

Mykola Khvylovyi

PUSS IN BOOTS\*

I

Now here's a colorless word for you: Hapka! Hapka, yes, it's colorless, and so we called her not Hapka but Comrade Beetle. That's all right, nothing colorless in that.

But *haptuvaty*—that's bright, for *haptuvaty* means embroidering with gold or silver thread... So we have things like embroidered sunsets, and sunrises too—that's when the glow of sunlight rises or falls in the sky. *Haptuvaty* evokes the fragrance of a meadow in September or the mown grass in the hay rick—when it carries the scent of sedge from the marshes.

Hapka—that's colorless.

We called her Comrade Beetle.

That was fitting!

Here she is: She's a Puss-in-Boots type. Do you know the Puss in Boots in a child's picture book? It is very comic—but warm and familiar, like a mother's hand with its blue vein, like a clear evening amid the gold coins of autumn leaves.

Puss in Boots is Comrade Beetle. And that's that!

And now I ask you: Whence did they come, these Comrade Beetles? How many were there? Eh? They have traversed our fragrant red revolution from one end to the other. They have come and gone, these Comrade Beetles, these "Puss in Boots."

Ah, I know; it's October's secret. Whence they came is October's secret.

Today in the steppes the sound of cavalry is no longer heard and "Puss in Boots" is nowhere to be seen.

Vanished to whence they came. Vanished, scattered over the high roads and country lanes and neighborhoods of the republic.

"Puss in Boots"—they're the ants of the Revolution.

And today, when the sky is blue-grey and the breeze caresses the brow, my heart is filled with the cornflower's sadness.

?

Yes! I would sing the song of the weeds of the steppe to these grey ants. Indeed, I would, but—

I can't. It should be a song of songs, it should be—an anthem.

That's why it is a cornflower's sadness; or shall I compose an anthem for "Puss in Boots" and carry the anthem into the farthest ends of the Republic? Shall I compose an anthem?

This is how she was dressed: A blouse, a skirt (in the winter—an old great-coat), a hat and boots. The blouse is khaki colored, without buttons. Khaki—that's green; and the revolution does nothing but bang, rattle, plow and roll over the slopes, in the weeds, by the mines—wherever the color is khaki. The whole revolution is without buttons, to keep it simple, unconstrained, to offer room to stretch, to fill your lungs in the wide-open steppe, in all places, in the whole, wide, world.

A khaki skirt, too; and if not quite so, near enough, because the color of the weeds had long since stamped itself on it. Yes, a khaki skirt, too. Torn a bit in front, and in back, too, and a bit at

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\* Initially translated by N. B. Jopson and D. S. Mirsky. Revised by Maxim Tarnawsky. The original translation appeared here: Mykola Khvylovy. *Stories from the Ukraine*. New York. Philosophical library, 1960. pp. 15–30

the sides. But no underwear was to be seen, for the revolution knows only one color scheme; red and khaki, so the underwear was green, the tint of the weeds had fallen on it.

There!

A cap ... and on it the pentagonal star. Is that enough for you? And more: under the cap a shaved head—not to suit a fashion—but for the march, for convenience.

And finally—Boots.

Now this is easy: look at the picture in the children's book.

Clear enough?

And now for her looks, and then—for the girl herself.

Looks? Fair? Dark? A beetle, of course.

But that's no matter.

Eyes ... oh, what eyes! It's not a novel I am writing, but only a little poem.

But I must mention her eyes.

The eyes—also a beetle's.

Have another look at her eyes; take the ray of an August sun on a blackberry—that's what her eyes were like.

And the nose (a disgrace for a fashionable lady) ... a nose like the head of a tack: snub (Snubby, that was another of her names, but not to her face).

And her height? That's obvious: "Puss in Boots."

And yet I don't at all want to idealize Comrade Beetle, I only want to write the truth about her—a scrap of truth; for the whole truth would be a revolution.

Now the reader expects perhaps from me a thrilling exposition of the plot with a thrilling resolution, and from "Puss in Boots" remarkable exploits and beautiful gestures, and so on and so forth.

You won't get it.

Comrade Beetle and I are not of the bourgeoisie; there won't be any beautiful gestures from us. None from Comrade Beetle.

If that's what you're after, look to the lovesick heroes of lovesick poems.

Comrade Beetle—just a "Puss in Boots" with energetic gestures and blackberry-like eyes, going through the weed patches of the revolution and, antlike, pulling the weight of the sun and drying out the mud of the swamps.

What kind of mud? Oh, you know very well.

Just like that!

So you needn't expect an illuminating exposition or a thrilling resolution from our story.

Because the exposition is October, and the resolution is the sunny age we are moving towards.

The resolution in lovesick poems is ... "Their lips met—The end," or "Oh, my Dulcinea! ... This dagger I plant in my breast.... He dies."

Comrade Beetle and I have nothing to do with that.

Yes, there are grand exploits, but they are not our doing.

Whose? ... Just think!

That's it. This is no novel, only a little song, and I shall soon finish it.

## II

In this chapter I shall relate a little exploit.

Whose? Just think!

Winter, a blizzard, snowbanks, more snowbanks....

A train, a railway and rails, rails into the steppe.

To Kuban, to Kuban, to Kuban!

The engine jostles into the train yard; train yard here and train yard there.

The snowy stations stand still and silent; perhaps we shall again retreat, defeated, with bloodshot eyes, and behind the bleak station buildings the wolves will bay at the plaintive cold semaphore.

But today we are off to Kuban, for we trust in our bloodshot eyes.

Comrade Beetle.

Yes, she is here, Comrade Beetle. And why she is in this regiment you, of course, don't know and never will know, because I don't know, and I don't want to tell lies; this is only a scrap of the truth and the whole truth—would be the whole revolution.

At each station nothing but cries of: "The Cossacks! The Cossacks!" Cossacks everywhere, bandits everywhere.

The train pounds on, like lazy oxen into a field, like lazy oxen from a field.

The steppe.

Suddenly: "Stop!"

"What's up?"

"No fuel."

"Comrades! The All-Russian coal tender<sup>2</sup> is in peril!"

The apple rolls freely down the track

If Krasnov<sup>3</sup> gets you, you'll never come back.

And suddenly:

On the hillside, reapers mow ...<sup>4</sup>

"Hey, you Khokhols<sup>5</sup>! Why that howling? Enough of this funereal melody—we're gloomy enough without it."

The steppe, a blizzard, snowbanks, more snowbanks...

"Here is Railcar No. 5—the international one. Now I'll tell you, my friend, about the different peoples. There are the Letts—quiet, peaceful, and smart; the Jews—also not so bad. The Chinks—Chinese or Tartar—a hard and steadfast folk. But this Khokhol—a mourner; when he begins howling about his fields or his girl—run!"

The steppe. A blizzard. And rails ... rails.

"Cossacks!<sup>6</sup>" "Cossacks!"

"Where? What? How?"

"Who is spreading panic? You swine!"

Suddenly, hundreds of Nagant and Browning pistols, and rifles appear.

Some stare mournfully into the distance, others put their cartridges in order, while still others climb onto the tender and race off; the engine is uncoupled and speeds away for fuel.

<sup>2</sup> All-Russian coal tender—a euphemism for the Donbas coal fields.

<sup>3</sup> Peter (Pyotr) Krasnov, an anti-bolshevik military leader of the Don Cossack Host. The lines are a Bolshevik variant of a Russian military song from WWI.

<sup>4</sup> First line of a very familiar Ukrainian folk song in praise of Zaporozhian Cossacks. It is not a mournful song.

<sup>5</sup> Pejorative term for Ukrainians.

<sup>6</sup> In this story Cossacks refers to anti-Bolshevik forces, like those of the Don Cossack host.

"Aren't you afraid, Comrade Beetle? There are Cossacks."

She laughs; there had been Cossacks in her village. She knows right enough what Cossacks are. And something casts a gloom over her, she becomes lost in thought.

... For a long time nothing but the wide snowy fields. The engine does not return for a long time. It is back at last. And again they're off into the wild and silent steppe.... From station to station, from cold night to cold night.

No fuel. At night, the station fences crack and crack and the walls of the tattered railcars crack, now all in holes, gaping sadly.

"The Train of General (fill in the blank)."

From the desolate station to a cold night, from the desolate night to the cold station.

Comrade Beetle has found fuel. This is how she does it:

"Granny, can I have this stick?"

"What?"

"Just this stick."

"Take it then."

She took it.

"Perhaps another one, eh?"

The Old Lady looks at her.

A beetle: Puss in Boots.

She gives her some more.

Comrade Beetle is laughing out loud.

"Ha, ha! I pulled the wool over granny's eyes."

She hadn't fooled her at all, it's just she's—Beetle!

Oh, these beetles in boots, really, they give me no peace! When I become a famous writer I'll write a great drama in verse: "Puss in Boots."

The cast iron stove crackles—fuel. The wild blizzard races and rages behind the boxcar.

We are off to Kuban.

This way? No, that way. (That's Comrade Beetle.)

This way? No, that way.

An individual from the boxcar near the cast iron stove. Maybe me? Maybe someone else? Maybe all of us.

She teaches us how to mend a burn in a great coat.

But she says:

"Stop playing stupid. You think that when you get home ... someone will do this for you, so I should do it now? Shoo! Not by a long shot! ... Here you are, sew!"

She makes our dinner for us; she is our cook.<sup>7</sup> That's all.

She is non-party, but she has a fat book in her knapsack *The Meaning of Communism* (Anonymous) ... Edition of the X battle squadron of the Workers' and Peasants' Red Army.

Sometimes we say to her: "I say, Comrade Beetle! Why don't we have a good time together?"

The answer is always: "Shoo!"

We guffaw, for we know that Shoo isn't for all the guys—we have a young swain—that's what we call him, swain. He's snub-nosed too, and we've noticed him putting his arms round

<sup>7</sup> Recalls Vladimir Lenin's famous quote: "Any cook should be able to run the country."

her, and she was silent. Well, that's their affair.

But she astounded us after all; sometimes she'd use words and make remarks that would set us gaping. While we were thinking only about the enemy, she would also have something else in her head.

"Did you finish high school?" Someone would say with a laugh.

She clapped her hands in amusement.

"High school? That's for the gentry."

For us it was "shoo!"

Then an uncouth Khokhol authoritatively proclaimed her "the regimental Lenin."

"Yes, with chapped hands."

There was longing outside the window, longing dropped from the wire that ran and ran from post to post into the unknown....

Blizzard, frost, stations with snow-covered bells, rarely longing on the wire, but always: "Hah! Revolution—is revolution!"

And then again, the cold boxcars, the long trains, trains like oxen, and suddenly:

"Stop!"

"What's up?"

"No fuel."

The engine is uncoupled, the engine speeds into the dark wild blizzard, into the wild silent steppe.

But I forgot to say: Often when the train stopped at a station "for an indeterminate period," Comrade Beetle, her work at the field kitchen over, would go away from the boxcar God knows where, and be away for a long time. And she would always come back distressed.

Why distressed?

That will be clear later.

Posters, Posters, Posters

Hoo! Hoo! Bang! Bang!

Posters! Posters! Posters!

East, West, North, South.

Russia, Ukraine, Siberia, Poland.

Turkestan, Georgia, Belarus,

Azerbaijan, Crimea, Khiva, Bukhara.

Posters! Posters! Posters!

Germans, Poles, Petliura<sup>8</sup>—etc., etc., etc....

Kolchak, Yudenich, Denikin<sup>9</sup>— etc., etc., etc....

Posters! Posters! Posters!

One month, two, three, six, twenty ... etc., etc., etc....

Hoo! Hoo! Bang! Bang!

The months sped by.

How many passed? I don't know; perhaps it was yesterday, perhaps the day before, or perhaps 200 years ago?

<sup>8</sup> Military commander and later leader of the Ukrainian People's Republic. Thus, anti-bolshevik.

<sup>9</sup> Military leaders of the "White" side, i.e., anti-bolshevik.

When was it? ... Maybe just a cornflower dream of the steppes.

I don't know!

And now again—summer, another steppe summer. But these are the steppes by the Dnipro—the river is nearby.

Oh, the night in the summer steppes—so wonderful, so moving!

Do you know it? You sit in the steppe and think of feather grass. It's so wonderful; thinking of the feather grass, when it rustles mysteriously, hopping like a rabbit.

It's so wonderful!

Oh, how sorry I am that my predecessors have already written descriptions of the steppe at night. I would have described it so well. Yes, indeed!

I arrived.

On the third day I get a message. "Comrade, you arrived, it seems, on Friday. You are requested to register immediately at the party cell."

I said: "The secretary must be a stick in the mud, likely enough an old party member."

The comrade laughed: "You're surprised by the message? That's nothing. Just wait 'til you get a whiff of the discussions. Those discussions are a pain in the neck."

My interest was stirred. "What discussions?"

"Wait, you'll see for yourself." And he didn't tell me.

I set out.

"Where is the room of the Communist cell?"

"Over there!"

I enter.

I look. Someone familiar, I think. I make a guess and suddenly I remember: it's Puss in Boots.

What a surprise!

"You're the Secretary of the Communist Party cell?"

"I am."

"You're called, if I remember, Comrade Beetle?"

"Yes."

"We know each other then. Do you remember?"

She, of course, remembers everything; but first she registered my party ticket and only then did she speak.

"Of course! It was so long ago."

Comrade Beetle had since finished reading *The Meaning of Communism* (Anonymous) Edition of the X battle squadron of the Workers' and Peasants' Red Army. And not only.

Everything else is so simple: Puss in Boots walks across the wastes of the revolution and perhaps does not even know that she is the Secretary of the Communist cell, and only then finds it out and writes down: "You are requested to register without delay" ... But I wasn't really astonished, you know; especially as so much time had passed, and even then, Puss in Boots was "the regimental Lenin." And to be candid, the second edition of Lenin: "the regimental Lenin" was sometimes stark and harsh.

Here's the picture.

I was at fault.

Comrade Beetle's eyes flashed like a dragon. "Comrade! Aren't you ashamed?"

"Allow me ... I really ... I ..."

Comrade Beetle's eyes flashed like a dragon: "Your party ticket! Hand it over!"

I hand it over.

She writes down: "Comrade So-and-So in such-and-such a month failed to attend so many meetings. He has been officially reprimanded by the Secretary of the Communist cell and warned that his lack of discipline may be subject to the judgement of the membership at the party tribunal with a view of his degradation to the stage of candidate or his definitive exclusion from our communist ranks."

Signature. Full stop.

Concise!

Clear!

I felt—how can I put it—ashamed.

Of course, now, just like then (then in the wild steppe) she's wearing khaki, for the revolution knows only one color scheme: red with khaki. Just like then, gigantic boots, wrong size. Just like then, "Shoo!"

Just like then, eyes like a blackberry and a blackberry laugh too, while the nose is like the head of a tack, snub.

And there were nights, just like then, but not cold now; warm, shimmering—the summer nights of the steppe.

But now it was not the Cossacks worrying us, but bandits from the woods in our rear. From the South we are pressed on by an enraged, mortally wounded bear from the white lair of the Great Russian Empire.

And now those discussions (a pain in the neck).

There is a turn of phrase, "hold yourself in check and don't forget the Cheka." We paraphrased it into: Discussion—hold yourself in check so as not to fall into the secretary's checklist.

Comrade Beetle says: "The discussion will be to-night!" We: "Oh! Oh! A pain in the neck!" (This, of course, not aloud.)

"Comrade, let me borrow your *The ABC-s of Communism*."

"Oh, don't bother me, comrade. Now, you made me forget. How does it go? Damn! Here we go. Capitalism has three characteristics: Hired labor ... hired labor ... hired labor..."

Someone tries to help him: "The monopolization of the means of production. And ..."

"Bugger off! I know it fine myself."

And then from the other extreme: "I say! How worried you've all gotten! Comrade Larikov, aren't you worried, too? No? I don't believe it. Don't tell me you know everything." (This to one of the know-it-alls.)

"Well, if you know everything, tell me this: When did Thiers destroy the great French Commune—in '71 or in '48? Eh? Let's hear your answer."

"And you, Comrade Molodchikov, don't be cunning, don't try to get out of it, say frankly that you don't know. Then I'll tell you." Molodchikov blushes, I blush and lots of us blush, for most of us are ignoramuses, but we wouldn't ever own up.

"What nonsense—these discussions, as if we were school kids!"

"That's right. To hell with this! It's a bourgeois way of education. We might just as well have an exam with inspectors!"

A voice again: "Let me borrow *The ABC-s of Communism* for a minute?"

"Oh, damn it! I've forgotten it again. Capitalism has three characteristics: The monopolization of production ... the monopolization of production . . ."

"You see, you don't know it at all."

"Oh, leave me alone, comrade."

At last, evening.

So, like this: Outside the window, as in my other stories (but not all)—thundering guns, and somewhere in the tall grass, and then on the road—cavalry. Ours? They say it's not ours. Whose then? I don't know. Perhaps the enemy's. Perhaps a raid.

And someone, in a whisper, from beyond the tall grass: "Perhaps tomorrow, here, where we are sitting, there'll be litter, rags, and the smell of emptiness, the smell of running, the smell of blood."

But these things are forgotten.

The reader finished his report.

Comrade Beetle: "Well, Comrade Boyko, I haven't understood anything at all. What's all this about dialectics if the subject is historical materialism? How can you explain that?"

"Excuse me, Comrade Chairman, but as a matter of fact, I wasn't planning to speak."

Comrade Beetle's eyes flashed like a dragon: "As chairman I don't excuse anyone, but as a comrade I request you to speak."

We spoke; we got mixed up (some of us even got rather sick). And all this was called the discussion.

Comrade Beetle said: "Shoo! Wrong! And now you, Comrade Molodchikov?"

She certainly fit into the role of a teacher.

And we were furious, as we had our own pride. We were enraged with our ex-cook, with today's secretary of the Communist Cell, with Puss in Boots.

Then she would run round, fuss, assemble the women, organize the women's assemblies, where the subjects were: Abortion, love, the rights of a cook (Lenin said).

Cries of: "Down with the family! Long live the single woman!"

And about the child-bearing woman they were saying: "There must be state lying-in homes, there must be communal laundries, and so on and so forth."

"Comrade Beetle, is it OK to love two at the same time?"

"That depends on your understanding of historical materialism." My knowledge of it is rotten, so I refrain from giving an answer.

Well then!

I could write a lot more about Comrade Beetle, a very interesting business. But you see it's now half-past four, and I must hurry for the party meeting because ...

Comrade Beetle No. 2 will be there and that means ... but, if you are Party, you know yourself what that means.

She wrote this:

"Comrade Mykola (that's me, Mykola Khvylovyi). You, it appears, will, by the day after tomorrow, be in the Tarashcha regiment, and I in the reserve cavalry; there is some Makhno<sup>10</sup> business there—we must agitate. Perhaps we shall never see each other again, so I want to ask you not to be angry about the discussion. I know that you have your pride, but we are struggling

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<sup>10</sup> Nestor Makhno, a Ukrainian anarchist revolutionary leader and thus a competitor to the Bolsheviks.

against ignorance. And, in so far as the dictatorship is ours. ... In short, you understand me; we must grow up in a year or two not an inch, but a whole yard. With Communist greetings. Beetle."

But she didn't go that day, and we did meet again.

This is where we met. Picture an empty school, political department. Comrades sleeping in the corners and on the tables. The ants of the revolution. Some of them go to the regiments, into the political directorate, others will stay on here, and afterwards will also go to the regiments, as political commissars.

This is the training school of the revolution.

The stars were shining, and then it got dark. Clouds were passing.

A drizzle.

It drizzled and drizzled, and for some reason I felt sad. I wanted to fall asleep as soon as I could. But someone was sniffing in the corner and preventing me from falling asleep.

"Comrade, don't keep me from sleeping."

Silence. The rainstorm beat gently and monotonously against the window. I longed for it and the rattling carts to stop; they reminded me of the hard road to Moscow—going away to Moscow, northwards away from the enemy's raids.

"Comrade, don't keep me from sleeping."

Silence.

Perhaps you have guessed already that it was Comrade Beetle who was sniffing.

She came up to me: "Let us be off!" I looked at her in amazement.

We went out onto the porch.

Nothing but a grey road into the night steppe and the drizzle.

"Were you crying?"

"I was!" And she laughed: "I'm a bit ashamed ... you know ... it happens."

And she told me all about it.

And so I learned that even Comrade Beetle, beetle and puss in boots though she is, could feel sad, and it wasn't always "Shoo!" with her.

Then the little snub nose told me that she wasn't 19, as we thought, but really 25, and that she had had a bastard, and a Cossack had hanged the little bastard on a lamp-post.

That was in the Far East, but she felt it still. It was in the Far East, when she went and followed a regiment down the road. And that was the Cossack's revenge.

I mentioned the snowy steppe.

The drizzle continued.

The same grey road and the dark shadows of the buildings.

But it wasn't such a big deal that a kid had been hanged on a lamp-post; there's been much worse than that.

I'm not trying to make you cry.

So that's the little exploit. An exploit for sure.

Whose exploit? Just think!

Comrade Beetle No. 2 ... No. 3 ... No. 4 ... and I don't know how many more.

There is no Comrade Beetle No. 1.

"Puss in Boots" has vanished into the hidden entrails of the republic.

Comrade Beetle has vanished.

Puss in Boots is stalking over the wastes of the revolution, pulling the weight of the sun and drying out the swamp. Which swamp? You know which one.

So: the priest christened her Hapka, a colorless word, and from *haptuvaty*—embroidering in gold and silver—everything is bright.

We called her Comrade Beetle.

History will call her Puss in Boots.

Puss in Boots. A type. Full stop. Concise! Clear!

That's all.