

Puss's Water Mill (2007)

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This is a tale from the small Baltic country of Latvia, and was written by Kārlis Skalbe.

The illustrations are from a stamp issue of 2001 celebrating Latvian literature.

It's worth noting that in the Latvian language the same word is used for 'milling' and 'purring'.

The old days

A long time ago, in the good old days, there lived a cat who owned a water mill. It worked day and night, milling hazel nuts and almonds; dwarfs looked out through the green window panes, waiting for grist, while Puss the miller walked around checking the bags of produce. It was a happy place and, in the evenings, although the mill still worked, Puss's little daughters danced with their young neighbours. Christmas was the best time, when a decorated tree stood in the mill and the dwarfs sat quietly among the flour sacks, smoking their clay pipes and saying, 'Aye, this is grand.'



Hard times

But the good times passed. As his daughters grew up and prospective bridegrooms appeared, Puss wanted to give the girls handsome dowries — so he mortgaged the mill to the black tomcat, who had become very rich from guarding the Devil's money-chest in the cellars of the old palace. When all his daughters had been married off, Puss had nothing of his own left but his white fur coat; then along came the black tomcat with the mortgage deed, demanding payment. Puss couldn't pay the debt — so the black cat took possession of the mill. The dwarfs fled down old mouse and weasel holes, and that night there was revelry in the mill as imps and witches danced and celebrated there. It became a grim and forbidding place, and decent folk gave it a wide berth.

On the road

Puss spent that night in a haystack, and next morning, after cleaning himself up, decided to go to the manor, where one of his sons-in-law was butler. He entered through a window covered with thistle plants and found the butler and his wife, Puss's daughter, busy making butter. They welcomed him, served him cream on a thistle leaf, sat down and asked him how things were; when he told them what had happened the daughter was sad, as she had spent a happy childhood at the mill. But the butler, a practical cat, asked where he was going now, as they had their own future to consider and he couldn't rely on them. So Puss knew he had to leave — but the weather was fine, he was certainly not short of leisure time now, and he would visit his other daughters. The pair saw him off affectionately and as he looked back after leaving the way he had come, he saw their white muzzles peeking through the green thistle leaves.

Ill fortune

But he wasn't sure where to go. He stopped on some wooden boards near a cow byre to have a think. All of a sudden the cows started returning from their pastures; one butted him off the boards and he was nearly trampled underfoot. He managed to somersault out of the way — but was almost caught by the big, ferocious black dog that was following the cattle; he escaped but was bitten on the paw. After a while, having safely put a hill between himself and the dog, he dragged himself to the old brickworks, where another daughter was married to the cat inspector.

However, there were three boys playing ball in the roadway and getting bored. They pounced on Puss; one pulled his ears and asked if he had any money, while another wanted to see whether cats could swim and threw him in the nearby pond. When he struggled out of the dirty green water on the other side, the third boy was waiting; he wanted to see whether cats always landed on their feet, so he carried Puss up a ladder and dropped him from a barn. The cat landed safely but in a dung-hole, from where he crawled out onto a bed of nettles. His lovely fur coat was ruined, and it was impossible to see he had once been a miller. When his daughter saw him in her yard she took him for a beggar and shut the door on him; her husband the inspector muttered something about cats becoming more and more disreputable these days.

No help

Puss tried other doors, but it seemed no one would help him; his relations were rich, and it seemed that the rich would help only the rich. As he didn't know anyone poor who might help him, his only choice was to go 'on the road' into the wider world. All summer he wandered, getting chased by dogs, mauled by other cats and tormented by boys who threw sticks and stones at him. Come autumn he had travelled most of the kingdom, picking up crusts and scraps where he could. Finally, as winter arrived and lakes and rivers started to freeze, he saw some blue towers in the distance. It was the king's city.

A change in fortune

At eventide he entered the city, where the palace was on a hill behind some old trees. There were no lights in the windows — just the red flickering of a fire in the hearth from one of them: the kitchen. He sat on the steps to warm his paws, until eventually an old man in cook's attire opened the door and saw him. 'Why, a cat!' the cook exclaimed. 'Come in; our old tomcat suffocated in the ashes last night, so we need a new cat. It doesn't matter that you're scraggy; you'll soon fatten up. You won't have to find your own food here.'

Puss hardly dared to believe his luck — but he shuffled in timidly. How could such a wretched cat enter the king's palace? But that didn't bother the cook, who picked him up and took him into the kitchen. There he had his own piece of old carpet to sleep on behind the woodpile, and as much food and milk as he wanted. When the fire went out and cooled down at night he could burrow down among the warm ashes — but being careful to leave his nose out so as not to suffer the same fate as the old tom. It wasn't too long before he had regained his soft, white miller's coat.

After supper, when the palace staff sat by the fire to relax, he would arch his back, purr, and tell them about his water mill. The little princess Ilze, who didn't like the blank, dark palace rooms, would often join them to listen and to stroke Puss. But the king was ill and didn't like Ilze being away from him, so he would send a servant to find the girl, and then she had to return to the dark rooms and sit in a golden chair. The palace was in mourning for the dead queen and the mourning lay over the building like a sickness even though she had been dead for years; no lamps were lit at night and the servants moved around silently in the gloom like ghosts.

Gloom at the palace

The king had a strange illness that fell on him soon after the queen's death. He was not grieving for her — indeed, he didn't even remember her — but he grieved for everything that man and beast suffered in the world. All the agonies that existed in the world pierced his heart like arrows, so he sat bowed in a chair, his arms folded tightly, in a room with blinds drawn during the day and no light at night except the starry twilight. The courtiers

carefully shielded him from any contact with real life; every evening a minister reported to him that all was well, so that not one discordant sound reached his ears. The sickness seemed to be incurable; his skilled physicians could bring him no relief. His only joy was to gaze into the eyes of the young Princess Ilze, which knew no suffering; but she was chilled by his sorrow and the joyless rooms — which is why she slipped into the kitchen whenever she could to listen to Puss.

Audience with the king

Eventually the king heard about Puss and his stories and asked that the cat be brought to him so that he, too, might hear them. So Ilze picked up Puss and set him at the king's feet, where he blinked at the sick man, curled his paws under himself and began his tale — how the black cat had taken his mill from him, how his daughters had rejected him, how the boys had tormented him: but he told of these things without anger, hate or pain. The king listened — and was amazed that Puss was able to speak so lightly of suffering. Tears began to come to his eyes; it began to dawn on him that suffering need not cause the bitterness and darkening of life that he had endured for so long. He could weep ... and at last he could smile.

Puss's advice

When Puss had finished his tale, the king lifted him onto his knee and said, 'Tell me: what must I do to the black tomcat?'

'Ah, king, I bear him no grudge,' answered Puss.

'Then what should I do to your ungrateful daughters?'

'Nothing but good. When I went out into the world as a beggar, there were sufferings enough. Why add to them? Rather let joy increase.'

'You're right, Puss,' said the king, thoughtfully. 'I once intended to hang a robber, but it grieved his mother. And his mother's grief hurt his sister, and the girl's grief hurt the plants in her garden; the flowers withered and the apple trees shed unripe fruit, for the girl in her grief had forgotten to water them. I pardoned the robber, because I didn't want to multiply suffering in the world. And what should I do to those boys who tormented you so callously?'

'Ah, king, I bear no grudge. Those little folk are so inquisitive; they don't yet know what suffering is. They want to see suffering and they delight in an animal's pain. Life is sure to wound their young hearts; then they will know what suffering is, and then we too shall become good friends.'

A new beginning

The king rose from his chair and ordered that his golden lamps were to be lit. One after another they were reflected in the green mirrors on the walls, and one after another they cast bright rays of light onto the faces and into the eyes of the king and young Princess Ilze when, as if lifted by a gentle wave, they walked through the palace rooms, ablaze now with myriads of joyous lights.

'But you must get back your water mill,' said the king to Puss, 'because you are a miller and I cannot think of a more suitable occupation for you.'

And so it came about that Puss had back his water mill. The imps turned against the black tomcat and dragged him and his money-chest off and cast them into a bog. Puss stood once again in his mill, wearing his white fur coat; and once again the hazel-nut millstones and the almond millstones went purr, purr, purr ...

The king was cured of his sickness, and life at the palace began anew.



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