

# **The Cheshire Cat (2)**

## **– How it came to disappear –**

Katsuko Kasai

- I. Preposition: An origin of the Cheshire Cat
- II. Condition: Alice meets the Cheshire Cat
- III. Interruption: A mouse-trap
- IV. Supposition: How it came to disappear
- V. Extraposition: Leaving a grin in the air

### **I. An origin of the Cheshire Cat**

The Cheshire Cat has a well-known pedigree. The type is known to those who do not care much for the feline species. It is unique and has great pride. It not only looks at a king but also mocks him. Its ancestry, however, is not as ancient as William the Conqueror. It was already familiar to the English people when our popular nonsense story-teller, Lewis Carroll, came into this world in 1832. The expression “Grin like a Cheshire Cat” came to exist between 1770 and 1811. Now who is this Cheshire Cat? The origins and ancestors of the Cat are studied in the present writer’s previous work (1989). Among the theories of the origins of this pedigree, we are now particularly interested in the theory of cheese moulded in the form of a cat. Edward Wakeling, a Carrollian scholar, suggested in his letter to the writer, “armed with a grin, (or is it a snarl with teeth bared to appear more ferocious) the marauding mice would be deterred from stealing the cheese. It makes logical sense to shape the cheese into a cat so that mice leave it alone. Carroll advised Tenniel to make the Cheshire Cat look fearsome.” Edward Wakeling cites the passage from the Wonderland, “The Cat only grinned when it saw Alice. It looked good-natured, she thought; still it had very long claws and a great many teeth, so she felt that it ought to be treated with respect.” (If a cat had very long claws and a frightful grin, not only Alice but anyone would also feel like treating it with respect.

Wakeling's account is concerned with how a Cheeseey Cat came to exist.  
Now let us look at the passages from the Wonderland in connection with the Cat.

## II. Alice meets the Cheshire Cat.

Alice's first encounter with the Cheshire Cat took place in the Duchess's kitchen in the chapter of "Pig and Pepper." It is introduced as follows:

The only two creatures in the kitchen, that did not sneeze, were the cook, and a large cat, which was lying on the hearth and grinning from ear to ear.

"Please would you tell me," said Alice, a little timidly, for she was not quite sure whether it was good manners for her to speak first, "why your cat grins like that?"

"It's a Cheshire cat," said the Duchess, "and that's why" . . . she took courage, and went on again. . .

"I didn't know that Cheshire cats always grinned; in fact, I didn't know that cats *could* grin."

"They all can," said the Duchess; "and most of 'em do."

"I don't know of any that do," Alice said very politely. . . .

After the howling baby turned into a pig (which Alice had carried out of Duchess's kitchen) and trotted away into the wood, she saw the Cat again:

. . . she was a little startled by seeing the Cheshire Cat sitting on a bough of a tree a few yards off.

The Cat only grinned when it saw Alice. It looked good-natured, she thought: still it had very long claws and a great many teeth, so she felt that it ought to be treated with respect.

"Cheshire Puss," she began, rather timidly, as she did not at all know whether it would like the name: however, it only grinned a little wider. "Come, it's pleased so far," thought Alice, and she went on.

"Would you tell me, please, which way I ought to go from here?"

"That depends a good deal on where you want to get to," said the Cat.

"I don't much care where . . ." said Alice.

"Then it doesn't matter which way you go," said the Cat.

". . . so long as I get *somewhere*." Alice added as an explanation.

"Oh, you're sure to do that," said the Cat, "if you only walk long enough."

Alice felt that this could not be denied, so she tried another question. "What sort of people live about here?"

"In *that* direction," the Cat said, waving its right paw round, "lives a Hatter: and in *that* direction, "waving the other paw," lives a March Hare. Visit either you like; they're both mad." . . .

"Do you play croquet with the Queen today?"

"I should like it very much," said Alice, "but I haven't been invited yet."

"You'll see me there," said the Cat, and vanished.

This was the Cat's first disappearance. Soon it reappeared:

While she was still looking at the place where it had been, it suddenly appeared again. "Bye-the-bye, what became of the baby" said the Cat. "I'd nearly forgotten to ask."  
"It turned into pig," Alice answered very quietly, just as if the Cat had come back in a natural way.

“I thought it would,” said the Cat, and vanished again.

So it disappeared for the second time.

Alice waited a little, half expecting to see it again, but it did not appear, and after a minute or two she walked on in the direction in which the March Hare was said to live.

. . . . she looked up, and there was the Cat again, sitting on a branch of a tree.

“Did you say ‘pig,’ or ‘fig?’” said the Cat.

“I said ‘pig,’ ” replied Alice; “and I wish you wouldn’t keep appearing and vanishing so suddenly: you make one quite giddy!”

At her request the Cat disappeared quite slowly this time:

“All right,” said the Cat; and this time it vanished quite slowly, beginning with the end of the tail, and ending with the grin, which remained some time after the rest of it had gone.

This triggers an amusing remark by Alice:

“Well! I’ve often seen a cat without a grin,” thought Alice; “but a grin without a cat! It’s the most curious thing I ever saw in all my life!”

It was in the chapter of The Queen’s Croquet-Ground when Alice saw the Cheshire Cat again. She began to feel very uneasy about the Queen, who was in a furious passion, and went stamping about, and shouting, “Off with his head!” or “Off with her head!” about once in a minute.

She was looking about for some way of escape, and wondering whether she could get away without being seen, when she noticed a curious appearance in the air: it puzzled her very much at first, but after watching it a minute or two she made it out to be a grin, and she said to herself, “It’s the Cheshire Cat: now I shall have somebody to talk to.”

“How are you getting on?” said the Cat, as soon as there was mouth enough for it to speak with.

This time it made its appearance all the other way round: beginning from the grin, then the mouth, then the eyes, then the ears, and the last of all the whole head.

“Alice waited till the eyes appeared, and then nodded. “It’s no use speaking to it,” she thought, “till its ears have come, or at least one of them.” In another minute the whole head appeared. . . .

This time only the Cat’s head is visible.

The Cat seemed to think that there was enough of it now in sight, and no more of it appeared. Because of this visible head with an invisible body and without a visible one(!), it allows the King and the executioner to put well-grounded arguments as we see below. The King asked Alice,

“Who are you talking to?” said the King, coming up to Alice, and looking at the Cat’s head with great curiosity.

Alice introduced the Cat. The king did not like the look of it at all.

“however, it may kiss my hand, if it likes.” said the King.

"I'd rather not," the Cat remarked.

"Don't be impertinent," said the King, "and don't look at me like that!" He got behind Alice as he spoke.

"A cat may look at a king," said Alice. . . .

"Well, it must be removed," said the King very decidedly. . . .

So he asked his dear Queen to have the cat removed, and she had only one way of settling all difficulties, great or small.

"Off with his head!" she said without even looking round. The king hurried off to fetch the executioner. When they arrived there rose a dispute between the executioner, the King, and the Queen, and the arguments of the first two sound most reasonable and give us a great entertainment.

The executioner's argument was, that you couldn't cut off a head unless there was a body to cut it off from: that he had never had to do such a thing before, and he *wasn't* going to begin at his time of life.

The King's argument was, that anything that had a head could be beheaded.

Alice was appealed to by them to settle the question, and all she could think of was to say "It belongs to the Duchess: "you'd better ask her about it." While the executioner went to bring the Duchess out of prison, the Cat's head began fading away, and by the time he had come back with the Duchess, it had entirely disappeared.

### III. A mouse-trap

Back to the Wakeling theory, we do not suppose that moulding cheese in the shape of a cat would be effective to get rid of devouring mice with watering mouths. The writer is not quite optimistic, for her larder has been too often exposed to serious attacks of that hideous family. Their eyes are too small to recognize the graceful line of a feline in cheese. Their senses are much sharper in another direction: their sense of smell excels their sense of sight. They could hardly resist the cheesy smell and this often leads them to a catastrophe: a mouse-trap. This is how her family entertains these pertinent enemies at the most. Thus they should learn the cause of the calamity is in the fact that their sight is pitifully weak. Apart from this realistic fact, however, what a charming idea it is to mould a cheese in the shape of a cat!

### IV. How it came to disappear

An idea flashed across the writer's mind when she was served a variety of English cheeses for lunch in Cheshire. When they served selected cheeses on a tray with a knife and cheese-board. To try them, you take a block, place it on the board, and slice off a piece large or small according to your appetite. Now you have a cheese moulded attractively in the shape of a grinning cat, where would you first apply your knife? Head or tail? It tells the tale. For I am sure many of us are willing to spare the head and start from the tail.

## V. The Cat vanished, leaving a grin in the air

So the cheesey cat on the board starts disappearing beginning from the tail, leaving its grin the last to vanish. Is this, one wonders, how the idea of a vanishing Cat occurred to Mr. Dodgson? Well, why not.

### Bibliography:

- Cohen, Morton N.: *The Letters of Lewis Carroll* (1979)  
Gardner, Martin: *The Annotated Alice* (1974)  
Hudson, Derek: *Lewis Carroll* (1976)  
Bailey, Nathan: *Etymological English Dictionary* (1981)  
Brewer, Cobham: *Dictionary of Phrase and Fable* (1894)  
Ciardi, John: *A Browser's Dictionary* (1980)  
Hyamson, Albert: *A Dictionary of English Phrases* (1970)  
Kasai, Katsuko: *Lewis Carroll and His World* (4) – *Cheshire Cat*  
Tremain, R.: *The Animal's Who's Who* (1982)