

The Cat, the Dog and the Money Lender

Many moons ago, in the imperial capital, lived a moneylender called Chuanli. Chuanli was rich. But he did not like to spend money. So he did not marry, and he did not have children.

As he entered old age, Chuanli grew lonely. To comfort himself he bought a dog and a cat. The dog was white apart from one black paw, so he called it Blackfoot. The cat was black apart from white paw, so he called it Whitefoot.

When they first met, Blackfoot and Whitefoot hated one another, as cats and dogs often do. They fought tooth and claw. But when Chuanli threatened to expel them from his house, the two animals agreed on a truce. After all, the food at the money lender's place was excellent and plentiful, and the fires burned all winter long.

Time went by and the animals grew fat and lazy. They would spend their days sitting at the windows mocking the gaunt and starving strays as they went from door-to-door begging for scraps.

"Hey, you down there," they would shout. "Be careful you don't fall down a grid." Or "Hey scrawny, I saw a skeleton with more meat on its bones than you." If the animals below had the strength to answer their tormentors, the pair would hang their ample bellies over the ledge and wiggle them from side to side.

All was going just perfectly. Then one day, they were awoken by a commotion coming from their master's bedroom. Intrigued by what might have befallen Chuanli, they went to investigate. They

found the old man sitting up in bed scratching furiously at his head and skin.

“What is the matter, master?” asked Blackfoot.

“Fleas!!” shouted Chuanli. “One of you has been outside and has brought fleas into my house. Whichever one of you it is will be sleeping with the strays this very night.”

The thought of such a fate brought terror to the faces of Whitefoot and Blackfoot, for they knew what would befall them if they were to be cast out amongst those they had so mercilessly mocked.

“Dear Master,” said Whitefoot. “In our years together, I have not strayed beyond these walls. I assure you, these fleas have not sprung from my coat. Another must have carried them here.” And with that he turned an accusing gaze on Blackfoot.

“Dearest Master,” Blackfoot exclaimed. “I am ever your most faithful servant. Please do not doubt me when I say that these fleas have not found harbour in my coat. It seems to me that the guilty are always too willing to cast the blame onto others.” And with that, he turned an accusing gaze on Whitefoot.

Chuanli, whose skin was now swollen with flea bites, jumped down from his bed, and taking a fine-toothed comb began to rake through the fur of Blackfoot. With each pass he held the comb up to the lamplight to check for fleas. On the third pass of the comb he exclaimed:

“You have more fleas than a whole army of baboons. Go now, pack your bags, and be ready to leave within the hour.”

Chuanli then turned his attention to the Whitefoot. It wasn't long before his comb was again crawling with fleas.

“You have more fleas than a forest full of gibbons,” he yelled. “Go now, pack your bags and be ready to leave within the hour.”

When Whitefoot went to join Blackfoot, he found the dog not filling his bags, but filling the bathtub.

“What on earth are you doing?” he asked. “Now is not the time for bathing. We must work out what we must do to survive on the outside.”

But Blackfoot ignored the cat. He waited for the tub to fill. Then he leapt into the steaming water. Whitefoot didn't have to wait long to discover what Blackfoot's game was. For after no more than a minute, a mass of drowned fleas floated to the surface of the water.

“Very clever, indeed” said Whitefoot, as Blackfoot clambered from the tub. “But what about me?”

“What about you?” said Blackfoot. “Why you too must get into the hot water and drown your unwelcome guests. Otherwise, you'll be a beggar within the hour.”

“But I'm a cat,” said Whitefoot. “And, as you well know, cats would rather die than be in water.”

“Well, in that case,” said Blackfoot grinning from ear to ear.

“There’s nothing I can do for you, other than to wish you a safe and pleasant journey.” And with that, he set off to look for the money lender to give him the news.

Whitefoot stood cursing his luck in the bathroom mirror. As he was doing so, he noticed the money-lender’s razor in a small pot above the washbasin. If I had no fur, he thought, then I would have no fleas. So he picked up the razor, and in two minutes flat had sheared away every strand of fur from his body. Then he set out to give his mater the glad tidings.

Whitefoot found Chuanli in his study with Blackfoot at his side. As Whitefoot approached the pair, Blackfoot pointed at Whitefoot and cried out.

“Heaven help us, master, an enormous rat!”

Before Whitefoot knew it, the old man had seized him by the tail, swung him in the air, and thrown him clean out of the window and into the street.

In the days that followed, Whitefoot sought everywhere for food. But he had not the cunning and craft of a stray, and soon he was starving. When he tried his hand at begging, people would tell him he was too plump to really be hungry, and would send him on his way with his tail between his legs.

One exceptionally cold and rainy night, Whitefoot was sheltering under a gingko tree, when out of the branches above fell a raven chick. It was only a small thing. But Whitefoot was thankful for

anything to eat. He was just about to tuck in, when a voice of the mother raven sounded from above him.

“Please do not eat my chick,” she begged. “It is the only one I have left.”

“And what will you give me not to eat it?” Whitefoot inquired.

“I’m not sure I have anything that you would want,” said the mother raven.

“How about some of your feathers to keep me warm?” said Whitefoot.

The mother raven agreed and sent down enough of her black feathers for Whitefoot to cover his entire body.

That night Whitefoot slept as snugly as he had slept for many nights. In the morning, he set off once more in search of food. Just as he entered the forbidden city, a gust of wind caught the feathers and blew him into the air. Up and up he went. But instead of crashing back to earth, the cat soared like a bird on the wing. Up he went, flapping his paws and twisting his tail. After several miles of flying, he saw below the house of his master, Chuanli.

Rather than fly directly to the house, Whitefoot instead flew to the cherry grove nearby. In that place, was encamped the King of the Fleas and his many followers. At that time, the King of the Fleas was without a host animal. And Whitefoot said to him:

“If you promise never again to make a home upon my back, I will take you to an animal whose fur is luxuriant and thick, and whose blood is sweeter than cherry wine.”

The King of the Fleas was happy to agree to this offer, and when the sun went down, he and a good many of his people clambered aboard the feathers that covered the cat.

Up Whitefoot flew. Over the wall of the compound and into the house of the moneylender.

They found Blackfoot sound asleep in his bed. One by one, the fleas leapt from the feathers of the cat onto the fur of the sleeping dog.

The next morning Blackfoot arose and went as he did every day to nuzzle the feet of his master. Then he went to the kitchen to get breakfast. It was while he was eating, that he heard a commotion coming from Chuanli's room. Confident that the problem could not possibly have anything do with him, he sauntered along the hallway to the room. But as he entered, he was seized by the collar.

“More fleas!!” the moneylender bellowed into his ear. “And this time, there is no cat to blame. Go now and pack your bags and be ready to leave at once.”

Blackfoot was at a loss to understand just how the fleas had got into the house and into his fur. He knew though what he must do. He headed straight for the bathroom to fill the bathtub. However, unbeknown to him, during the night, Whitefoot had blocked the taps with candle wax, so when he turned them on no water came out. In a panic, he ran to the scullery hoping to find water there.

But on his way the money lender caught him by the tail, and with a swing, hurled him out of the window and into the street.

When the money lender's anger had subsided, he realised that he was now without a companion, and he sat down with his head in his hands and sobbed. At that moment, Whitefoot, who had been hiding in the shadows, showed himself.

“Dearest Master,” he said. “It is me. Your ever faithful servant, Whitefoot. I have returned from my travels to comfort you through these lonely and difficult times.”

The money lender, whose poor eyesight did not allow him to discern between fur and feather, welcomed Whitefoot.

“It is very thoughtful that you have returned to keep me company through my old age,” he said.

Whitefoot was delighted that all was going to plan. He walked over to the money lender and was about to jump up onto his lap. But before he could, the old man said:

“Not so fast my feline friend. Before I allow you to join this household once more, I must first check that you have not brought any of those bloodsucking fleas with you.”

Confident that the money lender would not find a single flea on him, Whitefoot offered his back for inspection. Chuanli took the comb and began to rake through the feathers on the cat's back. Now the feathers had stuck themselves to the cat because the cat had rolled in the sap of the ginkgo tree before he had first covered himself. But the sap was not a strong enough a glue to keep the

feathers in place against the force of the comb. And as the money lender raked back and forwards, one-by-one they began to detach.

“What have we here?!” Chuanli cried. “You’re not old Whitefoot! You’re an imposter.” And with that he picked up the cat by its tail, span it twice, and hurled it out of the window.

Several months later Whitefoot and Blackfoot were begging door to door for scraps to eat. They were skinny and weak from hunger. In time, their path brought them to their old master’s house. As they passed they heard voices calling them from the upper floor. The first voice was that of a cat.

“Hey you down there,” it shouted. “Be careful you don’t fall down that grid.”

The second voice was that of a dog. “Hey scrawny,” it bellowed. “I saw a skeleton with more meat on its bones than you.”