

Mykola Khvylovyyi

PUSS IN BOOTS*

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... . There are gold embroidered sunsets and gold embroidered sunrises with the shimmer of light at dawn and dusk. *Haptuvaty* is as fragrant as a meadow in September or the mown grass in the hay rick—when the scent of sedge rises in the marshes. Hapka—that's colorless. We called her Comrade Beetle. That was appropriate!

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 close, 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 I can no longer hear the cavalry or see "Puss in Boots." Vanished to whence they came. Vanished, scattered over the high roads and the suburbs and the country lanes of the republic. "Puss in Boots"—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 bluebell's sadness.

?

Yes! I would sing the song of the wastes 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 bluebell'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. A khaki blouse without buttons, and khaki—that's green; and the revolution does nothing but bang, rattle, plough and roll over the slopes, in the weeds, by the mines—wherever the color is khaki. The whole revolution is without buttons, with elbow room, room to stretch, to fill your lungs in the wide open spaces. Yes, 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. A bit torn in front, and in back, too, and a bit at the sides. But no camisole was to be seen, for the revolution knows only one color scheme; red and khaki, so that the camisole was green—the shadows of the weeds had fallen on it. There! A cap ... and on it the pentagonal star. Is that enough for you? Or, under the cap a head shaved—not to suit a fashion—but for the march, for convenience. And to top everything—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.

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Looks? Fair? Dark? A beetle, of course. But that's no matter. Eyes ... oh, what eyes!... It's not a romance 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 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 story with a thrilling end, and from "Puss in Boots" officially recognized exploits and beaux gestes, and so on and so forth. You won't get it. Comrade Beetle and I are none of your bourgeois; there won't be any beaux gestes from us. None from Comrade Beetle. If that's what you're after, apply to the lovesick heroes of lovesick poems.

Comrade Beetle—just a "Puss in Boots" with clean gestures and sloe black eyes, going through the weed patches of the revolution and, ant-like, pulling the weight of the sun and drying the swamps. And what kind?—Oh, you know. Just that!

So you needn't expect a thrilling story or thrilling end from us. For the story starts with—October, and ends with the sunny age we are moving towards.

The end of the story with lovesick poets is ... "Their lips met—end" or "Oh, my Dulcinea! ... This dagger I plant in my breast... . He dies."

Comrade Beetle and I have nothing to do with that.

True, there are doughty exploits, but not ours, ... Whose then? Just think!

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

In this chapter I shall relate a little exploit ... Whose, then? Just think!...

Winter, blizzard, snow drifts, and more snow drifts...

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

To the Kuban, the Kuban, the Kuban!

The engine jostles into the goods yard; every time into a goods yard.

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 the Kuban, for we trust in our bloodshot eyes.

Comrade Beetle. Yes, there she is, Comrade Beetle. And why she is in this regiment you doubtless don't know and never will know, because I don't know and I don't want to make it up; 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 the dull oven into the field, like the dull oxen from the field.

The Steppe.

Suddenly: "Stop!"

"What's up?"

"No fuel."

"Comrades! the All-Russian Coal Bunker is in peril!"

Hey, apple, whither rolling with might and main?

You'll get to Krasnov, but never back again.

And suddenly:

Oh, oh, the reapers mowing on the hillside;

"Hey, you Khokhols! Why that howling? Enough of this lament—we're gloomy enough without it."

Steppe. Blizzard. Snow drifts and more snow drifts.

"Here is Rail car No. 5—the international one. Now I'll tell you about the different peoples. There are the Letts—wet and quiet and canny; the Jews—not so bad. The Chinks—Chinese or Tartar—a hard and steadfast folk. And now this khokhol with his wailing; when he begins howling about his fields or his girl—forget it!"

The Steppe. Blizzard. And rails ... rails. "Cossacks!" "Cossacks!"

"Where? What? How?"

"Who is making a panic? You swine!" The six-shooters, pistols and rifles come out in their hundreds. Some look back regretfully, others get out their cartridges while others climb on to the tender and are off; the engine is unhooked and speeds away for fuel.

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

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

... For a long time nothing but the wide fields. It is a long time till the engine is back. It is back at last. And again it's 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 tattered rail cars, all in holes, gape sadly.

"The Train of General X."

From the lone station to cold night, from lone night to cold station.

Comrade Beetle has found fuel. Like this:

"Give me just this log, granny!"

"What?"

"Just this log."

"Take it then."

She took it.

"Perhaps another one, eh?"

The Old Lady looks at her: Beetle: Puss in Boots.

She gives her some more.

Comrade Beetle laughs: "Ha, ha! Bamboozled the old granny."

She hadn't Bamboozled her at all, she's just—the Beetle!

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

The crackling of an iron stove—fuel. The wild blizzard races and rages behind the rail car. We are off to the Kuban. ... Up ... (That's Comrade Beetle.) Up ... down ... The rail car's complement is round the stove; perhaps it's someone else or perhaps it's us—all of us. She teaches us how to mend a burn in a great coat.

But she says: "Stop that fooling. Do you think that when you are home I shall knock around with you as I am doing now? Shoo! Not by a long shot! ... Here you are, sew!"

She makes our dinner for us—she is our cook— 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 Sector of the Workers' and Peasants' Red Army.

And again we say to her: "I say, Comrade Beetle! What about having a beano with you?" And her answer was "Shoo!"

We guffaw, for we know that Shoo isn't said to them all—we have a young laddy—that's what we call him, laddy. He's snub-nosed too, and we've noticed him putting his arms round her, and she's mum... Well, that's their affair.

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

"Did you get into the sixth grade at school?" Someone would say with a laugh.

She clapped her hands in amusement.

"The sixth grade? School? That was for the gentry."

For us it was—"shoo!"

Then an uncouth khokhol said in a tone of authority: "That's the regimental Lenin..."

"Yes, chapped hands."

... And their longing lurked behind the window pane, longing dropped from the wire, which ran along and followed the telegraph posts into the unknown... . Blizzard, frost, stations with snow-covered bells, occasionally longing on the wire, and all the time: "Hah! Revolution—is revolution!"

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

"Stop!"

"What's up?"

"No fuel."

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

But I have forgotten 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 rail car God knows where, and be away for a long time. And she would always come back pensively. Why pensively. That will appear further on.

Posters, Posters, Posters ... Hu! Hu! Bang! Bang! Posters! Posters! Posters! East, West, North, South. Russia, Ukraine, Siberia, Poland. Turkestan, Georgia, White Russia, Azerbaijan, Crimea, Khiva, Bokhara.

Posters! Posters! Posters! Germans, Poles, Petliura —etc., etc., etc... . Kolchak, Yudenich, Denikin— etc., etc., etc....

Posters! Posters! Posters! One month, two three, six, twenty ... etc., etc., etc... . He! He! Bang! Bang!

The months speed past. Passed ... I don't know how many passed; perhaps it was yesterday, perhaps the day before, or perhaps 200 years ago? When was it? ... Perhaps it is a—bluebell dream. I don't know!

And now again—summer, the summer of the steppes. They are the steppes by the Dnieper—not far away is the Dnieper... . Now the nights in the summer steppes. It is so

wonderful, so moving!

You know? You sit in the steppe and think of feather grass. It is so wonderful; thinking of the feather grass, when it rustles mysteriously, like the hey presto of a rabbit's scut. It is so wonderful! Oh, how sorry I am that my predecessors have described the steppe at night before me. Or else I would have described it. Yes, indeed!

... I arrived. I received a note on the third day. "Comrade, you came, I think, on Friday. You are requested to register immediately at the cell."

I said: "The secretary, tough proposition, likely enough an old party member."

The comrade laughed: "The note surprises you? ... That's a trifle. Now, you'll have to have a taste of the discussion. I am fed up with these discussions."

My interest awoke. "What discussions?"

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

I went off. "Where is the room of the Communist cell?"

"There!"

I enter.

I look—rather familiar, I think. I make a guess and suddenly I remember; the self same Puss in Boots.

That's got it!

"You the Secretary of the Communist cell?"

"I am" ...

"You, if I am not wrong, are Comrade Beetle?"

"Yes."

"We know each other then. You remember?"

She, of course, remembers everything; but first she entered my party ticket and only then did she speak. "Of course: it is So and So, long ago." Comrade Beetle had since read "The Meaning of Communism" (Anonymous) Edition of the X Sector of the Workers' and Peasants' Red Army. And that's all. Apart from that it is so simple: Puss in Boots talks over 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 long a time had passed, and even then Puss in Boots was—"the regimental Lenin" ... And, to be candid, the second edition of Lenin: "regimental Lenin"—also was sometimes stark and harsh.

That'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 will be brought before the public opinion of the party 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: "just a bit. Well ... nothing."

Of course, as then (then in the wild steppe) she has her khaki on, for the revolution knows only one color scheme; red with khaki. As then, gigantic misfitting boots. As then; "Shoo!"

As then, the eyes like sloes laugh and nose like sloes—head of a tack, snub.

As then there were nights, but not cold now, warm, shimmering—the summer nights of the steppe. But now it was not the Cossacks harrying us, but bandits from the woods harrying our rear. From the South we are pressed on by an enraged, wounded bear at bay from the white lair of the Great Russian Empire.

And now that discussion (we are fed up with it). There is a 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 Cheka.

Comrade Beetle says: "The discussion will be to-night!" We: "Oh! Oh! We are fed up!" (This, of course, not aloud.)

"Comrade, give me a look at 'The ABC-s of Communism'."

"Oh, don't bother me, comrade. Now, I've forgotten; how does it go? Damn! Here we go. Capitalism has three characteristics: Hired labor ... hired labor ... hired labor..."

Someone prompts him: "The monopolization of the means of production. And ..."

"Go to the devil! I know it fine myself."

And then at the other end: "I say! How flushed you've all gotten! Comrade Larikov, aren't you flushed, 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? Out with it."

"And you, Comrade Molodchikov, don't be sly, 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 bosh—these discussions, as if we were school kids!"

"That's right. The very devil! It's a bourgeois way of education. We might just as well have an exam with inspectors!"

A voice again: "Won't you give me the 'ABC-s of Communism' for an instant?"

"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, clear off, comrade."

At last, the evening. Yes. Outside, as in my other stories (not all)—thundering guns, and somewhere in the tall grass, and then on the road—cavalry. Ours? We are told 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 all the same. What's all this about dialectics, if the subject is historical materialism? How can you explain that?"

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

Comrade Beetle's eyes flashed like a dragon: "As chairman I have nothing to excuse, 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 was definitely falling into the role of a teacher. And we were getting 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 gatherings, where the subjects were: Abortion, love, the rights of a cook (Lenin said).

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

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, may you love two at the same time?"

"That depends on your understanding of historical materialism." My knowledge of it is rotten, so I stand down.

Well then—

I could write a lot more about Comrade Beetle, a very interesting business. But you see it's just half-past four, and I must hurry up for the party meeting, for there—Comrade Beetle No. 2 and that means ... but, if you are Party, you know yourself what that means.

This is what she wrote: "Comrade Mykola (that's me, Mykola Khvylovy). You, if I am right, will, by the day after tomorrow, be in the Tarashcha regiment, and I in the reserve cavalry; there is some Makhno 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 the whole lot of us are ignorant. 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, the inspection, others will stay on here, and afterwards will also go—to the regiments, the inspection. This is the training school of the revolution.

It was bright, and then it got dark—the clouds were passing. A drizzling rainstorm came pouring down. It rained, it rained, and for some reason I felt sad. I wanted to drop off as soon as I could. But there was a deal of sniffing going on in the corner stopping me from sleeping.

"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 into the porch. Nothing but the grey road into the night steppe and the rain.
"Were you crying?"

"I was!" And she laughed: "Just a bit ashamed ... you know ... it gets you like that."
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, just a little bastard—a Cossack had hanged it on a lamp-post. That was in the Far East, but she still felt it. That was in her Far East, when she went away with the commando. And that was the Cossack's revenge.

I remembered the snowy steppe. The rain came down. The same grey road and the dark shadows of the buildings.

But there wasn't anything in it after all, that they had hanged the kid on a lamp-post; there's been worse than that. I don't mean to draw the tears from you.

And here's a little exploit—no doubt of that. And whose? 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 the swamp, which one—you know. 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. And history will call her—Puss in Boots.

Puss in Boots—a type. Full stop. Concise! Clear! that's all.