**And too clever by half.**

**From Pussy and Doggy Tales by Edith Nesbit.
Age Rating 4 to 6.**

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**"TELL us a story, mother," said the youngest kitten but three. "You've heard all my stories," said the mother cat, sleepily turning over in the hay. "Then make a new one," said the youngest kitten, so pertly that Mrs. Buff boxed her ears at once--but she laughed too. Did you ever hear a cat laugh? People say that cats often have occasion to do it. "I do know one story," she said; "but I'm not sure that it's true, though it was told me by a most respectable brindled gentleman, a great friend of my dear mother's. He said he was a second cousin twenty-nine times removed of Mrs. Tabby White, the lady the story is about." "Oh, do tell it," said all the kittens, sitting up very straight and looking at their mother with green anxious eyes. "Very well," she said kindly; "only if you interrupt I shall leave off." So there was silence in the barn, except for Mrs. Buff's voice and the soft sound of pleased purring which the kittens made as they listened to the enchanting tale.**

**"Mrs. Tabby White seems to have been as clever a cat as ever went rat-catching in a pair of soft-soled shoes. She always knew just where a mouse would peep out of the wainscot, and she had her soft-sharp paw on him before he had time to know that he was not alone in the room. She knew how to catch nice breakfasts for herself and her children, a trick I will teach you, my dears, when the spring comes; she used to lie quite quietly among the ivy on the wall, and then take the baby birds out of the nest when the grown-up birds had gone to the grub-shop. Mrs. Tabby White was very clever, as I said--so clever that presently she was not satisfied with being at the very top of the cat profession. "'Cat-people have more sense than human people, of course,' she said to herself; 'but still there are some things one might learn from them. I must watch and see how they do things.'**

**"So next morning when the cook gave Mrs. Tabby White her breakfast, she noticed that cook poured the milk out of a jug into a saucer. That afternoon Tabby felt thirsty, but instead of putting her head into the jug and drinking in the usual way,--you know--she tilted up the jug to pour the milk out as she had seen the cook do. But cats' paws, though they are so strong to catch rats and mice and birds, are too weak to hold big brown jugs. The nasty deceitful jug fell off the dresser and broke itself. 'Just to spite me, I do believe,' said Mrs. Tabby. And the milk was all spilled. "'Now how on earth could that jug have been broken?' said cook, when she came in. "'It must have been the cat,' said the kitchenmaid; and she was quite right, but nobody believed her. "Then Mrs. Tabby White noticed that human people slept in big soft-cushioned white beds, instead of sleeping on the kitchen hearth-rug, or in the barn, like cat people. So she said to her children one evening-- "'My dears, we are going to move into a new house.'**

**"And the kittens were delighted, and they all went upstairs very quietly, and crept into the very best human bed. But unfortunately that bed had been got ready for a human uncle to sleep in; and when he found the cats there he turned them out, not gently, and threw boots at them till they fled, pale with fright to the ends of their pretty tails. And next morning he told the Mistress of the house that horrid CATS had been in his bed, and he vowed that he would never pass another night under a roof where such things were possible. Mrs. Tabby White was very glad--because no lady can wish for the visits of a person who throws boots at her. But the Mistress of the house said sadly, 'Oh, Tabby!--you have lost us a fortune!' And Tabby for all her cleverness didn't understand what the Mistress meant, but went on purring proudly, and wondering what clever thing she could do next. And \_I\_ don't know what it meant either, so don't you interrupt with silly questions. "'I think we ought to wear shoes,' was the next thing Mrs. Tabby White said; but all the human shoes were too big for her. However, there was a nice pair of salmon-coloured kid shoes, quite new, belonging to the human child's big doll--and Mrs. Tabby White put them on her eldest kitten's little browny feet.**

**"'Now, Brindle,' she said (he was named after the gentleman who told me the story), 'you are grander than any kitten ever was before.' And at first Brindle felt pleased--then he tried to feel pleased--then he knew he wasn't pleased at all. Then the shoes began to hurt him horribly, so he mewed sadly; and Mrs. Tabby White boxed his ears softly--as mother cats do; \_you\_ know how I mean! But when she was asleep he took off the pink shoes and bit them to pieces. And Nurse slapped him for it. Poor Mrs. Tabby White was very miserable when she saw her son being slapped: for it is one thing to box your son's ears (softly, as mother cats do; \_you\_ know how I mean), and quite another to see another person do it--heavily, as is the way with nursemaids. "But the last and greatest effort Mrs. Tabby White made to imitate human manners was one Saturday night. "She saw the human child have its bath before the nursery fire, with hot water, pink soap, dry towels, and much fussing, and she said to herself, 'Why should I waste hours every day in washing my children with my little white paws and my little pink tongue, when this human child can be made clean in ten minutes with this big bath. If I had more time I could learn to be cleverer, and I should end by being the most wonderful Cat in all the world.' So she sat, and watched, and waited.**

**"When the human child was in bed and asleep, Nurse went down to her supper, leaving the bath to be cleared away later, for it was a hot supper of baked onions and toasted cheese, and if you don't go to that supper directly it is ready, you may as well not go at all, for it won't be worth eating--at least so I have heard the kitchenmaid say. "Mrs. Tabby White waited till she heard the last of Nurse's steps on the stairs below, and then she put both her cat-children into the tub, and washed them with rose-scented soap and a Turkey sponge. At first they thought it very good fun, but presently the soap got in their eyes and they were frightened of the sponge, and they cried, mewing piteously, to be taken out. I don't know how she could have done it, I couldn't have treated a kitten of \_mine\_ like that.**

**"When she took them out, Mrs. Tabby tried to dry them with the soft towel, but somehow catskin is not so easy to dry as child-skin, and the little cats began to shiver, and moan: 'Oh, mother, we were so nice and warm, and now we are so cold! Why is it? What have we done? Were we naughty?' "'Drat the cats!' said Nurse, when she came up from supper, and found Mrs. Tabby White trying to warm her kittens against her own comfortable fur; 'if they haven't tumbled in the bath!' "Nurse dried the poor, dear, cruelly-used kittens a little (her hands were bigger than Mrs. Tabby's, so she could do it better), and put them in a basket with flannel, and next day Tabby-Kit was quite well, though rather ragged looking; but Brindle had taken a chill, and for days he hung between life and death. Poor Mrs. Tabby was like a wild cat with anxiety, and when at last Brindle was well again (or nearly, for he always had a slight cough after that), Mrs. Tabby White said to her children, 'My darlings, I was wrong, I was a silly old cat.' "'No,' purred the cat-children, 'darling mother, you were always the best of cats.'**

**"Mrs. Tabby kissed them both, for of course any one would be pleased that her children should think her the best of cats, but in her heart she knew well enough how silly she had been. "Then she set about washing the kittens, not with pink soap and white towel this time, but with white paws and pink tongue in the good old-fashioned way." \* \* \* \* \* "Thank you, mother," said all the kittens; "what a nice horrible story." "What is the moral?" asked the youngest kitten but three. "The moral," said Mrs. Buffy, "is, 'There is such a thing as being too clever by half.' I'm not sure about the story being true, but I know the moral is. Why, it's nearly tea-time. Come along, children, and get your tea." So they all crept quietly away to catch the necessary mice, and the youngest was so afraid of being too clever by half, that she would never have caught a mouse at all, if her mother had not boxed her ears--softly, as mother cats do; you know how I mean!**