

Richards Laura Elizabeth Howe

Three Minute Stories



Laura Richards

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Laura E. Richards
Three Minute Stories

TO

My Grandchildren,

WITH MUCH LOVE

Author's Note

Many of these stories and rhymes appeared originally in the *Ladies' Home Journal*, and were signed either with my initials, or with names of characters in my books. Others were adapted by me from the Indian "Hitopadesa," or "Book of Good Counsel," and from two anonymous story-books of a bygone generation, long out of print. These are marked "Adapted."

L. E. R.

JOHNNY AND HIS SAND BOX

Johnny's sand box is in the back yard. It is a fine big box, with the sides raised so that Johnny and the sand will not fall out. The sand is fine and dry, and almost white; it came from the seashore, and sometimes you find a little shell in it.

The things that belong in the sand box (beside Johnny himself!) are the blue tin pail to hold sand, and the red tin pail to hold water, and the shovel, and the rake, and the old kitchen spoon. The things that do *not* belong there (some of them) are the woolly dog (because the sand gets all into his wool, and then shakes out on the nursery floor, and Maggie says it is a Sight!), and Johnny's shoes and stockings (he likes to take them off and sift the hot, clean sand between his bare toes), and the neighbors' cats.

This story is about the cats. There are five of them. One is black, and has a red leather collar with a little silver bell; it belongs to the deaf old lady next door, and its name is Jetty. Another is yellow, and belongs to the lame girl in the white house with green blinds; its name is Topaz. The third cat is gray, with white front and paws. This is a lady cat, and her name is Malta; she belongs to the lady whom Johnny calls Mrs. Nose. Mamma does not allow him to say this, and he tries to remember, but sometimes he forgets; one day he said right out, "Good morning, Mrs. Nose!" and she only laughed, and said her nose was just the right size, and she needed it all to smell catnip with. She is a funny lady, and Johnny likes her, and Malta too.

The fourth cat belongs to Mr. Chops the butcher, and is a big tabby, with green eyes and fierce whiskers. Johnny does not like him at all. But the fifth cat is Muffet, his own dear white kitten.

Now all these cats were friends except Bobs, the butcher's cat. He lives on meat, and Mamma says perhaps that makes him cross. Anyhow, he is cross, and he growls and snarls and spits at Muffet and Jetty and Topaz and Malta, and tries to steal their fishbones, and upsets their milk, and is really a very horrid cat.

The story happened one night last week. Johnny was asleep, and Maggie was tidying up the nursery before going to bed, when suddenly she heard a queer noise. It came from the yard, and she stepped to the window and looked out. It was bright moonlight; and what do you think? The cats were having a party in the sand box! the four friendly cats, that is, Muffet and Topaz and Malta and Jetty. Maggie thought Muffet must have invited the others, for she was sitting in the middle of the box with her front paws tucked under her, looking so pleased and happy; and the three others had their paws tucked in too, and they were all four talking in little soft mews, and seemed to be having a very good time. Then all of a sudden there was a snarl and a yowl, and that horrid great Bobs sprang over the fence and into the sand box, and began clawing and spitting and scratching right and left, just as hard as he could. At first the four friendly cats were too startled to do anything; but in another minute *they* began to spit and scratch and claw, and there were all five of them rolling over and over, scattering the sand on every side, and making such a noise that it woke Johnny out of his sound sleep. At first he was frightened, but Maggie told him what it was, and said wait and see what she would do. She pushed up the fly screen very softly, and then she brought the great big jug full of water, and leaning out, – splash! she emptied it full on the fighting, struggling cats. *Oh!* how they yelled! One jumped this way, and one jumped that; and the next moment not one was left except poor little Muffet, sitting in the middle of the box and crying pitifully. "Oh, *poor* Muffy!" said Johnny. "Poor Muffy *all* wet!" So then good Maggie ran down and brought Muffet up, and dried her with a towel, and comforted her till she purred. Johnny wanted to take her into bed with him, but Maggie said that never would do; so, – what *do* you think? She put her in the doll's cradle with Susan Dolly, and covered her up, and told her to go to sleep, and she did!

MONOSYLLABICS

The black cat sat
In the fat man's hat;
"Oh, dear!" the fat man said.
"May the great gray bat
Catch the bad black cat
Who has left me no hat
For my head!"

The big brown bear
Tried to curl his hair
To go to the Fair so gay.
But he looked such a fright
That his aunt took flight,
And he cried till night, they say.

A pale pink pig,
In a large blond wig,
Danced a wild, wild jig
On the lea;
But a rude old goat,
In a sky-blue coat,
Said, "You're nought but a shoat, tee hee!"

A poor old King
Sold his gay gold ring
For to buy his old wife some cream;
But the cat lapped it up
With a sip and a sup,
And his tears ran down in a stream.

A large red cow
Tried to make a bow,
But did not know how,
They say.
For her legs got mixed,
And her horns got fixed,
And her tail *would* get
In her way.

A boy named Sam
Had a fat pet ram,
And gave him some jam
For his tea;
But the fat pet ram
Tried to butt poor Sam,

Till he had to turn
And flee.

A girl named Jane
Had a sad, bad pain
In the place where she wore
Her belt;
She mopped and she mowed,
And she screamed aloud,
Just to show the crowd
How she felt.

A sad, thin ape
Bought some wide white tape
To trim a new cape
For his niece;
But a bold buff calf,
With a loud, rude laugh,
Bit off one whole half
For his geese.

A pert, proud hen
Laid an egg, and then
Said “Cluck!” and “cluck!” and
“cluck!”
Said the cock, “Had I known
You would take that tone,
I would have wooed none
But a duck!”

THE NEW LEAVES

“Wake up!” said a clear little voice. Tommy woke, and sat up in bed. At the foot of the bed stood a boy about his own age, all dressed in white, like fresh snow. He had very bright eyes, and he looked straight at Tommy.

“Who are you?” asked Tommy.

“I am the New Year!” said the boy. “This is my day, and I have brought you your leaves.”

“What leaves?” asked Tommy.

“The new ones, to be sure!” said the New Year. “I hear bad accounts of you from my Daddy – ”

“Who is your Daddy?” asked Tommy.

“The Old Year, of course!” said the boy. “He said you asked too many questions and I see he was right. He says you are greedy, too, and that you sometimes pinch your little sister, and that one day you threw your reader into the fire. Now, all this must stop.”

“Oh, must it?” said Tommy. He felt frightened, and did not know just what to say.

The boy nodded. “If it does not stop,” he said, “you will grow worse and worse every year, till you grow up into a Horrid Man. Do you want to be a Horrid Man?”

“N-no!” said Tommy.

“Then you must stop being a horrid boy!” said the New Year. “Take your leaves!” and he held out a packet of what looked like copy-book leaves, all sparkling white, like his own clothes.

“Turn over one of these every day,” he said, “and soon you will be a good boy instead of a horrid one.”

Tommy took the leaves and looked at them. On each leaf a few words were written. On one it said, “Help your mother!” On another, “Don’t pull the cat’s tail!” On another, “Don’t eat so much!” And on still another, “Don’t fight Billy Jenkins!”

“Oh!” cried Tommy. “I *have* to fight Billy Jenkins! He said – ”

“Good-by!” said the New Year. “I shall come again when I am old to see whether you have been a good boy or a horrid one. Remember,

“Horrid boy makes horrid man;
You alone can change the plan.”

He turned away and opened the window. A cold wind blew in and swept the leaves out of Tommy’s hand. “Stop! stop!” he cried. “Tell me – ” But the New Year was gone, and Tommy, staring after him, saw only his mother coming into the room. “Dear child!” she said. “Why, the wind is blowing everything about.”

“My leaves! My leaves!” cried Tommy; and jumping out of bed he looked all over the room, but he could not find one.

“Never mind,” said Tommy. “I can turn them just the same, and I mean to. I will not grow into a Horrid Man.” And he didn’t.

GRANDMOTHER'S ALPHABET

The Ant is so busy
It makes her quite dizzy,
She says that her head
Goes whirl-around-whizzy.

The Bunny is funny;
He cannot make honey,
Nor write with a pen,
Nor shoot with a gunny.

The Cow is not able
To sit at the table,
And so we must send her
To eat in the stable.

The Duck goes a-quacking
And clicking and clacking,
And eats all she finds
From beeswax to blacking.

The Elephant mighty
Can *not* find his nighty!
It makes him feel nervous,
And fractious and flighty.

The Fish has no wish
To be put in a dish,
So he's off like a flash
With a swishety-swish.

The Goose has no use
For an Indian pappoose,
So she looks at it sadly,
And says, "What's the use?"

The Hen lays an egg,
And stands on one leg,
And says, "Cut-ker-dah-cut!
Observe me, I beg!"

The Ibis is pretty,
But not very witty;
And when he is tired
He plays with the kitty.

The Jaguar so cruel
Was killed in a duel,
And left his poor wife
To eat nothing but gruel.

The kind Kangaroo
Has so little to do,
That he talks to the Moolly
And tries to say "Moo!"

The Lizard goes sighing,
And sobbing and crying,
Because his poor tail
Got shrunk in the dyeing.

The Moose is all humpy,
And grumpy and lumpy,
And if you say, "Boo!"
He is off with a thumpy.

The Newt has a neighbor
Who fights with a sabre,
And when he has conquered
He beats on a tabor.

The Owl and the Oyster
Went off for a royster,
And when they came back
They were put in a cloister.

The Pig bought a carrot
To give to his parrot:
But Poll was so frightened
She hid in the garret.

The Queen in her crown
And velvety gown,
She went to the circus,
And laughed at the clown.

The Ram and the Rattle-
Snake had a great battle:
For each called the other
A tittlety-tattle.

The Stork had a fancy
To go to a dancy,
But people said, "No!
You are rather too prancy!"

The timorous Tapir
Was reading the paper,
And found that his aunt
Had married a draper.

The Unicorn tried
On a camel to ride,
But there came a sad fall
To himself and his pride.

The Viper is vain,
And cannot explain
Why people persist so
In calling him plain.

The Woodchuck is wealthy,
And hearty and healthy:
But sometimes his movements
Are snooping and stealthy.

The Xiphias perks his
Head up to see Xerxes:
And thinks him much finer
Than Tartars or Turkses.

The Yammering Yak
Has spots on his back:
He can't get them off,
So he puts on a sacque.

The Zebra with zeal
Was cooking a meal:
But he found it was onions
And stopped with a squeal.

THE NEW LEAF

“Why are you crying, Little Cat?” asked Little Dog.

“Because my paws are so cold!” said Little Cat. “I have been digging in the snow and I cannot find one.”

“One what?” asked Little Dog.

“One new leaf.”

“What do you want of a new leaf?”

“I want to turn it over, but there just aren’t any to turn.”

“Of course there aren’t!” said Little Dog. “It is winter.”

“But Little Girl is going to find one,” said Little Cat. “I heard her mother say to her, ‘You really must turn over a new leaf!’ and she said, ‘I truthfully will, Mamma!’ and when Little Girl says she truthfully will she always does. Then her mother kissed her, and said everybody had to turn over new leaves now, and she had some of her own to turn, so she knew just how it was. The door shut then – on the tip of my tail, too – and I heard no more; but what do you suppose it means?”

Little Dog shook his head. “We must ask somebody,” he said. “Let me see! Great Old Dog is out for a walk, and Crosspatch Parrot bit me the last time I asked her a question.”

“I know,” said Little Cat. “We will ask Old Cat in the Barn. She knows a good many things, and if she isn’t catching rats – but she generally is – she will tell us.”

They found Old Cat in the Barn sitting on a truss of hay, washing herself. She listened to Little Cat’s story, and her green eyes twinkled.

“So you have been looking for new leaves under the snow!” she said.

“Yes,” said Little Cat. “First I looked on the trees, and there weren’t any there; so I thought it must be leaves of plants and things, so I scratched and dug till my poor paws were almost quite frozen, but not one single scrap of a leaf could I find.”

“Fffff!” said Old Cat in the Barn. “This barn is full of ’em!”

“Full of leaves!” cried Little Cat and Little Dog together. “What can you mean, Old Cat? We don’t call hay leaves!”

“How many rats have you caught this week?” asked Old Cat, turning to Little Dog.

“None!” said Little Dog. “The last rat I caught bit me horridly; besides, they are odious, vulgar beasts, and I don’t care to have anything to do with them.”

“Fffff!” said Old Cat. “Little Cat, how many mice have you caught in the kitchen this week?”

Little Cat hung her head. “I haven’t caught any,” she said. “I don’t care for mice, the flavor is too strong; I like cream better.”

“Fffff! grrrr-yow!” said Old Cat; her green eyes shot out sparks, and her fur began to stand up. “Now, you two, listen to me! Why do you think the Big People keep you? Because you are soft and pretty and foolish? Not at all! They keep you because you are supposed to be useful. Your mother, Little Cat, was a hard-working, self-respecting mouser, who caught her daily mouse as regularly as she ate her daily bread and milk. Your father, Little Dog, hunted rats with me in this barn as long as he had legs to stand upon, and between us we kept the place in tolerable order. Great Old Dog cannot be expected to hunt at his age, and besides, he is too big; one might as well hunt with an ox. But since your parents died you two lazy children have done next to nothing, and what is the consequence? I am worked to skin and bone, and the mice are all over the house; I heard Cook say so. Mind what I say; no creature, with four legs or two, is worth his salt unless he earns it, in one way or another. Now, what have you to say for yourselves?”

“Miaouw!” said Little Cat. “I am very sorry, Old Cat.”

“Yap! Yap!” said Little Dog. “I am sorry too, Old Cat.”

“Very well!” said Old Cat in the Barn. “Then turn over a new leaf!”

“Miaouw!” “Yap!” “That is just what we want to do!” said Little Cat and Little Dog together; “but we can’t find any.”

“The fact is,” said Old Cat in the Barn, “it is one of the foolish ways of speaking that the Big People have. It just means, stop being bad and begin to be good. Now do you see?”

“Prrr!” said Little Cat; “now I see. I will go and catch a mouse this minute, Old Cat.”

“Wuff!” said Little Dog; “I see, too, and I will come and hunt rats with you, Old Cat.”

“Prrrrrrr!” said Old Cat in the Barn. “That is right! Go to work, like good children, and as I may have been rather short with you lately I will turn over a new leaf, too, and ask you both to supper with me in my hay-parlor. Cook gave me the bones of the Christmas goose, and we will have a great feast.”

MR. HOPPY FROG

Mr. Hoppy Frog
Was very, very funny;
Mr. Hoppy Frog
He had not any money.
So he could not buy
A squeaky woolly dog;
It made him sigh and sob and cry,
Poor Mr. Hoppy Frog!

Going down the lane,
He met with Mistress Kitty;
When she saw his pain,
Her heart was filled with pity.
“Mr. Hoppy Frog,
Oh! do not weep for that!
To buy your woolly dog
I'll sell my Sunday hat.”

Bowing down before,
Said Mr. Hoppy Frog,
“I love you even more
Than squeaky woolly dog!
Come to church with me,
And wear your Sunday hat;
And we'll through life be Frog and wife,
Sweet Mistress Kitty Cat!”

NEW YEAR'S DAY IN THE WOOD

“Do I look nice?” asked the Rabbit.

“Very nice!” said the Chipmunk; “that is, for a person who has no tail to speak of. But, of course, you cannot help that.”

The Rabbit looked into the looking-glass pond and saw his little white blob of a tail. “Don't you want to lend me yours, just this once?” he asked. “I would take great care of it!”

“No, I cannot do that,” said the Chipmunk, “but I can lend you the tail of my late uncle. It is such a fine one that we have kept it to brush out the nest with.”

“The very thing!” said the Rabbit.

So the Chipmunk brought the tail of his late uncle and tied it on to the Rabbit's stub.

“How does that look?” asked the Rabbit.

“Fine!” said the Chipmunk. “Now tell me how I look!”

“Well enough!” said the Rabbit. “Of course, you would look better if you had long ears.”

“Dear me!” said the Chipmunk; and he, too, looked into the looking-glass pond. “Haven't you a spare pair that you could lend me?”

“Why, yes,” said the Rabbit. “There is a pair that belonged to my grandfather, hanging on the wall at home. I will get those.”

So the Rabbit got the ears and tied them on to the Chipmunk's head.

“How do I look now?” asked the Chipmunk.

“Splendid!” said the Rabbit. “Now let us go and make our New Year's calls. Where shall we go first?”

“I wish to call on Miss Woodchuck!” said the Chipmunk.

“So do I,” said the Rabbit. “We will go there first.” And off they went.

They came to Miss Woodchuck's door and knocked, and she opened the door. “Mercy!” she cried. “Who are you, and what do you want?”

“We are Mr. Rabbit and Mr. Chipmunk,” said the two friends, “and we have come to make you a New Year's call.”

“More likely you have come to steal the nuts!” said the lady angrily. “I know Mr. Rabbit and Mr. Chipmunk well, and neither of you is either of them. Who ever heard of a long-tailed rabbit or a long-eared squirrel? Get along with you! You are frights, and probably thieves as well.” And she shut the door in their faces.

The two friends walked a little way in silence; then they stopped and looked at each other.

“You said I looked fine!” said the Rabbit.

“I – I meant the tail!” said the Chipmunk. “It is a fine tail. But you said I looked splendid!”

“I was thinking of the ears!” said the Rabbit. “They are splendid ears.”

They walked on until they came once more to the looking-glass pond. They looked at themselves; then they looked at each other; then, all in a minute, off came the long ears and tail.

“There!” cried the Chipmunk. “Now we look as we were meant to look; and I am bound to say, Rabbit, that it is much more becoming to you.”

“So it is to you!” replied the Rabbit. “Now shall we call on Miss Woodchuck again?”

“Come on!” said the Chipmunk.

So they went to Miss Woodchuck's house, and knocked once more at the door, and Miss Woodchuck opened it. “Oh!” she cried. “Mr. Chipmunk and Mr. Rabbit, how do you do? I am so glad to see you. A happy New Year to you both!”

“The same to you, Ma'am!” said the Rabbit and the Chipmunk.

THE NEWS FROM ANGEL LAND

Oh! Harry Boy and Johnny Boy,
And little Libbety,
They were three happy children
As ever you did see:
One day there came another child;
Oh! he was sweet and small!
And round his cradle quickly came
The other children all.

“Oh! what’s the news from Angel Land,
Baby, Baby?
We think we still might understand,
Maybe, maybe!
Daddies and Mammies long ago
Forgot the things the babies know;
We hardly think we could forget,
And yet – and yet!”

Now Harry’s eyes were diamond dark,
And John’s were starry blue,
And little Libbety was like
A rosebud dipped in dew.
They stood around the cradle white,
With rosy ribbons tied,
They looked into the baby’s face
And earnestly they cried:

“Oh! what’s the news from Angel Land,
Baby, Baby?
We think we still might understand,
Maybe, maybe!
Daddies and Mammies long ago
Forgot the things the babies know;
We hardly think we could forget,
And yet – and yet!”

The baby gravely met the look
Of brown eyes and of blue:
And gravely opened his baby mouth,
And gravely said, “*A-Goo!*”
Harry and Johnny shook their heads:
“That word’s too deep for me!”
“I think I used to know it, though!”
Said little Libbety.

“But what’s the news from Angel Land,
Baby, Baby?
We think we still might understand,
Maybe, maybe!
Daddies and Mammies long ago
Forgot the things the babies know;
We hardly think we could forget,
And yet – and yet!”

The baby said “*A-Goo!*” again
With meaning calm and deep:
And then he said, “Ba-be, ba-ba!”
And then he went to sleep.
The children sighed and turned away:
But none of all the three
Gussed, neither John nor Harry Boy,
Nor little Libbety,

He had told the news from Angel Land,
Baby, baby,
He thought that they *might* understand,
Maybe, maybe.
Daddies and Mammies long ago
Forgot the things the babies know:
The children *ought* not to forget,
And yet – and yet!

THE BOASTFUL DONKEY **(Adapted)**

Once upon a time there was a donkey who lived in a field where there was no pond; so he had never seen his own image, and he thought he was the biggest and strongest and handsomest creature in the world.

One day a lion came through the field, and, being a polite beast, stopped to greet the donkey. “Good morning, friend!” he said. “What a fine day this is!”

“Fine enough, I dare say!” said the donkey. “I never think about the weather. I have other things to think about.”

“Indeed!” said the lion. “May I ask what things?”

“None of your business!” said the donkey rudely; and he set up a loud braying, thinking to frighten the lion away.

“Why do you bray?” asked the lion.

“Bray!” cried the donkey. “That was not braying – it was roaring!”

“If you think I don’t know braying from roaring,” said the lion, still politely, “you are mistaken. That was a bray.”

“Very well!” shouted the donkey. “If that was, this shall not be!” and he uttered a long and loud “Hee-haw!” and kicked up his heels in angry pride. “What do you call that?” he asked proudly.

“I call it a bray,” replied the lion; “and a very ugly one. You see, after all, you are a donkey; look at the length of your ears!”

“How dare you?” cried the donkey. “My ears are the finest in the world, everybody says so. And as for roaring, if I have not scared you yet, just listen to me now!” And flinging up his heels again he bellowed till his own long ears tingled with the sound.

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