



Three Jolly Fellows

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The four-part fairy tale series Three Jolly Fellows tells the adventures of three small men in a world that borders on the fantastic: the composed and close-to-nature Mossbeard, the irritable city dweller Halfshoe, and the sensitive poet Muff.

The first two books deal with a chain of events set off by human tampering with the laws of nature. An old woman's inexplicable love of cats has lured a horde of felines to the city. Risking their lives, the diligent and ready-to-help fellows drive the gang of cats out of town, with the outcome being trouble in the city and nature alike: rats take control of the urban environment, all the birds are devoured in the forest, and insects consequently launch their own wave of destruction. Only through great peril do Mossbeard, Halfshoe, and Muff manage to bring the cats back to the city and restore environmental balance.

The third and fourth books address human dignity. A high-class lady wants to make Mossbeard her pet, and Muff finds himself being used as a toy by wolf pups.

Awards:

1987 Estonian State Prize

1980 Annual Award of Children's Literature

1974 IBBY Honour List

A Meeting at the Ice-Cream Stand

Once upon a time, three strange little men met at an ice cream stand purely by chance: Mossbeard, Halfshoe, and Muff were their names. They were all so short that the ice-cream vendor thought they were elves at first, though several other peculiar features caused them to stand out. Mossbeard had a soft, mossy beard with pretty red lingonberries nestled in it (even though they were last summer's berries). Halfshoe had cut off the caps of his shoes so that he could wiggle his toes around. Instead of regular clothes, Muff wore a big muff, from which only his head and feet stuck out.

The trio licked their ice-cream cones and eyed one another curiously.

"Excuse me," Muff finally spoke up. "I may be mistaken, but it seems to me like we all have something in common."

"I suppose it might be that we're all rather jolly fellows," Halfshoe said, nodding.

Mossbeard plucked a few lingonberries from his beard and offered them to his new acquaintances.

"It's good to snack on something sour with ice cream," he said.

"If it isn't too forward of me, then I'd like to propose that we all meet up again," Muff said. "We could make hot cocoa and have a nice little chat."

"That would be tremendously fun," Halfshoe said. "I'd invite you both over, but I don't have a home. I've just been wandering around since childhood."

"As have I," Mossbeard said.

"What an unusual coincidence!" Muff exclaimed. "It's the exact same story with me! Turns out we're all wanderers alike!"

He tossed his ice-cream wrapper into the trash bin and zipped up his muff. Namely, Muff's muff was equipped with a zipper that could be pulled open and shut. The other fellows also finished their ice creams.

"Do you reckon the three of us could maybe join up?" Halfshoe asked. "Roaming around together would be much more pleasant!"

"But of course," Mossbeard grunted cheerfully.

"What a brilliant idea!" Muff said, beaming. "That's a downright wonderful plan!"

"Then it's settled," Halfshoe said. "But we could, perhaps, have another ice cream before we set off."

Everyone agreed, so each bought himself one more ice-cream cone.

Then, Muff mentioned:

"I have a vehicle, by the way. If you don't object to the idea, then it could be a—so to say—a mobile home for all of us."

"Oh!" Mossbeard exclaimed. "How could we say no!"

"We've no objections in the least," Halfshoe affirmed. "Driving in a car is actually quite nice."

"But will the three of us all fit?" Mossbeard asked worriedly.

"It's a truck, actually," Muff said. "There's room aplenty."

Halfshoe whistled cheerfully through his teeth.

"That'll do," he said.

"Sure will," Mossbeard sighed in relief. "After all, there is an old saying that goes: 'A lot of good lambs can fit in a single barn.'"

"So, where is this barn on wheels of yours parked?" Halfshoe asked Muff.

"Out in front of the post office," Muff said. "I mailed a couple dozen letters earlier."

"A couple dozen!" Mossbeard exclaimed. "You sure do have a lot of friends!"

"Oh, no, quite the opposite," Muff smiled sheepishly. "I don't write to any friends, per say: I write to myself."



"You mean you send yourself letters?!" Now, it was Halfshoe's turn to be amazed.

"The thing is that I very much like to get letters," Muff said, "but I have no friends. I'm extremely lonely, and that's why I have to write to myself. I mail them for general delivery, I should add. I post the letters in one town, then drive to the next town, and receive them at the post office there."

"Well, that's a very unique way to correspond, in any case," Mossbeard shrugged.

"It truly is some sharp thinking," Halfshoe agreed. "Should we have another round of ice creams?" "Naturally," Mossbeard said.

"I'm not against the idea, either," Muff said. "I even reckon we could try the chocolate ice cream. It's certainly a bit more expensive than regular ice cream, but it's not worth penny-pinching in the event of such a wonderful and unexpected meeting as ours."

They ordered chocolate ice-cream cones and licked them in silence for a while.

"It's sweet," Mossbeard finally spoke. "Much sweeter than regular ice cream, even."

"Mm-hmm," Halfshoe agreed.

"It's simply wonderful pudding," Muff said.

"What was that?" Mossbeard looked at Muff in surprise. "What's this pudding you're talking about? We're eating chocolate ice cream, if I'm not mistaken."

"Oh, my sincerest apologies," Muff said, embarrassed. "It goes without saying that we're eating chocolate ice cream and not pudding. The thing is that when I get worked up, I get the names of my desserts mixed up very easily."

"So, why do you get worked up when you eat chocolate ice cream?" Mossbeard asked, flummoxed. "There's nothing to get worked up about here!"

"I don't really get worked up over ice cream, you know," Muff explained. "I'm worked up by getting to know you two. It's getting worked up in a good way, as they say. So far, I've spent my whole life feeling unspeakably lonely, and now, all of a sudden, I've found myself wonderful fellows such as you. An event like this gets you worked up whether you like it or not."

"Maybe," Halfshoe said. "But I also get worked up

by chocolate ice cream, in any case. Just look at the way I'm trembling in excitement."

He had indeed started trembling violently, and his face had even turned blue.

"You're freezing," Mossbeard realized. "You've had too much ice cream."

"I suppose so," Halfshoe agreed.

"We shouldn't have any more," Muff said, almost in a tone of alarm. "At the very most, we should only take a few along to have later. I've got a freezer installed in my truck, by the way."

"Do you, now!" Mossbeard exclaimed.

"That's wonderful!" Halfshoe cheered. "We'll take a proper supply along with us, maybe even enough for eight weeks!"

"The only problem," Muff continued, "is that the freezer only works when the truck is turned off. The electric current heats the freezer as hot as can be when you're driving."

"Hmm," Halfshoe grunted. "And the ice cream will melt then?"

"Undoubtedly," Muff confirmed.

"I suppose in that case, it'd be wiser to forego having a backup supply at all," Mossbeard said thoughtfully.

"I also believe that would be the best solution," Muff said. "Although I don't wish to force my opinion upon you."

"My toes will be frozen solid soon," Halfshoe said. "Maybe I can warm them up a little in Muff's freezer."

"Let's get going," Mossbeard said. "To tell the truth, I've been burning up with my desire to see Muff's truck for a while already."

"Thank you," Muff said for some reason.

With that, they set off.



The Cats

With the endless line of milk- and fish trucks as their guide, the jolly fellows journeyed onward. They hadn't even been walking for half an hour before strange sounds coming from somewhere in the distance reached their ears. The sounds were horrendous and inhuman, and the jolly fellows were completely unable to explain their source. It gave them the heebie-jeebies. Every person who walked past them also had an oddly miserable look on their face.

"It's as if a dire, dismal shadow has fallen over this whole part of town," Mossbeard sighed.

Muff stopped sympathetically in front of a young woman who was standing by the door of a grocery store, swinging an empty milk can in one hand and wiping tears from her eyes with the other.

"Excuse me, please," Muff politely addressed the young woman. "Has something serious happened?" "There's no more milk in the stores," the young woman sobbed. "My newborn baby has been crying in hunger since this morning, but there's simply no milk to be found."

"But the whole street is filled with milk, figuratively speaking!" Mossbeard said, pointing at the idling milk trucks.

"Yes, of course," the young woman said, still sobbing. "But it's all for the cats. All the milk in the area has already been bought up for the cats several weeks in advance, just like all the fish."

"What an unspeakable outrage," Muff murmured.

"Perhaps your baby might like some Iceland moss tea, instead?" Halfshoe asked, stepping closer. "We were just making a batch. It was actually going to be for treating my cough, but I could certainly sacrifice it for your poor child."

"Thank you," the young woman smiled through her tears, but shook her head. "Unfortunately, there's nothing that can replace milk for an infant."

The jolly fellows tried to comfort the young woman with a couple more kind words, then continued on their way.

"What a strange town," Mossbeard said. "Who has ever heard of cats slurping up all the human children's milk?"

"A strange town and strange people," Halfshoe nodded. "Who could have imagined a mother heartlessly turning down healthy Iceland moss tea that was offered for her very own infant out of pure kindness?"

The farther the jolly fellows walked, the louder and harsher the strange chorus of sounds consistently grew. Suddenly, Mossbeard exclaimed:

"Cats! Those are cats screeching like that!"

Muff and Halfshoe cocked their ears. Even they could now pick out the meowing and yowling in the din: sounds that cats, and cats alone know how to make.

The jolly fellows quickened their pace. After walking a little while longer, they arrived at the house at which all the milk- and fish trucks were lined up in an unbroken row. The awful cat-racket thundered up into the heavens from the yard.

"Look!" Mossbeard whispered, peeking through the fence. "Just look at that!"

His beard quivered in agitation.

The sight before the jolly fellows was truly worth viewing. Cats, cats, cats, and more cats. Black ones, gray ones, striped ones, yellow ones. Cats and more cats. Just cats and cats once again. Milk was being piped straight from the trucks' tanks into thousands of saucers, while the fish were just being tossed over the fence into heaps. The old woman bustling about in the middle of it all kept pointing out whatever empty space was to be found for the delivery men to fill.

"I bet this is the most unbridled cat feast any human has ever happened to lay eyes upon," Muff said.

"You've got that right," Halfshoe agreed. "It really is some meowing and mayhem!"

The saucers were emptying at an immense speed to that tune of meowing and mayhem, and the piles of fish were vanishing as if by magic. More and more trucks drove up as more and more cats tackled the food.

After staring into the yard for a while, the jolly fellows finally decided to walk in through the gate. With great care, they navigated the hordes of cats and worked their way towards the old woman.

"Forgive us for bothering you for just a minute," Muff said, bowing politely to the old woman. "May we exchange a few words?"

He then handed her a more or less rectangular business card, upon which was written in green crayon:

Muff

Address: General Delivery

The old woman took a curious look at Muff's business card and then stuck it into her apron pocket.

"Take a seat," she said in a friendly tone. "Rest your legs for a spell."

There were several wicker chairs and a little table close by. All the garden furniture was, of course, covered in fish scales and sopping with milk, but the jolly fellows didn't mind all that much, and sat down with the old woman.

"I'd be happy to make you some hot cocoas and bake you a few fish pastries," the old woman said. "I'm awfully fond of fish pastries, especially with hot cocoa. But I'd need both milk and fish to make them, and right now, there's a huge shortage of those foods."

"We know," Halfshoe retorted. "There's not even enough left for infants anymore."

"Well, do you think there's enough for the cats?!" the old woman cried. "Not even close! Dozens more show up here every day, and if things keep going the way they are, then the cats won't be able to fill bellies at all before long."

"It's a difficult situation, of course," Muff said, trying to find a softer tone. "But if I may ask, then why are you feeding this immense herd of cats in the first place?"

"They want to eat," the old woman sighed. "What am I to do?"

"Do you really feel such great and selfless love for all these cats?" Mossbeard asked. "For each and every one of the cats meowing here?"

The old woman shrugged and smirked wryly.

"Oh, my dear young man," she said, "how could I manage to love all of them?! Just washing their saucers alone takes up so much of my day that very little time is left over for loving. I only love one cat: my Albert."

"That's completely understandable," Muff nodded. "I'm certainly not much of a saucer-washer myself, but in spite of the fact, I find that you can only love cats in ones, twos, or, at the very most, in threes."

"So, aside of Albert, you're saying all the other cats here are absolute strangers??" Halfshoe marveled.

"What am I to do when they all flock here?" the old woman sighed. "I have to feed them, like it or not, because otherwise, they'd eat up all of Albert's food. And there's no one who can free me of this curse. If someone could manage to get the cats away from here, then I'd be the happiest person in the world."

"Is that so," Mossbeard mumbled.

Suddenly, Halfshoe declared:

"I believe we can help you, ma'am."

"Heaven bless you!" the old woman exclaimed, clapping her hands in joy. "I simply don't know how I can thank you!"

Baffled, Muff and Mossbeard stared at Halfshoe. What was he planning? What thoughts could be running through his head? Did he seriously hope to pull off moving that whole massive herd of cats? Unfortunately, Halfshoe couldn't detail his plan at greater length, because he was struck by another coughing fit.

"You three are my saviors," the old woman said emotionally. "You're going to give me the gift of happy, peaceful old age."

Since Halfshoe's coughing fit just wouldn't seem to end this time, the old woman couldn't find out right away how exactly he intended to get rid of the cats. The jolly fellows bid the old woman goodbye, and only when they got back to the truck were Halfshoe's coughs finally sparse enough for him to explain his plans to the others.

"I've got a toy mouse," he said. "We'll tie it to the back of the truck with string, and if Muff drives fast enough, then none of the cats will be able to tell whether it's a toy mouse or a real one."

"Ah-ha!" Mossbeard realized. "So, you think the cats

will start chasing the mouse?”

“Without a doubt,” Halfshoe affirmed, already convinced of his plan’s success. “So many cats live in this town that all of the real mice hightailed it a long time ago already. That being the case, my mouse should be quite a big change for the cats.”

“We can at least give it a try,” Muff said crisply.

They waited until all the milk- and fish trucks had finished making their deliveries. Now, the street was finally clear. Halfshoe took a toy mouse on wheels out of his inside pocket, held it delicately for a few moments, and whispered:

“Do well, my little mousey—do well!”

Then, he tied it to the back of the truck, and the preparations were finished.

The drive could begin.