

# The Blue Cat.

A Story for Children  
From the French  
of  
Daniel Defoe



Those of the middle class had to content themselves with silver jewellery and with eating out of porcelain dishes; but, more philosophic than men, they ate with no less appetite. This island was, at that time, truly the paradise of cats: their lives, protected by special laws, had nothing to fear, either from traps or from the river, which, amongst us, makes so many victims. They increased and multiplied at leisure, and their wishes were carefully respected. So it was that no country had ever cats so beautiful or so numerous.

When the shades of evening closed in, the inhabitants went forth into their streets without lanterns, their path illuminated by thousands of flaming eyes, beaming from the house-tops to the cellar-gratings, sparkling from the shadows of every bush, from the tree-branches above their heads, from the hollows between the stones at their feet, flying, climbing, crossing through space, like a flight of disordered stars.

Then it was a strange concert, a discordant symphony, in which the mewing of all ages and conditions mingled without confounding each other; at first, a mere confused rumour, which speedily grew into a tumult, filling the shades of night with alarms, augmenting, hissing, growling, to burst into a deafening fracas, in which the affrighted ear might imagine it was listening, in the midst of inhuman roaring, to the agonising cries of a child being put to death.

But, with the coming of day, flames and battling dispersed, order returned, and the mutineers of the night once again became

**T**HERE was, once upon a time, in an island of the East, an incomparable Princess, gifted with all the perfections of heart and mind. Her graces were celebrated a hundred leagues round; her kingdom was flourishing, her subjects respectful, her ministers capable. She lived in the time of the fairies. More than a thousand suitors, all kings or sons of kings, aspired to her hand; but the Ailla showed no favour to any of them, the only preference she had ever exhibited having been concentrated on white Velvetpaw, her favourite cat.

Velvetpaw was a charming little playful animal, with large irised eyes, tufts at the ends of its shapely ears, and a coat so soft, silky, and abundant that the Princess's hands disappeared when she caressed it.

In imitation of the sovereign, all the great people in the kingdom possessed at least one favourite cat, which they petted and nursed incessantly. They were seen with jewels in their ears, bracelets on their paws, or with collars inconceivably magnificent; they slept on down and satin, ate out of golden or silver dishes, and had servants to themselves.



peaceful citizens, resumed the insignia of their dignities, their mild and inoffensive demeanour, and all the airs of honest people incapable of committing the smallest peccadillo.

Ailla was living happily in this way, and all her people with her, when, one fine night, she took it upon herself to dream of a blue cat with topaz-coloured eyes, having upon its neck a collar of diamonds, the most sparkling in the world. Could a poor princess, who has nothing to desire, dream of anything else? So there would have been no great harm done, but for the intervention of an enchanter one hundred and twelve years old, who, twice before, had explained to the Princess dreams which had troubled her sleep.

This magician lived not far from the royal palace, in an old ruined tower haunted by spirits, a place thoroughly fitted, if there ever was one, for carrying on of mysterious operations.

Ailla went there, the very morning after she had had that dream, attended by one slave only; for neither for evil spirits nor women would the magician put himself in the least out of the way. At the first sound of approaching footsteps, the owls, the daws, and the ravens, who inhabited the sinister old tower, took wing with a frightful clatter, and from under the shuddering grass vipers and serpents glided, hissing now softly, now angrily.

At the entrance to a large room, draped with enormous spiders' webs, a great toad croaked three times. Though the sun had been for some time risen, a dim light, like that of the moon, alone entered this awe-

inspiring dwelling, which was almost filled with darkness.

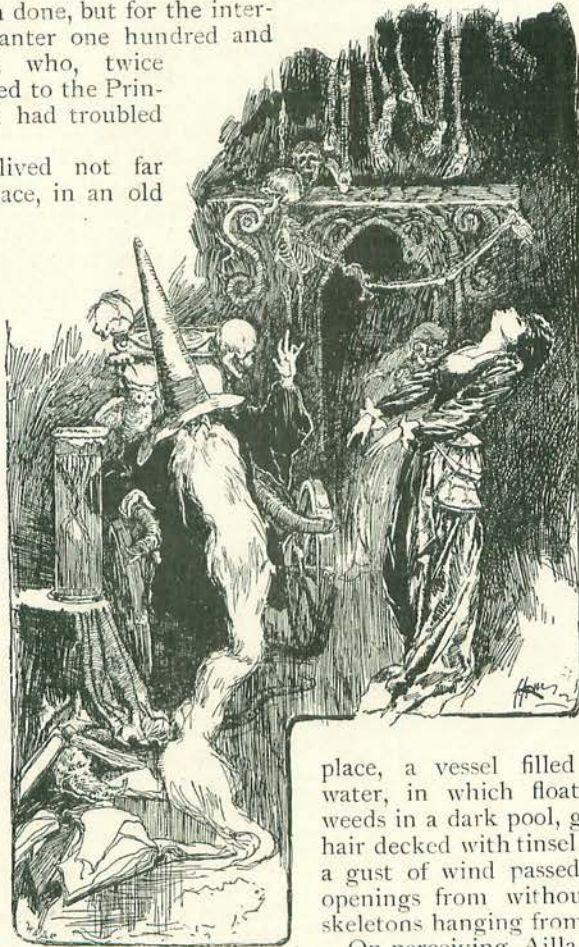
In the obscurest corner of the room sat the magician, or, rather, he lay half buried in an immense wheeled arm-chair, in which he ceaselessly, and with prodigious activity, moved about. He was, besides, so well wrapped up in a red and black robe garnished with bells, and his hat, three feet high, and tipped with the eye of a lynx, was pressed down so tightly on his head, that it was with difficulty that his face, angular and

polished as ivory, could be distinguished. Not content with being legless, he was one-eyed, his unique eye, deep-set, glittering like a firefly in a glass case. His beard, white and abundant, descended to the ground, forming on his black robe a snowy cascade.

On every side lay, heaped in strange disorder, objects of odd form: living animals motionless, others, that were stuffed, writhing; on overturned trunks were seen open books, written in undecipherable characters; in another

place, a vessel filled with bloodstained water, in which floated, like streaming weeds in a dark pool, great locks of human hair decked with tinsel spangles; and when a gust of wind passed through the wide openings from without, the rattling of skeletons hanging from the roof was heard.

On perceiving Ailla, the magician made her a sort of bow; but scarcely had she told him, in trembling tones, what had brought her to his abode, than he uttered a frightful imprecation. After which, having made with his chair three rapid circles about the Princess, he stopped short, and, in a piercing voice, announced to her that, if she wished to avoid terrible misfortunes, she must instantly have search made



THE MAGICIAN.



for the Blue Cat, the presence of which could alone save her from impending disaster.

At these words the screech-owl perched on the master's shoulder, flapped its wings and uttered a dismal cry; a monstrous spider crouching on his knees set up the bristles on its back; all the bells on the magician's robe jangled at once; the lynx eye shot forth a greenish beam; then all became obscured. The Princess fainted, and, without paying any other heed to her the old enchanter had her carried out of the tower by one of his familiar animals.

To tell the truth, the wicked old enchanter had wished to make a strong impression on the Princess's mind, though it is possible that he meditated some other dark project. Everybody knows how deep is the rascality of enchanters. However, it may have been, his cunning did not much profit him; for that same evening while he was preparing a brand-new enchantment his big cauldron burst, and next morning nothing was found in his dwelling but a heap of cinders, in the midst of which were some still smoking bones.

Ailla saw in this death a confirmation of the prophecy, and fainted for the second time.

Now the whole kingdom was turned upside down. By order of the Grand Vizier search was everywhere made, from the floor of the palace to the roof of the highest garret. Notices were published, rewards were offered to whoever should discover, seize, and bring to the Princess the marvellous cat.

It was spring-time, and there was no lack of kittens; the entire army was occupied in examining all the new-born, amongst which were found every known hue of coat; but not one that was blue. Then the open country was minutely explored, the forest, the rocks—vainly.

The Princess visibly declined day by day, trembling unceasingly, and turning from all food.

At length, weary of waiting, Ailla convoked an extraordinary sitting of the Grand Council, and solemnly declared that she would give her hand to whoever should bring her the marvellous cat.

Great was the stir amongst her suitors; never before did so many travellers stream over the surface of the globe! Panting horses crossed and recrossed each other everywhere; the roads in every direction were encumbered with overthrown car-

riages. Ships were seen to sink under the weight of passengers on board of them; while the sky was dotted with balloons ballasted with travellers. The easy explanation of all this voyaging energy is that every one of the Princess's official suitors had published, far and near, promises of rich rewards to whoever should succeed in finding the Blue Cat. The result was that one half the world rushed upon the other half.

A year sped; the Princess had become the merest shadow of her former self. Her temper was sharpened; she saw about her nothing but crime and treason. Horrible phantoms disturbed her sleep; and, on awaking, she confounded the dreams of her brain with the actuality of things. Instinctively she condemned all those of whom she had conceived any doubt. The executioner, hitherto unemployed, demanded an increase of salary; he even spoke of taking an assistant!

In utter despair, all the most learned men in the world were consulted. They came from all countries, and, greeting each other with a thousand civilities, did not fail to exchange a vast number of compliments on their own works, of which they spoke with reverence, while, not having read a line of them, each, on his side, firmly believed that his own works alone were worthy of sincere praise and deep study. These salaamings got through, one banquet and then another was organised for their edification—for there is no talking well save at table—and a thousand subjects were discussed, all wide of the matter which had brought them together.

On that subject, they speedily divided themselves into two camps; one affirmed that the Blue Cat was but a variety of the tiger; the other party, on the contrary, maintained that the tiger is nothing but a completely developed cat. From tigers the discussion passed by insensible degrees, to leopards, to the lion—even to monkeys. In short, at the end of six months, the Prime Minister, wishing to know the result of their labours, found them almost smothered under a mass of reports; their heads alone were yet visible, and all at the moment were profoundly occupied in active researches on the subject of a certain kind of *coleoptera* missing since the time of the Deluge, and which one of them flattered himself he had refound. So hotly were they disputing over this matter, indeed, as hardly to be conscious of the purpose



which had brought them together. Furious at their conduct, the Princess ordered them all to be hanged, which had the effect of making them all of one opinion, this time at least.

Next day an edict was posted on the walls of all the cities in the kingdom, announcing that each day, in alphabetical order, ten citizens, men and women, should be hung, and that the extermination should be continued until the Blue Cat was found and brought to the Princess.

The consternation was extreme. In all directions the streams became swollen with the tears that were shed to such a degree as to threaten an inundation in several parts of the kingdom, and the wind was drowned in the sounds of the cries forced from the despair which such a tyranny excited. The boldest spoke in low tones of revolt

which, in the times of the fairies, was a thing unheard of.

It was then that a young man, well made and of distinguished bearing, took a violent

resolution.

His name was Brisloün, and he desired to save his country, his fellow citizens, and himself. Possibly he had a wish even beyond all this. With this purpose he went to the

house of the Prime Minister, who, before being hung next day (his name beginning with an A), was in a very bad temper, and very little disposed to receive visitors. However, a message given by the young man having been conveyed

to him, reawakened in the diplomatist's downcast soul a gleam of hope. He ordered the stranger to be shown in to him.

In two words the young man explained his idea and plan. The idea was a very simple one, which readily accounted for the fact that nobody had before thought of it. The plan was a bold one. It was nothing less than to play the oracle, mystify a queen, and gull a people—who could tell? perhaps to falsify for ever the history of science in regard to the colour of cats! The mere thought of it made the Minister's forehead burst into a cold perspiration.

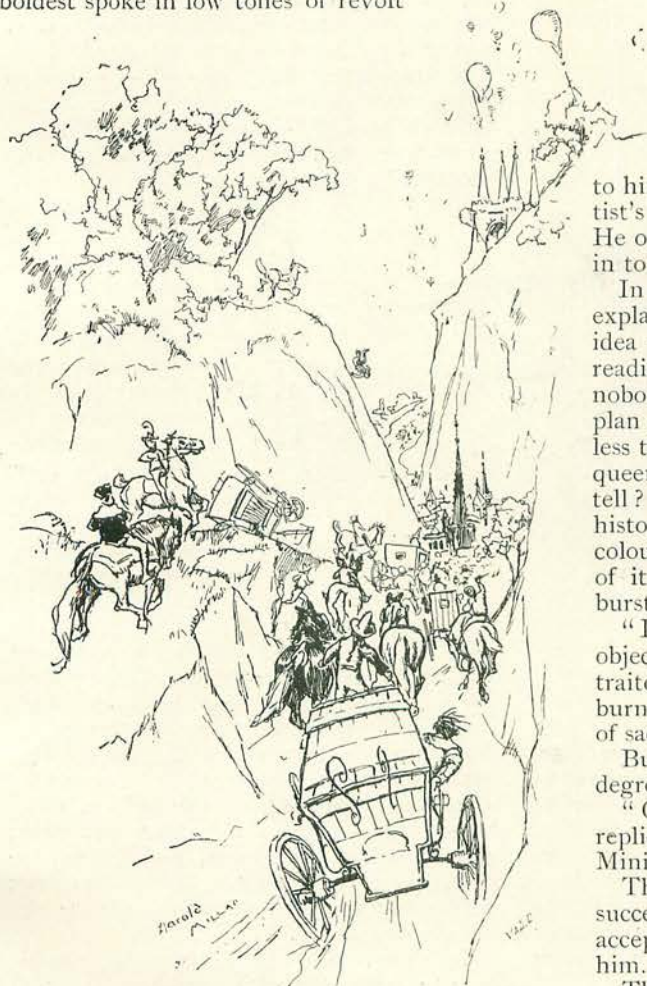
"If the trick is discovered," he objected, "we shall be impaled like traitors, beheaded like forgers, and burned at a slow fire like men guilty of sacrilege."

But Brisloün was not in the least degree weak-minded?

"One can but die once," he replied. In the situation of the Minister he ran but little risk.

These arguments were, in the end, successful, and the young man's plan accepted. Velvetpaw was confided to him.

The night passed feverishly and



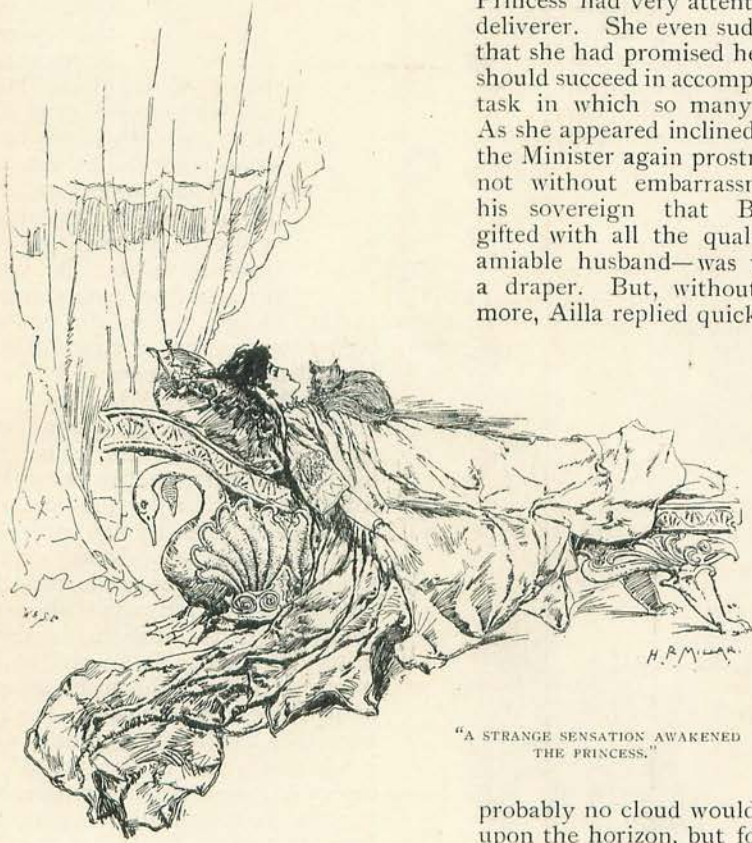
"THE SKY WAS DOTTED WITH BALLOONS."



slowly for the unfortunate Minister. At length dawn appeared, shedding its rosy tints upon the long row of gibbets which had been set up.

Exhausted by a terrible nightmare, the Princess hardly closed her eyes. One of her thin hands hung down from the side of her couch; her bosom heaved.

At that moment one of the doors of her chamber was partially opened, and, a moment afterwards, closed again noiselessly. At the same instant a strange sensation awakened the Princess. An enormous weight was stifling her. Feebly she raised



"A STRANGE SENSATION AWAKENED THE PRINCESS."

her heavy eyelids, pressed on by the finger of death. Oh, miracle! Curled up upon her breast—soft, supple, graceful, and of an azure the most beautiful imaginable—a cat was admiring her, smiling at her, in its way, with its great limpid golden eyes. Diamonds, big as stars, sparkled amid its silky coat. Ailla had only power to utter a loud scream, to break the cord of her bell, and to faint away once more.

Some hours later, happy, appeased, and already less pale, the Princess went in great pomp to the Council Chamber. Before her, on a cushion of cloth of gold, the azure-coloured cat allowed itself to be devoutly borne. Then the Prime Minister, prostrating himself, and with all the usual ceremonial, presented Brisloin to the Princess, and related to her how, after having discovered the Blue Cat at the bottom of an inaccessible cavern, guarded by frightful monsters, this young man had, at the peril of his life, and after overcoming a thousand difficulties, brought it away.

During the delivery of this address the Princess had very attentively regarded her deliverer. She even suddenly remembered that she had promised her hand to whoever should succeed in accomplishing the difficult task in which so many others had failed. As she appeared inclined to keep her word, the Minister again prostrated himself, and, not without embarrassment, observed to his sovereign that Brisloin—otherwise gifted with all the qualities that make an amiable husband—was unfortunately only a draper. But, without pausing to hear more, Ailla replied quickly:—

"His address and courage shall stand him in stead of letters of nobility, and to begin with I will name him Grand Commander of the Blue Cat, of which order the lowest chevalier shall be princes of the blood! The wedding shall take place a week hence!"

Many days sped happily, and probably no cloud would have shown itself upon the horizon, but for the fancy which overtook the precious Blue Cat to escape from the royal apartments, where it was kept with great ceremony, to scamper for awhile on the roof of the palace. The moon, it was true, was shining that night with peculiar brightness, and it may be imagined that being a cat does not necessarily imply inability to admire the beauties of nature.

In short, imprudent pussy, intoxicated by the air and liberty, pranced about so



wildly as suddenly to lose her balance, to slip down a gutter which descended perpendicularly into an inner court of the palace, and, finally, to pitch head first into a big basin in which aromatics and essences were in course of soaking. Stunned by the fall and half stifled by the violence of the perfumes, the poor creature struggled some time before being able to extricate itself.

The agitation of the Princess may be conceived when, next day, she beheld this cat on which the security of the kingdom rested enter her chamber shivering, soiled, dazed, with the aspect, in short, of a half-drowned animal. This agitation, however, was as nothing compared with that which followed on her discovering that large patches of white marred the robe of azure obtained at the cost of so many sacrifices.

Presently, alas ! even doubt was no longer possible ; for, by force of rubbing against the bed-curtains to dry itself, Velvetpaw, Oh, perfidious—Velvetpaw herself reappeared, still slightly blue, but nevertheless only too recognisable ! It had been able to save its skin in the accident of the past night, but not its colour, which was not proof against essences.

The anger of the Princess was extreme on learning in this way the trick by which she had been abused. Instantly she wished to avenge herself, but in a terrible, cruel manner ; and she was hesitating on the choice of a punishment, when the Prince entered, handsomely dressed in a cherry-coloured satin robe embroidered with pearls, which admirably set off his gallant bearing.

As soon as she saw him she pointed an accusing finger towards discoloured Velvetpaw, which, with a very crestfallen air, was curled up at the foot of the Princess's bed.

"Torture shall make you repent, miserable impostor !" she cried, trembling with passion, and with flashing eyes.

Brisloün was not in the least alarmed.

"What has made you so angry, madam, and what crime has drawn down upon me such severe reproaches ?" he asked.

"Tricking me !" replied the Princess furiously.

Brisloün was still unmoved.

"You ought, on the contrary, to thank me," he said. "The cat of which you dreamed has no existence ; I made it ; your

life, your beauty, your happiness—I say nothing of that of your whole people—depended on this caprice ; I staked my head on satisfying it." And in a gentle tone he added : "Say, Princess, have you been less happy ?"

"To have played the oracle !" said Ailla, her bosom heaving.

"To have interpreted it, you would say." And, as she suddenly became thoughtful, Brisloün went on : "Your dream, my beautiful Princess, was at once a warning and a lesson. The sorcerer gave you the word, I the sense of it. Happiness, Ailla, is not like the grenades, less red than your lips, which are brought to you on a salver of gold, fresh gathered, perfumed, and perfectly ripe ; the divers elements which compose it are floating freely about in the world ; it is for us to seize upon them and bring them together."

Was it the effect of this address, or a new caprice ? Did the large black eyes of Brisloün influence her who had many times before submitted to their powerful fascination ? No one has ever known ; but the anger of Ailla suddenly disappeared, like the melting of thin snow under the rays of spring. With a slightly pouting smile, she held out to the Prince a hand which he needed no beseeching to carry to his lips.

Velvetpaw, thinking that a good moment for re-entering into the Princess's favour, went and gently rubbed her tiny head against her skirts ; and, thinking of something else, the Princess sat down and caressed her.

Ailla was superstitious, and, moreover, she was a woman. She reflected for a few minutes, then turning with irresistible grace to Brisloün, who was watching her, she said :

"Prince, you have discovered the true meaning of the oracle, and I thank you for doing it. And now I am going to ask a favour of you."

He hastened to protest that he was ready to give his dear Princess all the proofs of love and devotion it should please her to require.

Without speaking she took up Velvetpaw and handed it to him.

"What !" cried Brisloün, laughing, "you want a new one ?"

"I should feel more at ease ; only—" she paused, laughing also ; but presently added in a coquettish tone, "since it makes no

difference to you, dye it rose-colour this time."

The moral of the story is this :—

A white cat is as good as a blue cat. What is most important is, to have a box of colours and to know how to use it on due occasion.

