

Aesop, "The Monkey And The Cat"

Once upon a time a Cat and a Monkey lived as pets in the same house. They were great friends and were constantly in all sorts of mischief together. What they seemed to think of more than anything else was to get something to eat, and it did not matter much to them how they got it.

One day they were sitting by the fire, watching some chestnuts roasting on the hearth. How to get them was the question.

"I would gladly get them," said the cunning Monkey, "but you are much more skillful at such things than I am. Pull them out and I'll divide them between us."

Pussy stretched out her paw very carefully, pushed aside some of the cinders, and drew back her paw very quickly. Then she tried it again, this time pulling a chestnut half out of the fire. A third time and she drew out the chestnut. This performance she went through several times, each time singeing her paw severely. As fast as she pulled the chestnuts out of the fire, the Monkey ate them up.

Now the master came in, and away scampered the rascals, Mistress Cat with a burnt paw and no chestnuts. From that time on, they say, she contented herself with mice and rats and had little to do with Sir Monkey.

Jean de la Fontaine, "The Monkey And The Cat"

De La Fontaine (1621 - 1695) was a French poet, translator, and writer; this poetic version of the Aesop's fable is from a collection of such works by Fontaine first published in 1668. The translation here is by Elizur Wright, Jr, first published in 1841.

Sly Bertrand and Ratto in company sat,
(The one was a monkey, the other a cat.)
Co-servants and lodgers:
More mischievous codgers
Ne'er mess'd from a platter, since platters were flat.¹ 5
Was anything wrong in the house or about it,
The neighbours were blameless, — no mortal could doubt it;
For Bertrand was thievish, and Ratto so nice,²
More attentive to cheese than he was to the mice.
One day the two plunderers sat by the fire, 10
Where chestnuts were roasting, with looks of desire.
To steal them would be a right noble affair.
A double inducement our heroes drew there —
'Twould benefit them, could they swallow their fill,
And then 'twould occasion to somebody ill. 15
Said Bertrand to Ratto, 'My brother, to-day
Exhibit your powers in a masterly way,
And take me these chestnuts, I pray.
Which were I but otherwise fitted

¹ "mess'd" means "ate" — as in "mess hall," the place where soldiers eat; lines 4 and 5 means no two more mischievous creatures ever ate from plates, or platters, ever since plates were flat — presumably, ever since plates were invented.

² "nice" in the old sense, meaning very particular, very finicky or fussy, especially as concerns food.

(As I am ingeniously witted) 20
For pulling things out of the flame,
Would stand but a pitiful game.'
"Tis done,' replied Ratto, all prompt to obey;
And thrust out his paw in a delicate way.
First giving the ashes a scratch, 25
He open'd the coveted batch;
Then lightly and quickly impinging,
He drew out, in spite of the singeing,
One after another, the chestnuts at last, —
While Bertrand contrived to devour them as fast. 30
A servant girl enters. Adieu to the fun.
Our Ratto was hardly contented, says one. —

No more are the princes, by flattery paid
For furnishing help in a different trade,
And burning their fingers to bring 35
More power to some mightier king.