

The Cat

adapted from the French of Jean Richepin

It was Christmas Eve and two poor people, a cottager and his wife, were wandering about the snowy countryside.

They were very poor indeed. They had no Christmas pudding nor any pot in which to put a pudding nor any fire over which to boil it or any house in which to build a fire. If they could have had only a little house it is quite possible that they would have been able to keep a few coals burning and hang a pot over these and stir up a small pudding for the pot.

Having none of these they were indeed very, very poor.

What they longed for most of all was a cottage, no matter how small. Four walls, between which they could light a few dry sticks and sit beside the hearth and chat together, would have made them happier than anything else in the world.

As they walked along the high road, hand in hand, and trying to comfort each other they met a stray cat who meowed to them and asked their friendship. Such a lean, poor cat as it was! It was not much more than skin and bone and it had almost no hairs upon its skin. If it had been a sleek, well fatted cat it would very likely have been strong enough to catch mice but this was not possible in its present state. It was indeed very, very poor.



The poor are always willing to help and be kind to each other. They took the cat with them and gave it a scrap or two of meat that had been given them in charity. The cat purred gratefully and started off, leading them through the darkness of the night until they came to a small empty cottage.

A ray of moonlight that crept in at the window served them for a candle and showed them a black hearth without any fire and two stools, side by side, in front of it. They looked about for the cat but it was nowhere to be seen so they sat down, side by

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side, upon the stools in front of the black hearth and stretched out their hands that were so cold.

“If we had only two coals, even,” said the woman wistfully.

“Yes, two would be quite enough,” said the man.

As they said that a strange thing happened. From out the dark hearth there shone two bright embers, as yellow as gold and as warmth giving as the sunshine.

“It is our Christmas gift,” exclaimed the woman.

“From the Christ Child who has marked our need,” said the man joyfully. “I will blow and make the embers burn more brightly so as to light the whole fire,” he added.

“Oh, no! It is not necessary to do that and it would make them burn out too fast,” begged the woman. “Two coals are quite enough. Only feel how warm my hands are, and yours are quite as warm!”

So they began talking together of what a pleasant Christmas it was for them because of this beautiful gift of a fire and they felt, each moment, warmer and happier. They sat there before the hearth all the night long and each moment they realized more and more that the fire had been sent to them by a miracle, for it filled the cottage with its warmth and glow; yet it was only two coals that never burned out.

Then it was Christmas morning and the ray of moonlight that had come in through the window gave place to the first bright rays of the Christmas sun. The cottage was still warm and comfortable and they saw spread out upon a table a great number of Christmas gifts for them; woolen clothing and a Christmas pudding full of plums and enough gold and silver pieces to keep them for the rest of their days. They did not know what to think or what to say and they turned again to the fire of two coals beside which they had sat all the night.

But they saw only the poor cat to whom they had been kind sitting there and looking at them with her two yellow eyes. It had been the light from the cat’s eyes that had kept them so warm and happy.



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