

THE TALE OF KITTY-IN-BOOTS

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WRITTEN BY
BEATRIX POTTER

ILLUSTRATED BY

Quentin Blake

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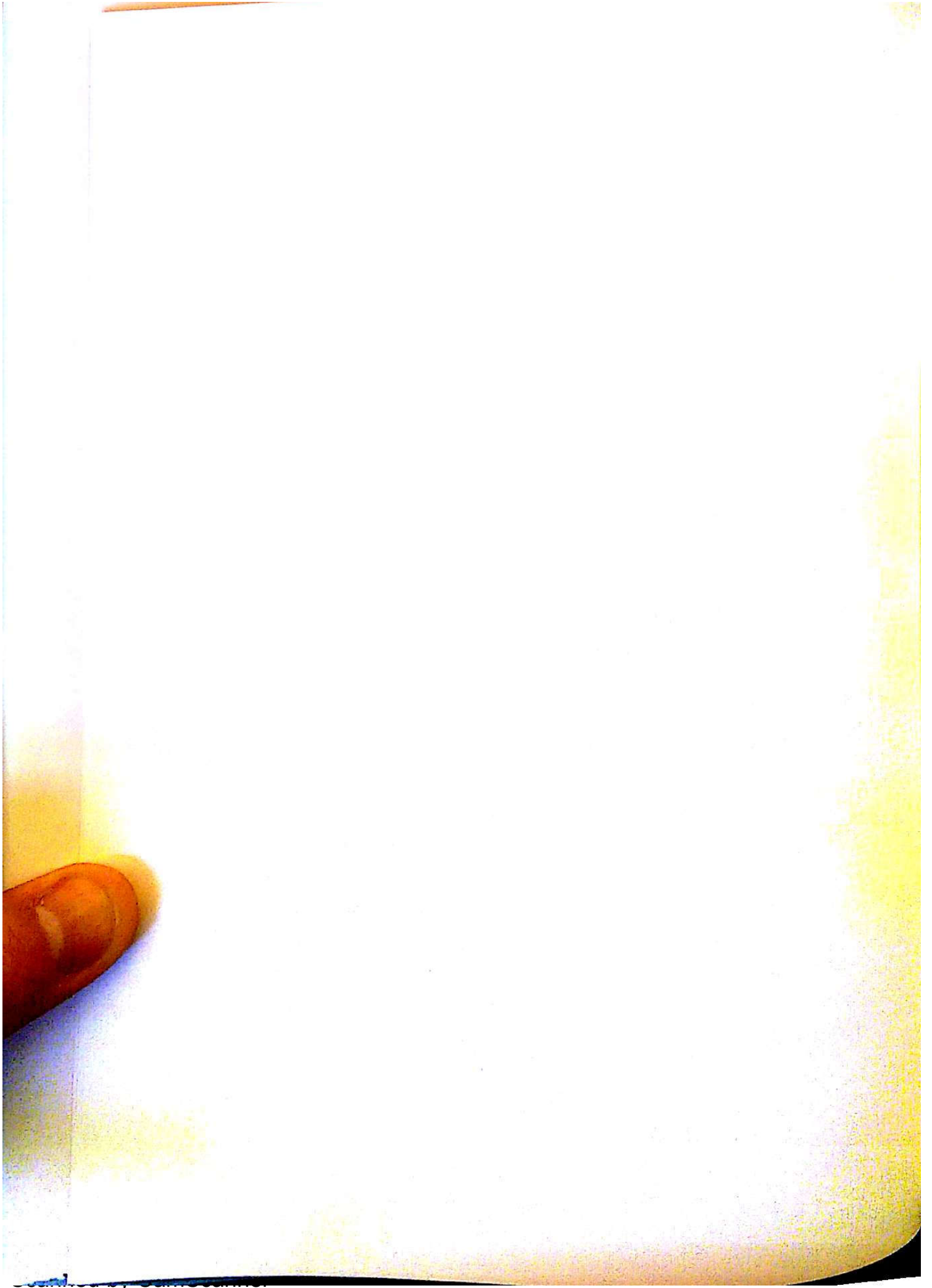
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ONCE UPON A TIME there was
a serious, well-behaved young
black cat.

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It belonged to a kind old lady who assured me that no other cat could compare with Kitty.

She lived in constant fear that Kitty might be stolen — “I hear there is a shocking fashion for black cat-skin muffs; wherever is Kitty gone to? Kitty! Kitty!”

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She called it "Kitty", but Kitty called herself "*Miss Catherine St. Quintin*".

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Cheesebox called her "Q", and
Winkiepeeps called her "Squintums".
They were very common cats. The old
lady would have been shocked had she
known of the acquaintance.

And she would have been painfully
surprised had she *ever* seen Miss Kitty
in a gentleman's Norfolk jacket and
little fur-lined boots.

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Now most cats love the moonlight and staying out at nights; it was curious how willingly Miss Kitty went to bed.

And although the wash-house where she slept — locked in — was always very clean, upon some mornings Kitty was let out with a black chin. And on other mornings her tail seemed thicker, and she scratched.

It puzzled me. It was a long time before I guessed there were in fact *two* black cats!

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If we had been outside the wash-house one summer night by moonlight, we might have seen one black cat cross the yard and jump upon the window-sill —

“You are late, Winkiepeeps,” said another black cat inside.

“Sorry, Squintums,” answered the first black cat, unfastening the outside shutter.

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“I *object* to being called names,” said Miss Catherine, jumping gracefully out of the window.

For this was naughty Kitty’s plan — when she wanted to go a-hunting, Winkiepeeps opened the window and came in, to wait till Kitty came home.

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TONIGHT he stopped outside. Kitty had put on her coat and little boots —

“Get in through the window, Winkiepeeps.”

“Shan’t,” said Winkiepeeps defiantly.

“*What?*” said Miss Catherine, preparing to scratch him.

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Winkiepeeps changed his tone, and began to purr and coax.

“Please, Miss Kitty, let me go a-hunting too; Slimmy Jimmy is doing rabbit holes, with his cousin John Stoat-Ferret.”

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“Where? Where?” asked Kitty. Her cat’s eyes flashed; she had once seen a rabbit in the garden.

“In the wood behind Cheesebox’s house; they want to borrow your air-gun, Miss Squintums,” purred Winkiepeeps. “Cheesebox wouldn’t give it to them.”

“*Certainly not,*” said Miss Catherine. Nevertheless, she and Winkiepeeps hurried away up the lane, towards Cheesebox’s house.

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CHEESEBOX was a stout tortoise-shell cat who lived at the edge of the wood. I do not think Cheesebox herself ever went rabbiting; she had more sense while there were rats and mice in plenty.

But she collected odds and ends for Mr. Worry Ragman, a knowing little terrier who drove about the country in a little rattling cart.

He bought rabbit skins and mole skins, rags and bones, and (oh, shocking) feathers and eggs from Cheesebox, and from Winkiepeeps, and from Tommy Brock the badger and Mr. Tod the fox.

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“There’s your gun, Miss Q; much good it may do you! I don’t hold with poaching along with dirty ferrets. Mind that —”

At this moment the gun, which Miss Kitty was loading, went off.

Winkiepeeps fled from the house with a squall, and Cheesebox cuffed Kitty.

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When Kitty came out, Winkiepeeps was nowhere to be seen. "I think Cheesebox may be right about ferrets." Miss Kitty shut the gun with a snap, and it went off again.

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The gun was an air-gun, so Miss Kitty ran no risks with gun-powder. "I will mouse," said she, snapping it shut; it went off sideways.

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"Was that meant for me? If you please, Sir, it's gone through the washing!"

Miss Kitty was rather flattered to be mistaken for a sportsman; she apologized to the person who came out with a bundle, curtsied, and trotted down the field.

"I wonder what sort of things it would be proper to shoot? Certainly not washer-women who are hedgehogs," said Miss Kitty, watching Mrs. Tiggy-winkle.

"No; I suppose I must mouse."

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MISS KITTY stalked behind trees.

She saw a mouse, took a long aim and pulled the trigger; but the air-gun was not loaded at all, and the mouse jumped away from Miss Kitty.

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Another mouse she missed, another she durst not fire at because it was carrying a basket; and twice she shot at sticks and stones that were not mice at all.

Except for the pride of carrying a gun, it was only poor sport.

“Perhaps I could shoot birds — are those crows?” She came through a gate into a field, and found both crows and a flock of mountain sheep. “Mutton?” said Kitty doubtfully, presenting her gun.

The sheep stamped their feet, and began to walk up to the odd little cat, while the crows swooped over her head — Miss Kitty took to her heels. “I cannot waste pellets on rocketing birds!”

She hid at the back of a wall.

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PRESENTLY there was a scuffling noise of falling stones; Kitty was all attention.

The noise moved further on.

Something poked out of a hole, and whisked in again.

After several false starts, Kitty's air-gun went off and there was a squeak.

She ran forward and met — not a mouse — but a large white ferret, rubbing his head, while another brown ferret in gaiters dropped off the top of the wall, and wrenched the precious air-gun out of Miss Kitty's hands, exclaiming, "Give us that there gun! You ain't fit to carry a gun! What do you mean by shooting my cousin Slimmy Jimmy? Give us your pellets *this minute!*"

Miss Kitty replied with a very painful scratch across both their faces. She also spat at them.

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(I ONCE saw a copy-book heading to the effect that "Evil Communications Corrupt Good Manners"; Miss Catherine's manners were not improved by associating with poaching ferrets . . .)

AND at home that kind old lady was giving Winkiepeeps breakfast, and wondering why "dear Kitty's" chin was black!

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UP IN the wood, the real Kitty, sulky and spitting, followed the ferrets; she would not give them the pellets and they would not give up the gun.

We will not go into details; they took it in turn to go underground, and I believe they did bag a few young rabbits. But at last they met their match . . .

. . . Slimmy Jimmy suddenly came out of a burrow, pursued by a stout buck rabbit in a blue coat, who was prodding him violently and painfully with an umbrella.

They upset John Stoa-Ferret who was waiting outside with the net; and, before he could pick himself up, Miss Kitty had seized the gun.

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The rabbit, after several violent pokes, went off, walking fast and brandishing the umbrella; the ferrets followed him; Miss Catherine also followed — at a distance.

The rabbit made no attempt to get right away; from time to time he stopped and waved the umbrella defiantly. They saw him go over a mossy tumble-down wall, and disappear.

John Stoat-Ferret and his cousin Slimmy, being short-legged and in gaiters, went through a conveniently arranged tunnel under the wall. But they did not come out at the other side; they had walked into one of Mr. Tod's traps!

There we will leave them, as the rabbit did, after he had come near enough to make sure that they were fast.

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Miss Catherine, rather out of breath, eyed the rabbit. He was very fat. He winked at Miss Catherine, pointed at the ferrets, made a bow, and turned to go home.

Now why could not Kitty have the sense to go home too? It is true that Winkiepeeps would have been there, so there would have been two black cats; but she might have stayed quietly at Cheesebox's until dark.

No; I fear Miss Catherine was a born poacher; nothing would serve her but she must follow that rabbit.

(She did not like to shoot, because he was wearing such an elegant jacket.)

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The rabbit at first took no notice. Then he became uneasy, and hid behind trees.

Miss Kitty could see the tips of his ears; whenever he stopped, she lifted her gun.

The rabbit opened his umbrella, and set off again; it bobbitted along under the bushes like a live mushroom.

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Miss Kitty followed and followed. The rabbit led her round and round, till at length they came back to another part of the same wall. He shut his umbrella, waved it defiantly, took a long jump off the top of the wall, and disappeared.

Miss Kitty — avoiding all risks of drains and tunnels — took a jump too, but not quite so long a jump as the rabbit's.

She came down — FLOP — in another of Mr. Tod's traps, caught by both toes across her lovely fur-lined boots.

She gave a loud caterwaul, and then sat still.

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Miss Kitty sat on the trap.

She sat and she sat.

She ate one mouse (raw), which was
all the game in her bag.

Her toes were not really hurt, but so
very, very fast. Her feet went to sleep,
and she had pins and needles.

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SHE sat there all night; her green cat's eyes peered into the dark.

Once there was a noise like a cat in the distance; could it be Winkiepeeps? Kitty mewed, but there was no answer.

It was very sad; but Miss Kitty ought not to have gone out on the sly, poaching. It served her right.

It seemed plain she would have to remain in the trap till the person who had set it let her out. And when he arrived — it was Mr. Tod the fox.

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"Oho," said Mr. Tod, getting over the wall and throwing down a rather bulging bag. "Oho? Is this the rest of the black cat-skin muff?"

Miss Kitty shivered!

"It *seems* to match," said Mr. Tod, opening the bag. It contained mole and furs of various sorts, and he drew out half of a fine thick black cat's tail!

"A complete set of furs," said Mr. Tod, edging up towards Miss Kitty, who immediately pointed the gun at him.

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“Gently, gently, Madam!” cried Mr. Tod, skipping over the wall. “I was only going to release you from your uncomfortable position. Allow me to push forward the catch of the —

“Oh! oh! that went through my coat sleeve!”

Mr. Tod’s nerves were *thoroughly* upset.

“Madam, I beg you to put down that most unsafe fire-arm. Allow me to unfasten the trap and pick up my bag.”

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“The bag?” thought Miss Kitty. “He dare not come for it; I have only five pellets left; but he does not know that.”

Mr. Tod and Miss Kitty argued all day. In the evening Mr. Tod went off.

“Perhaps you may have come to your senses before morning, *Madam!*”

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KITTY sat disconsolately in the trap and eyed the bag.

The bag wobbled, turned over, and rolled within reach of Kitty.

“Winkiepeeps?” enquired Kitty in a horrified whisper.

“Oh, Sir, if you please, it’s only me; oh please let me out; I’m nearly smothered!”

Kitty unstrapped the bag, which contained five mole skins, a brown and white fur of good quality but unpleasant smell, half a cat’s tail, two young rabbits, partly eaten — and a *hedgehog*.

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"Oh, Sir, I'm that grateful —"

"Ma'am; Miss Catherine St. Quintin;
you do my washing."

"Why, M'm, Miss Squintums, is it you?
Whatever is the matter?"

"I'm fast by the feet; and I'm awfully
hungry."

Mrs. Tiggy-winkle jerked up her prickles.
"You wouldn't go to eat me, M'm? Not to
mention the washing?"

"Indeed I wouldn't and couldn't,
Mrs. Tiggy-winkle; do pray help me to
get loose."

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“A knave he is, M'm, that Tod. Now let me put a little stone in the hinge of the trap, and we'll try to unlace your boots.”

It was a painful struggle, but at length Miss Kitty, with the loss of one toe, wriggled out, leaving her boots in the trap.

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It was of less consequence, as she immediately
threw away her coat and gun —
“Never again will I poach,” said Miss Kitty.
She limped home, and into the drawing-room.

THERE upon the hearth rug sat Winkiepeeps, wrapped in a shawl, with sticking plaster on his tail.

Kitty chose to look upon Winkiepeeps as the cause of her misfortunes; she rushed upon him and they fought all over the drawing-room.

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FOR the rest of her days Kitty was a little lame; but it was an elegant limp; and she found quite enough occupation about the yard catching mice and rats; varied by tea-parties with respectable cats in the village, such as Ribby and Tabitha Twitchit.

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But Winkiepeeps lived in the woods.

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"Slimmy Jimmy suddenly came out of a burrow, pursued by a stout buck rabbit in a blue coat, who was prodding him violently and painfully with an umbrella."



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