

The Cheshire Cheese Cat

A DICKENS OF A TALE

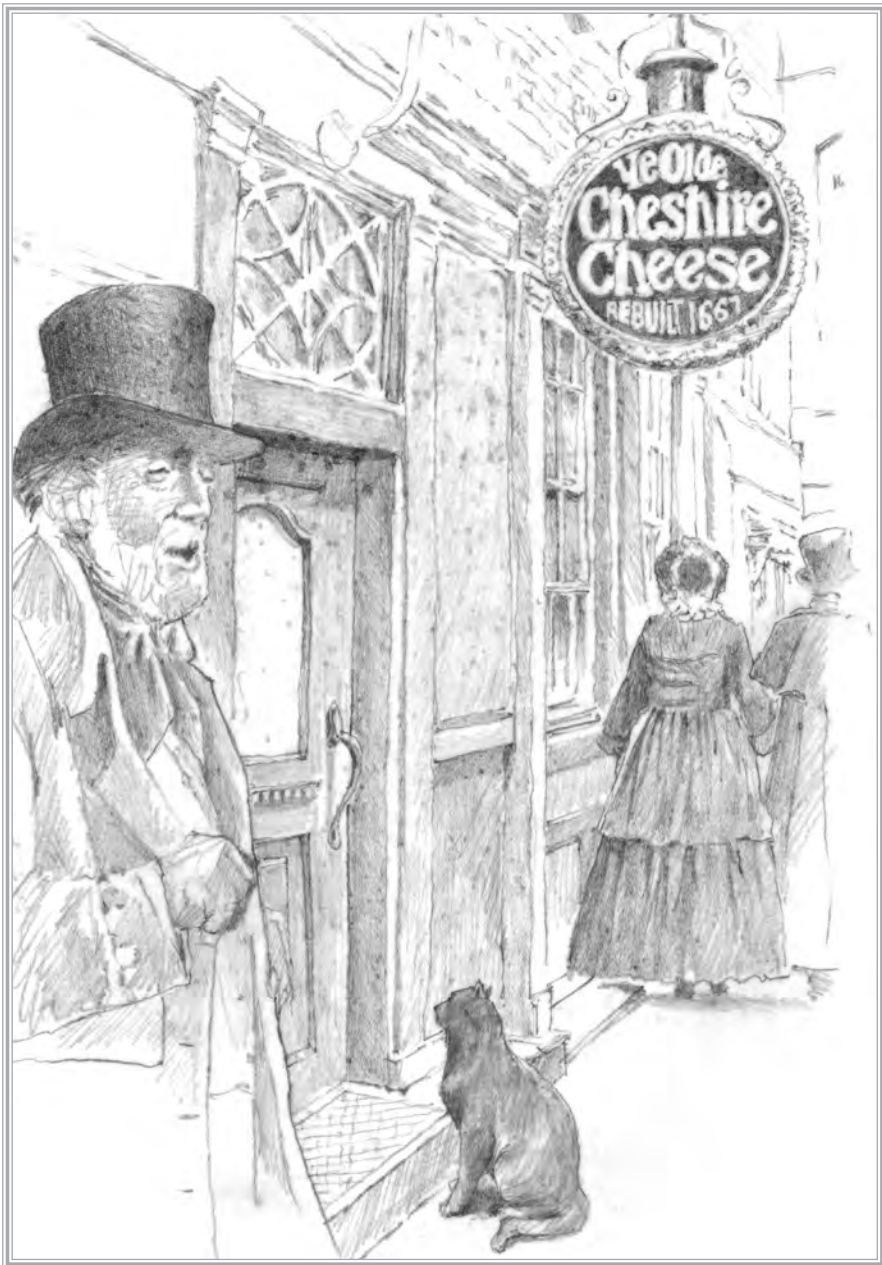


Carmen Agra Deedy & Randall Wright

Drawings by Barry Moser

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DEDICATIONS

To my luminous granddaughter, Ruby Rabbit
—C. D.

To Dawn, my sunshine and joy
—R. W.

For my friend Helen Casey-Brazeau and her Miss Bailey
—B. M.

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CHAPTER ONE

LIST OF CHARACTERS IN ORDER OF APPEARANCE

SKILLEY—A jaded street cat with a disgraceful secret and a shameful past.

PINCH—A perfectly foul villain and Skilley’s nemesis.

YE OLDE CHESHIRE CHEESE—This venerable inn is one of the grand ladies of London public houses. For centuries, she has attracted writers and word lovers the likes of Samuel Johnson, Mark Twain, and Arthur Conan Doyle. And cats. Let’s not forget the cats...

PIP—A mouse of Ye Olde Cheshire Cheese with more than a few secrets of his own.

NELL—The innkeeper’s misunderstood daughter, who dotes on the inn’s animals.

CROOMES—The temperamental cook whose cheese is famous far and wide; she is often in a state of ill temper.

MR. CHARLES DICKENS—A writer of some distinction who frequents the inn.

HENRY—The portly innkeeper, who is desperate to rid his inn of cheese-thieving mice.

ADELE—A barmaid, busybody, and hater of mice.

MALDWYN—The proud creature hidden away in the inn’s garret, upon whom rests the future of the realm.

A MYSTERIOUS VISITOR—You didn’t really expect a description, did you?

HE WAS THE BEST OF TOMS.

He was the worst of toms.

Fleet of foot, sleek and solitary, Skilley was a cat among cats. Or so he would have been, but for a secret he had carried since his early youth. A secret that caused him to live in hidden shame, avoiding even casual friendship lest anyone discover—

“Scat, cat!” A broom came down hard out of London’s cold and fog. Startled, Skilley leapt sideways and the broom whiffled empty air.

The cat, however, refused to scat.

He eyed the dead fish, then the broom, calculating the distance between the two.

“Off now, you thieving moggy!” the fishmonger shrilled. As if reading his thoughts, she kicked the fish under her stall and cocked the broom for another swing.

Angry women with brooms unnerved him. The only encounter Skilley dreaded more was one with Pinch, the terror of Fleet Street.

With a flick of his peculiar tail, Skilley turned his back to the fishwife, putting all the disdain he could muster into the sway of his hips.

But once he had rounded the corner, he flitted into an alley, where he ran its length with darts and dashes. Pausing at the end of the passageway, he surveyed the familiar cobblestones and his spirits lightened.

Huddled over her fire, on a near corner, was the crone who sold roasted chestnuts for a ha-penny. A few paces from her, a boy hawked mulled cider. Down the street, the song of the rag and bone man mingled with the rattle of carriages and the hum of pedestrians.

Ah, Fleet Street, Skilley thought.

Home to some of the finest eating and drinking in London, the street was a perfect gathering place for scavengers. And down a certain modest court stood a most particular pub, famed as a haunt for London writers: Ye Olde Cheshire Cheese.

Skilley peered through the gauzy mist. The inn’s hanging

wooden sign twitched in a swirl of January wind. Skilley shivered and looked longingly toward the cozy tavern.

There has to be a way in, he thought.

“Whatever it is you’re thinkin’—don’t,” came the warning, followed by a soft, dangerous purr.

“Ah, Pinch.” Skilley’s tone was pleasant, but this outward calm belied the clenching of his stomach. “And a fine day to you.”

Cold-blooded and volatile, Pinch was not a cat to be trifled with. “You can keep your *ah, Pinch* and your *fine day.*” His eyes narrowed and the hackles on his ginger-striped shoulders rose in challenge. “Just mind you keep away from The Cheese.”

“The Cheese?” Skilley asked, unblinking. “What of it?”

“Mice,” Pinch said.

“Mice?” Skilley’s eyes widened with pretend innocence.

“Aye, mice. The Cheese tavern is overrun with ’em.”

“Ah.”

“Grandest cheese in England, or so they say. And where there’s that manner of cheese, there’s mice aplenty.” He paused and gave a pleasurable groan. “Fat and juicy. Plump and round, young and...tender.” His nose twitched as though it could already smell a nest of baby mice.

“Mice aplenty, you say?” Skilley interrupted.

“The tavern is my ’ome. You ’old your distance.”

Skilley sat and licked a paw, a token of his indifference. As an added touch, he stroked behind his ear. “I wasn’t aware you had a home, Pinch.”

“Aye, but I do. And that there’s it.” He nodded toward the inn.

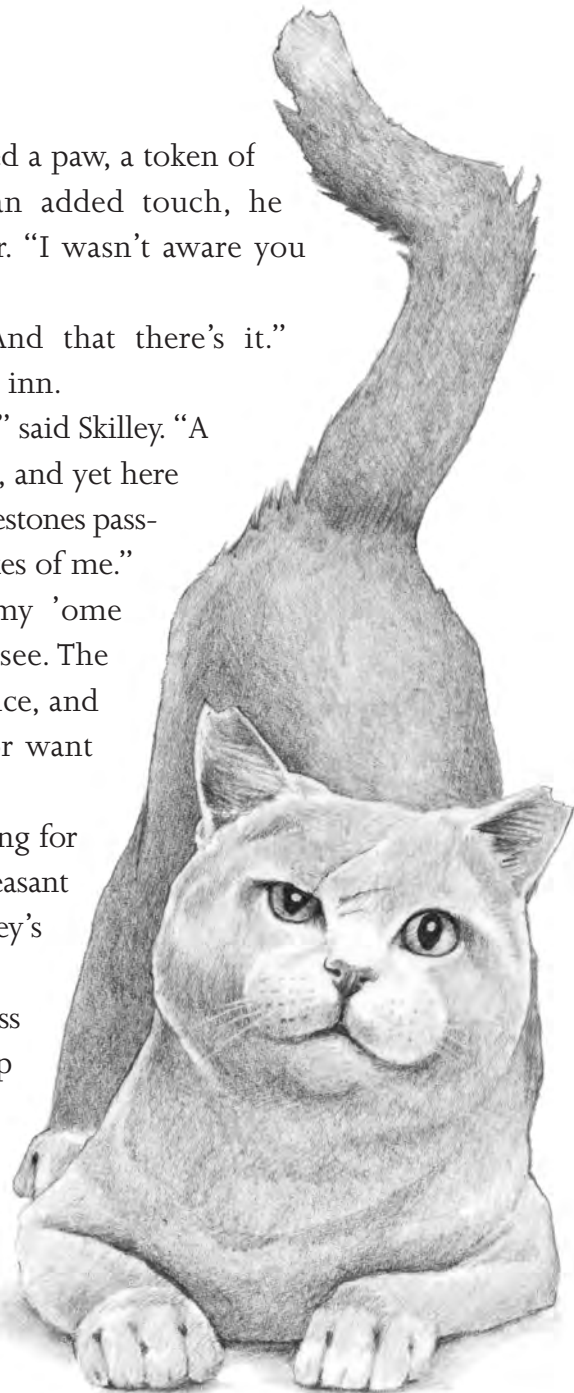
“Hmmm, odd that,” said Skilley. “A cozy tavern for a home, and yet here you sit on the icy cobblestones passing the day with the likes of me.”

“Well, it will be my ’ome soon, you watch and see. The place is ate up with mice, and the master’s witless for want of a mousekiller.”

“The Cheese is looking for a mouser?” A not-unpleasant chill danced up Skilley’s spine.

“Yes, and I’m it. Cross me and s’elp me I’ll rip out your...”

But Skilley had dropped the thread



of the conversation. A mouser, eh? A plan began to nibble at his mind—a plan of such elegant simplicity he was amazed he hadn’t thought of it before.

Stretching lazily, he rose, and with a last twitch of his crooked tail said, “You are a cat among cats, Pinch, and I thank you!”

“For what?” the ginger cat snarled after him. “What’d I do?”

Skilley didn’t answer. He was already engrossed in the audacity of a scheme so bold, so cunning, it would surely set him up for the rest of his nine lives.

CHAPTER TWO

Cat...

Cat...

Cat...

Cat...

Cat...

Cat...

“What do you hear?”

“Pip! Tell us what they’re say—”

“Shhhh.” Pip raised a single digit on his tiny paw and pressed it to his lips. His fellow mice fell begrudgingly silent.

Pip closed his eyes and pressed a fuzzy, delicate ear to the thin wall between himself and the chop room of Ye Olde Cheshire Cheese. To his dismay, the wall was not thin enough. He could catch only a word or two, which made it difficult, even for him, to understand the language of the humans.

Human language was a talent he had mastered while living in the pocket of Nell, the innkeeper’s daughter.

As Pip strained to listen, his thoughts returned to that blackest of days when his entire family, including five brothers and sisters, had been cruelly murdered by some unknown hand.

Croomes the cook. Pip harbored no doubt there. *Her bloody cleaver was found nearby, was it not?*

Pip alone had been left alive—unseen, no doubt, due to his unusually small size. Nell had heard his squeaks and rescued him from the bloody carnage. Her anger and distress was such that her breath came in gasps as she carried him away *up, up, up* the twisting, winding, impossible stairs of the inn.

She’d stopped only when she reached the safety of the attic. Holding the frightened little thing in one cupped hand, she’d used the other to search and find the bag of lamb’s wool. She’d torn away a small cloud of it, pressed it deep into her apron pocket, and then, with much tenderness, she’d nestled Pip safely inside.

When she heard his hiccuped sobs, Nell’s anger melted away, replaced with a welling up of grief that was as much for herself as for the mouse.

Nell’s mother had not experienced a violent death. Quite the opposite. Her passing had followed a short and

rather unremarkable illness. Still, there had been no proper good-bye. Her young mother had simply fallen asleep and never again awakened, like some princess in an ancient tale. Nell and her father were left feeling as though she'd never really gone, as though they might yet encounter her suddenly on a stair.

Everyone agreed that Nell had not been the same since that day. The less charitable among the inn's inhabitants went so far as to suggest she had gone a bit soft in the head.

Whether Nell were sane, daft, or merely heartsick, the young mouse had found a friend in the newly orphaned girl. Reaching into her pocket, she'd stroked his downy back with a fingertip and whispered, "You sleep now. No one will hurt you, so long as you're with me."

And she'd choked back a sob.

It had been the best and worst day of Pip's life.

That is, until this afternoon, when he finally quieted his fellow creatures enough to hear spoken again, in the rumbling voice of the innkeeper, that ominous word...

Cat.

CHAPTER THREE

The moment Skilley left Pinch's side, he set his plan in motion. Careful to seem unhurried lest his rival might be watching, Skilley wove a path among the bustling humans until he lost himself in the crowd. He waited but a few moments. Then, with a leap and a lightning sprint, he sped to the unimposing front door of Ye Olde Cheshire Cheese. Not to the back door, mind you, where smelly fish bones and gelatinous puddings were hurled daily into the gutter—and where no doubt, even now, Pinch and the other toms and tabbies would be assembling for the evening meal.

No. Skilley marched directly to the front door.

Unthinkable impudence for a cat.

Halted by a brief moment of doubt—not in the plan itself, but in its execution, he paused. It was a perfect plan that was now perfectly ruined by... a door.

Of all things.

Skilley hated doors.

He sat back on his haunches and considered the situation.

He looked at his right paw.

Then his left.

He examined the confounding doorknob. While he stared, as if in answer to his unspoken wish, a gloved hand reached out from the fog and pushed open the door.

“Good evening, Sir Puss,” said the owner of the hand. His voice sounded like the rolling bass notes of the great pipe organ at Saint Paul’s Cathedral.

Skilley ignored the greeting and darted inside. The man and his companion followed close behind. “A slab of cheese and a loaf, Henry,” the first cried to the landlord. “Mr. Collins is feeling a bit peckish this afternoon.” He pulled a leather-bound notebook from the pocket of his greatcoat and set it on a table.

“And who’s this with you?” Henry asked.

“Why, you know my friend, Wilkie! He’s just penned a work that will take London by storm. It’s about a ghostly woman in white—”

“Writers,” Henry sighed. “No, I meant old tom there.” The innkeeper tilted his head in the direction of the cat.

As all eyes turned upon him, Skilley shot back the most ill-tempered expression he could muster, hoping to impress them with his sincere ferocity.

“Just another loyal patron for The Cheese,” said Mr. Collins with a laugh and a respectful bow toward Skilley. “Give him a slice of your best, Henry.”

The gentleman of the musical voice swept off his hat and cloak and hung them on a peg. “Perhaps he’s heard of

your troubles and wants to recommend himself as rat catcher. He has a fierce enough look about him.”

The man’s words seemed serious, but the tone made Skilley think that laughter lay not far behind.

I’ll have to keep my eye on this one, he thought.

“MOUSE catcher, if you please, sir,” corrected Henry, lowering his voice. “There’re no rats at The Cheese, sir, Providence be praised! Though enough mice to drive Adele to hysterics and my poor little Nell to near madness! Since Croomes came to our kitchen these ten winters ago, our Cheshire cheese is finer than ever, and it would seem every mouse in London who’s got wind of it has come to claim his share.” Henry heaved a great sigh of consternation. He turned to Skilley. “Let’s see here, then, mouse catcher.”

The innkeeper bent forward, hands on knees, and inspected Skilley with a critical eye. London’s alleyways, docks, and sewers appeared to have dealt harshly with the young cat. The artful dodging of hansom cabs, chamber pots, and the inevitable fishwives’ brooms had left him with a ragged ear, numerous scrapes, and a tracery of scars.

Then there was the hooked tail; it looked to have once been painfully broken—but by what?

“A right cruel-looking puss,” Henry said at last. “But can he catch mice, Mr. Dickens?”

The great writer, however, was no longer listening. He had settled himself in a corner where he'd begun a vigorous scribbling in his notebook—scribbling and crossing out, scribbling and crossing out, unaware of those around him.

"Don't mind him," Mr. Collins said, nodding toward Mr. Dickens. "He's in a right state. Says he'll never write again."

"What? Never write again?"

"All for want of a beginning," Mr. Collins answered. "The first edition of his new magazine is coming out soon, but poor Charles seems to be at a loss for an opening to his story." Then he answered Henry's question about the cat. "If the look of that tom is anything to judge by, Henry, I pity your poor mice."

Skilley rewarded Mr. Collins with a low growl.



From behind the wall, through the tiniest of cracks, with ever mounting alarm, a pewter gray mouse watched and listened.

C. DICKENS

Those were dire days, indeed—

The times were cruel—

ghastly—

appalling—

It was the worst of all the days the world has seen—

Oh, why can't I write an opening for my new novel that stands out from all the rest?

I'm at Ye Olde Cheshire Cheese today with my friend Wilkie.

I was looking forward to a marvelous afternoon of cheese and chummery, but with my well of words tapped dry, I can only despair. If only I could find my opening as effortlessly as old Henry has found his mouser. . .

I think I'll just jump in the Thames.

Or become a lamplighter or a chimney sweep.

Anything but a writer.