



Fragment książki *Kot na medal* Malgorzaty Kur przełożył Marek Kazmierski.

Tłumaczenie zrealizowane w ramach projektu „Literackie zbliżenia”.

A Black & White Sailor

George walked along the streets of Hong Kong, whistling cheerfully and moving at a very brisk pace. It was a beautiful, sunny day and it had been so long since he'd last been on dry land that now, walking along the solid pavement, he still felt his ship's unsteady rolling beneath the soles of his boots. You see, George was a British sailor and his ship The HMS Amethyst had just pulled into port.

As was normal during this time of day, the streets of the port district were particularly crowded. Alongside the local Chinese population, so many of them riding bicycles with huge wicker baskets attached to the handlebars in order to get their shopping, there were also sailors wearing clean, white uniforms and numerous labourers rushing to their jobs in the docklands. It must be said that, in 1948, Hong Kong was a major destination for ships from all around the world, as well as local fishing vessels.

When George stopped at a small street stall, operated by an elderly chap wearing a straw hat and selling fish stock soup with noodles and vegetables, a small black & white cat appeared out of nowhere and instantly began rubbing itself up against George's legs.

“Hey there, little friend!” George said.

“Meow!” the cat replied and looked up at George. And though it was a Chinese cat and George only spoke English, they instantly understood one another.

“Would you like to eat something?” the sailor asked, while the cat climbed up his trouser leg using its front paws and began purring. It was in fact black all over, with only a white band wrapped round its neck, right below the chin. Oh, and its paws and whiskers were also pale white. “I'm sorry, little buddy, but I don't have anything for you to eat. Not that you at all look starved to me!” George commented, bending down to stroke the cat's soft, glistening fur.

And it was this gentle gesture which helped the young sailor suddenly feel right at home in this exotic port. He recalled the farm he had been raised on, along with his parents and sister, and when he closed his eyes, as his fingers moved through the cat's delicate fur, he could almost



imagine himself lying on a meadow behind his family farmhouse stroking his beloved mongrel called Fido. Somewhere close by a car horn blared all of a sudden and George almost leapt into the air, surprised to find his day dream disrupted, leaving him once again all alone in Hong Kong.

“Enough of this, I must go. Look after yourself, cat!” he said and set off towards the port, but the cat had clearly taken a liking to him and followed George along the pavement, his tail raised high in the air.

Once George was about to walk the gangway to board his ship, his friends stopped and looked at him with surprise.

“Hey, George, will you introduce us to your new friend?” Charlie shouted, while the rest of the sailors burst out laughing.

George looked behind him, but he couldn't see anything there.

“What are you talking about?” he asked.

“What do you mean what? About that wee fellow!” Charlie answered and crouched down, trying to attract the cat which was standing right by George's feet. Soon enough, the cat ran up to Charlie, purring loudly, while the other sailors gathered round them and began talking to the furry creature as if he were a child.

“Now, what is this lost wee kitten?”

“What lovely fur you have!”

“Come here, little Chinese pussycat!”

The cat looked relaxed and pleased to finally find itself in the company of such appreciative gentlemen.

“What name did you give it, George?” Charlie asked eventually.

“Why would I give it a name? I'm not going to take it on board with us!”

“We could use a cat aboard the Amethyst, to help catch all the rats running wild down below deck! Plus, he can keep us company during long sea journeys, right, little furball?” Victor said.

“Meow!” the cat replied, for it clearly seemed fluent in English.

And in this way, a Chinese cat was smuggled aboard the Amethyst and was given its first ever proper name – Simon. It was also assigned its own bowl and a sleeping blanket, though like all sensible cats it preferred not to make use of it, but slept instead inside the sailor's berths. He liked to spend his days in the cabin belonging to George and his fellow sailors, keeping them company,



while managing to hunt down the odd rat or two from time to time. He liked to show off to the ship's crew by bringing them such trophies in his sharp little teeth, and would probably have stayed with them until the end of the Amethyst's mission, if it weren't for Commodore Ian Griffiths who came to pay the sailors' cabin an unannounced visit one dark evening.

The commodore entered the cabin so suddenly, the surprised sailors only had time to toss a blanket over the sleeping cat. Unfortunately, the curious animal quickly crept back out and stood in the centre of the room, right under Griffith's very nose, theatrically stretching its arched back. Next, it sat down, yawned, exposing its brilliant white fangs in a show of total disrespect to the ship's captain, looking right up into Griffith's eyes as if to introduce himself.

“What is this now?” the commodore asked. Simon purred disapprovingly at the question. He was, after all, a textbook example of a cat – how could anyone dare ask such an impertinent question?

“How did this flea-ridden cat come to be aboard my ship?” the commodore pressed his crew, making Simon even more upset – everyone could see there wasn't a single flea anywhere in his fur, why was no one coming to defend him from this bearded thug?

“This is Simon, commodore. He came aboard with me back in Hong Kong. We really did think a cat would come in useful to our work on the Amethyst...” George began trying to explain, but one furious look from his captain was enough to silence the young sailor.

“Bringing animals aboard this ship without permission is not allowed!” commodore Griffiths screamed at the top of his voice. “This isn't some Noah's Ark, you hear, but a war ship! Understood?”

“Ay-aye, commodore!” the crew answered as one man, trembling with fear over their little pet and looking round among themselves, hoping someone would have something clever left to say.

“I'm confiscating this cat! I have to consider what to do with it. We are, after all, sailing across the very centre of the East China Seas!”

Charlie stepped out of line.

“May I speak, commodore?” he asked and received a fleeting wave of the captain's left hand in agreement. Griffith was using his right hand to hold the cat, which was so unaware of the commotion he was causing he wasn't even trying to wriggle free. “Commodore, sir, Simon is a very useful cat. Ever since he came aboard, the ship's cooks no longer complain about rats eating up our



food supplies. We give him some of our own food, so he is no drain on the ship's food stores.”

“Let me be the judge of his usefulness! Disperse right now, back to your duties, men!” the commodore roared and left, holding Simon under his arm, stomping back towards his own cabin having slammed the door behind him.

Once sat at his own desk, Griffith took off his cap, let the cat drop to the ground and began looking through the documents waiting for him. The cat was going to have to wait, while he attended to more pressing matters. As he busied himself with maps and papers, Simon explored the captain's cabin, checking every corner and cranny carefully, sniffing around the bed, the wardrobe, the litter bin and table used to hold up the ship's radio receiver. He then crawled beneath the armchair and circled around it, finally deciding to leap up onto the desk.

“Get thee gone! Shoo!” the commodore barked, but Simon, instead of leaping back down to the floor, began to purr loudly and use his damp nose to poke Griffith's hand.

Finally, the commodore gave in and began stroking Simon's shiny black coat, slowly realising no one had shown him as much affection as this cat was doing now ever since they had set off on their international adventure. Meanwhile, Simon climbed inside the commodore's upturned cap, rolled up into a ball and squinted his eyes charmingly.

“Did you know, Simon, that I used to have a cat just like you? My daughter found it outside our home near a rubbish pile and decided to bring it inside. She carried it around like it was her own baby, dressing it in dolls' clothes and letting it sleep in her bed. It's been ever so long since I've seen my darling daughter!” the commodore exclaimed, but then corrected himself straight away: “What is going on with me? I am talking to a cat!”

Simon did not mind this in the least bit, purring gently as if letting Griffith know that talking to cats was the most natural and healthy thing to do in the world.

The very next day, the commodore took Simon back to the main ship's crew cabin, stood in the centre of the room and said to George and his shipmates:

“I'm sorry to announce things cannot stand as they are...” Griffith opened to audible groans from the other men in the cabin. He raised his hand to silence the crew and continued: “... It's not right for the sailor-men of a battle-ready navy vessel to have a pet cat. This is why I am promoting Simon to the rank of junior shipmate and assigning him the responsible task of catching every single rat aboard our vessel. I hope he will carry out this duty well enough to earn himself the



payment of a tin of golden sprats!” Griffith concluded, the sailors clapping their hands and whistling approvingly.

Simon bravely busied himself hunting down all the mice and rats he could find all around the Amethyst, and brought each new trophy back to the captain's cabin – in gratitude, the commodore allowed him to sleep each night curled up inside his cap. Even the new commodore – Bernard Skinner – who in time replaced Ian Griffith, instantly took a liking to Simon.

Unfortunately, there came a day when a loud bang reminded the cat that he was sailing upon a battleship which was always at risk of attack out on open waters. That particular day, commodore Skinner was sitting at his desk, filling out documents, while Simon slept curled up into a ball in his comfortable bed. This was when a terrible explosion shook their ship and before Simon had time to fully open his bright eyes to check who had dared disrupt his sleep, pieces of broken glass and metal lodged themselves in his shiny fur.

“Meow! Meow!” Simon complained, leaping, or rather crawling off the bed and beginning to call for help. Next, he began to sniff round the captain lying on the floor. “Meow!” he shouted in Skinner's ear, but his captain was no longer breathing.

Simon was terrified and hurt all over. Alarm bells were ringing on the top deck, the lights out in the smoke-filled corridor outside the door to the captain's cabin, while the men's screams could be heard in the distance. As carefully as he could, Simon approached the open door and looked outside. His hind leg was hurting, his sides on painful fire. He sat down and began to lick his wounds, while trying to work out what best to do next. He felt very tired and weak.

Suddenly, three sailors ran into the commodore's cabin, almost trampling our poor black cat in the dark.

“Simon! Are you OK? Victor, take the cat to the ship's doctor! And where is commodore Skinner?” One of the men shouted.

Simon had no idea what happened next – he only felt one of the sailors scoop him up in his hat and then carry him all the way to the ship's doctor, who already had his hands full of countless injured crewmen. Their heads, arms and legs wrapped in bandages, they waited for the medic and his assistants to run around the room, checking pulses, disinfecting wounds and removing bits of shrapnel from the bodies of those most seriously injured.

“What happened?” Simon wanted to ask, but he was beaten to it by a young lad who had



just come to in a berth to his right.

“We've been attacked by a Chinese vessel! Our ship is damaged, there's casualties,” one of the doctor's assistants answered.

Once the doctor had attended to all the injured sailors, he took care of Simon. The cat did not look all that good – his fur was stuck together with blood flowing from a large wound on his back. Two crewmen held Simon down by his hind and front legs, while the doctor used a pair of tweezers to remove the broken bits of glass and metal, before cleaning the wound out with disinfectant. Yet, even though they all did their best to be as gentle as they could, Simon was unable to stop himself from howling in pain.

“Meow! Meow!!!” he cried to high heavens.

“There, there, Simon, you'll be fine. Now, be a good little kitten, and you'll get a big bowl of sprats as reward!”

“I would like to have a little sprat...” Simon thought to himself and fell asleep. Once his eyes opened again a few hours later, he was completely wrapped in bandages. Only his tail and front paws stuck out from the wrapping – Simon looked about him, noticing all the beds were taken up by injured sailors who had been bandaged up like mummies. Not a single bit of fish could be seen in the room, but he was too sore all over to get up and set off in search of dinner. Simon waved his tail three times, which tired him out completely. Then instantly fell back into a deep sleep.

It turned out the Amethyst not only suffered heavy damage, but then ran aground on some shallows in the Yangtze River. It took several weeks for the damage to be patched up, meanwhile the onboard stores of food and drinking water began to run low. Thankfully, Simon along with the rest of the injured crew members were healing quickly. One fine day, as the cat was getting ready to lie down to sleep in order to recover his strength, he heard two of the ship's officers talking:

“We're starting to run out of food. What is more, rats are running riot in the food stores. They feel completely at home there, while the crew is busy patching up the ship and there is no one who can go down below and get rid of the vermin,” one of the men said.

“I've seen the beasts with my own eyes, how they run between the flour and rice sacks, eating all they like!” said the other officer. “If we don't do something quickly, we will die of hunger. And then there's that cat, which has to be fed, even though he does no work...” The second



officer

Projekt współfinansowany w
ramach programu Unii Europejskiej
„Kreatywna Europa”



was called John Kerans and was deputising for commodore Skinner.

“Rats on my ship!” Simon thought to himself angrily. “I have to show them who's boss! And in this way earn the respect of the new commander,” he decided and set off below deck, right for the food stores.

As soon as Simon got to the dark, cramped pantry, he instantly noticed the glowing red eyes of all the rats running loose below deck. One of the rats stopped right in front of Simon, but then ran on towards a sack filled with rice. The cat took three steps back – not only was the pantry filled with vermin, they did not seem to be scared of him at all. For a moment, he began to doubt if he stood any chance of winning a battle against so many enemies, and was about to run back to the warm officers' mess, when he felt something tugging at his tail. Simon turned to see it was a giant rat.

“Meow!” Simon screamed, calling for help. The rat refused to budge, still pulling at Simon's fluffy tail.

“No self-respecting cat would ever allow such flea-ridden vermin to tug at his tail!” Simon thought to himself angrily, then tensed all of the muscles in his dark body and leapt up on top of a storage cupboard. This was an excellent vantage point, from which he could see the whole room – he focused on a single rat, jumped down and chased it long enough to finally hunt the little beast down. Once he had defeated the rat, he carried the body in his jaws all the way to the ship captain's cabin door. Then he went back, repeated the hunt and brought more rat bodies as trophies to be laid at the door of the captain's cabin.

Eventually, John Kerans opened his door wide and said:

“What on earth is this?!” to no one in particular as he stepped out of his cabin and stumbled upon the pile of dead rats. Just then, Simon showed up carrying another dead rat trophy. Holding the vermin body in his sharp teeth, Simon looked up at the captain.

“Did you hunt down all these rats?” Kerans asked, rather strangely – who else might have done it? As far as Simon knew, he was the only cat on board this ship. Still, just to be polite, he opened his jaws, letting the latest dead rat drop to the floor, and answered elegantly:

“Meow!”

The captain crouched down and reluctantly reached his hand out to stroke the cat's arched



back. Simon began rubbing up against Kerans who seemed to be getting a feel for how nice it was to stroke the cat's soft fur.

“Good kitty! You've earned your sprats!” the captain announced. “But what is this? You're bleeding. Come, I will carry you to the doctor.”

It turned out one of Simon's wounds hadn't quite healed up properly, but it wasn't at all serious. The doctor quickly cleaned up the cut and Simon was just about to go to enjoy the bowl of sprats had been promised so long ago when he heard someone whispering softly “kitty, kitty...” Simon turned around to see one of the injured sailors reaching out a bandaged hand towards him. Simon approached the man, sniffing all about his berth before jumping on top of it.

He looked the sick man over carefully, and instantly identified the most severely injured part of his body – where, as is the way with all good cats, he then decided to curl up and lie in good spirits – for, as is widely known, cats' bodies have healing properties.

Ever since that day, Simon's working days began by battling the remaining rats in the pantry, and ended with a visit to the doctor's cabin, where the injured sailors keenly applied our furry feline to their injured bodies – they told Simon their secrets, cuddling him with great affection, recalling the happy times they had spent back in their homes with the cats of their lives. In time, the doctor himself was forced to admit in surprise that the overall wellbeing of the men in his care improved substantially. They no longer complained of pains and boredom, and most of all they had all regained their will to get better and return to their homes as quickly as was possible.

A hundred and one days later, the Amethyst was finally fixed and sailed down the Yangtze River in the middle of the night towards the open seas. From there, it sailed on to Great Britain. Once it had reached the port of Plymouth, the whole crew came out on deck in order to greet the crowds awaiting their arrival. Hundreds of children and women were waving flags and flowers at the sailors, who waved their caps back at those down below. A raggedy Union Jack flew on the ship's mast – the symbol of heavy fighting and the crew's courage – something captured by the cameras of documentary film crews from all over Europe waiting on shore.

Once Simon was descending, or rather was being carried down to shore by one of the ship's officers, he heard the crowds chanting his name: “Simon! Simon! Simon!”

“Oh, the English are ever so lovely!” Simon thought to himself. “No one has ever greeted me this kindly before...” He had no idea he had become famous and was now considered a real



hero. While he was serving upon the Amethyst, he had received thousands of letters from all over

England. Complete strangers kept wishing him a speedy recovery and sent him warm hugs.

Children sent him hand-drawn cards, and adults sent little bits of money to pay for his treats.

Even the King of England himself noted the cat's courage, awarding Simon the Dickin Medal – a special honour bestowed upon animals which achieved great deeds in the service of the nation. Simon is the only cat to have ever received such a medal – a real hero indeed.