

DICK WHITTINGTON AND HIS CAT

A Tale from England

More than 500 years ago in the small town of Gloucestershire lived an orphaned boy named Dick Whittington. From the time that he was three years old, when his parents died, until he became a teenager he lived off food scraps given to him by others. Throughout his youth he heard tales of the great city of London. Some said its streets were paved with gold. Because of these stories, Dick left Gloucestershire to head for London where he hoped to make his fortune.

Dick traveled for days and days before reaching his destination. Oh, how disappointed Dick was when he saw London. It was a large city indeed, but it was dirty; and the streets were NOT paved with gold as he had been led to believe. Dick looked like a rag-a-muffin in his thread worn clothes. He was so hungry he began begging for food, or pennies, or any kind of charity. Unfortunately, no one bothered to help poor Dick.

Eventually Dick did find work, as a field hand. This he did until the crops were harvested. Once that job was over, Dick went back to being hungry and poor. One day, Dick cried himself to sleep on the back stoop of a large mansion. In the morning he

was discovered by the cook maid. She was a cross woman who began shooing Dick away from her boss's house.

Fortunately for Dick, Mr. Fitzwarren, the homeowner came by to see what all the fuss was about. Dick begged for work. Mr. Fitzwarren saw that Dick was starving, so he asked the cook to give him some food. After that, he asked that Dick be cleaned up and given kitchen work to do. This would have been Dick's dream come true, but the cook maid was a mean woman who made life very difficult for Dick. She scolded him, hit him, and made him sleep in the attic, which was cold and dark and home to many rats and mice.

One day, Dick was paid a penny for helping a neighborhood woman with some chores. With this money he purchased a cat. Once the cat began eating the mice and rats in his attic room, Dick was able to sleep better at night. Even though he was mistreated by the cook maid, Mr. Fitzwarren and his daughter, Alice, were very kind to him. So, Dick stayed on and continued working for the Fitzwarren's.

Mr. Fitzwarren was a merchant who spent months at a time away from home buying and selling merchandise. One day he asked each member of his household to give him a possession so he could sell them in other parts of the world; and thus hopefully help make them a bit richer. All Dick had was his cat, which he reluctantly gave up to his kind boss.

While Mr. Fitzwarren was away, the cook maid was extra cruel to Dick. It wasn't long before Dick couldn't take it any longer, so he walked away from the Fitzwarren home. As he left London he heard church bells ringing. They seemed to be calling him back. Although he wasn't sure why, Dick went back to the Fitzwarren home. Luckily he got back before the cook maid even knew he was gone.

While this was going on, Mr. Fitzwarren's ship landed off the coast of Africa. There Mr. Fitzwarren began trading with the king of the Barbary Coast. When they were done trading, the king invited Mr. Fitzwarren to a feast. Almost as soon as the food was set out, dozens of mice and rats came to eat off the plates. This astonished Mr. Fitzwarren who asked about it. The king agreed that it was annoying but didn't know what to do about it. In fact, the king said he would give half his treasure to anyone who could help him rid his palace of the annoying vermin. With that, Mr. Fitzwarren sent a sailor back to the ship to retrieve Dick Wittington's cat, which he gave to the king.

The cat immediately did what she did best. She chased after, and killed, as many mice and rats as she could. The king was overjoyed and gave Mr. Fitzwarren half of his treasure. This amounted to bags of gold and jewels. Soon thereafter, the cat had kittens so the King of the Barbary Coast could keep his castle, and country, vermin free.

When Mr. Fitzwarren returned to England, he gave Dick the bags

of gold and jewels that were given to him for the cat. Dick couldn't believe his good fortune. He gave some of the gold to the ship's captain and crew for taking such good care of his cat. He gave all the servants in the Fitzwarren household some of the gold as well. The rest he used to better himself by purchasing a fine house to live in, and clothes to wear that were suitable to a man of his new stature.

Soon, Dick became a merchant himself. In this way, he was able to maintain his wealth, which he used to better the city. He restored a hospital and built a college. Eventually he became Lord Mayor of London. He and Alice married and the two lived happily ever after.

*Adapted by Kathleen Simonetta. Inspired by the following tales

“Dick Whittington” found in, British Folk Tales: New Versions, by Kevin Crossley-Holland. NY: Orchard Books, c1987, pp. 190-211.

“Dick Whittington and His Cat” found in English Fairy Tales, by Joseph Jacobs. Illustrated by John Batten. NY: Alfred A. Knopf, c1993, pp. 167-176.

“Dick Whittington and His Cat” found in English Fairy Tales, retold by Flora Annie Steel. Illustrated by Arthur Rackham. NY: Macmillan, c1962, pp. 169-178.

“Dick Whittington” found in Usborne Stories from Around the World, retold by Heather Amery. Illustrated by Linda Edwards, London: Usborne Publishing Ltd., c2000, pp. 106-111.

