

Tales for Dark Nights: The King of the Cats

This is an old folk tale, which I have adapted to include a particular cat (his name is "Harry"). Do you have a cat? Or do you know a cat? Try changing the description of the cat in the story to fit your own favourite cat.

There was a family who had a cat. It was a stray, who turned up on their doorstep one late Summer evening. No-one knew where it had come from, but it was in a dreadful state. Its fur was matted with mud, and leaves and twigs were sticking to it. The cat limped, and one of its ears was chewed up, as if it had been in a fight. But a good cleaned-up turned it into a beautiful tabby. The matted fur became a big cloud of fluff enveloping its body, and the tail stuck up straight and proud.

They called the cat "Harry". He liked to lie on his back, as if he were inviting people to stroke his tummy; but when they tried, he would sink his claws deep into their hands. Typical cat behaviour!

Late one afternoon, about a year after Harry had moved in with the family, the Mum went out for a walk in the nearby woods. It was beginning to get dark when she returned. The Dad and the children were in the kitchen telling stories and riddles, and Harry the cat was lying on his back on the floor. No-one was trying to stroke him. When the Mum came back in, she looked pale and upset. The Dad made her a cup of tea and asked what was wrong. This is her story:

"I was in the clearing in the woods. It was strangely quiet and still. There were no birds singing and there was no wind. And then I heard a sound coming from a way off among the trees. It seemed like voices, but not human voices. It made me shiver. I hid behind a tree and waited as the voices got nearer. When they were very close I peeped out. It was getting quite dark, but I could see some tiny figures coming out of the woods into the far side of the clearing. As they got closer I realised they were cats. They were walking on their hind legs, and they carried a little box on their shoulders. It was a cat shaped coffin... and they were wailing, "Timmy Thomkins is dead, Timmy Thomkins is dead!"

When the Mum said this, Harry, who seemed to have been asleep on the floor, rolled over, and stood up on his back legs. In a very loud voice he said, "WELL, IF TIMMY THOMKINS IS DEAD, THEN **I'M** THE KING OF THE CATS."

He shot up the chimney with a "whoosh!", and they never saw him again.

Cats are often associated with spooky tales, because people used to believe they were witches' "familiars". Can you think of any other animals that are linked to magic or the supernatural? Do these animals have any special powers? Are they linked to particular figures, for example characters in books you've read, or gods from ancient mythologies?

*When you've substituted the description of your own cat for the description of Harry, try turning *The King of the Cats* into a comic book or a storyboard. The story has lots of opportunities for powerful visual imagery.*

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