

Opening extract from

Kaspar

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The Coming of Kaspar

Prince Kaspar Kandinsky first came to the Savoy Hotel in a basket. I know because I was the one who carried him in. I carried all the Countess' luggage that morning, and I can tell you, she had an awful lot of it.

But I was a bell-boy so that was my job: to carry luggage, to open doors, to say good



morning to every guest I met, to see to their every need, from polishing their boots to bringing them their telegrams. In whatever I did I had to smile at them very politely, but the smile had to be more respectful than friendly. And I had to remember all their names and titles too, which was not at all easy, because there were always new guests arriving. Most importantly though, as a bell-boy – which, by the way, was just about the lowest of the low at the hotel – I had to do whatever the guests asked me to, and right away. In fact I was at almost everyone's beck and call. It was "jump to it, Johnny", or "be sharp about it, boy", do this "lickedysplit", do that "jaladi, jaladi". They'd click their fingers at me, and I'd jump to it lickedysplit, I can tell you, particularly if Mrs Blaise, the head housekeeper, was on the prowl.

We could always hear her coming, because she rattled like a skeleton on the move. This was on account of the huge bunch of keys that hung from



her waist. She had a voice as loud as a trombone when she was angry, and she was often angry. We lived in constant fear of her. Mrs Blaise liked to be called "Madame", but on the servants corridor at the top of the hotel where we all lived – bell-boys, chamber maids, kitchen staff – we all called her Skullface, because she didn't just rattle like a skeleton, she looked a lot like one too. We did our very best to keep out of her way.

To her any misdemeanour, however minor, was a dreadful crime – slouching, untidy hair, dirty fingernails. Yawning on duty was the worst crime of all. And that's just what Skullface had caught me doing that morning just before the Countess arrived. She'd just come up to me in the lobby,





hissing menacingly as she passed, “I saw that yawn, young scallywag. And your cap is set too jaunty. You know how I hate a jaunty cap. Fix it. Yawn again, and I’ll have your guts for garters.”

I was just fixing my cap when I saw the doorman, Mr Freddie, showing the Countess in. Mr Freddie clicked his fingers at me, and that was how moments later I found myself walking through the hotel lobby alongside the Countess, carrying her cat basket, with the cat yowling so loudly that soon everyone was staring at us. This cat did not yowl like other cats, it was more like a wailing lament, almost human in its tremulous tunefulness. The Countess, with me at her side, swept up to the reception desk and announced herself in a heavy foreign accent – a Russian accent, as I was soon to find out. “I am Countess Kandinsky,” she said. “You have a suite of rooms for Kaspar and me, I think. There must be river outside my window, and I must



have a piano. I sent you a telegram with all my requirements.”

The Countess spoke as if she was used to people listening, as if she was used to being obeyed. There were many such people who came in through the doors of the Savoy: the rich, the famous and the infamous, business magnates, lords and ladies, even Prime Ministers and Presidents. I don’t mind admitting that I never much cared for their haughtiness and their arrogance. But I learned very soon, that if I hid my feelings well enough behind my smile, if I played my cards right, some of them could give very big tips, particularly the Americans. “Just smile and wag your tail.” That’s what Mr Freddie told me to do. He’d been working at the Savoy as a doorman for close on twenty years, so he knew a thing or two. It was good advice. However the guests treated me, I learned to smile back and behave like a willing puppy dog.



That first time I met Countess Kandinsky I thought she was just another rich aristocrat. But there was something I admired about her from the start. She didn't just walk to the lift, she sailed there, magnificently, her skirts rustling in her wake, the white ostrich feathers in her hat wafting out behind her, like pennants in a breeze. Everyone – including Skullface, I'm glad to say – was bobbing curtsies or bowing heads as we passed by, and all the time I found myself basking unashamedly in the Countess' aura, in her grace and grandeur.

I felt suddenly centre stage and very important. As a fourteen-year-old bell-boy, abandoned as an infant on the steps of an orphanage in Islington, I had not had many opportunities to feel so important. So by the time we all got into the lift, the Countess and myself and the cat still wailing in its basket, I was feeling cock-a-hoop. I suppose it must have showed.



"Why are you smiling like this?" The Countess frowned at me, ostrich feathers shaking as she spoke.

I could hardly tell her the truth, so I had to think fast. "Because of your cat, Countess," I replied. "She sounds funny."

"Not she. He. And he is not *my* cat," she said. "Kaspar is no one's cat. He is the Prince of cats. He is Prince Kaspar Kandinsky, and a prince belongs to no one, not even to a Countess." She smiled at me then. "I tell you something, I like it when you smile. English people do not smile so often as they should. They do not laugh, they do not cry. This is a great mistake. We Russians, when we want to laugh, we laugh. When we want to cry, we cry. Prince Kaspar is a Russian cat. At this moment he is a very unhappy cat, so he cries. This is natural, I think."

"Why's he so unhappy?" I found myself asking her.



“Because he is angry with me. He likes to stay in my house in Moscow. He does not like to travel. I tell him, ‘how can I go to sing in opera in London if we do not travel?’ He does not listen. When we travel he always make big fuss, big noise. When I let him out of his basket, he will be happy again. I will show you.”

Sure enough, the moment Kaspar climbed out of the basket in the Countess’ sitting room, he fell completely silent. He tested the carpet with one paw, and then leaped nimbly out and began at once to explore. That was when I first understood just why the Countess called him a Prince of cats. From his whiskers to his paws he was black all over, jet black, and sleek and shiny and beautiful. And he knew he was beautiful too. He moved like silk, his head held high, his tail swishing as he went.

I was about to leave the room to fetch the rest of

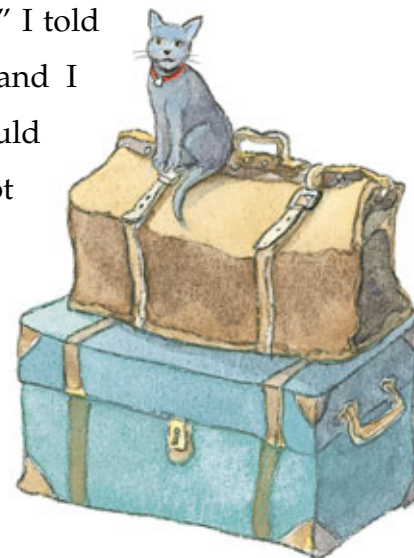


her luggage, when the Countess called me back, as guests often did when they were about to give me a tip. Because of her title, and her ostrich feathers, and all the fine luggage she had arrived with, I was very hopeful by now that the tip might be a generous one. As it turned out she didn’t want to give me a tip at all.

“Your name? I wish to know your name,” she said, removing her hat with a flourish.

“Johnny Trott, Countess,” I told her. She laughed at that, and I didn’t mind, because I could tell at once that she was not mocking me.

“That is a very funny name,” she said. “But who knows? Maybe for you Kandinsky is a funny name too.”





By this time Kaspar had leaped up on to the sofa. He sprang off again almost at once, and went to sharpen his claws, first on the curtain, then on one of the armchairs. After that he went on a tour of the room, behind the desk, in under the piano, up on the window ledge, for all the world like a prince inspecting his new palace, claiming it, before settling down on the armchair by the fireplace, from where he gazed up at us both, blinking his eyes slowly, and then licking himself, purring contentedly as he did so. Clearly the prince approved of his palace.

"He's a very smart looking cat," I said.

"Smart? Smart? Kaspar is not smart, Johnny Trott." The Countess was clearly not at all pleased with my description of her cat. "He is beautiful – the most beautiful cat in all of Russia, in all of England, in all of the whole world. There is no other cat like Prince Kaspar. He is not smart, he is magnificent. You agree, Johnny Trott?"

I nodded hurriedly. I could hardly argue.

"You wish to stroke him?" she asked me.

I crouched down by the chair, reached out my hand tentatively and stroked his purring chest with the back of my finger, but only for a second or two. I sensed that, for the moment, this was all he would allow. "I think maybe he likes you," said the Countess. "With Prince Kaspar, if you are not a friend, you are an enemy. He did not scratch you, so I think you must be a friend."





As I stood up again I noticed she was fixing me with a searching look.

"I wonder, are you a good boy, Johnny Trott? Can I trust you?"

"I think so, Countess," I replied.

"This is not good enough. I have to know for sure."

"Yes," I told her.

"Then I have a very important job for you. During each day I am here in London you will look after Prince Kaspar for me. Tomorrow morning I begin rehearsal at the opera. Covent Garden. *Magic Flute*. Mozart. I am Queen of the Night. You know this opera?"

I shook my head.

"One day you will hear it. Maybe one day I shall sing it for you on the piano, when I practice. Every morning after breakfast I must practice. Prince Kaspar, he is happy when I sing. At home in



Moscow he likes to lie on my piano to listen to me, and he waves his tail, just like now. Look at him. This is how I know he is happy. But when I am at rehearsal I must know that you look after him well, that he is happy. You will do this for me? Feed him for me? Talk to him? Take him for a walk outside, once in the morning, once in the evening? He likes this very much. You will not forget?"

The Countess Kandinsky was not an easy person to say no to. And anyway, the truth is I was flattered to be asked. I did wonder how I would be able to manage it in between my other duties downstairs. But I wondered also whether maybe she'd give me a good tip for it, though I certainly didn't dare say anything about that.

The Countess smiled at me and held out her gloved hand to me for me to take. I hesitated. I had never before shaken hands with a guest. Bell-boys just didn't ever shake hands with guests. But I knew



she meant me to, so I did. Her hand was small and the glove very soft.

“You and me and Prince Kaspar, we shall be good friends. I know this. You may leave us now.”

So I turned to go.

“Johnny Trott,” she said, laughing again. “I am sorry, but you have a very funny name, maybe the funniest name I ever heard. I have decided you are a good boy, Johnny Trott. You know why I think this? You never ask for money. I shall pay you five shillings every week for three months – I am here for three months at the opera. Ah, so now you smile again, Johnny Trott. I like it when you smile. If you had a tail, you would be waving it like Prince Kaspar, I think.”

When I brought up her trunks later on and left them in the hallway of her suite, I heard her in the sitting room singing at the piano. I caught a glimpse of Kaspar lying there right in front of her, gazing at



her, his tail swishing contentedly. When I left I stayed outside the door for a while just listening. I knew even then as I stood there in the corridor that this was a day I would never forget. But I could never have imagined in my wildest dreams how the arrival of the Countess and the coming of Kaspar would change my life for ever.

