanker after, and to pack delicious things to take home as gifts to his so-generous master, the Marquis of Carabas.

Generous—and mysterious, never appearing himself but only ever sending his emissary, the cat, to speak in his stead. Gossip about the Marquis was rife in the King's court, with each of those important persons letting it be understood they knew exactly who he was, where he lived, and many other things besides. But of course they knew nothing at all. Only the cat knew, and he wasn't about to tell, he just smiled enigmatically at what he heard, and said neither yea nor nay to any of it.

The King, meanwhile, didn't worry himself about it; kings don't have to worry about such trivial things as who might be giving them gifts, they can just enjoy the gifts themselves, as their due. As to his daughter, the world's most beautiful Princess, she wasn't particularly fond of wild rabbit stew or roast partridge or jugged hare or any of these things, but she was fond of her father and saw how much more cheerful he'd been ever since Puss in Boots, as she'd dubbed him, had come into their lives, so what need was there to ask any questions about his master?

But the cat knew that was a state of affairs that couldn't last long. The Marquis of Carabas would have to show himself soon, and to his best advantage. The youngest son of the miller might be humble and have a simple soul, but he was quite easy on the eye, or so the cat had heard from village girls' whispers. He was tall, well-formed, with shining dark hair and hazel eyes, and a dimple when he smiled. And he had nice manners, not the type important people at Court deem right, but the sort that go with a kind heart and a lack of guile. (The cat had grown quite fond of his master, truth be told). Dressed in the right clothes, set in the right surroundings, the title of Marquis of Carabas would fit him like a glove. But those things couldn't be acquired with a sack and a rabbit; more had to be done. So the cat began to think, and plan, and plot, and when he wasn't at Court or with his master, wandered around the countryside, searching, keeping his eyes and ears open, and waiting for the right moment...

And then one day it came. The cat learned that the King, the Princess, and a brace of important persons were to go on a picnic by the river, quite some distance away. Now the cat had reconnoitred this area a few days before and thought what a perfect place it was in so many ways for the dramatic appearance of the Marquis. 'On this day, you must be bathing in the river, at the time and spot I will tell you,' he told his master, 'and don't fail to be there.' The young man just nodded; he had long since stopped asking any questions, for everything since he had inherited the cat had gone like a dream. So at the appointed time and spot, he was bathing in the river, naked as the day he was born, for he had of course taken all his clothes and left them on the riverbank, under a tree. It was a hot summer's day and the water was cool and silky on his skin, and in the enjoyment of it, he did not notice the cat creeping up to his clothes and throwing them away deep in the bushes, well out of sight. Just as he did so, along came the King and the Princess and the important persons in their carriages, and as the vehicles swept along by the river, up sprang the

cat, calling frantically, ‘Help! Your Majesty! Your Majesty! My master the Marquis of Carabas is in great danger of drowning, and perfidious thieves have stolen his clothes as well, please help us!’

Well, of course the King ordered his carriage to stop, and then ordered his footmen to save the Marquis’ life, and his modesty too of course. The young man was most surprised to be seized by brawny arms and dragged from the water, and even more when they enveloped him in a long brocaded coat, but he knew his cat must be behind this, so allowed himself to be led out without protest, his hair glistening from the water. As he clambered out onto the bank, he met the eyes of the Princess, looking out from the window of her father’s carriage, and both liked the look of each other very well, though neither of them said a word. As he was led to a spot where other clothes were handed to him so he might appear as a nobleman should, the young man stopped being the miller’s youngest son, and became, indeed, the Marquis of Carabas, the man most worthy of the hand of the most beautiful Princess in the world.

But the cat had not lingered to see this happy sight. Instead, he had raced on, past the bend in the river to a place where he knew, from eavesdropping on coachmen discussing the route, that the King and his entourage must pass close by on their way home. Tucked away in a secret valley, well away from prying eyes, lay a beautiful estate, with rich cropped fields and bountiful orchards and gardens surrounding a charming small castle with walls yellow as sunlight and roofs that shone with the sheen of pink and grey pearls. There were people working in the fields, and as the cat approached, he called out, ‘The King is coming soon! You must tell him these fields belong to the Marquis of Carabas, or you will be minced up and served up as pâté in the castle!’ The people looked at him with dull eyes and slack mouths but nodded, fearfully. On went the cat, and came to the orchards where people were picking fruit, and to them he made the same threat and received the same response; and so to the gardens, where again the same thing happened.

Now the cat had discovered that this beautiful estate actually belonged to a fearsome ogre with a great talent for shapeshifting. Where this ogre had come from, and when he had come, nobody quite knows, and that is not the question here. It is that the cat had learned of his existence and studied the few frightened bits of stories about him and understood how he had to be defeated. It was not the cat’s concern

of course that the ogre kept his people in great fear; that might be the concern of his master the Marquis—if the cat got the better of the ogre, of course.

Up marched the cat to the door of the castle and knocked on the door. The ogre himself answered and the cat bowed most politely and said he had come to pay his deepest respects for he had heard about the ogre's great shapeshifting powers. 'Honoured sir, ' he went on, 'I would be so delighted if perhaps you might consent to give me a demonstration, for I have heard you can turn yourself into any kind of animal, even a lion or an elephant.'

The ogre found his flattery pleasantly amusing and was neither surprised nor concerned by the cat's sudden appearance—for he had seen stranger sights than a booted hatted cat in his time and as to being concerned, why, he was many times bigger and mightier than a skinny feline who he could gobble up in two mouthfuls if he chose. 'You have heard right, I can indeed do that,' he said, and in a flash, there was a huge lion with blazing yellow eyes standing there in his place, roaring fit to shake the walls. So sudden was the lion's appearance, so loud the roaring, that the cat could not help but jump in fright to the top of some furniture, and it was about all he could do to gather his wits and shout, 'Ah yes, marvellous, marvellous! But I've heard it's actually much harder to turn into something smaller than yourself, for instance a rat or a mouse, and I don't suppose you can do that?'

'You suppose wrong!' roared the lion-ogre and in the twinkling of an eye, the lion vanished and in its place was a squeaking grey mouse running across the floor. Instantly, the cat sprang onto the mouse, killed it and ate it. And that was the end of the ogre.

Outside came the rumble of carriage wheels on the gravel and as the cat, licking his lips(it had been a tasty sort of mouse!) raced outside, he was just in time to see them drawing up to the castle entrance. Out he went and bowing low, called out, 'Welcome Your Majesty and Royal Highness, to the home of my dear master, the Marquis of Carabas, whose lands you have just passed through.'

'Thank you, Puss,' said the King, 'that is most decent of you,' and turning to the young man, he added, 'This all belongs to you, then, Marquis? Well, well, most impressive indeed, I must say,' and he went into the castle without waiting to hear what the Marquis had to say, which was just as well, for that young fellow was dumbstruck. And that condition was not improved when the smiling Princess took his hand, saying, 'What a beautiful place this is, indeed, so suited to its master,'

making him blush a fiery red. He did not know it then but that won the Princess' heart even more; none of the important persons buzzing around at Court blushed at all, considering it common. And as she found them most uncongenial companions, she was glad to see that the Marquis, who was nevertheless obviously a person of great note, did not feel the same way.

Hand in hand, they followed the King and the cat into a magnificent room where on a long table reposed a feast of wine, roasted meats, cheese and cakes. It had been meant for the ogre, for he ate as much as twenty men; but it did very well for the King and his entourage, even the important people, who had to admit that the Marquis of Carabas kept a very fine table.

Soon, of course, there was a wedding; the King was more than happy with his new son-in-law, especially because he could see how happy his daughter was, and he was a loving father. (Besides, he had been rather dreading having to accept one of the important people as a son-in-law who would bore him to tears). The Marquis also proved to be a kind master to the people on his lands; and the fear that had ruled them when the ogre lived ebbed away, replaced by good cheer. As to the cat, he was a favoured guest in both the King's palace and the Marquis' castle, and never had to chase mice for his supper again, but only for his own entertainment. And that suited him very well indeed.

## **Afterword**

*Le Maître Chat ou le Chat botté* (Master Cat or the Booted Cat), usually known in English as Puss in Boots) has an origin going back to Italy in the 16th century but is most famous in French writer Charles Perrault's brilliant 17th century version, which I have used for my retelling. It was included in Perrault's collection of eight fairy tales, *Histoires ou contes du temps passé* (Stories or tales from past times), sometimes known as *Les Contes de ma mère l'Oye* (Tales of Mother Goose), written when he was in his 60's, and published in 1697. The book was an immediate success, kicking off an enduring fashion for fairy tales in France which soon spread to other countries. The tales contained within Perrault's collection, which as well as Puss in Boots include Cinderella, Sleeping Beauty, Blue Beard, Red Riding Hood and others, are still massively popular around the world to this day.

It's not surprising that Perrault's versions of these stories are probably still the most famous of any others, even Grimm's. Perrault (1628-1703) was a gifted writer whose lightness of touch, wit, keen observation of people, sense of drama and occasional black humour combine with an ability to conjure a magical yet grounded world. They have an atmosphere which blend elegance and earthiness, pointing to the fertile mix of peasant and aristocratic cultures which produced the fairy tale as a literary form. The 'morals' he includes at the end of each tale are not dry morals lessons, or conventional confirmations of social norms, but full of wit, good sense and often slyly subversive. There are two for Puss in Boots which I have freely translated below:

*First morality:*

However great may it be/To receive a great fortune/Handed down from father to son/It is nevertheless true/That hard work, skills and quick wits/Matter more than inherited goods.

*Second morality:*

If the son of a miller can with such speed/Win the heart of a Princess/Making her look at him with longing eyes/Then it's clear that good looks, fine clothes and youth/Are not indifferent means/Of inspiring tenderness.

Of course you could say that in fact Puss in Boots is a most amoral tale, and that deceit and trickery lie at the heart of the transformation of the miller's son into the Marquis, and moreover that he did not exactly work hard to effect that transformation himself. And you might well be right. But it does not matter; the tale is so sprightly, clever and full of intriguing enigmas around the nature and powers of that great feline con-artist, that it stands apart from any moralising, even Perrault's light-on ones.

I chose to retell *Le Chat botté* firstly because I wanted to include of course a fairy tale by the great Perrault and because it seems to me to perfectly exemplify his engaging voice and sparkling style, as well as convey a vivid picture of a hard-scrabble but quick-thinking rural world that sits side by side with a mannered, bored courtly one. Secondly, it was a tale I really enjoyed as a young child, mostly because I adored the idea of a skinny little cat in hat and boots basically running rings around everyone (and like most young children, I was not fazed at all by Puss' ruthlessness) and because there were funny moments, like the miller's son stuck in the river because his clothes had been pinched (again like most young children, I thought



nakedness was pretty funny!) . Later, as I got older, I loved the story too for its dramatic incidents—the ogre and the shapeshifting!—and its romantic element, and much later still I appreciated the humorous juxtaposition of such things as a King thinking a humble wild rabbit was a fine gift; or the dry comment at the beginning of the tale about the brothers not fighting over the inheritance and so no lawyers being required. Thirdly, this tale was the inspiration and basis for my very first fantasy novel, *Carabas*, which was published in Australia in 1996, the US in 2000 and the UK in 2002. In the novel, I teased out some of the intriguing enigmatic elements around the cat's nature, linking it to Southern French stories of 'matagots' or witches, female and male, who could shape-shift into cats, as well as to other even more surprising elements. You could say that *Le Chat botté* helped to kick-start my own love of creating my own literary fairy tales, long novelistic riffs on those beautiful, magical old tales.

This is the first time I have retold the original tale, however; and I wanted to pay full honour to Perrault's original whilst also creating my own version which includes a few extra elements. I used the French original exactly as it was first published, and embroidered around that, using the same light, jaunty tone as Perrault. So for instance, I added details about where the cat's boots came from, why the King was so happy with the rabbit gift, and also sketched in the Court a bit more and the 'important persons' there, who never see what is in front of them, but only what their conventional straitjacket tells them. I have not changed the essential nature of the cat and just as in the original tale he is the hero (or anti-hero, if you like!) of the story, with a nice line in repartee, but I have lightly sketched in a little more about his master. And I have based the description of the ogre's castle on a glimpse of a lovely yet homely small castle/towered manor house in the Perigord in southern France, rather than the rather more imposing pile in the Val de Loire, Chateau d'Oiron, which is said to have inspired Perrault (Certainly, it appears that a 16<sup>th</sup> century owner of the chateau, Claude Gouffier, who had been granted the title of Marquis de Caravaz, was an inspiration for the fairy tale Marquis.)

It has been a great pleasure to recreate the atmosphere of such an enjoyable tale, and I venture to hope that Monsieur Perrault himself might not have disapproved.