



Tonight's Bedtime Story

Fairy Tales for Sleepy Children

presents

The White Cat

From "The Fairy Book" by Miss Mulock



here was once a king who had three sons, all handsome, brave and noble of heart. Nevertheless, some wicked courtiers made their father believe they were eager to wear his crown, which, though he was old, he had no mind to resign. He therefore invented a plan to get them out of the kingdom, and prevent their carrying out any undutiful projects. Sending for them to a private audience, he conversed with them kindly, and said: “You must be sensible, my dear children, that my great age prevents me from attending so closely as I have hitherto done to state affairs. I fear this may be injurious to my subjects; I therefore desire to place my crown on the head of one of you; but it is no more than just that, in return for such a present, you should procure me some amusement in my retirement, before I leave the capital for ever. I cannot help thinking that a little dog, handsome, faithful, and engaging, would be the very thing to make me happy; so that, without bestowing a preference on either of you, I declare that he who brings me the most perfect little dog shall be my successor.”

The princes were much surprised at the fancy of their father to have a little dog, yet they accepted the proposition with pleasure; and accordingly, after taking leave of the king, who presented them with abundance of money and jewels, and appointed that day twelvemonth for their return, they set off on their travels.

Before separating, however, they took some refreshment together, in an old palace about three miles out of town, where they mutually agreed to meet in the same place on that day twelvemonth, and go all together with their presents to court. They also agreed to change their names, and travel incognito.

Each took a different road; but it is intended to relate the adventures of only the youngest, who was the most beautiful, amiable, and accomplished prince in the world. As he travelled from town to town, he bought all the handsome dogs that fell in his way; and as soon as he saw one that was handsomer than those he had, he made a present of the rest; for twenty servants would scarcely have been sufficient to take care of all the dogs he was continually purchasing. At length, wandering he knew not whither, he found himself in a forest; night suddenly came on, and with it a violent storm of thunder, lightning, and rain: to add to his perplexity, he lost his way. After he had groped about for a long time, he perceived a light, which made him suppose that he was not far from some house: he accordingly pursued his way towards it, and in a short time found himself at the gates of the most magnificent palace he had ever beheld. The entrance-door was of gold, covered with sapphires, which shone so that scarcely could the strongest eyesight bear to look at it: this was the light the prince had seen from the forest. The walls were of transparent porcelain, variously coloured, and represented the history of all the fairies that had existed from the beginning of the world. The prince, coming back to the golden door, observed a deer’s foot fastened to a chain of diamonds; he could not help wondering at the magnificence he beheld, and the security in which the inhabitants seemed to live; “For,” said he to himself, “nothing could be easier than for thieves to steal this chain, and as many of the sapphire-stones as would make their fortunes.” He pulled the chain, and heard a bell, the sound of which was exquisite. In a few moments the door was opened; yet he perceived nothing but twelve hands in the air, each holding a torch. The prince was so astonished that he durst not move a step—when he felt himself gently pushed on by some other hands from behind him. He walked on, in great

perplexity, till he entered a vestibule inlaid with porphyry and lapis-stone, where the most melodious voice he had ever heard chanted the following words:-

“Welcome, prince, no danger fear,
Mirth and love attend you here;
You shall break the magic spell,
That on a beauteous lady fell.
Welcome, prince, no danger fear,
Mirth and love attend you here.”

The prince now advanced with confidence, wondering what these words could mean; the hands moved him forward towards a large door of coral, which opened of itself to give him admittance into a splendid apartment built of mother-o’-pearl, through which he passed into others, so richly adorned with paintings and jewels, and so resplendently lighted with thousands of lamps, girandoles, and lustres, that he imagined he must be in an enchanted palace. When he had passed through sixty apartments, all equally splendid, he was stopped by the hands, and a large easy chair advanced of itself towards the fireplace; then the hands, which he observed were extremely white and delicate, took off his wet clothes, and supplied their place with the finest linen imaginable, adding a comfortable wrapping-gown, embroidered with gold and pearls.

The hands next brought him an elegant dressing-table, and combed his hair so very gently that he scarcely felt their touch. They held before him a beautiful basin, filled with perfumes, for him to wash his face and hands, and afterwards took off the wrapping-gown, and dressed him in a suit of clothes of still greater splendour. When his toilet was complete, they conducted him to an apartment he had not yet seen, and which also was magnificently furnished. There was a table spread for supper, and everything upon it was of the purest gold, adorned with jewels. The prince observed there were two covers set, and was wondering who was to be his companion, when his attention was suddenly caught by a small figure not a foot high, which just then entered the room, and advanced towards him. It had on a long black veil, and was supported by two cats dressed in mourning and with swords by their sides: they were followed by a numerous retinue of cats, some carrying cages full of rats, and others mouse-traps full of mice.

The prince was at a loss what to think. The little figure now approached, and throwing aside her veil, he beheld a most beautiful white cat: she seemed young and melancholy; and, addressing herself to him, she said, “My prince, you are welcome; your presence affords me the greatest pleasure.”

“Madam,” replied he, “I would fain thank you for your generosity, nor can I help observing that you must be an extraordinary creature to possess, with your present form, the gift of speech, and the most magnificent palace I have ever seen.”

“All this is very true,” answered the beautiful cat; “but, prince, I am not fond of talking, and least of all do I like compliments; let us therefore sit down to supper.”

The trunkless hands then placed the dishes on the table, and the prince and white cat seated themselves at it. The first dish was a pie made of young pigeons, and the next was a fricassee of the fattest mice. The view of the one made the prince almost afraid to taste the other, till the white cat, who guessed his thoughts, assured him that there were certain dishes at table which had been dressed on purpose for him, in which there was not a morsel of either rat or mouse: accordingly, he ate heartily of such as[351] she recommended. When supper was over, he perceived that the white cat had a portrait set in gold hanging to one of her feet. He begged her permission to look at it; when, to his astonishment, he saw the portrait of a handsome young man, who exactly resembled himself! He thought there was something most extraordinary in all this: yet, as the white cat sighed and looked very sorrowful, he did not venture to ask any questions. He conversed with her on different subjects, and found her extremely well versed in everything that was passing in the world. When night was far advanced, his hostess wished him a good night, and he was conducted by the hands to his bedchamber, which was different still from anything he had seen in the palace, being hung with the wings of butterflies mixed with the most curious feathers. His bed was of gauze, festooned with bunches of the gayest ribands, and the looking-glasses reached from the floor to the ceiling. The prince was undressed and put into bed by the hands, without speaking a word. He, however, slept little, and in the morning was awakened by a confused noise. The hands took him out of bed, and put on him a handsome hunting-jacket. He looked into the courtyard, and perceived more than five hundred cats, busily employed in preparing for the field—for this was a day of festival. Presently the white cat came to his apartment; and having politely inquired after his health, she invited him to partake of their amusement. The prince willingly acceded, and mounted a wooden horse, richly caparisoned, which had been prepared for him, and which he was assured would gallop to admiration. The beautiful white cat mounted a monkey; she wore a dragoon’s cap, which made her look so fierce that all the rats and mice ran away in the utmost terror.

Everything being ready, the horns sounded, and away they went: no hunting was ever more agreeable. The cats ran faster than the hares and rabbits; and when they caught any, they turned them out to be hunted in the presence of the white cat, and a thousand cunning tricks were played. Nor were the birds in safety; for the monkey made nothing of climbing up the trees, with the white cat on his back, to the nests of the young eagles. When the chase was over, the whole retinue returned to the palace; the white cat immediately exchanged her dragoon’s cap for the veil, and sat down to supper with the prince, who, being very hungry, ate heartily, and afterwards partook with her of the most delicious wines. He then was conducted to his chamber as before, and wakened in the morning to renew the same sort of life, which day after day became so pleasant to him that he no longer thought of anything but of pleasing the sweet little creature who received him so courteously: accordingly, every day was spent in new amusements. The prince had almost forgotten his country and relations, and sometimes even regretted that he was not a cat, so great was his affection for his mewling companions.

“Alas!” said he to the white cat, “how will it afflict me to leave you, whom I love so much! Either make yourself a lady, or make me a cat.” She smiled at the prince’s wish, but offered no reply.

At length, the twelvemonth was nearly expired: the white cat, who knew the very day when the prince was to reach his father’s palace, reminded him that he had but three days longer to look for a perfect little dog. The prince, astonished at his own forgetfulness, began to afflict himself; when the cat told him not to be so sorrowful, since she would not only provide him with a little dog, but also with a wooden horse, which should convey him safely home in less than twelve hours.

“Look here,” said she, showing him an acorn, “this contains what you desire.”

The prince put the acorn to his ear, and heard the barking of a little dog. Transported with joy, he thanked the cat a thousand times; and the next day, bidding her tenderly adieu, he set out on his return.

The prince arrived first at the place of rendezvous, and was soon joined by his brothers: they mutually embraced, and began to give an account of their success; when the youngest showed them only a little mongrel cur, telling them that he thought it could not fail to please the king, from its extraordinary beauty. The brothers trod on each other’s toes under the table, as much as to say, “We have little to fear from this sorry-looking animal.” The next day they went together to the palace. The dogs of the two elder brothers were lying on cushions, and so curiously wrapped around with embroidered quilts, that one would scarcely venture to touch them. The youngest produced his cur, and all wondered how the prince could hope to receive a crown for such a shabby present. The king examined the two little dogs of the elder princes, and declared he thought them so equally beautiful that he knew not to which, with justice, he could give the preference. They accordingly began to dispute; when the youngest prince, taking his acorn from his pocket, soon ended their contention; for a little dog appeared, which could with ease go through the smallest ring, and was besides a miracle of beauty. The king could not possibly hesitate in declaring his satisfaction; yet, as he was not more inclined than the year before to part with his crown, he told his sons that he was extremely obliged to them for the pains they had taken: and since they had succeeded so well, he wished they would make a second attempt; he therefore begged they would take another year in order to procure a piece of cambric, fine enough to be drawn through the eye of a small needle.

The three princes thought this very hard; yet they set out, in obedience to the king’s command. The two eldest took different roads, and the youngest remounted his wooden horse, and in a short time arrived at the palace of his beloved white cat, who received him with the greatest joy, while the trunkless hands helped him to dismount, and provided him with immediate refreshment. Afterwards the prince gave the white cat an account of the admiration which had been bestowed on the beautiful little dog, and informed her of the further injunction of his father.

“Make yourself perfectly easy, dear prince,” said she; “I have in my palace some cats who are perfect adepts in making such cambric as the king requires; so you have nothing to do but to

give me the pleasure of your company while it is making, and I will procure you all the amusement possible.”

She accordingly ordered the most curious fire-works to be played off in sight of the window of the apartment in which they were sitting; and nothing but festivity and rejoicing was heard throughout the palace for the prince’s return. As the white cat frequently gave proofs of an excellent understanding, the prince was by no means tired of her company; she talked with him of state affairs, of theatres, of fashions: in short, she was at a loss on no subject whatever; so that when the prince was alone, he had plenty of amusement in thinking how it could possibly be, that a small white cat could be endowed with all the attractions of the very best and most charming of women.

The twelvemonth in this manner again passed insensibly away; but the cat took care to remind the prince of his duty in proper time. “For once, my prince,” said she, “I will have the pleasure of equipping you as suits your high rank.” And, looking into the courtyard, he saw a superb car, ornamented all over with gold, silver, pearls, and diamonds, drawn by twelve horses as white as snow, and harnessed in the most sumptuous trappings; and behind the car a thousand guards, richly appalled, were waiting to attend on the prince’s person. She then presented him with a nut: “You will find in it,” said she, “the piece of cambric I promised you: do not break the shell till you are in the presence of the king your father.” Then, to prevent the acknowledgments which the prince was about to offer, she hastily bade him adieu.

Nothing could exceed the speed with which the snow-white horses conveyed this fortunate prince to his father’s palace, where his brothers had just arrived before him. They embraced each other, and demanded an immediate audience of the king, who received them with the greatest of kindness. The princes hastened to place at the feet of his majesty the curious present he had required them to procure. The eldest produced a piece of cambric so extremely fine, that his friends had no doubt of its passing through the eye of a needle, which was now delivered to the king, having been kept locked up in the custody of his majesty’s treasurer all the time. But when the king tried to draw the cambric through the eye of the needle, it would not pass, though it failed but very little. Then came the second prince, who made as sure of obtaining the crown as his brother had done, but, alas! with no better success; for though his piece of cambric was exquisitely fine, yet it could not be drawn through the eye of the needle. It was now the turn of the youngest prince, who accordingly advanced, and opening an elegant little box inlaid with jewels, took out a walnut and cracked the shell, imagining he should immediately perceive his piece of cambric; but what was his astonishment to see nothing but a filbert! He did not, however, lose his hopes; he cracked the filbert, and it presented him with a cherry-stone. The lords of the court, who had assembled to witness this extraordinary trial, could not, any more than the princes his brothers, refrain from laughing, to think he should be so silly as to claim the crown on no better pretensions. The prince, however, cracked the cherry-stone, which was filled with a kernel; he divided it, and found in the middle a grain of wheat, and in that a grain of millet-seed. He was now absolutely confounded, and could not help muttering between his teeth, “O white cat, white cat, thou hast deceived me!” At this instant he felt his hand scratched by the claw of a cat; upon which he again took courage, and opening the grain of millet-seed, to

the astonishment of all present, he drew forth a piece of cambric four hundred yards long, and fine enough to be threaded with perfect ease through the eye of the needle.

When the king found he had no pretext left for refusing the crown to his youngest son, he sighed deeply, and it was easy to be seen that he was sorry for the prince's success.

"My sons," said he, "it is so gratifying to the heart of a father to receive proofs of his children's love and obedience, that I cannot refuse myself the satisfaction of requiring of you one thing more. You must undertake another expedition. That one of you, who, by the end of a year, brings me the most beautiful lady, shall marry her and obtain my crown."

So they again took leave of the king and of each other, and set out without delay; and in less than twelve hours, our young prince arrived, in his splendid car, at the palace of his dear white cat. Everything went on as before till the end of another year. At length only one day remained of the year, when the white cat thus addressed him: "To-morrow, my prince, you must present yourself at the palace of your father, and give him a proof of your obedience. It depends only on yourself to conduct thither the most beautiful princess ever yet beheld, for the time is come when the enchantment by which I am bound may be ended. You must cut off my head and tail," continued she, "and throw them into the fire."

"I!" said the prince, hastily—"I cut off your head and tail! You surely mean to try my affection, which, believe me, beautiful cat, is truly yours."

"You mistake me, generous prince," said she; "I do not doubt your regard; but if you wish to see me in any other form than that of a cat, you must consent to do as I desire, when you will have done me a service I shall never be able sufficiently to repay."

The prince's eyes filled with tears as she spoke, yet he considered himself obliged to undertake the dreadful task; and the cat continuing to press him with the greatest eagerness, with a trembling hand he drew his sword, cut off her head and tail, and threw them into the fire. No sooner was this done, than the most beautiful lady his eyes had ever seen stood before him: and ere he had sufficiently recovered from his surprise to speak to her, a long train of attendants, who, at the same moment as their mistress, were changed to their natural shapes, came to offer their congratulations to the queen, and inquire her commands. She received them with the greatest kindness, and ordering them to withdraw, thus addressed the astonished prince:

"Do not imagine, dear prince, that I have always been a cat, or that I am of obscure birth. My father was the monarch of six kingdoms; he tenderly loved my mother, and left her always at liberty to follow her own inclinations. Her prevailing passion was to travel; and a short time before my birth, having heard of some fairies who were in possession of the largest gardens filled with the most delicious fruits, she had so strong a desire to eat some of them, that she set out for the country where they lived. She arrived at their abode, which she found to be a magnificent palace, on all sides glittering with gold and precious stones. She knocked a long time at the gates; but no one came, nor could she perceive the least sign that it had any inhabitant. The difficulty, however, did but increase the violence of my mother's longing; for she saw the tops of the trees above the garden-walls, loaded with the most

luscious fruits. The queen, in despair, ordered her attendants to place tents close to the door of the palace; but, having waited six weeks without seeing any one pass the gates, she fell sick of vexation, and her life was despaired of.

“One night, as she lay half asleep, she turned herself about, and, opening her eyes, perceived a little old woman, very ugly and deformed, seated in the easy-chair by her bedside. ‘I and my sister fairies,’ said she, ‘take it very ill that your majesty should so obstinately persist in getting some of our fruit; but since so precious a life is at stake, we consent to give you as much as you can carry away, provided you will give us in return what we shall ask.’ ‘Ah! kind fairy,’ cried the queen, ‘I will give you anything that I possess, even my very kingdoms, on condition that I eat of your fruit.’ The old fairy then informed the queen that what they required was, that she should give them the child she was going to have, as soon as it should be born; adding, that every possible care should be taken of it, and that it should become the most accomplished princess. The queen replied that, however cruel the conditions, she must accept them, since nothing but the fruit could save her life. In short, dear prince,” continued the lady, “my mother instantly got out of bed, was dressed by her attendants, entered the palace, and satisfied her longing. Having eaten her fill, she ordered four thousand mules to be procured and loaded with the fruit, which had the virtue of continuing all the year[361] round in a state of perfection. Thus provided, she returned to the king my father, who, with the whole court, received her with rejoicings, as it was before imagined she would die of disappointment. All this time the queen said nothing to my father of the promise she had made to give her daughter to the fairies; so that when the time was come that she expected my birth, she grew very melancholy; till at length, being pressed by the king, she declared to him the truth. Nothing could exceed his affliction when he heard that his only child, when born, was to be given to the fairies. He bore it, however, as well as he could, for fear of adding to my mother’s grief; and also believing he should find some means of keeping me in a place of safety, which the fairies would not be able to approach. As soon, therefore, as I was born, he had me conveyed to a tower in the palace, to which there were twenty flights of stairs, and a door to each, of which my father kept the key, so that none came near me without his consent. When the fairies heard of what had been done, they sent first to demand me; and on my father’s refusal, they let loose a monstrous dragon, which devoured men, women, and children, and which, by the breath of its nostrils, destroyed everything it came near, so that even the trees and plants began to die. The grief of the king was excessive; and, finding that his whole kingdom would in a short time be reduced to famine, he consented to give me into their hands. I was accordingly laid in a cradle of mother-o’-pearl, orna[362]mented with gold and jewels, and carried to their palace, when the dragon immediately disappeared. The fairies placed me in a tower, elegantly furnished, but to which there was no door, so that whoever approached was obliged to come by the windows, which were a great height from the ground: from these I had the liberty of getting out into a delightful garden, in which were baths, and every sort of cooling fruit. In this place was I educated by the fairies, who behaved to me with the greatest kindness; my clothes were splendid, and I was instructed in every kind of accomplishment; in short, prince, if I had never seen anyone but themselves, I should have remained very happy. One day, however, as I was talking at the window with my parrot, I perceived a young gentleman who was listening to our conversation. As I had never seen a man but in pictures, I was not sorry for the opportunity of gratifying my curiosity. I thought him a very pleasing object, and he at length bowed in the most respectful manner, without daring to speak, for he knew that I was

in the palace of the fairies. When it began to grow dark, he went away, and I vainly endeavoured to see which road he took. The next morning, as soon as it was light, I again placed myself at the window, and had the pleasure of seeing that the gentleman had returned to the same place. He now spoke to me through a speaking-trumpet, and informed me he thought me a most charming lady, and that he should be very unhappy if he did not pass his life in my company.

“I resolved to find some means of escaping from my tower, and was not long in devising the means for the execution of my project: I begged the fairies to bring me a netting-needle, a mesh, and some cord, saying I wished to make some nets to amuse myself with catching birds at my window. This they readily complied with, and in a short time I completed a ladder long enough to reach to the ground. I now sent my parrot to the prince, to beg he would come to the usual place, as I wished to speak with him. He did not fail; and finding the ladder, mounted it, and quickly entered my tower. This at first alarmed me, but the charms of his conversation had restored me to tranquillity, when all at once the window opened, and the Fairy Violent, mounted on the dragon’s back, rushed into the tower. My beloved prince thought of nothing but how to defend me from their fury; for I had had time to relate to him my story, previous to this cruel interruption; but their numbers overpowered him, and the Fairy Violent had the barbarity to command the dragon to devour my lover before my eyes. In my despair, I would have thrown myself also into the mouth of the horrible monster; but this they took care to prevent, saying, my life should be preserved for greater punishment. The fairy then touched me with her wand, and I instantly became a white cat. She next conducted me to this palace, which belonged to my father, and gave me a train of cats for my attendants, together with the twelve hands that waited on your highness. She then informed me of my birth and the death of my parents, and pronounced upon me what she imagined the greatest of maledictions; that I should not be restored to my natural figure until a young prince, the perfect resemblance of him I had lost, should cut off my head and tail. You are that perfect resemblance; and accordingly you ended the enchantment. I need not add, that I already love you more than my life; let us therefore hasten to the palace of the king your father, and obtain his approbation to our marriage.”

The prince and princess accordingly set out side by side, in a car of still greater splendour than before, and reached the palace just as the two brothers had arrived with two beautiful princesses. The king, hearing that each of his sons had succeeded in finding what he had required, again began to think of some new expedient to delay the time of his resigning the crown; but when the whole court were with the king assembled to pass judgment, the princess who accompanied the youngest, perceiving his thoughts by his countenance, stepped majestically forward and thus addressed him:

“It is a pity that your majesty, who is so capable of governing, should think of resigning the crown! I am fortunate enough to have six kingdoms in my possession; permit me to bestow one on each of the eldest princes, and to enjoy the remaining four in the society of the youngest. And may it please your majesty to keep your own kingdom, and make no decision concerning the beauty of three princesses, who, without such a proof of your majesty’s preference, will no doubt live happily together!”

The air resounded with the applauses of the assembly: the young prince and princess embraced the king, and next their brothers and sisters: the three weddings immediately took place, and the kingdoms were divided as the princess had proposed.

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