

The talking tomcat

I'm a little worried, children, that you won't believe what I'm about to tell you. Yet it's as true as true can be. The Cobblers of Hrusice had a tomcat. His name was Nico.

I suppose you think that's funny, children. "What's so amazing about that?" I hear you say. "We've got a tomcat too." "So have we, and a she-cat as well!"

But the thing is, children, this tom could talk! And believe it or not, little Joey Cobbler understood him quite well when he called out things like: "Joey, thombodyth lookin fru da window at me!" His speech was so bad because he was still quite a little tom.

I can no longer quite remember how it happened that he learned to talk. Maybe it was because Joey was always talking to him. Or maybe it was just that he was a special tom. But what's so strange about it anyway? We've all heard starlings and parrots talk, so why shouldn't a tomcat? Animals understand what humans say to them as well. Say "Here you are!" to any dog and it'll look at your hands for a titbit.

Although Nico the tom was good at talking, he never used his voice to gossip about others or to shout at them. If someone gave him some food he would thank them for it, and he was always ready with a courteous greeting.

Picture this, children: old Mr Franták is passing the Cobblers' garden, drawing happily on his pipe, when he hears someone call to him in a feeble voice: "Good evening, Mr Franták!" The old man jumps. He casts his eyes about, but he doesn't see anyone. Then he hears from somewhere in the trees, "I bid you good evening, Mr Franták!" This time, the old man takes a closer look. Then he slaps his leather breeches and cries merrily, "What have we here, then? As I live and breathe, it's a tomcat, yet he calls hello to me like a little boy. Bless my soul! A tomcat, and he greets you like the mayor!"

Joey and Nico shared a bed above the stove. As Joey was climbing up, Nico would fly after him like a bat from hell and reach the top before the



boy did. They would snuggle up under the eiderdown together, Nico sounding like a spinning-wheel as he purred his contentment into Joey's ear. Before they fell asleep, Joey would tell stories. Nico loved to listen, but if Joey started telling a tale about ghosts, he would say, "Not that kind of story, Joey. Or I'll be too scared to go mouse-hunting in the barn!"

One day Joey heard old Mr Švihla tell a story about a puss in boots. He liked it so much that he went to his

father (a cobbler by trade) and asked him to make some boots for Nico.

And let me tell you, children—Nico was delighted with his boots!

It was winter-time, and sometimes Nico would return from the hunt numb with cold. The chill in his paws was the worst of all. So he jumped for joy when he was given the boots. But it took him a long time to learn to walk in them. Joey was teaching him to walk on his hind legs, and time and again he toppled over into the snow, laughing whenever he did. His front paws were as warm as toast as well—Joey had found him some gloves. Actually, they were mittens, with one section for the fingers and another for the thumb. Now they could wade through the snow in the yard, build snowmen and go sledging. Just imagine the other children's surprise the first time Joey took Nico along to the ice slide! The children all had tamed animals at home like squirrels, starlings, hares and hedgehogs, but there was nothing special about any of those. So when a boy turned up at Jedliček Pond with a booted and gloved tomcat standing upright, tottering about on the ice like an old man, they could hardly believe their eyes.

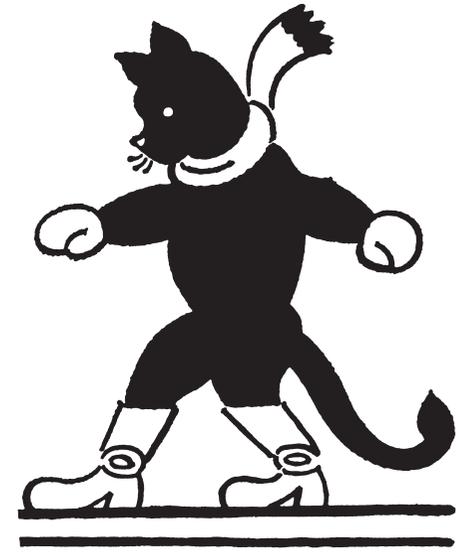
Boys surged at them on single skates (none of them could skate on two) from all sides, and soon everyone had made friends with Nico. Joey told Nico the name of each boy, and he asked the boys to make sure Nico came to no harm—he was just a little tomcat, after all.

Well, children, just imagine the children's amazement when Tony Tonda asked Nico, as little boys will, "Who do you belong to, puss?", and Nico replied boldly, "I'm Nico Cobbler."

Some of the noisier children ran straight from the ice slide to their snow-topped houses and called from the yards, "Mum! Dad! Joey Cobbler is at Jedliček Pond with a black cat, and the cat's chattering away like a boy or a girl!" Then they ran straight back to the slide. When Frankie Bubeník asked Joey if his family had

got Nico from a travelling circus, Joey answered proudly that he had taught Nico to talk himself. Silly Frankie then asked if Joey would trade Nico for a harmonica! And as he was asking, he looked so keen on the deal that Nico grabbed the tail of Joey's coat. Joey wouldn't have given him up to anyone, of course, even for a proper barrel organ! Joey showed Nico how to slide, and before long our feline friend was romping around on the ice like any boy or girl would.

But then his tail would get caught under his feet, sending him head over heels before he swept across the slide on his thick coat. And how we laughed each time he did it, children! And when Nico saw how much fun the children were having, and how little Dottie Chalupa was clutching her tummy because she was laughing so much, he made himself fall over again and again. He would feel his back and groan, as if he'd really hurt himself. "That's done it!" he would





say. "The old woman with the herbs will have to put me right this evening with some of her ointment."

Twisting and turning like the crank of a barrel organ, he went all the way across Jedliček Pond. When he got to the end, though, he suddenly straightened up, pulled the gloves from his front paws, pulled off his boots, stuffed the gloves into the boots, tossed the boots over his shoulder and, with a hop and a jump, launched himself up into the poplar tree that stood next to the pond. It was high time, after all!

The Vávras' dog, Chappy, came racing over like the devil, coming within a whisker of clamping his jaws around Nico's tail, and he was quite beside himself with rage that he had missed out. He barked something at Nico in doggy language, to which Nico replied something in cat language. Then Nico got really angry and yelled at Chappy as humans do: "Go home!"

Well, children, what a fright that gave Chappy! He stopped barking and hairs stood up all along his back. Then, with his tail between his legs, he ran home as fast as his legs would carry him, sending snow flying everywhere. Now that Chappy had gone, Nico climbed down from the tree, put his boots and gloves back on, and proudly returned to the ice slide.

The children cheered Nico as he made his hero's return. Willie Strnad set Nico on his shoulders, in 'piggyback' style, and they raced all over the slide like that. Nico's little black head bobbed about like crazy.

I'm sure the children would have stayed out on the ice with Nico until midnight, but it was time to go home for supper. Granny was calling Joey's name. And no sooner was supper over than Joey and Nico went straight to beddy-byes.

After all the sliding about, they were frozen-through and worn-out, and they found themselves in the Land of Nod in no time. Nico slept like a log, and when he shouted out "Go home", he must have been dreaming of climbing the poplar tree to escape Chappy. Good night, children!

Now the Cobblers' pig starts talking

Granny Cobbler took good care of the household. Everyone got their food on time and plenty of it, so no one ever went hungry. Joey liked to eat on a little stool by the stove, with Nico the tomcat. The boy had taught the cat to eat with a spoon from a little tin bowl, and now Nico had table manners that would put many a slovenly child to shame! Granny liked the tom because he was polite and obedient. When Joey wasn't at home and Granny needed onions, dried pears or plums bringing from the attic, she would send Nico, and he would always bring the right thing. In fact, she would rather send Nico than Joey, because Nico didn't eat such things, whereas Joey often did and would. Granny was so pleased with Nico that she sometimes liked to stroke him as he was grinding the coffee in the squeaky old mill, all the while singing:

"Three blind mice, three blind mice,
See how they run, see how they run!"

But, one time, Granny got really cross! It was noontime, and she was taking Paddy the pig his lunch of mashed potatoes and milk. She pushed back the gate, opened the little door and stood watching Paddy for a few moments. "I don't much like the look of you, Paddy," she said. "You're as thin as a rake. Why can't we fatten you up?"

Well, imagine this, children. The pig wiped his snout with a front trotter, looked at Granny with a something like wisdom in his little eyes and, what do you know, he started talking! "The thing is, Granny," he said. "Nico told me that it's fashionable to be thin."

For a moment Granny was struck dumb. But then she set the bowl on the ground, put her hands on her hips and exclaimed, "Well I never! Call yourself a dumb animal? That really does take the biscuit! It's becoming more like a circus here than a well-run household! As if it wasn't enough



to have a tomcat that talks like a circus act, now the boy has taught the pig to do the same!”

It made Granny quite upset. “I wouldn’t complain if Nico and the pig spoke Turkish or double Dutch to each other. What I can’t stand is that Nico is leading Paddy on! Well, eat your lunch, Paddy. I’m going to ask the old shepherd what he thinks about your mischief-making!”

Granny closed the pig sty and went up the hill, to the old wooden hut of the local shepherd.

The old man happened to be standing by the goat shed, cleaning Bob the goat’s long hairy chin. He was tugging hard at the Bob’s beard, and the animal was bleating angrily.

Having bid the shepherd good day, Granny went straight on to tell him how much worry her boy Joey was causing her. First he’d taught Nico the tomcat human speech, and now he’d done the same with Paddy the pig.

“Joey would do better to learn his times tables properly,” she concluded.

“I know, I know,” muttered the old shepherd. “I’ve heard tell in the village that your Joey doesn’t know his seven times table.”

“I can forgive the boy for the tom,” Granny continued. “I don’t mind them talking together above the stove if it stops Joey from getting up to

no good with the other boys. But this business with Paddy has quite upset me!”

The shepherd frowned, rested his chin in his hand and thought hard. When he spoke, his tone was stern. “Was Paddy impertinent, Granny?”

“I can’t say he was, shepherd,” said Granny. “But as he can talk, he might, at least, have bid me good afternoon! But I suppose it’s not his fault that he didn’t if no one has taught him how. What bothers me, shepherd, is that Nico had told Paddy not to get fat, for it’s fashionable to be thin. You tell me, shepherd, what good to me is a lean pig that talks like a theatre actor? What do you think I should do?”

The shepherd scratched his bristly chin, then tickled Bob behind the ears.

“First of all, Granny, make it properly clear to Nico that he shouldn’t lead Paddy on. Tell him that if he does, you’ll put him on notice! Then order Joey to teach some of your other animals to talk like humans. They should know ‘i’ after ‘e’ except after ‘c’ and all that. I hope you don’t mind my saying, Granny, that I think it would be very good if animals could talk, as long as they talked well. It grieves me when I have a sick beast on my hands and I can’t find out what’s wrong with it. It looks at me with its wise eyes and tells me nothing. How great it would be if I entered the cowshed and heard: ‘Welcome, shepherd! I’m glad to see you because I’m feeling quite down in the mouth. I’ve been off my food for a few days and I feel completely jaded. My head and my tummy hurt as well.’ Then I’d know straight away how to treat that cow, without the need for guesswork.”

“You’re quite right, my dear shepherd!” said Granny. “It always bothered me when the pig refused his food and I didn’t know what was the matter with him. Now I can simply ask him, and he’ll tell me! Thank you so much, shepherd! I’ll go back to him right away and ask what food he enjoys and what he’d like next. I wish you and Bob the goat well, shepherd. Goodbye!”

Granny went down the hill with a spring in her step. When she saw Nico in eager conversation with the pig, she didn’t frown. On spotting Granny, Nico was about to run away, but she made it clear she wanted him to stay. “Good afternoon, Granny,” called Paddy. Then he glanced at Nico, as if asking him if the greeting was polite enough.