

The Cat who became Head Forester (2013)

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This is a story by Arthur Ransome (1884–1967), an English author who became famous for his children's stories Swallows and Amazons. In 1913 he went to live in Russia to study Russian folklore, and in 1916 published Old Peter's Russian Tales, a collection of 21 folk tales of which this is one. Later he returned to England and settled in the Lake District, where the Swallows and Amazons stories are set.

If you drop Vladimir by mistake, you know he always falls on his feet. And if Vladimir tumbles off the roof of the hut, he always falls on his feet. Cats always fall on their feet, on their four paws, and never hurt themselves. And as in tumbling, so it is in life. No cat is ever unfortunate for very long. The worse things look for a cat, the better they are going to be.

Well, once upon a time, not so very long ago, an old peasant had a cat and did not like him. He was a tomcat, always fighting; and he had lost one ear, and wasn't very pretty to look at. The peasant thought he'd get rid of his old cat, and buy a new one from a neighbour. He didn't care what became of the old tomcat with one ear, so long as he never saw him again. It was no use thinking of killing him, for it's a life's work to kill a cat, and it's likely enough that the cat would come alive at the end.

The cat is thrown out ...

So the old peasant took a sack, and he bundled the tomcat into the sack, and he sewed up the sack and slung it over his back, and walked off into the forest. Off he went, trudging along in the summer sunshine, deep into the forest. And when he'd gone very many versts into the forest, he took the sack with the cat in it and threw it away among the trees.

[A 'verst' is an old Russian measure of just over a kilometre — Ed.]

'You stay there,' says he, 'and if you do get out in this desolate place, much good may it do you, you old quarrelsome bundle of bones and fur!'

And with that he turned round and trudged home again, and bought a nice-looking, quiet cat from a neighbour in exchange for a little tobacco, and settled down comfortably at home with the new cat in front of the stove; and there he may be to this day, so far as I know. My story doesn't bother with him, but only with the old tomcat tied up in the sack away there out in the forest.

The bag flew through the air, and plumped down through a bush to the ground. And the old tomcat landed on his feet inside it, very much frightened but not hurt. Thinks he, 'This bag, this flight through the air, this bump, mean that my life is going to change. Very well; there is nothing like something new now and again.'

... but soon makes his escape

And presently he began tearing at the bag with his sharp claws. Soon there was a hole he could put a paw through. He went on, tearing and scratching, and there was a hole he could put two paws through. He went on with his work, and soon he could put his head through, all the easier because he had only one ear. A minute or two after that he had wriggled out of the bag, and stood up on his four paws and stretched himself in the forest.

'The world seems to be larger than the village,' he said. 'I'll walk on and see what there is in it.'

He washed himself all over, curled his tail proudly up in the air, cocked the only ear he had left, and set off walking under the forest trees.

A place to live and food to eat

'I was the head cat in the village,' says he to himself. 'If all goes well, I shall be head here too.' And he walked along as if he were the Tsar himself. Well, he walked on and on, and he came to an old hut that had belonged to a forester. There was nobody there, nor had been for many years, and the old tomcat made himself quite at home. He climbed up into the loft under the roof, and found a little rotten hay.

'A very good bed,' said he, and curled up and fell asleep.

When he woke he felt hungry, so he climbed down and went off in the forest to catch little birds and mice. There were plenty of them in the forest, and when he had eaten enough he came back to the hut, climbed into the loft, and spent the night there very comfortably.

But he thinks he deserves better ...

You'd have thought he'd be content. Not he. He was a cat. He said, 'This is a good enough lodging. But I have to catch all my own food. In the village they fed me every day, and I only caught mice for fun. I ought to be able to live like that here. A person of my dignity ought not to have to do all the work for himself.'

Next day he went walking in the forest. And as he was walking he met a fox — a vixen, a very pretty young thing, gay and giddy like all girls. And the fox saw the cat, and was very much astonished.



'All these years,' she said — for though she was young she thought she had lived a long time — 'all these years,' she said, 'I've lived in the forest, but I've never seen a wild beast like that before. What a strange-looking animal! And with only one ear. How handsome!'

And she came up and made her bows to the cat, and said:

'Tell me, great lord, who you are. What fortunate chance has brought you to this forest? And by what name am I to call your Excellency?'

Oh! the fox was very polite. It isn't every day that you meet a handsome stranger walking in the forest.

... and sees an opportunity

The cat arched his back, and set all his fur on end, and said, very slowly and quietly:

'I have been sent from the far forests of Siberia to be Head Forester over you. And my name is Cat Ivanovitch.'

'O, Cat Ivanovitch!' says the pretty young fox, and she makes more bows. 'I didn't know. I beg your Excellency's pardon. Will your Excellency honour my humble house by visiting it as a guest?'

'I will,' says the cat. 'And what do they call you?'

'My name, your Excellency, is Lisabeta Ivanovna.'

'I will come with you, Lisabeta,' says the cat.

And they went together to the fox's earth. Very snug, very neat it was inside; and the cat curled himself up in the best place, while Lisabeta Ivanovna, the pretty young fox, made ready a tasty dish of game. And while she was making the meal ready, and dusting the furniture with her tail, she looked at the cat. At last she said, shyly: 'Tell me, Cat Ivanovitch, are you married or single?'

'Single,' says the cat.

'And I too am unmarried,' says the pretty young fox, and goes busily on with her dusting and cooking.

A wedding

Presently she looks at the cat again.

'What if we were to marry, Cat Ivanovitch? I would try to be a good wife to you.'

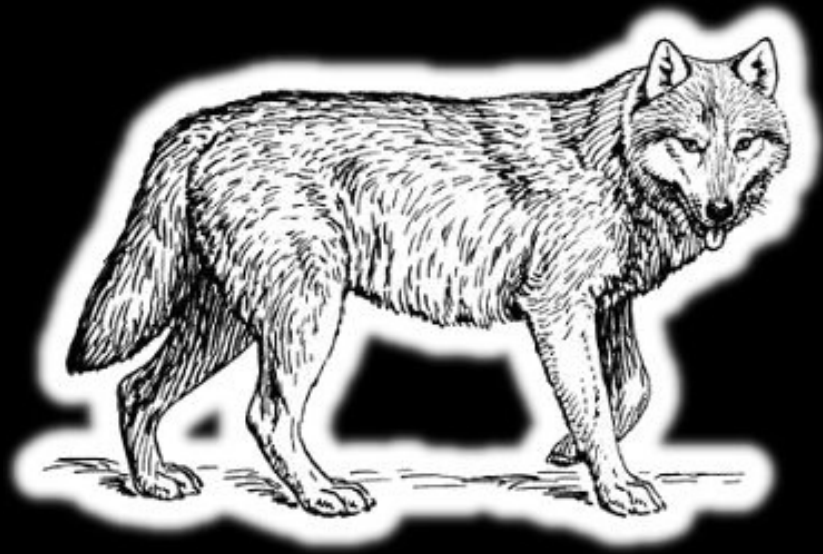
'Very well, Lisabeta,' says the cat; 'I will marry you.'

The fox went to her store and took out all the dainties that she had, and made a wedding feast to celebrate her marriage to the great Cat Ivanovitch, who had only one ear, and had come from the far Siberian forests to be Head Forester.

They ate up everything there was in the place.

Next morning the pretty young fox went off busily into the forest to get food for her grand husband. But the old tomcat stayed at home, cleaned his whiskers and slept. He was a lazy one, was that cat, and proud.

The fox was running through the forest, looking for game, when she met an old friend, the handsome young wolf, and he began making polite speeches to her.



'What had become of you, gossip?' says he. 'I've been to all the best earths and not found you at all.'

'Let be, fool,' says the fox, very shortly. 'Don't talk to me like that. What are you jesting about? Formerly I was a young, unmarried fox; now I am a wedded wife.'

'Whom have you married, Lisabeta Ivanovna?'

'What!' says the fox, 'you haven't heard that the great Cat Ivanovitch, who has only one ear, has been sent from the far Siberian forests to be Head Forester over all of us? Well, I am now the Head Forester's wife.'

The news spreads

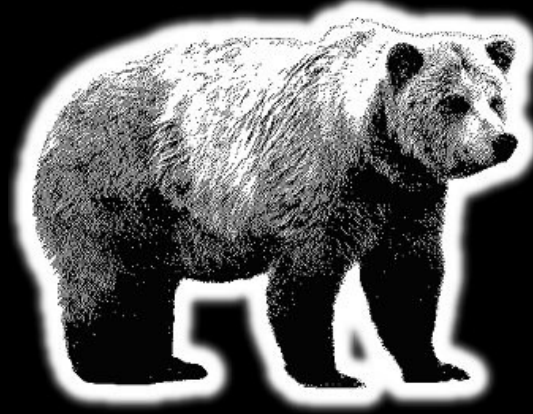
'No, I hadn't heard, Lisabeta Ivanovna. And when can I pay my respects to his Excellency?'

'Not now, not now,' says the fox. 'Cat Ivanovitch will be raging angry with me if I let anyone come near him. Presently he will be taking his food. Look you — get a sheep, and make it ready, and bring it as a greeting to him, to show him that he's welcome and that you know how to treat him with respect. Leave the sheep near by, and hide yourself so that he shall not see you; for if he did, things might be awkward.'

'Thank you, thank you, Lisabeta Ivanovna,' says the wolf, and off he goes to look for a sheep.

The pretty young fox went idly on, taking the air, for she knew that the wolf would save her the trouble of looking for food.

Presently she met the bear.



'Good day to you, Lisabeta Ivanovna,' says the bear. 'As pretty as ever, I see you are.'

'Bandy-legged one,' says the fox; 'fool, don't come worrying me. Formerly I was a young, unmarried fox; now I am a wedded wife.'

'I beg your pardon,' says the bear, 'whom have you married, Lisabeta Ivanovna?'

'The great Cat Ivanovitch has been sent from the far Siberian forests to be Head Forester over us all. And Cat Ivanovitch is now my husband,' says the fox.

'Is it forbidden to have a look at His Excellency?'

'It is forbidden,' says the fox. 'Cat Ivanovitch will be raging angry with me if I let anyone come near him. Presently he'll be taking his food. Get along with you quickly; make ready an ox, and bring it by way of welcome to him. The wolf is bringing a sheep. And look you: leave the ox nearby, and hide yourself so that the great Cat Ivanovitch shall not see you; or else, brother, things may be awkward.'

The bear shambled off as fast as he could go to get an ox.

The gifts arrive

The pretty young fox, enjoying the fresh air of the forest, went slowly home to her earth, and crept in very quietly, so as not to awake the great Head Forester, Cat Ivanovitch, who had only one ear and was sleeping in the best place.

Presently the wolf came through the forest, dragging a sheep he had killed. He did not dare to go too near the fox's earth, because of Cat Ivanovitch, the new Head Forester. So he stopped, well out of sight, and stripped off the skin of the sheep, and arranged the sheep so as to seem a nice tasty morsel. Then he stood still, thinking what to do next. He heard a noise, and looked up. There was the bear, struggling along with a dead ox.

'Good-day, brother Michael Ivanovitch,' says the wolf.

'Good-day, brother Levon Ivanovitch,' says the bear. 'Have you seen the fox, Lisabeta Ivanovna, with her husband, the Head Forester?'

'No, brother,' says the wolf. 'For a long time I have been waiting to see them.'

'Go on and call out to them,' says the bear.

'No, Michael Ivanovitch,' says the wolf, 'I will not go. Do you go; you are bigger and bolder than I.'

'No, no, Levon Ivanovitch, I will not go. There is no use in risking one's life without need.'

Suddenly, as they were talking, a little hare came running by. The bear saw him first, and roared out: 'Hi, Squinteye! Trot along here.'

The hare came up, slowly, two steps at a time, trembling with fright.

'Now then, you squinting rascal,' says the bear, 'do you know where the fox lives, over there?'

'I know, Michael Ivanovitch.'

'Get along there quickly, and tell her that Michael Ivanovitch the bear and his brother Levon Ivanovitch the wolf have been ready for a long time, and have brought presents of a sheep and an ox, as greetings to His Excellency ...'

'His Excellency, mind,' says the wolf; 'don't forget.'

The hare ran off as hard as he could go, glad to have escaped so easily. Meanwhile the wolf and the bear looked about for good places in which to hide.

The gift bearers hide

'It will be best to climb trees,' says the bear. 'I shall go up to the top of this fir.'

'But what am I to do?' says the wolf. 'I can't climb a tree for the life of me. Brother Michael, Brother Michael, hide me somewhere or other before you climb up. I beg you, hide me, or I shall certainly be killed.'

'Crouch down under these bushes,' says the bear, 'and I will cover you with the dead leaves.'

'May you be rewarded,' says the wolf; and he crouched down under the bushes, and the bear covered him up with dead leaves, so that only the tip of his nose could be seen.

Then the bear climbed slowly up into the fir tree, up to the very top, and looked out to see if the fox and Cat Ivanovitch were coming.

They were coming; oh yes, they were coming! The hare ran up and knocked on the door, and said to the fox: 'Michael Ivanovitch the bear and his brother Levon Ivanovitch the wolf have been ready for a long time, and have brought presents of a sheep and an ox as greetings to His Excellency.'

'Get along, Squinteye,' says the fox; 'we're just coming.'

And so the fox and the cat set out together.

The Head Forester appears ...

The bear, up in the top of the tree, saw them first, and called down to the wolf:

'They are coming, Brother Levon; they are coming, the fox and her husband. But what a little one he is, to be sure!'

'Quiet, quiet,' whispers the wolf. 'He'll hear you, and then we are done for.'

The cat came up, and arched his back and set all his furs on end, and threw himself on the ox, and began tearing the meat with his teeth and claws. And as he tore he purred. And the bear listened, and heard the purring of the cat, and it seemed to him that the cat was angrily muttering, 'Small, small, small ...'

And the bear whispers: 'He's no giant, but what a glutton! Why, we couldn't get through a quarter of that, and he finds it not enough. Heaven help us if he comes after us!'

The wolf tried to see, but couldn't, because his head, all but his nose, was covered with the dry leaves. Little by little he moved his head, so as to clear the leaves away from in front of his eyes. Try as he would to be quiet, the leaves rustled, so little, ever so little, but enough to be heard by the one ear of the cat.

The cat stopped tearing the meat and listened.
'I haven't caught a mouse today,' he thought.

... and gets a surprise

Once more the leaves rustled.

The cat leapt through the air and dropped with all four paws, and his claws out, on the nose of the wolf. How the wolf yelped! The leaves flew like dust, and the wolf leapt up and ran off as fast as his legs could carry him.

Well, the wolf was frightened, I can tell you, but he was not so frightened as the cat.

When the great wolf leapt up out of the leaves, the cat screamed and ran up the nearest tree, and that was the tree where Michael Ivanovitch the bear was hiding in the topmost branches.

'Oh, he has seen me. Cat Ivanovitch has seen me,' thought the bear. He had no time to climb down, and the cat was coming up in long leaps.

The bear trusted to Providence, and jumped from the top of the tree. Many were the branches he broke as he fell; many were the bones he broke when he crashed to the ground. He picked himself up and stumbled off, groaning.

The pretty young fox sat still, and cried out, 'Run, run, Brother Levon! ... Quicker on your pins, Brother Michael! His Excellency is behind you; His Excellency is close behind!'

A good life

Ever since then all the wild beasts have been afraid of the cat, and the cat and the fox live merrily together, and eat fresh meat all the year round, which the other animals kill for them and leave a little way off.

And that's what happened to the old tomcat with one eye, who was sewn up in a bag and thrown away in the forest.

'Just think what would happen to our handsome Vladimir if we were to throw him away!' said Vanya.



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