

The Unfortunate Affair of the Tom-Cat

One day, during an argument with his neighbour Křička, Mr Hustoles said: 'A fine party, that party of yours! Any Tom, Dick or Harry straight from the gallows will do for it as a candidate!'

To which Mr Křička said in reply: 'All right then, Mr Hustoles, we'll just wait and see, shall we?'

Not only was Mr Hustoles a deep political thinker, he was also the proud possessor of a large black tom-cat, which was usually to be found sitting on the threshold of his greengrocer's shop. This tom-cat was well-liked through the whole neighbourhood. It was a cat that the locals held in high esteem for its genial manner and light-hearted spirit which, as we all know, is half-way to good health. This cat was also respected for its affectionate nature and never in a million years would it have occurred to anyone to think that this excellent animal could acquire an enemy in the immediate vicinity.

Such an enemy arose, nevertheless, in the person of Mr Křička who said to his eight-year-old son Josef, after that political quarrel with Mr Hustoles:

'Pepíček, the next time you see the ugly black brute that belongs to that silly fool Hustoles, you tread on its tail!'

What child would not sally forth with a light heart on a secret mission of such gallantry?

Off Pepíček went and trod on the tom-cat's tail and he crowned his exploit by spitting all over the cat as well, a sight that made an old woman who saw it from across the street feel as if her heart would burst.

Then he ran off. For the first moment or two, the cat did not know quite what to think about all this but then, after giving the matter its most careful consideration, it came to the view that what that little blighter had done to it had hurt and that when he had blown water over it out of his mouth, it had felt unpleasant. By evening, it had come to the final conclusion that it had been insulted.

It made up its mind to watch out for the little ruffian.

Pepíček's father rewarded him for his valour with a kreutzer and promised him more if he would go on as he had begun for in Mr

Křička's eyes, the cat, being the property of his political adversary, stood for the whole of the enemy political party.

It was not just a tom-cat on whose tail Pepíček was treading in this case, it was the whole of the hostile political party and it wasn't just a cat he was spitting on, but each and every adherent of that party, among whom was numbered the owner of the cat in question.

Pepíček went gaily out to do battle in the political arena.

The tom-cat was sitting in front of the door and it looked to all the world as if it was sleeping. But all the world was deceived. That cat was only shamming. Let no-one condemn it for this behaviour: it did not go to school, so no-one had told it that it was a sin to pretend.

There is the cat, then, shamming away in the innocence of its heart and along comes Pepíček, treads on its tail and spits on its head.

But then, up jumps the cat and bites Pepíček in the leg.

And while it's at it, it spits, it clammers all over Pepíček, tears at him with its claws, hisses and growls, bites him in the ear for good measure, climbs down from him and with tail held high, walks away from the bawling youngster in a superior manner and sits calmly down on the threshold of its master's shop, purring demurely away.

When Pepíček arrived home, hoarse with crying and covered in blood, Mr Křička cried out: 'Praise be! Got you at last, Mr Hustoles!' and took his son off to the police-station, where the police doctor examined Pepíček and wrote a report on the whole case, whereupon the Police Commissar ordered that the cat be taken into custody and sent for veterinary examination.

So two policeman set off to bring the tom-cat in, and arrested it in the name of the law. And because it attempted to get away and scratched and spat, they had no option but to send for the municipal drunk-cart, into which they shut the cat, but not before it had rendered itself guilty of a public order offence by sinking its teeth into a police-uniform and laid itself open to the charge of contempt for the law by spitting at a policeman. What it had been growling under its breath, they had not been able to ascertain.

Then the cat was taken off to the veterinary section of the Agricultural Technical Science Department and the policemen submitted their report on its behaviour: 'When we arrived to apprehend the animal, it scratched and bit. We sent for the municipal drunk-cart and after a violent struggle, we threw it into the basket. It made an attempt to snatch one of our revolvers from us.'

This report was taken down, signed and submitted to the Public

Prosecutor's Office.

The Public Prosecutor decided that Mr Hustoles had been guilty of the offence of Failure to Exercise Sufficient Control Over An Animal.

He had not previously kept the cat on a chain, nor had he furnished it with a muzzle.

Next, this had occurred during an election, a time when an animal might easily contract rabies.

Further, political tension had existed for some considerable time between Mr Kříčka, the father of the party assaulted by the tom-cat, namely his son Josef, and Mr Hustoles, the owner of the black tom-cat that had committed the assault on the young lad belonging to Mr Kříčka. The Prosecutor's Office was therefore of the opinion that a case had been established against the cat owned by Mr Hustoles, to wit that it had with malice aforethought set out to occasion grievous bodily harm to the young son of its master's political adversary, in which intention it had been successful and which act it had carried out. But since, according to the relevant Austrian law of 8th January 1801, cats were classified as persons of diminished mental responsibility, for whom the owners were required to answer with their names and their lives, the guilt fell exclusively on Mr Hustoles.

The veterinary institute attached to the Agricultural Technical Science Department had meanwhile carried out an examination of the cat's physical and mental condition and the papers had been sent on to the Prosecutor's Office.

The medical report ran as follows:

Mr František Hustoles

The subject was found to have strong bones and to be in a well-nourished condition, but to be suffering from periostitis, so that its bite could constitute a danger to life.

For these reasons, it is desirable that the subject be put down.

Dr M. Kašpárek

The Public Prosecutor's Office sent this document to the police-station for action and it was immediately filed with the papers on the Hustoles case.

The cat, meanwhile, had been returned to Hustoles and great was the surprise of the wretched man's family when at five o'clock one morning, four policemen arrived to pick Mr Hustoles up, and took the

unfortunate man away. At the police-station, a stern-faced sergeant asked the prisoner none too gently:

‘Are you František Hustoles?’

‘Yes Sir, I am, Sir.’

Tears began to glisten in the eyes of a young policeman in the corner. ‘Bring me the papers relating to František Hustoles and don’t blubber!’

The papers were brought.

‘I shall now read out to you, Hustoles, Gubernatorial Decree No. 75-289, dated 15th June, 1911:

In the matter of František Hustoles, it has been decided, on the basis of Veterinary Report No. 2145/65, that the said person be put down without delay. On the basis of para. 5 of the law relating to rinderpest of 12th February 1867, there is no appeal against this decision.

Signed

Vaniček

Councillor, Imperial and Royal Prosecutor’s Office

‘As you see,’ the sergeant said to the unhappy man, ‘there is no appeal. Make your final dispositions and stop bawling. You’re going to be put down one way or another, as soon as Vienna confirms the sentence and informs us of the method to be used.’

I’m really curious to know how Mr Hustoles managed to get himself out of that one.