

The gift of speech

A tale of Henren the Bloody and the Cat

I heard them long before they came into sight: first the piercing wail of an infant, then, as I drew closer, the raised voices of a woman and a man. Topping a slight rise in the road I saw them: a couple of pedlars standing beside a small but heavily loaded cart with a long-faced donkey yoked to it. The man was holding the infant in his arms and berating the woman, who was peering down at one of the cart's wheels and snapping back at him.

They weren't so preoccupied that they didn't notice my approach, though. The roads were safer than they had been, but no experienced traveller would let a stranger come up on them unawares. The couple held off their arguing as I approached, the woman rising to move beside the man with a long-handled hammer in her hands and the man turning half away with the infant, as if ready to dash into the trees lining the road. Even the child stopped its mewling, as if sensing its parents' apprehension.

I slowed my pace as I neared to give them the chance to look me over. I saw them take in the short spear and sword strapped to the flanks of the horse that I led and the heavy dagger at my belt – I lifted my cloak obligingly to give them a clearer view – before their gaze turned back to the horse. More precisely, their eyes were drawn to the Cat's cradle mounted before the saddle. The Cat himself, black as coal from nose to tail, was out of sight for them, curled up in the cradle. It was a sunny day, so I'd folded back the cover that protected him from rain and cold.

"Trouble with your cart?" I asked when I was close enough to talk without raising my voice too much. I had no desire to set the child off howling again. The pedlars clearly decided that I didn't pose an immediate danger and relaxed slightly. The woman lowered her hammer and nodded to the wheel she'd been inspecting. "Wheel's coming loose. Can't decide whether to fix it here or carry on to the next inn and hope for the best."

"Your son can't stay out in the open while you mess around with your tools," the man interjected. As if on cue the bundle in his arms raised a loud scream, sucked in a lungful air, then really let rip. On the horse's back I saw the Cat's ear flick, and his tail curled over his ears. One eye opened, full of reproach. As if it my fault his peace and quiet was being disturbed.

I pointed back the way I'd come. "There's a river ford about a mile that way. Your cart will never make it over with a dodgy wheel."

The woman nodded, but the man gave a loud sigh. "Well, that's just wonderful! Now I suppose we'll be stuck out here for hours, and it will be midnight before we find that inn!"

Seeing another argument about to start between the two – they'd obviously mastered the ability to tune out their child's screams and devote their full attention to their own disagreement – I hastily interrupted the woman's growled reply. "How about this? There's a shelter just off the road a few hundred yards back. We can share a fire there, and I'll help you fix that wheel. Then you can be on your way again early tomorrow."

The pedlars broke off their bickering, and put their heads together with a few suspicious looks my way. I tried to look amiable and harmless while they talked, gritting my teeth at the wails that seemed to have nestled at the base of my skull. The Cat raised his head briefly, and gave me a look of disgust before tucking his nose between his paws again.

Eventually the pedlars agreed to my plan, and it was decided that we'd hitch my horse to the cart as I led the way back to the shelter. The woman positioned herself by the weak wheel while the man trailed along behind holding the screaming child. He'd been making as if to climb on the cart until a glare from the woman told him otherwise. The donkey, unyoked and tied to the back of the cart, seemed to be the only one of our little troupe who enjoyed the new arrangement. The sad look was gone and it walked with its nose up in the breeze, despite the noisy bundle in the man's arms. The Cat just glared at me with baleful gold-green eyes.

The shelter, when we reached it, was like any of the hundreds scattered along the old highways, and in fact in better shape than most. Signposted by a tall standing stone at the roadside, the shelter itself was nestled a short way back in the trees. It was little more than a lean-to, comprised of two walls with a bit of roof to keep the wind and the worst of the rain off, and a paved area with a firepit.

With the horse pulling, and the man giving useful advice and admonishments, the woman and I managed to guide the cart over the rough ground to the shelter without the wheel coming off entirely. I paused for a moment to catch my breath before moving to unhitch the horse. The man passed me on his way to the lean-to, then stopped as he got a look at the cradle on the horse's shoulders.

"You have a cat!" he exclaimed. "Why would anyone want to travel with a cat?" He didn't wait for an answer.

"A cat?" the woman asked from behind me. "Sounds like a nice, quiet companion." She had untied the donkey and turned it loose, and was starting to unload the cart.

"Not as quiet as you'd think," I replied. Mercifully the infant had stopped wailing when the man reached the lean-to and sat down with a groan of satisfaction. "He's sometimes very talkative."

"Ah, but you can always shut a cat up with food," said the woman, with blissful ignorance. "That's what they want when they miaow, you know."

"Not this one. Has some very strong opinions." But the woman wasn't listening. She was carefully lifting packs, parcels and hampers from the cart and stacking them neatly on the stone paving. I shrugged and turned my attention to the horse. The Cat stayed curled up in the cradle as I lifted it from its high perch. "No thoughts on our camping arrangements?" I asked quietly. My only answer was silence and a sullen look from a half-open eye.

In spite of their bickering, the pedlars had a routine for camping. The woman quickly got a fire going while the man prepared ingredients for their dinner. By the time I'd unsaddled the horse, rubbed it down and fed it, then done the same for the uncomplaining donkey, the woman had returned her attention to the cart's wheel and the man was stirring a pot over the fire. The Cat had wandered off in search of his own dinner, but I knew he'd be back before too long,

The woman had strong, capable hands and clearly knew what she was doing. With my help to lift the cart she soon had the wheel firmly in place once more. "There," she said with satisfaction, "that should hold until I find a proper cartwright to look at it."

By the time the sun sank below the trees she'd loaded their wares back onto the cart and the man had plated up two bowls of a watery stew. He half-heartedly offered me some, but I demurred, preferring my own dinner of smoked chicken and cold root vegetables, with a small loaf of sweet bread that I warmed by the fire. With my back against a large tree stump, I'd have enjoyed my meal if the pedlars' baby hadn't started up again.

"I think we ought to keep watch," the man proclaimed when he'd finished eating. "These are lawless lands, and it wouldn't be the first time innocent travellers fell victim to bandits." Evidently he'd decided that I could be trusted.

"The Cat can keep an eye out," I told him. "His excuse for sleeping all day is that he's nocturnal, so it's only fair for him to stand watch."

The Cat had returned while I was eating and was now lying on my stretched-out legs. At my words he flicked his tail once.

"Of course!" the man replied, with the forced joviality of someone who thinks he's heard a joke but doesn't actually have a sense of humour. "The talking cat. I'm sure he'll keep us all safe." The Cat turned his gaze on him, and the man's chuckle died on his lips. "Ah, well, yes, if you say so. I don't suppose there's much danger anyway."

The Cat continued to stare at him, and the pedlar started to shift uncomfortably, and it wasn't long before he announced that it was time for them to sleep. The woman agreed, and they carried their infant – quiet once more – to the lean-to, where the man had made up a bed for the three of them.

I sat by the fire for a while longer before I lifted the Cat off my legs, wrapped myself in my blanket and settled down to sleep. The Cat found a comfortable spot as far away from the sleeping pedlars as he could without losing the warmth of the fire. I woke up briefly some time later when the wailing started again, but it had been a long day and I was soon sleeping again.

Dawn was still some hours off when I was roused by a loud scream from the woman, and the sound of the man shouting. "Demon beast! Begone, leave us be!" Sitting up, I watched by the dying glow of the fire as the pedlars hastily gathered their belongings. The woman was hitching the donkey – looking profoundly sad once more – to the cart as the man walked past me with the crying infant. He saw me looking, and paused. "A demon, that's what it is! And you a consorter with demons!" With his free hand he gestured to where the Cat was primly washing his face by the fire, ignoring everything that was happening around him. "Demon beast!"

In a few minutes they were off, and as the sounds of crying faded into the distance the area around the shelter was soon quiet. It was too early for the birds to be awake, and even the coals in the fire weren't crackling. The Cat finished his grooming and came to sit next to me.

"You did that on purpose," I said.

For a long moment he looked at me, large eyes unblinking. Finally he spoke. "I offered to catch a mouse for their young. I thought that might shut it up." Its tone was mocking.

"No, you just wanted to scare them out of their wits."

The Cat didn't reply, just tucked his paws under himself and closed his eyes slowly. I sighed. Speech was a gift, I'd been taught. If so, it was wasted on a creature that could say more with a look than most humans said in a lifetime.