



The Cat with the Silver

Tongue

Wyn E. Owens

Retold Fairy Tales

“This,” said Heloise to her cat, “is all your fault.”

The Cat, being of the irritating sort, ignored her accusation and continued washing his orange and white coat.

“Everything I have done has been in your service, sweet mistress.”

Heloise, however, was having none of it as she sank further into the water. “If I hadn’t listened to you, Chaton, none of this would have happened. I would still be safe at home and have all my clothes and...”

“And you’d be slaving away in the mill without sight or smell of daylight,” Chaton said.

“Daylight doesn’t have a smell,” Heloise snipped back, because it was the only thing in his entire statement she could find grounds to bicker with.

Chaton smirked at her—or at least she thought he did. It was rather hard to tell, because he was a cat, but his entire being was radiating smugness. “Not to you, sweet mistress, being nasally challenged as you are, but I assure you that for animals it has a very real scent.”

Being unable to answer this, Heloise submerged herself up to her chin and brooded on how exactly she had gotten into this mess.

It had all started, she supposed, when her father the miller died. Heloise had two older sisters but no brothers, so the property was divided among the three of them. Hilaire, as the oldest, got the mill, and Helaine, the middle child, got the donkey.

And what did that leave for Heloise?

The cat.

Now, it wasn't that Heloise didn't like Chaton. She did. He was warm and sweet and gentle to her, and hissed at her older sisters when they teased her. Not to mention that he was a very handsome specimen, with his orange-gold stripes and his white face and fluffy tummy. But, despite his sweetness and handsomeness, all in all, he wasn't much of an inheritance.

"Well, Chaton," she had said, "At the very least I suppose I can travel around and hire you out as a mouser, and it will be an excuse to travel."

"Or," said the cat, "We could go out and seek our fortunes."

Heloise had blinked, opened her mouth, and then decided the best course of action was to take her now-talking inheritance in stride. "Well, then. What do you suggest we do?"

Chaton proceeded to outline his plan. To the north was a grand forest with a magnificent castle within, surrounded by sumptuous farmland. However, the castle, farmland, and forest were all owned by a horrible, vile being—an ogre.

And Chaton's plan was to free the farmland and forest from its cruel overlord.

Now, Heloise thought this sounded very well, but she was concerned about whether or not Chaton would be able to pull it off. "After all, it is an ogre—and you and I are just a talking cat and a miller's daughter."

But Chaton said, "Ogres, as everyone knows, are very stupid. It shouldn't be too hard to trick him." They thought about it for a while, then Heloise came up with a plan, and whispered it in the ears of her cat. Hearing it, the cat smiled as only a cat can smile, and flicked his tail. "Excellent," he purred. "It'll need a bit of tweaking, but perhaps..." He trailed off into contemplative silence, before turning to Heloise. "But I'd like two things in payment as thanks, sweet mistress."

Being a generous soul, Heloise promptly responded. "Of course, whatever you ask!"

"First," Chaton said, "When we claim the castle as your own, I'd like fish and cream to eat once a day."

"Of course!" Heloise said. "What else do you want?"

"Boots." said the cat.

"Boots?" Said Heloise.

The cat swished his fluffy plume of a tail. "Yes. Boots."

Heloise pondered this. It seemed a very strange thing, but she couldn't see any reason not to. So she cut up her

old father's worn out leather vest and stitched her cat some boots. Chaton was very pleased, and then together they set out to seek their fortunes.

It was a long trip to the North and the ogre's castle, and every so often Chaton would disappear for a day or two, and come back looking more smug than usual (which was quite a feat). Heloise was curious, but he was her friend and she trusted him, so she said nothing.

And that is how she ended up here. In a pond close to the road, with all her clothes having been taken by 'thieves'.

Heloise was no fool, and she smelled the cat all over this. Several times along their travels, he had protected her from thieves and assailants, and she doubted anyone would have got to her clothes under his guard. It goes beyond saying that she was rather displeased with Chaton.

"I know you have something planned," she accused, wrapping her arms about herself and sinking even further, "And whatever it is, I don't approve."

"Me?" Chaton said, insulted and deeply hurt (or so he pretends to be, Heloise thought sourly). "I have planned nothing."

Her chestnut eyebrows arched. "And you expect me to believe that, puss? I may not be able to smell daylight, but I can smell you all over this."

Chaton nobly turned his head away, appearing above the wild accusations his sweet mistress flung at him. But Heloise could feel the smugness rolling off him in waves, and wildly struggled with the impulse to splash him. Whether she would have or no we shall never know, for just then the sounds of carriage wheels reached her ears, and she shrieked in terror. "CHATON!"

Chaton immediately leapt up and Heloise sighed in relief—until she realized with dread he was racing straight toward the road, and was shouting "Help! Help!"

She closed her eyes and prayed with all her might that whoever was driving that blasted carriage would avoid the cat shouting for help and drive right on. It was the only sensible thing to do, after all.

Sadly, she was out of luck. The driver checked the horses and the carriage clattered to a stop, and Heloise immediately ducked even further under the surface.

The carriage door opened, and a woman's voice issued forth. "What is the matter, good Chevalier Chaton? Can we be of assistance?"

I knew it. Heloise thought grumpily. That proves it. He DID plan this, the scheming alleymog.

Chaton executed an elegant bow, "My sweet mistress, the Marquise of Carabas, is in a terrible trouble, your majesty!"

Heloise thought her heart had leapt from her chest in a burst of terror. Her Majesty the Queen was in a carriage not 50 feet away and here she was in a pond with no clothes.

She'd always thought fainting was a rather silly concept, but as of right now it seemed very fine indeed. Right after she skinned that cat.

"Oh my! That generous young lady? What has happened? What can we do to help?"

Chaton bowed again with the faintest smug twitch of his tail. "My sweet mistress was out walking on her lands, and decided to go swimming in her favorite pond. But then, alas, her fine garments were stolen away by thieves that lurked in the forest, and now she is trapped here!"

The Queen gasped. "The poor dear. Coeur, quickly, go and fetch my trunk for the Marquise! And hurry!"

Heloise blinked. Wait, Marquise? What Marquise? What's going on????

The footman on the back of the carriage immediately hopped down, scurrying around the carriage to pull down one of the trunks stowed away on the top.

Heloise's head was spinning with confusion. She opened her mouth to call out to Chaton, but her cat looked back at her at that instant and frantically flapped his paw, as if to say Just play along.

Well... it wasn't like she had any control or grasp of the situation anyway. Might as well go along for the ride.

"Chevalier Chaton," the Queen's voice sounded again, "If you would be so kind as to escort me to the Marquise?"

"Of course, your majesty!" Chaton purred, and out of the carriage emerged a wondrous lady in a gorgeous dark green gown, embroidered with golden thread. The Queen.

Heloise felt like fainting for the second time in ten minutes.

How exactly did I get in this mess?

Oh, that's right. It's the cat's fault.

The Queen, with the booted puss trotting along smugly at her side, made her way to the edge of the pond.

Heloise frantically curled into an embarrassed ball and shrank into the water.

Her Majesty stopped at the edge of the pond, surveyed the situation, then smiled kindly and offered a slight curtsy. "Good evening, my lady. You seem to be in a bit of a bind."

Heloise's head was spinning, but she did an awkward sort of bob that she hoped would pass as a curtsy.

"Indeed so, Your Majesty."

“Well then, Lady Carabas, once my footman has arrived with suitable clothing, come out of that pond and avail yourself, and we shall return you to your home, no worse for wear.”

Lady Carabas?... Heloise blinked and looked to Chaton. He nodded meaningfully. Swallowing hard, Heloise did her odd bobbing motion again and lifted her chin, bravely stating, “Of course, Your Majesty. That would be wonderful.”

The Queen smiled in a royally reserved manner, and beckoned her servant, regally demanding he turn around and hand her the dress. The Queen then handed the gown onto Heloise, who had climbed out of the pond and was now shivering behind some bushes, and ordered her to dress.

Heloise had never worn anything so fine, but she tried her best not to act like it as she stepped out into view. The Queen looked her up and down quickly, before nodding with an approving smile. “Excellent. You clean up quite nicely, Lady Carabas. Come on, it’s time we got you home.”

Heloise rather limply followed the Queen, confusedly listening to her chatter. “It’s rather serendipitous that we met here, Lady Carabas,” the Queen was saying as they neared the carriage. “We were on our way to visit you, you know, to thank you for those delicious presents that you sent us.”

Presents? Heloise wondered for a second, before the answer struck her.

Ah. Of course. Chaton must have planned this, somehow.

She was starting to be incredibly impressed by his machinations. She wasn’t sure how in all the world he was able to pull this one off—if only he could have done it without embarrassing her in front of the ever-loving Queen!

They reached the carriage, and the footman handed the Queen in before turning to Heloise. Deciding to follow Her Majesty’s example, the miller’s daughter extended her hand to the footman and allowed him to assist her into the carriage.

She immediately almost fell out again when she realized she and the Queen weren’t alone in the carriage.

“Ah!” said the Queen cheerfully. “Luc, this is Lady Heloise, the Marquise de Carabas. My dear Lady Carabas, this is my son, His Royal Highness Prince Luc d’Leon.”

He was very handsome, with tawny gold hair that curled about his shoulders and bright, intelligent blue eyes. Blushing, Heloise bowed her head and murmured, “Your Highness.”

He extended his hand and Heloise tentatively placed her own into his grasp. He then gallantly bent over it, saying politely, “My Lady.”

Heloise's heart gave a rather odd flutter as she sat down across from the royals, and she let out the faint huff of disapproval at it. Seriously! Behave yourself now, just what do you think you're doing? She thought at it crossly. Did Chaton somehow mess with you, too? At this point I don't think I would put anything past him. At that moment, as if summoned, Chaton stuck his head into the carriage. "I must beg leave, Your Majesty, Your Highness, my Lady. I must run on ahead and prepare the castle for the arrival of our most esteemed guests."

Ah. Heloise's heart and brain felt like a great weight had been lifted off them. Now she knew what the cat was up to (well, mostly, anyway). He was going to enact The Plan.

The cat glanced at her with a bow and she gave the slightest of nods. "That would be wonderful, my dear Chevalier," she said. "Go with all speed."

The cat bowed again—and Heloise could swear he winked at her, before stepping back and disappearing from sight.

Heloise settled back in her seat, folding her hands in her lap, and resisted the urge to sigh. All right. If I play this right maybe, just maybe, with the help of all the Saints, I'll manage to get through this without being accused of treason.

I hope.

~C~

Chaton ran through the forest, so fast he appeared to be an orange flame, flitting among the trees of the old forest. He, as one might suppose from the fact that he could talk, was a magical cat. And when someone gives a magical animal a gift, that gift can take on surprising tendencies.

In this case, the little boots that Heloise had worked so hard on to make her strange new friend happy now gave Chaton the power to run as fast as the wind.

He darted around the trunks of the old, old trees, leapt carefully over a tiny streamlet, and came to a stop at the edge of a large clearing. Inside this clearing was a great big castle, covered in vines.

With a flick of his tail, the cat trotted across the clearing and into the great, gaping gates.

The inside of the castle was grim and gloomy, and here and there scurried human servants, hunched over and staring at the floor. Not one of them gave the orange tabby in the strange boots even a glance, which rankled Chaton's pride. He decided to ignore the affront to his majesty on account of them being dim-witted and scared, and continued proudly on to the great hall.

When he entered the great hall, the first thing he saw was a great chair of oak wood, draped in fine velvets that gleamed mysteriously in the dim torchlight. The denizen of the chair, however, was far less fine.

“My dear Ynez the Ogress.” Chaton said with a bow. “It’s so good to finally meet you.”

“I have no idea who you are.” Ynez the Ogress said. “Nor do I care. Now get your whiskery face out of here, or I shall remove it for you.”

“There’s no need for such barbarism!” Chaton protested, scandalized, though he seriously doubted the Ogress knew the meaning of the word ‘barbarism’. “I merely came because of the rumors I have been hearing.”

The ogress’ poisonous yellow eyes narrowed. “What rumors?” she grumbled in a voice that sounded like mud and gravel. The mere sound made Chaton give an inward shiver of disgust, but outwardly he smiled and flicked his tail fetchingly.

“All the magical beasts have told of your great skill in the shifting of shape. I only wished to know if this was true.”

Ynez sat up and smirked, showing off crooked, disgusting, yellowed teeth. “It is,” she said, proud and preening. “I’ll even show you.”

The cat twitched his nose, but that was the only outward show of his delight. The ogress loudly cracked her knobby knuckles, there was a flash of light, and a mirror image of Chaton himself sat on the ogress’ throne.

“Astounding!” gasped the cat. “I have never seen such fine shapeshifting. Tell me... can you shapeshift into an elephant? I have heard tales of their might and majesty and I have always wished to see one.”

“Of course!” scoffed Ynez, whose voice sounded very strange coming from Chaton’s body. “Mere ogreling’s play.” The Ynez-Chaton (or Chaton-Ynez?) hopped down from her chair, sauntered (rather poorly, in Chaton’s humble opinion) into the center of the room, stretched, and disappeared in another ginormous flash of light. When Chaton blinked, standing in the middle of the room was a giant grey creature with a snake-like nose and large, ivory tusks.

“Magnificent!” Chaton gasped dramatically. “Can you transform into an eagle?”

The next few minutes were a grand confusion of rapidly changing shapes and animals until at last Ynez stood before him, back in her own form again. “Well, little cat,” said the Ogress. “Are you satisfied?”

“Oh, more than, more than, my dear lady!” the cat said. “It was a truly glorious display! I am well satisfied!” The Ogress smiled smugly, but the smug smile slid off abruptly when Chaton said hesitantly, “Well... except for... but no.”

“What?” Ynez snapped. “Except for what?”

“Well,” the cat said humbly, “I always thought the mark of a great shapeshifter would be if they could transform into something that isn’t alive... a flame, perhaps. But while you are surely a wondrous shifter of shape, that task is too much even for you. Forget I said anything, I—”

But Ynez cut him off with a wave of her green, warty, clawed hand. “No! I shall do this thing—no challenge can best Ynez!”

And with that, there was a great flash of light—greater than any Chaton had seen the ogress display before—that suddenly fizzled into nothing with a quiet pop, like a fire-cracker exploding.

Ynez the ogress had become flame without any fuel.

Chaton looked around the room, flicked his tail, and purred, “Just as I thought.” Then the cat made himself comfortable on Ynez’ footrest and proceeded to give his tail a good washing. He still had a bit of work to do before his sweet mistress arrived, and he needed to look his best.

The carriage rolled across an old stone bridge that arced over a moat and entered through the great gaping gates of ‘Heloise’s’ castle.

At last they rumbled to a stop in the courtyard, and the footman descended and opened the door for the passengers.

His Royal Highness Prince Luc stepped out first, and proceeded to hand out his mother the Queen. Then he turned to look at Heloise.

Nervously trying to hide her nervousness, Heloise stood up and took his offered hand, allowing him to assist her down to the ground.

The conversation during their trip to the castle had put most of her fears to rest—obviously Chaton had been preparing extensively for this event. The Queen had gushed and thanked Heloise, or Lady Carabas, nigh on a hundred times for all the kind gifts she had sent to the royal palace. As far as Heloise could figure, on all those times Chaton had disappeared without a trace, her cat had been hunting rabbits and fishing for trout and sending these to the palace, courtesy of the Marquise de Carabas.

He had also apparently gone and instructed all the old Ogress’ servants working in the field to say, if asked, that the lands belonged to the Marquise de Carabas. Her Majesty had been quite impressed by the magnificent expanse of Heloise’s supposed lands.

He has come through every time so far and has proved himself a faithful pet, companion, and friend. There’s

every reason to expect he has everything figured out—there’s no reason to be afraid. She thought as she carefully removed her hand from the prince’s grasp and clasped it demurely in front of her.

Still, there was a tiny frisson of fear in her stomach that refused to be quelled. That is, it refused until the great wooden doors of the castle swung open gracefully to reveal her cat.

Chaton was in fine form—his coat fairly glowed from numerous washings, his boots shone, on his head was perched a magnificent feathered hat, and around his neck was a shining white ribbon with a golden bell.

“Welcome, most esteemed majesties, to the Château de Carabas!” the cat announced grandly.

I knew you’d come through. Heloise let out a sigh of relief and curtsied to the Queen. “If you would follow me, my Queen?”

The castle was the most magnificent building Heloise had been in in her entire life. The floors and walls were covered in tapestry and fine rugs, and there were great drapes at the windows. Here and there cheerful servants bustled back and forth, preparing the castle for the presence of their royal guests. Every so often they would shoot Chaton a grateful look, to which he responded with an elegant nod of his head.

Finally, a tall, stately woman in the dress of a high-ranked servant approached and curtsied deeply to the Queen. “If you please, Your Majesty, I’m here to take you to the rooms we have prepared for you, if you wish to freshen up before dinner.”

“Ah, yes. That would be excellent.” She turned to Heloise and gave her the barest curtsey. “Until dinner then, my dear Marquise.”

Heloise returned the gesture with a much deeper curtsey. “Of course, Your Majesty. Until then.”

The queen set off through the halls of the castle, leaving Heloise alone with her cat and Prince Luc.

“You’re doing quite well, my lady,” the Prince said with a dry smile. “You’ve gotten my mother quite fooled.”

Heloise froze, and she could feel her face going ashen. Ah well. It was nerve-racking while it lasted. And look on the bright side—while I may be imprisoned in a dark, dank dungeon without sight or smell of daylight, at least I won’t be slaving away in a mill to please my sisters.

Somehow, she was less than relieved.

Slowly, she forced herself to turn to the prince and assume a calm mask of confusion. “Pardon, my prince?”

He smiled and raised his eyebrows. “When we first stopped at an inn as we were nearing the lands Chevalier Chaton informed us were yours, I overheard a lot of talk about an evil ogress that ruled the lands surrounding the old castle.” He glanced down at Chaton. “I was beginning to suspect that the cat was trying to trick us, but

then we ran into you. At first I thought perhaps you were the ogress disguised in human form, but you seemed both too intelligent and too ill-at-ease to be her.”

Heloise blinked several times as she thought through that. He knew the whole time? Figures, I guess.

She opened her mouth to say something clever, but what came out was, “I could have been an intelligent ogress that doesn’t get out much.”

The next second she clapped her hands over her mouth, her eyes wide with horror as she felt like fainting for the third time that day.

Well, there goes any chance of managing to escape this situation. She thought glumly as she waited for his wrath to befall.

Instead, he laughed. And after he laughed, he smiled at her, his blue eyes twinkling with amusement. “I hadn’t thought of that, my lady. I should have been on my guard against intelligent, introverted ogress-humans.”

Heloise was pretty sure her cheeks had suddenly burst into flame, and she bowed her head. “I’m very sorry, my prince, for deceiving you. It is unpardonable, and I don’t expect forgiveness.”

She felt cool fingers touch her chin and gently lift her head up until she met the bright blue eyes of the prince. Suddenly she realized they were kind eyes, and that they were smiling at her, and then all at once she didn’t feel afraid anymore.

“Deceiving me? Well, if you truly deceived me, that would indeed be quite grave, but I was under the impression that you had defeated the ogress. She obviously isn’t here anymore, anyhow.”

Heloise blinked in confusion. “Well, I mean, I assume Chaton was the one to defeat her...”

“Using my sweet mistress’ plan,” the cat cut in smoothly with an elegant swish of fluffy tail and a graceful lick of upraised paw. “Or, well, mostly. I tweaked it a little. Her plan was to have Ynez the Ogress turn into something small, so I could pounce upon her and swallow her whole. Instead I had her turn into a flame that died because of its inability to sustain itself. The new plan of mine worked just as well, if not better. If I had eaten the old ogress, I’d have probably ended up with indigestion.”

The prince gave a short bow. “And the kingdom and these lands are in debt to your bravery and silver tongue—and the impressive cleverness of your mistress.” He turned and smiled at Heloise. “And I believe the law says that if someone disposes of a foul creature that has taken over a castle, they inherit the castle and surrounding lands by right. So therefore, you are the Marquise de Carabas.”

“Oh!” Heloise stammered. “But the ogress wasn’t defeated until after I met you and told you I was the

Marquise—”

Prince Luc raised an eyebrow. “I don’t remember you telling us anything. Just the cat.”

Heloise’s eyes widened. “Don’t punish him, please! He’s my only friend and I’m very fond of him, even if he can be dreadfully annoying and too clever for his own good at times.” Chaton responded to this slur upon his person with a haughty sniff, but Prince Luc shrugged.

“He’s a magical creature. For all we know, he can see the future. As far as I’m concerned, there’s no reason to send anyone to prison.” Then, to Heloise’s surprise, he bowed to her again. “Now, would the fair and clever lady deign to properly introduce herself, now she is a Marquise in truth?”

“Uh...” Heloise said intelligently. Then she managed to gather herself, and curtsied deeply. “My name is Heloise d’Fleur, Marquise de Carabas.”

“And I am Luc d’Leon, Second Prince of this fair kingdom of Pierreverte.” He took her hand, kissed it, then looked up at her with a smile.

“I like your name, my Lady Heloise.” The prince said. “It’s very pretty.”

Heloise, to her surprise, found herself blushing. “Thank you. I... I like yours to, your majesty.”

He grinned. “It’s not a very princely name, but I think I’m rather lucky. My brother the Crown Prince is named Leodegrance.”

Heloise burst out into giggles. “I agree. I think Luc is much nicer than Leodegrance, regarding or disregarding princeliness.”

Luc smiled at her and said, “Thank you. You’re the first, I think.” He moved to the nearest window, looking out at the land. “Pierreverte is greatly blessed to have you, my dear Marquise.”

Heloise tilted her head to one side. “Why do you say that?”

Luc swept one arm out, gesturing at the view. “It’s not often that a peasant girl comes up with a plan to defeat an ogress and rightfully rise above her station, freeing hundreds of people from the ogress’ oppression along the way. Not to mention you’re clever enough to pretend to be a noble and trick the Queen herself. We could always use more people with brains in their head.” He shot her a quick glance. “And I, for one, am looking forward to getting to know such a clever girl as you better.”

Heloise blushed. “I’m just glad I could help the people,” she said. “Though the house and title are nice, I suppose. And of course, I’m also glad you’re not going to throw me in the dungeon.”

Luc laughed and looked about to say something, but at that moment, one of the servants appeared with the

announcement that dinner was ready. The prince immediately bowed to Heloise and offered her his arm.

“Would you allow me to escort you to dinner, my dear Marquise Heloise?”

“Of course,” Heloise said, and together they walked to dinner. Chaton followed behind them, as smug as any cat has ever had the right to be.

~C~

“You know,” said Chaton thoughtfully, as the Marquise Heloise de Carabas stroked his ears, “I feel that I am due a better name than Chaton.”

Heloise quirked an eyebrow and moved her ministrations to his neck. “Really? What sort of name?”

The cat executed an elegant, feline shrug. “I’m not certain. Something a little more befitting of my renown and cleverness, though.”

The pair lapsed into thoughtful silence, save for the rather loud rumbling purring issuing from the cat. Finally, Heloise exclaimed, “I have it!”

Chaton twitched his tail in excitement. Heloise solemnly laid a regal hand upon his head and declared, “I believe I shall call you... Maître Chaton.”

Chaton blinked at her.

“Or perhaps Maître Chat, if you prefer,” she said, with the barest discernable twitch of her lip.

“I think not,” the cat said with a sniff.

Heloise smiled innocently. “Then you prefer Maître Chaton?”

The cat didn’t even deign this statement with more than a supercilious glare.

Heloise nodded solemnly. “No, I agree... it isn’t quite right.” She clicked her tongue thoughtfully, then grinned.

“How about Chat Botté?”

There was a little silence. “Chat Botté?” Chaton repeated.

“Yes,” Heloise said happily, but her eyes were dancing with laughter. “It is wonderfully applicable, don’t you think?”

The cat was quiet for a few moments, then said, “If you wake up tomorrow with a dead snake on your pillow, I’d like to let you know I will have had nothing to do with it.”

“Of course not,” Heloise said, and then the Marquise de Carabas burst out into laughter, and she stroked Chaton’s ears till he stopped glaring and resumed purring instead. And they all lived happily ever after (except,

of course, Ynez the ogress, who happened to be dead).

The End

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