

TABIKA

by

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For

Kerryn and Robyn

(Also for children aged 6 - 100+ who admire cats.)

*Anyone lucky and honoured enough
To have feline friends by the score
Knows all the fantastic and wonderful stuff
Tabika does, they do – and more!*



PRELUDE TO BOOK ONE

Obviously, this was no ordinary cat.

I noticed him the instant he strolled confidently into the lights of the little restaurant and supermarket in Johannesburg. Although it was a rainy night, his fairly long coat looked quite dry and not a whisker was out of place. He was larger than most cats, and his tabby markings were striped in various shades of black to grey, brown to yellow, and cream to white, so that he looked exactly like a furry toy tiger come to life, or a tiger shrunk in the wash and then fluffed out a bit too much. Tail held high, he moved elegantly through the doorway, enormous yellow eyes roving interestedly from side to side.

What happened next was partly my fault. Alone in a strange city, I wanted company, and I went, ‘Urr-wrr!’ to call him, just as he passed behind a fat, greasy and ill-tempered-looking man who was helping himself to salads at the end of the counter. I distracted the cat’s attention at completely the wrong time - just as the man turned round, glanced down, and without any reason aimed a mighty kick, snarling ‘Scat, you (*dreadful word*) cat!’

‘Meow-wow!’ I yelled – (‘Look out’ in cat-talk) – and the

tabby dodged in an instant. Unfortunately he was too late to avoid the kick completely, and the foot caught him a glancing blow, bowling him head-over-heels. In a flash he was back on his feet and had vanished amongst the tables.

I was furious, and decided it would make me happy to plant a fist – as hard as possible – somewhere in the bully’s bulging tummy. As I started getting up from my corner table a voice came from right next to me. ‘Thanks-sss, but don’t bother – I’d like to deal with this myss-self. Be back just nee-ow.’ Startled, I only had time to glimpse a striped face and long whiskers before the cat disappeared. I sat down wondering what one small cat – or, to be more accurate, one quite large cat – was going to be able to do about getting his own back on someone so much bigger, stronger, fatter – and nastier!

I was not long in finding out.

By now the man had piled the last portions of salad onto a heaped plate, and started to move off towards one of the tables. As he lifted his leg to take a second step, a little striped flash of lightning shot out from behind one of the hanging tablecloths, and bumped lightly against the foot in midair - with spectacular results. Instead of swinging normally past the right ankle, the fat bully’s left foot tangled itself behind his right leg. By that time his weight was well forward and he came crashing down, burying his face completely in the mound of salads while saying something that sounded like, ‘Groosh! Blip-bloop!’

The little tiger hadn't finished with him yet. He waited patiently until the face lifted from the plate, spitting out swearwords and bits of potato. Then he launched himself into the air to land on the back of the man's head. The ugly face went back into the salads with a loud squelching noise, and arms and legs waved wildly in all directions.

By the time the man lifted himself clear again, screeching and raving like a madman, the cat simply wasn't there any longer. A calm, unruffled cat-voice came from alongside my chair. 'Well, that's that. He-ow do you do? My name's Tabika: Tabika Town-Cat – sometimes-sss.' The name is pronounced 'Tib-BEE-ka' to rhyme with 'fib-SPEAK-er' but it would be a fib to say he spoke fibs.

'V-very pleased to meet you, Tabika,' I responded rather weakly, wondering if my eyes had been playing tricks on me. Had I really seen what I thought I had? I must have: there was the fat man, now back on his feet, stamping and storming in a total tantrum with chunks of salad flying from his face as he shook his head in rage. By this time, of course, all eyes were on him, and the Greek owner of the restaurant had come from behind the counter to see what the commotion was all about. He had not seen Tabika's part in the affair, and obviously thought the fat man had tripped and then lost his temper. 'You start big disturbings,' he accused crossly. 'I tellings you now, the so-dirty mouth you now shuttings, you payings me for breakings, and you out!'

The bully tried to explain about ‘Crazy cats’, but he was in such a rage that it was impossible to make out what he was saying. The Greek lost all patience. ‘Payings breakings now, and out-out-out, or else policings!’ he snapped, and moved to the telephone as if to call the police. At this the fat man gave up. Muttering furiously, he paid for the damages and stormed out. He could still be heard swearing, voice growing gradually fainter, for some time after he had left.

I shook my head dazedly, and turned to Tabika. ‘Sorry,’ I said. ‘I didn’t mean to be impolite. I’ve ordered a mixed grill, which should be coming up when things get back to normal over there, and I’d be honoured if you’d let me share it with you. Goodness,’ I couldn’t help adding, ‘you’re a fine furry fury when roused, aren’t you?’

A faraway look came into Tabika’s eyes for a second. ‘That’s-ss the s-sort of thing Rufus would have s-s-said,’ he remarked, almost to himself.

‘Who is Rufus?’ I asked curiously.

‘You should have said, ‘Whoooo is Rufus,’ actually,’ Tabika responded, smiling slightly (cats do, you know). ‘Never mind. Later, purr-haps. First, tell me about yourself. There are so verry few humans one can rreally talk to. I haven’t enjoyed a decent chat with one for ages-s.’

Our food arrived at that moment, and this is a good time to break off and explain that I am one of those lucky people who has been able to learn quite a lot of animal language, and especially cat-talk. Animal languages are far more difficult than human ones – particularly for a human. Animal speech is only partly made up of sounds, and far more is said by actions like the movement of ears or tail or whiskers, or even the way the whole body is held. That’s why it’s nearly impossible for humans to talk properly to animals – how do you flick a tail or twitch a set of whiskers if you don’t have one or the other?

As it happens, most animals don’t have a great deal to say. They can tell you they’re hungry, or thirsty, or excited, or want to go out, or feel like playing – things like that – but it is only the super-intelligent ones like Tabika who are able to have proper conversations. Even then, it needs some mind-talk. Mind-talk (or telepathy) is being able to send pictures or messages from one mind to another - like radio or television, in a way. Most of us have this ability, but few develop it or even realise it is there. Anyway, most of my chats with Tabika (and his with other creatures that I’ll be telling you about) were mostly in mind-talk.

Tabika sprang lightly onto the chair opposite me, put his front paws on the table, and craned his neck to see what was on the plate. ‘Wurrrrr,’ he said approvingly, ‘that looks and smells scrrrrumptious. Do you think you can spare a nice fatty piece of that lamb chop, please?’

While we both ate I told him that my wife, children and I shared a home at the seaside in Durban with a number of animal friends, and that I was visiting for a while on business. He sympathised with me when I said how much I hated living in a hotel in the city. ‘Urrr-wrrr, I know heow you feel. I grew up not far from herre, and know every wall and bin and alley, but I can’t ssay I like it much myself.’

He went on to tell me a little about his many adventures from kittenhood until, about ten months ago, he had come to a comfortable arrangement with Theo, the Greek owner, whereby the shop and restaurant became his home and he ensured that it was never troubled by mice. ‘Although,’ said Tabika, ‘home is purr-haps not quite the rright worrd. Theo is nice enough, but he doesn’t understand animals verry well. Not like...’ Here he lapsed into silence, and licked himself several times. I knew better than to ask questions just then. I hoped he would tell me more in his own good time.

After supper we had a game. I made my hand pretend to be a little animal, and Tabika stalked it, pounced on it, kicked it with his hind paws, and looked as if he were tearing it to pieces – all without doing the slightest harm, of course, as he shielded his claws in a well-brought-up manner. When we had played for some time, I decided to try and get more of his story from him. ‘Tell me,’ I asked casually, ‘what did you mean about Rufus being a “whoo”, and about being a town cat sometimes? Have you ever been in the country?’

‘Oh, yesss,’ Tabika replied, rolling onto his back and flailing his paws. ‘I have, indeed. And that is quite a...’ - at this point my hand pounced and tickled the tenderest part of his tummy and he kicked like anything, - ‘...mrrwow! You got me, there! ...quite a sstory,’ he finished, laughing with his little pink tongue and sharp white fangs showing.

I withdrew my hand, and patted the top of my leg. ‘Come up here and tell me,’ I invited eagerly.

Tabika paused for a second, then sprang lightly onto my lap, sat, and gave himself several licks to gather his thoughts. Suddenly, his great yellow eyes looked straight up into mine and he said, most seriously, ‘Do you believe in... errrrrm... fairies?’

I was so taken by surprise that I almost made the dreadful mistake of laughing. Fortunately, I stopped myself in time, but even so I said, ‘No, of course not,’ without thinking.

Tabika turned away and licked himself furiously for a while. ‘Well, then,’ he said a bit gruffly, ‘let’ssss forget it, shall we?’

Thoroughly alarmed I stuttered, ‘N- no, wait...I didn’t quite *mean* that. Er...that is...um...I...ah...haven’t actually *seen*

one, so I thought...that is to say...you know...' I broke off in confusion.

Tabika looked straight up at me again. 'Rrrright, let me say it,' he growled. I *have* seen fairies. One of them is a verrry dearr friend, in fact. Arre you going to laugh?'

'I simply wouldn't dream of it,' I cried hastily. 'If you say you've seen fairies, then I believe in them, most definitely!'

I could feel Tabika relax a little. 'Verry well, then, here goes. It all began one night about six months ago, after Theo had locked me in the shop for the night. Oh-wow, I was fed up and *bo-r-r-r-ed...*'

CHAPTER 1: THE BEE FAIRY

Tabika prowled round the supermarket in a thoroughly bad mood. He was beginning to hate living in the city: the smelly, noisy traffic, crowded pavements with people always in a hurry, hardly any sand to scratch in, hardly any trees or grass, and no real friends (the other neighbourhood cats were too busy trying to scrape a living from dustbins to be in the least sweet-tempered). To top it all he'd nearly been run over by a minibus taxi that day, and was sure he'd lost at least one of his nine lives. Also, he was totally bored. The last surviving mouse had left in great haste a couple of weeks ago, meaning that Tabika had nothing to do.

‘I’m sssick and tir-r-ed of it here,’ muttered Tabika, pacing restlessly. ‘Heow I wish I could go to the countryside for a while – it musst be rreally lovely there...Quivering Whiskers! What on earth is-sss that?’

Beneath some shelves marked *Fresh Farm Produce* Tabika had suddenly spotted a most extraordinary thing. It seemed to be a tiny black stick, with a glowing yellow star-shape at one end. The cat sniffed at it. Strangely, it seemed to have no smell at all. He stretched out a paw and hooked it out with a claw. Then he gave it a little tap. It skittered across the floor, making a noise like a distant, small bell – and then

Tabika's fur stood on end, his back arched, and his tail fluffed out. For, from the direction of the now mouse-less mouse-hole some distance away there came a small but very unhappy wail. This was followed by some little, muted, sobs and snuffles, and then there was silence again.

Slowly, Tabika's fur settled, and the shape of his back returned to normal. Whatever was in there was nothing to be afraid of, he was sure of that. Could some silly mouse have come back? He tested the air with his nose. No, there was no recent mouse-smell, so what *could* it be? Tabika intended to find out, but remembering that Curiosity Killed Cats he trod warily. 'Who'ssse in therrre?' he hissed-growled softly.

'Mum-mum-mum-mum-me!' came in a little voice so sweet and tinkly – like the noise made by the stick when he had moved it – that Tabika guessed at once what the owner must be. 'Twitchery Whiskers!' he exclaimed in the greatest astonishment. 'What's a fairy doing hiding in a mouse-hole?'

Another wail answered him, and, 'I've l-l-lost mum-mum-my w-wand!' sobbed the voice.

Tabika was puzzled. 'But, of cour-rr-se you haven't lost it,' he purred soothingly. 'I've got it rright here.'

Yet another wail followed. 'T-that's j-just it,' said the

fairy, between snuffles. ‘If I c-come out to g-get it, you’ll c-c-c-catch me!’

Tabika felt hurt. He gave himself a few angry licks to steady himself. ‘Why would I do that?’ His whiskers and tail flicked angrily. ‘Cats catch rats and mice and birds and things, not fairies.’

‘Y-you might not b-be able to help it,’ sniffed the fairy. ‘You s-see, I’m a b-bee fairy, and I b-buzz when I fly. And many cats can’t help pouncing on b-buzzing or fluttering things. Don’t you find you l-leap at any buzzing creature?’

‘Yes, as a matter of fact,’ admitted Tabika, and gave himself more licks while he thought the matter out. Suddenly he remembered something. ‘You didn’t buzz when you came in, or I would have heard you.’

‘N-no,’ agreed the fairy, sobs and snuffles slowing somewhat, ‘but I had my wand with me then, and I c-could magic myself to be quiet. And then I dropped the wand and couldn’t find it – just when I’d seen the j-jar of honey I need to look at for Queen Beatrice – and then you came back and I had to h-hide!’

Tabika couldn’t follow all this talk about honey and queens, but he was a practical cat and decided first things came

first. With a few deft darts of his paws he sent the wand sliding across the floor, and a final well-aimed pat sent it tinkling into the mouse-hole. A little squeal of delight came from inside, followed a few seconds later by the fairy herself. There were no signs of sobs or tears now; in fact, she was smiling radiantly. A dainty and lovely sight she made, with her yellow-and-black striped dress, yellow wings, and yellow coronet topping her long black hair.

‘You darling, darling pussy,’ she said, flying over to him (without buzzing, Tabika noticed) and giving him a big hug, which wasn’t easy for her as her arms only came part-way round his neck, ‘you are the sweetest pussy in the world and I love you and I’m going to reward you and...’ She ran completely out of breath.

Tabika wasn’t all that keen on the ‘pussy’ part, although he rather liked being hugged, but to keep his dignity he moved back slightly, gave his tail a long lick, and said, ‘Oh, prrr-hmmm, it was nothing, rreally. What were you saying about a jar of honey on a queen’s mattress?’

~End of Preview ~