



The Cat and the Cradle

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Dutch

Intermediate

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In the early ages, when our far-off ancestors lived in the woods, ate acorns, slept in caves, and dressed in the skins of wild animals, they had no horses, cows or cats. Their only pets and helpers were dogs. The men and the dogs were more like each other than they are now.

However, they knew about bees. So the women gathered honey and from it they made mead. Not having any sugar, the children enjoyed tasting honey more than anything else, and it was the only sweet thing they had.

By and by, cows were brought into the country and the Dutch soil being good for grass, the cows had plenty to eat. When these animals multiplied, the people drank milk and learned to make cheese and butter. So the Dutch boys and girls grew fat and healthy.

The oxen were so strong that they could pull logs of wood or draw a plough. So, little by little, the forests were cut down and grassy meadows, full of bright colored flowers, took their place. Houses were built and the people were rich and happy.

Yet there were still many cruel men and bad people in the land. Sometimes, too, floods came and drowned the cattle and covered the fields with sand, or salt water. In such times, food was very scarce. Thus it happened that not all the babies born could live, or every little child be fed. The baby girls especially were often left to die, because war was common and only boys, that grew into strong warriors, were wanted.

It grew to be a custom that families would hold a council and decide whether the baby should be raised or not. But if any one should give the infant even a tiny drop of milk, or food of any kind, it was allowed to live and grow up. If no one gave it milk or honey, it died. No matter how much a mother might love her baby, she was not allowed to put milk to its lips, if the grandmother or elders forbade it. The young bride, coming into her husband's home, always had to obey his mother, for she was now as a daughter and one of the family. All lived together in one house, and the grandmother ruled all the women and girls that were under one roof.

This was the way of the world, when our ancestors were pagans, and not always as kind to little babies as our own mothers and fathers are now. Many times was the old grandmother angry, when her son had taken a wife and a girl was born. If the old woman expected a grandson, who should grow up and be a fighter, with sword and spear, and it turned out to be a girl, she was mad as fire. Often the pretty bride, brought into the house, had a hard time of it, with her husband's mother, if she did not in time have a baby boy. In those days a "Herman," a "War Man" and "German" were one and the same word.

Now when the good missionaries came into Friesland, one of the first of the families to receive the gospel was one named Alfrid. With his bride, who also became a Christian, Alfrid helped the missionary to build a church. By and by, a sweet little baby was born in the family and the parents were very happy. They loved the little thing sent from God, as fathers and mothers love their children now.

But when some one went and told the pagan grandmother that the new baby was a girl instead of a boy, the old woman flew into a rage and would have gone at once to get hold of the baby and put it to death. Her lameness, however, made her move slowly, and she could not find her crutch; for the midwife, who knew the bad temper of the grandmother, had purposely hid it. The old woman was angry, because she did not want any more females in the big house, where she thought there were already too many mouths to fill. Food was hard to get, and there were not enough war men to defend the tribe. She meant to get the new baby and throw it to the wolves. The old grandmother was a pagan and still worshipped the cruel gods that loved fighting. She hated the new religion, because it taught gentleness and peace.

But the midwife, who was a neighbor, feared that the old woman was malicious and she had hid her crutch. This she did, so that if the baby was a girl, she could save its life. The midwife was a good woman, who had been taught that the Great Creator loves little girls as well as boys.

So when the midwife heard the grandmother storm and rave, while hunting for her crutch, she ran first to the

honey jar, dipped her forefinger in it and put some drops of honey on the baby's tongue. Then she passed it out the window to some women friends, who were waiting outside. She knew the law, that if a child tasted food, it must be allowed to live.

The kind women took the baby to their home and fed it carefully. A hole was drilled in the small end of a cow's horn and the warm milk, fresh from the cow, was allowed to fall, drop by drop, into the baby's mouth. In a few days the little one was able to suck its breakfast slowly out of the horn, while one of the girls held it. So the baby grew bigger every day. All the time it was carefully hidden.

The foolish old grandmother was foiled, for she could never find out where the baby girl was, which all the time was growing strong and plump. Her father secretly made her a cradle and he and the babe's mother came often to see their child. Every one called her Honig-je', or Little Honey.

Now about this time, cats were brought into the country and the children made such pets of them that some of the cows seemed to be jealous of the attentions paid to Pussy and the kittens. These were the days when cows and people all lived under one long roof. The children learned to tell the time of day, whether it was morning, noon or night by looking into the cats' eyes. These seemed to open and shut, very much as if they had doors.

The fat pussy, which was brought into the house where Honig-je' was, seemed to be very fond of the little girl, and the two, the cat and the child, played much together. It was often said that the cat loved the baby even more than her own kittens. Every one called the affectionate animal by the nickname of Dub-belt-je', which means Little Double; because this puss was twice as loving as most cat mothers are. When her own furry little babies were very young, she carried them from one place to another in her mouth. But this way, of holding kittens, she never tried on the baby. She seemed to know better. Indeed, Dub-belt-je' often wondered why human babies were born so naked and helpless; for at an age when her kittens could feed themselves and run about and play with their tails and with each other, Honig-je' was not yet able to crawl.

But other dangers were in store for the little girl. One day, when the men were out hunting, and the women went to the woods to gather nuts and acorns, a great flood came. The waters washed away the houses, so that everything floated into the great river, and then down towards the sea.

What had, what would, become of our baby? So thought the parents of Honig-je', when they came back to find the houses swept away and no sign of their little daughter. Dub-belt-je' and her kittens, and all the cows, were gone too.

Now it had happened that when the flood came and the house crashed down, baby was sound asleep. The cat, leaving its kittens, that were now pretty well grown up, leaped up and on to the top of the cradle and the two floated off together. Pretty soon they found themselves left alone, with nothing in sight that was familiar, except one funny thing. That was a wooden shoe, in which was a fuzzy little yellow chicken hardly four days old. It had been playing in the shoe, when the floods came and swept it off from under the very beak of the old hen, that, with all her other chicks, was speedily drowned.

On and on, the raging flood bore baby and puss, until dark night came down. For hours more they drifted until, happily, the cradle was swept into an eddy in front of a village. There it spun round and round, and might soon have been borne into the greater flood, which seemed to roar louder as the waters rose.

Now a cat can see sometimes in the night, better even than in the day, for the darker it becomes, the wider open the eyes of puss. In bright sunshine, at noon, the inside doors of the cat's eyes close to a narrow slit, while at night these doors open wide. That is the reason why, in the days before clocks and watches were made, the children could tell about the time of day by looking at the cat's eyes. Sometimes they named their pussy Klok'-oog, which means Clock Eye, or Bell Eye, for bell clocks are older than clocks with a dial, and because in Holland the bells ring out the hours and quarter hours.

Puss looked up and saw the church tower looming up in the dark. At once she began to meouw and caterwaul with all her might. She hoped that some one in one of the houses near the river bank might catch the sound. But none seemed to hear or heed. At last, when Puss was nearly dead with howling, a light appeared at one of the windows. This showed that some one was up and moving. It was a boy, who was named Dirck, after the saint Theodoric, who had first, long ago, built a church in the village. Then Puss opened her mouth and lungs again and set up a regular cat-scream. This wakened all her other relatives in the village and every Tom and Kitty made answer, until there was a cat concert of meouws and caterwauls.

The boy heard, rushed down-stairs, and, opening the door, listened. The wind blew out his candle, but the brave lad was guided by the sound which Pussy made. Reaching the bank, he threw off his wooden klomps, plunged into the boiling waters, and, seizing the cradle, towed it ashore. Then he woke up his mother and

showed her his prize. The way that baby laughed and crowed, and patted the horn of milk, and kicked up its toes in delight over the warm milk, which was brought, was a joy to see. Near the hearth, in the middle of the floor, Dub-belt-je', the puss, was given some straw for a bed and, after purring joyfully, was soon, like the baby, sound asleep.

Thus the cat warned the boy, and the boy saved the baby, that was very welcome in a family where there were no girls, but only a boy. When Honig-je' grew up to be a young woman, she looked as lovely as a princess and in the church was married to Dirck! It was the month of April and all the world was waking to flowers, when the wedding procession came out of the church and the air was sweet with the opening of the buds.

Before the next New Year's day arrived, there lay in the same cradle, and put to sleep over the same rockers, a baby boy. When they brought him to the font, the good grandmother named him Luid-i-ger. He grew up to be the great missionary, whose name in Friesland is, even today, after a thousand years, a household word. He it was who drove out bad fairies, vile enchanters, wicked spirits and terrible diseases. Best of all, he banished "eye-bite," which was the name the people gave to witchcraft. Luid-i-ger, also, made it hard for the naughty elves and sprites that delude men.

After this, it was easy for all the good spirits, that live in kind hearts and noble lives, to multiply and prosper. The wolves were driven away or killed off and became very few, while the cattle and sheep multiplied, until everybody could have a woollen coat, and there was a cow to every person in the land.

But the people still suffered from the floods, that from time to time drowned the cattle and human beings, and the ebb tides, that carried everything out to sea. Then the good missionary taught the men how to build dykes, that kept out the ocean and made the water of the rivers stay between the banks. The floods became fewer and fewer and at last rarely happened. Then Santa Klaas arrived, to keep alive in the hearts of the people the spirit of love and kindness and good cheer forever.

At last, when nearly a hundred years had passed away, Honig-je', once the girl baby, and then the dear old lady, who was kind to everybody and prepared the way for Santa Klaas, died. Then, also, Dub-belt-je' the cat, that had nine lives in one, died with her. They buried the old lady under the church floor and stuffed the pussy that everybody, kittens, boys, girls and people loved. By and by, when the cat's tail and fur fell to pieces, and ears tumbled off, and its glass eyes dropped out, a skilful artist chiselled a statue of Dub-belt-je', which still stands over the tomb in the church. Every year, on Santa Klaas day, December sixth, the children put a new collar around its neck and talk about the cat that saved a baby's life.

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