

The Old Woman and Her Cats

Once upon a time there lived an old woman in a little stone and thatch cottage by the edge of the forest. She lived alone except for the company of her animals, a cow, a dog, some chickens, and most important to her, her cats. She loved her cats and they returned her affection. Every morning and evening at milking time, they would come and rub against her legs, purring for their warm saucer of milk. They were the only animals permitted in the house and would sit on her lap when she rested in her rocker by the hearth. They would sleep with her in her soft feather bed at night. She talked to them and they always listened. They also had their jobs, keeping mice out of the house and chasing the birds out of her strawberry patch.

One day, a peddler came to try to take advantage of this old woman by selling her over-priced merchandise. She refused to buy anything knowing it was not worth the price. The peddler got very angry, but keeping his composure, looked around and tried to think of a way to hurt her. He noticed her cats and the affection she gave them. He had an idea. Since he hated cats anyway, his plan would accomplish two things, getting rid of the cats, and getting back at the old woman.

He smiled to himself as he very sweetly said, "Well then, since you don't need any of my wares, I'll be on my way. Good day to you, Madame." He bowed and then climbed up on his wagon and drove away.

But that night, he came back just as the old lady was letting the cats out for their evening romp before bedtime. Now this peddler had dabbled a bit in sorcery and knew a few magic potions. He had treated some fish with a very special potion. He came quietly up to the cottage while the cats were still outside and called in a whisper, "Here kitty kitty". The old woman could not hear, but the cats did and they could smell-Fish! Their favorite food. It smelled so good as the peddler held it out to them.

Now these cats were well-fed. Their mistress fed them twice daily and occasionally gave them tidbits from the table. And they sometimes ate the mice and birds they caught doing their jobs. They had been warned by their mistress not to eat anything given to them by strangers. "Some people don't like cats and may try to poison you," she had said.

"We really shouldn't eat it," one said.

"But he's not a stranger," said another. "He was here today and he seems really nice."

"It smells wonderful and I bet it tastes even better. Surely our mistress wouldn't want us to miss something that good."

"Besides, something that good couldn't hurt us."

So convincing themselves, they all pounced on the fish and devoured them in short order leaving only the heads. Then they ran back in the house and jumped upon the bed to sleep while the peddler slunk away in the dark chuckling softly to himself.

In the morning when they woke up, they were in for a big surprise. Everything seemed different. Everything was much bigger. It was a lot farther down to the floor from the bed and they couldn't make it in one easy jump. They looked at each other, then at themselves. Their noses were pointed and their whiskers twitched constantly. Their tails were longer and without fur. They had little round ears and tiny paws. They were stunned. What had happened? They then realized, "We're not cats anymore. We're mice!"

But almost immediately one of the mice said, "I'm hungry."

Another joined in, "Do you smell any cheese around?"

"Yes. It's coming from the table in the kitchen," said another.

One mouse who still hadn't gotten over the shock and remembered that he had been a cat asked, "Shouldn't we wait for our mistress to feed us?"

"Why?" the others asked. "We're hungry now. We'll just go and help ourselves."

So all the mice scurried down the bed legs across the floor to the kitchen, up the kitchen table

legs and helped themselves to bread and cheese.

Soon after the mice left her bed, the old woman woke up, dressed, and went out to milk the cow and feed the chickens. There were no small furry bodies rubbing up against her legs as she got the milking stool and walked towards the cow. "Here kitty, kitty," she called. But no response. "Wherever can they be and what could have happened to them," she thought.

She milked the cow and gave the chickens their grain. Crossing the yard back to the house, she saw a pile of fish heads. "That's strange. I wonder where those came from," she thought.

She entered the kitchen, set the milk pail on the counter, and glanced at the table just as the mice were finishing up their breakfast. "Where did all those mice come from?" she exclaimed out loud.

The mice, upon hearing her voice and seeing how big she was, became very frightened and tried to get away. They scurried down the table legs and ran in all directions. She stared at them as they went, then realized, "These are the strangest colored mice, one black, one white, one black and white, some calico, a gray, and some with tiger stripes." She remembered the mysterious fish heads. Yes, these were her cats, now turned into mice, probably the work of that disgruntled peddler.

Now what could she do? She made herself a cup of tea and sat down in her rocker by the hearth to think. The mice who had fled to safety now peered out from their hiding places behind furniture legs and trunks to see what she would do.

She sat in her chair, sipped her tea, rocked, and mused. Finally, she put down her tea cup, stood up, and announced out loud, "I know what must be done. I will do what I can now and hope that I will be able to do what must be done later. So saying, she went to the kitchen to get a basket and went off into the woods.

The mice watched her go and then decided they had best set to work to make nests for themselves. As cats, they had kept any mice away from the house so there were no mouse holes or former nests to use. So they set about with their sharp teeth gnawing holes in the floor and in the walls so they could get about without having to cross the wide-open spaces across the floors.

By the end of the day their mouse instincts had taken over completely. Only a few even remembered that they had been cats and that was only a very vague, dim memory.

The old woman came home with a basket full of herbs and plants, made herself a simple supper, and sat down in her rocker again. "I'm going to have to work quickly," she said to herself, "because those mice are creating a huge mess in the kitchen, leaving their droppings everywhere and contaminating my food as well as chewing up the rest of the house." She made this last statement as she was staring at a new hole in her wall with a long nose and little black beady eyes peering out watching her.

She shook her head in disgust and sadness. But as much as she hated mice, she still loved her cats and thought of these mice as her cats in spite of their mouse-like ways and looks.

As she sat in her chair, she began to talk to them knowing that even though they were hiding, they could still hear her.

"Here kitty, kitty," she called softly. This stirred a long forgotten memory in some of the mice and they came out of their holes a little - not understanding what it meant. But it sounded sort of familiar and comforting.

"Come here, my little kittens. I will tell you what you used to be and what you may yet become. You used to be my friends and my helpers. You were called cats and looked not as you do now. You were much larger and had flat noses, pointed ears, and furry tails. You meowed and purred instead of squeaking. You were fastidiously clean. You washed yourselves after you ate and went outside to relieve yourselves. You were fearless and attacked mice that tried to come into my house. You drove off and killed the birds that came to eat my fruit. You came to the sound of my voice and sat in my lap and slept in my bed. You did not need nests because my whole house was your house as well. I fed you from my own food.

"But now, you steal my food and leave you dropping where you eat. You make holes in my

house and chew up my clothing and linens to make your nests. As mice, you have only three concerns, eating, enjoying cozy nests, and making babies. And lastly, you run from the sound of my voice.

"But I have made a way for those of you who so desire to become cats again. Tomorrow, I will start feeding you again. Whoever wants to be a cat, come and eat." So saying, she got up and went to bed.

Some mice ignored what the old woman had said and went right back into their holes and nests. They couldn't really remember what it was like to be a cat, but it sounded like a good animal to be. At least they would be bigger and not so afraid. Some mice had gone outside that day and been terrified by the birds who had by now taken over the strawberry patch and claimed it as their own. These mice thought it would be great to be able to scare off the birds. So for whatever reason, some of the mice decided to listen to the old woman and eat her food.

The next morning the woman got up early and busied herself in the kitchen most of the day. The group of mice who wanted to be cats watched from a safe distance. They were getting hungrier and hungrier. But she had said that she would feed them, so they waited. The crumbs on the table were very tempting, but still they waited.

Finally, the woman put a saucer on the floor and called, "Kitty, kitty, kitty."

The mice came and ate. It didn't taste that good, but it was filling.

The old woman said to them, "I'm sorry this won't turn you back into cats instantly. But tomorrow, you will notice a difference. You won't have your cat body back, but you will have your cat nature and instincts along with your mouse instincts. So you will be able to choose whether to act like a cat or a mouse. Some day when your mouse body dies (mice don't live very long anyway), your mouse nature will die too, and your cat nature will turn your mouse body into a cat body. There is another way, but this is all I can do for you now. As you eat the food I provide, your cat nature will get stronger. If you eat stolen food, your mouse nature will get stronger."

The mice who had eaten her food really didn't understand all this, but they felt full so went off to their nests to sleep. But when they woke up in the morning, they felt different.

"Why are we sleeping in these holes?" said one.

"I feel trapped, like I'm suffocating. I need to get out into the open where I can breathe."

They ran out of their hole into the middle of the room, no longer afraid of exposure.

"Here kitty, kitty," the old woman called.

"Breakfast," they all exclaimed and scurried off to the kitchen to eat. The old woman still seemed large but wasn't at all scary this morning; in fact, they came right up to eat while she was standing there. After they had eaten, she sat down in her chair and called them into her lap. They had to climb up her skirt, but it wasn't so hard, and her lap was soft and warm. She gently picked up each one and held it up to her face as she talked to it and stroked its fur.

"It's so nice to have my friends again," she said.

Meanwhile, some of the other mice also decided that they wanted to be cats. But they didn't trust the old lady and did not want to be dependent on her and eat the food she put out. They wanted the freedom of eating what they wanted, when they wanted it. They prided themselves on their independence, not realizing that it was the old woman who purposely left the crumbs out for them, having by now put all her good food in mouse-proof containers.

Among these mice there were several schools of thought on how to become cats. One group said, "The old woman told us how cats act so we will make a list of cat rules. We will follow these rules and so become cats."

One rule was cats chase birds, so they went outside to the garden acting brave and fearless. That was fine, until a very large crow swooped down threatening to eat them alive. They ran back inside in terror.

Another boy mouse said he was going to chase away and kill any outside mouse that tried to get into the house. But the first mouse he met was an especially attractive girl mouse and not only did he

not kill her, he found himself inviting her into his nest.

They tried so hard to be cleaner and started washing their fur several times a day, but they still left their droppings everywhere.

Then there was another group that believed in creating your own reality. "Reality is what you believe it to be. We are cats and we just have to believe it and then we can act like the cats we are."

They knew as cats they were supposed to sleep on the bed and cats could easily jump up on the bed. So after believing they were cats for awhile, they tried to jump up on the bed in one leap. They kept falling down flat on their backs. "I guess we just didn't believe we were cats strongly enough." So they kept on trying to believe harder, but kept landing on their backs.

One mouse of this persuasion would repeat over and over to himself, "Every day in every way I am becoming more cat-like." He was last seen being carried off by the tail dangling from the beak of a rather larger bird as he continued to mutter, "Every day, in every way aaaa y . . ."

Then there was the group that said, "We don't have to worry about acting like cats. We just have to remember what we have all forgotten, that we are cats, therefore, since we are cats, whatever we choose to do is what cats do. We must meditate to get in touch with our hidden memories, our true selves, our catness within."

They spent a lot of time in trance-like states. But they still climbed the table legs to eat the crumbs of bread and cheese and left their droppings all over like all the other mice.

As the days went on, there seemed to be three distinct groups of mice. One group had no interest in becoming a cat and were even interbreeding with the field mice. Another group talked a lot about becoming cats but were still acting like mice.

The other group, while still looking like mice, were behaving more and more like cats. Except once in awhile when something unexpected happened, they would revert to their mouse-like ways and get nervous and fearful. Sometimes, they would miss their meals and resort to stealing crumbs and then would leave their droppings in the old woman's bed. This was very disconcerting to the mice and the old woman. The mice were so embarrassed. But she would tell them, "It's OK.," and patiently clean it up.

One day, the birds were out eating strawberries as usual when a few cat/mice saw this. "This should not be," they said. "It is our job to chase them away."

The birds laughed and mocked them. "You talk big, but we have met you kind before. All we have to do is swoop down and you run - like this!" A large black crow flew at the mice, but they did not run. As his feet came near them, two mice jumped, one on each leg, hanging on with their teeth. This was too much weight for the crow and he fell to the ground trying to peck at them with his beak, but another mouse jumped for his throat and with his sharp little teeth, broke his neck. The rest of the birds could hardly believe what had happened. What kind of mice were these? The mice cheered. "We did it. We don't have to be afraid of the birds anymore."

As the cat-mice followed their cat nature, they wouldn't let field mice come into the house and they tried to keep the birds out of the garden. They slept with their mistress, sat on her lap, and listened to her. They were clean and didn't leave their droppings all over. but they had so many limitations. They couldn't do a lot of things cats could do because of their mouse bodies. One thing they especially wanted to do for their mistress was to purr, but they couldn't.

They also tried to keep the birds out of the strawberries but while three or four mice guarded one area, the birds would come and eat in another.

The old woman knew they were trying so hard to please her and do their jobs. To her, they were still her beloved cats, but she could see their frustration and longed to be able to have them be totally changed back into being cats again.

The other mice who had refused to eat her food were becoming a major problem. They were ruining her home. They had been interbreeding with field mice and becoming very numerous. They were making holes all over, chewing through everything, and leaving droppings all over. The house

was beginning to smell like mice. Something would have to be done soon. She still tried to call these mice, but they weren't interested anymore. Most were content as she had predicted with three interests, eating, making babies, and enjoying their comfy nests.

She knew what had to be done, but there was a missing ingredient. She needed the help of a lion; however, there had been no lions around for many decades, not since she had been a little girl.

So day after day things continued to get worse on her little farm. Her valiant little cat-mice were her only consolation and she wanted to help them so badly.

Then one night she was awakened by a strange, terrible noise. Could it be? She rubbed the sleep from her eyes and listened again. There. It came again, the unmistakable roar of a lion. She got up immediately, dressed quickly, and set off in the dark to find the great beast, following the sound of his roaring.

It was close to dawn when she emerged from the forest into a clearing and came face-to-face with the lion.

"What do you want with me, old woman?" it asked.

"Please, your majesty, I came here not for myself, but for my little friends, your cousins." she then proceeded to tell the story of her cats turned into mice.

When she finished, he asked, "How can I help?"

"Sire, this is hard to ask, but I need a drop of your blood. Only this will have the power to change their bodies back to being cats again," she responded.

"It will hurt, but for my unfortunate cousins, I am willing," he said as he held out his paw.

The old woman had brought a sharp knife for this purpose and a small flask to catch the blood. She deftly stuck him in the center of his paw and as he whined, squeezed out a large drop of the precious liquid.

"Thank you kind sir," she said bowing to him as she left. Swiftly she made her way back to her cottage with the flask safely in her satchel, ready to mix in the missing ingredient in the meal that night.

It was all ready. This would be the most important meal her cat-mice would eat. She hoped that they would all be listening and come when she called, that none would miss this special night's meal. So she called as she had for so many nights. "Here, kitty, kitty. Here kitty, kitty. Here, kitty, kitty." Only she called louder, longer, and more insistently. Some of the other mice muttered, "Why doesn't she shut up, she's disturbing the sleep of our babies."

But the cat-mice came and they ate. Some of these mice by now had babies and these they brought with them to eat also, but the younger ones who still nursed were left on the bed. After they ate, they went to bed with the mistress as usual.

The next morning the old woman woke up first and just lay in bed looking at her friends and their kittens. Some so young their eyes weren't even open yet. Slowly the cats woke up, stretching, yawning, and digging their claws in the bed in a kneading motion, purring contentedly. Then suddenly realized - they were purring! They looked at each other and themselves realizing they were cats!

They followed their mistress out for milking and had a nice saucer of milk. After that, they scared off the birds in the strawberry patch and managed to kill a few as the birds were too startled to fly away. They left one cat to guard the whole patch which he could now do easily.

Inside, the mice had made a mess as usual on her table. The old woman was so tired of cleaning it up. These mice had had their chance and made their choice.

"Kill or drive out all the mice," she said to the cats.

They were eager. "We haven't had any mouse meat for awhile and we're hungry for some now."

The first several mice strolled out of their hole indolently, intent on breakfast as usual. They didn't even notice the cats lined up motionless watching them. The morning procession marched across the floor and scrambled up the legs of the table to the crumbs on top. They stuffed themselves and started down. But as soon as they started across the floor - "Now!" meowed a cat and suddenly there was a mouse dangling from the mouth of each cat. The other mice squealed and ran for their holes.

"Cats! Real cats! We're not cats. We're really mice and we're doomed!"

Some managed to flee outside and so escaped in the fields. Others came out later to get food and were then killed. Soon they were all gone, the old woman repaired the holes and cleaned up the messes for the last time.

After the day's chores are over, the old woman has her strawberries and cream. The cats are content with their cream. Then they may take a nap on the carpet by the hearth or sit in the old woman's lap as she talks to them, very happy to be cats again.

Scriptures for discussion

Romans 8

John 6:51-57