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Cat Out Of Its Skin! – The Return of an Old Munchausen Tale in Estonia.

Eda Kalmre
Estonian Folklore Archives

In 2005 the Estonian police launched an investigation on the basis of an article published in a regional newspaper. The article described incidents in which cats were skinned in Pärnu, a resort with a population of 52,000 on the Baltic coast in Southwest Estonia. The article claimed that some boys had cut a T-shape into a cat's face, tied a rope to its tail, and thrown it from the roof, with the result that its skin peeled off over its ears.

Reportedly, the boys had killed at least six cats this way.

The results of the police investigation were published as a Baltic News Service piece entitled "Article on Cat-Slaughter Based on an Urban Legend" (*"Artikkel kasside tapmisest põhines linnalegendil"*, March 9). According to the police PR officer, the article was inspired by a conversation between two girls, during which one girl had told her friend similar stories about cats and blowing up frogs. The friend passed these stories on to her mother who was so shocked by the cruelty of the children that she wrote an article in the

local newspaper. This sparked off the police investigation. The police asserted that they had consulted with experts, who had explained that animals could not be skinned in this manner.

This story reflects a former popular belief that if you hold on to a wild animal's tail, the animal will jump clean out of its skin. *The Man Nails the Tail of the Wolf to the Tree* UAT 1896 is a popular tall tale with an international distribution. In the twentieth-century lore of hunters, foresters, and lumber jacks, such tall tales were usually told as personal experience stories. The first-person narration made the story appear reliable and the audience appreciated the fantastic end arrived by unusual means and blind chance. These types of tales have also been called the Munchausen tales. Here is an example from the Estonian Folklore Archives (1961).

I went to the woods once, and found seven horse shoe nails lying on the ground. Since I knew that the nails were supposed to bring luck, without thinking further I put them in my pocket. Suddenly I see a big tree stump, and seven wolves resting nearby after their meal. I ponder: if I go to look for help, they will wake up and leave, but with a little trick—I will be a wealthy man at once. Suddenly an idea came to me. I took all the seven horse shoe nails, pinned each wolf's tail to the stump, then banged with a cudgel against the tree and barked. Lo and behold—as if they had been stung, all the wolves jumped up and took off towards the woods, but forgot their tails pinned to the stumps and so they jumped out of their skin. Pity about the meat, but it couldn't be helped; I had to be satisfied with the skins.

Estonian folklorist Mall Proodel-Hiimäe, who has studied such tales in live performance contexts, claims that tall tales

were not told in order to take advantage of the ignorance of the audience. The tale would be successful as long as it was told as a fiction and accepted as such by the audience. To put it briefly, people who were familiar with the life and physiology of animals for the moment forgot what they knew and enjoyed the style and fantasy of the tale set in the familiar context. The audience appreciated the lie for the sake of a good story. In analogous tales people told how they had turned a bear inside out by sticking a hand up its backside, or suffocated a wolf by sticking their hand down its throat so that it was unable to shut its mouth.

In the 1990s it became evident to me that the cat story was different from other sadistic anecdotes which were popular among the Estonian children at the time, and owed more to the old Munchausen tales in the sense that it shared a similar perception of reality. Here is one cat story from the Estonian Folklore Archives, narrated by a 13-year-old boy in 1998.

Once an annoying cat kept returning to the stairway. People had repeatedly thrown turpentine on its back. The cat had then scurried away and sat down on its behind, and pulled itself forward with front paws. As the cat would not leave, the boys living there had enough of it and tied a rope around the cat's neck and threw the cat out the window. Holding on to one end of the rope. The cat reportedly jumped out of its skin. A chunk of meat fell on the ground.

It would seem probable that the re-localisation of the old tall tale in 1990s Estonia is the result of a rise in awareness of issues concerning pets in society. Attitudes towards domestic animals such as dogs, cats, hamsters, and pet mice are gradually beginning to change. The former pragmatic perception of pets as property is being replaced with respect for the animal as a friend and a companion. (In 1995, for example, the first pet cemetery was opened in Estonia, and numerous pet clinics and stray animal shelters have been established).

For some reason, however, these new attitudes do not always apply to cats, which have a marginal position as pets. Larger cities are faced with the problem of

strays who reproduce too freely and are thought to spread disease. The same newspaper issue which published the announcement of the public relations officer referred to above includes an article reporting that all stray cats in Pärnu were going to be sterilized. The attitude to cats is reflected in many urban legends about dead cats which are taken to the countryside to be buried, or are exchanged or stolen, or about how the cat run over by the neighbour's car is considered the victim of poisoning. All these familiar tales are popular in modern Estonian tradition.

A superficial glance at the two texts in their natural contexts confirms that the modern children's tale is more violent and shocking than the hunters' old tall tale. The cruelty of the hunter's tale is not gratuitous—it is part of the ingenious and fanciful plot. In contrast, the cruelty is central to the children's story, which delights in realistic descriptions and seemingly true contexts. The hunters' traditional tall story was a lie and did not pretend to be the truth. In the case of the children's sadistic tale, both narrators and the audience will not have doubted that these were actual happenings.

References

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Thank God It's Not HMS Friday

Bonnie Taylor-Blake

There is no doubt that somewhere in the English-speaking world on 13 October 2006 some newspaper columnist will recount this peculiar tale of a certain doomed ship,

In the 18th century, the government tried to debunk the naval myth that ships sailing on a

Friday would have bad luck. A vessel was commissioned, named HMS Friday. The yard began construction on a Friday the 13th, hired her crew on a Friday and chose a captain called Jim Friday. She set sail on her maiden voyage in 1796 on a Friday, and vanished. Lloyds of London stopped insuring ships launched on Friday the 13th. [Duff, 2005]

At least the U.S. Navy hasn't given up on the *Friday*. Forty years ago the Commandant of the U.S. Marine Corps recounted a similar version of the yarn during the commissioning ceremony for the USS *Raleigh* [Phillips, 1962]; today the legend lives on at the website of the U.S. Navy's Fleet Forces Command,

The reluctance of seaman to sail on a Friday reached such epic proportions, that many years ago the British Government decided to take strong measures to prove the fallacy of the superstition. They laid the keel of a new vessel on Friday, launched her on a Friday and named her HMS Friday. They then placed her in command of one Captain Friday and sent her to sea on Friday. The scheme worked well, and had only one drawback ... neither ship nor crew were ever heard from again. [<http://www.cffc.navy.mil/customs.htm#superstition>]

Despite the U.S. government's faith in the tale, however, those who keep track of every ship that has ever served in the Royal Navy will tell you that in the annals of its history there never was, in fact, such a vessel [see Colledge, 1987].

If the *Friday* never was, then, what can we say about the construction and launch of her legend? A review of American publications from the last two centuries yields clues about the tale's history, at least as it was told on the western side of the Atlantic. These writings reveal that forms of this legend were already in place on New England and mid-Atlantic shores at least by 1830.

As Fletcher Bassett [1885] and Patrick Mullen [1988] had noted, the brief narrative that forms the *Friday* legend is built on centuries-old superstitions regarding undertaking a variety of endeavors on a Friday [see Opie and Tatem, 1989]. Bassett's passing mentions of James Thacher's and James Fenimore Cooper's separate uses of the tale in fact identify variants that are among the earliest in American literature.

Certainly, however, a very early American telling, one presumably patterned after a still earlier and as yet undiscovered version, slightly predates those appearing in Thacher's and Cooper's works,

Sailors strongly imbibe the popular prejudice against Friday, and, however important a fair wind may be, would rather run the risk of losing it, and, perhaps, being detained for a considerable period, than voluntarily sail on that unlucky day. In cases where they are obliged to do so, all disasters that may occur subsequently are generally attributed to this reason. The following is a singular story connected with this subject:—An intelligent merchant of Connecticut, wishing to do what he could towards eradicating this often inconvenient impression, caused the keel of a vessel to be laid on a Friday—she launched on a Friday—named the *Friday*—sailed on her first voyage on a Friday. "Unfortunately for the success of this well-intentioned experiment, neither vessel nor crew were ever again heard of!" [*The New-York Mirror*, 1828]

(In 1833 Cooper revised *The Red Rover, a Tale*, originally published in 1827 [Europe] and 1828 [United States], and included the same version, told nearly verbatim, in a footnote – one of eight – he had added to the text. Editions published in 1834 and thereafter contain the *Friday* legend.)

Thacher presented the legend in a paper he read before the Plymouth Lyceum in 1829. Although the ill-fated ship this time escaped being christened the *Friday*, Thacher added new details about its construction and the engaging of its crew,

Friday, for instance, is considered an inauspicious day for the commencement of any undertaking. It is seldom that a seaman can be prevailed upon to commence a voyage on that day. An account has been published of some person who, desirous of eradicating this prejudice, ordered the timber of his vessel to be cut on Friday; her foundation laid, her launching, and the engaging of her crew, on Friday, and finally he ordered her to sail on Friday. But it was remarkable and unfortunate, that neither the vessel nor crew were ever heard from afterwards. This, however, is no proof that Friday is more likely to produce disasters than any other day of the seven. We know that all events are under the control of Divine Providence, and it is inconsistent with reason to imagine, that fatality will attend undertakings because they were commence on any one particular day. [Thacher, 1831]

Later versions of the legend, including a British variant recounted in American publications, burgeon with new details. An 1850 reprinting of a piece that had appeared in *Dickens's Household Words* (London; ca. 1850) introduces us not only to a Jonah named Friday, but also to the ship's placement within the Royal Navy,

There is no branch of the public service, for instance, in which so much sound mathematical knowledge is to be found, as in the Navy. Yet who are more superstitious than sailors, from the admiral down to the cabin boy? Friday fatality is still strong among them. Some years ago, in order to lessen this folly, it was determined that a ship should be laid down on a Friday, and launched on a Friday; that she should be called "Friday," and that she should commence her first voyage on a Friday. After much difficulty a captain was found who owned to the name Friday; and after a great deal more difficulty men were obtained, so little superstitious, so as to form a crew. Unhappily, this experiment

had the effect of confirming the superstition it was meant to abolish. The "Friday" was lost — was never, in fact, heard of from the day she set sail. [Reprinted in *Harper's New Monthly Magazine*, 1850]

More elaborate forms of the legend emerging in the latter half of the 19th century feature a "Friday"-named ship owner, a like-named African-American cook, and a figure-head in the form of an African-American man, christened after Robinson Crusoe's companion [*The Boston Daily Globe*, 1878; *The Chicago Daily Tribune*, 1892].

What became of the *Friday* and its crew? Generally, tellings hold that no one knew what befell the doomed ship, only that it was lost, never to be heard of again. Some forms, however, do provide clues. *The Washington Post's* reprinting [1883] of a *New York Tribune* piece held that after the ship left Hyannis "[h]er record was made complete when she was wrecked on Friday and everyone on board lost." *The Indiana [Pennsylvania] Weekly Messenger* [1886] reported that "[t]he vessel was finally lost on a Friday and the captain, two mates and twelve seamen were drowned." One ship owner responsible for building the *Friday* "[said] he thinks she went to the devil on a Friday, because she was never heard of again" [*The Daily Herald* (Delphos, Ohio), 1898]. *The Portsmouth [New Hampshire] Herald* [1906] reported that once the *Friday* was launched from down in Connecticut and "[a]fter she passed out by Montauk she was never heard of more. The ocean and hoodoo blotted her out forever."

In 1891 *Scientific American*, in fact, endeavored to explain why the experiment failed,

The presumption is that when she encountered her first storm, the sailors who are proverbially superstitious, became apprehensive and took to the boats, leaving the ill-fated craft to founder in mid-ocean and to perish themselves in like manner. It is singular how one such incident will deepen a prejudice already existing and establish in the minds of many, who are otherwise

sensible, a connection between two events that can have no possible relation to each other.

Yet at least once, we're told, the effort to break the superstition proved successful and the *Friday* returned to its port unscathed,

Multitudes of intelligent people never leave home or begin any new enterprise on this day. All accidents and evils come to them on Friday. Sailors, universally, are influenced by this superstition. To break down this belief, the ship owners in one of our seaports laid the keel of a vessel on Friday, launched it on Friday, named it Friday, and had it sailed on Friday. As it had a competent captain and crew, it proved to be a very fortunate vessel, notwithstanding the tradition. [*Friends Intelligencer*, 1864]

As Bassett had noted, Howard Pyle included a particularly rich treatment of the *Friday* legend in his description of the early years of Wilmington, Delaware. This sketch not only features a named shipbuilder and his worried wife, but also contains a vivid description of what befell the unfortunate ship.

Some of the stories handed down border so closely upon the legendary that one hesitates to place the entire reliance upon them which a historical narrative deserves. Such, for instance, is the story of the boat *Friday*, built by Isaac Harvey, which runs thus: Isaac laid the keel of the brig on a Friday; that night his wife had an ill dream, and strongly urged him to tear it up, and begin the ship anew on Saturday (seventh day, in the Quaker vernacular). But Isaac was a hard-headed, matter-of-fact man, and placed no faith in a woman's dreams. It is these little things in life that breed strife in a family and strife was bred in this; but altercation only made Isaac more fixed in his own way, so that, out of pure perversity, he not only fitted the brig out on Friday, but he

named her the *Friday*, and sent her out under command of a good captain on Friday. On that Friday week, in the midst of a gale that piped and roared and thundered as if the Dutchman and his demon crew were loose, a homeward-bound vessel, running before the gale, saw the hulk of a brig pitching heavily in the trough of the sea, while her crew ran about the deck, cutting loose the wreck of the masts that dragged and bumped alongside. As the homeward-bound vessel darted past down the slippery side of a great wave, a wail went up from the doomed brig, and under her counter they saw, painted in white letters,

FRIDAY
of
WILMINGTON

The oncoming wave rose like a wall between the vessels, and when they lifted on the crest of the next, nothing was to be seen but a few floating timbers. When Mrs. Harvey heard the news she folded her hands and remarked: "I told thee so, Isaac. This is all thy sixth-day doings. *Now thee sees the consequences. Thee never had the vessel insured.*" [Pyle, 1881]

The Reno Evening Gazette [1938] in fact mixed the Harvey form of the legend with that specific and then somewhat new distrust of Friday the 13th. Bennett Cerf, no less, recounted a 13th-laden version in one of his "Try and Stop Me" columns from 1948,

A SHIP OWNER who scoffed at superstition had the keel of a new vessel deliberately laid on a Friday the thirteenth, launched it on the thirteenth, and sailed for the maiden voyage on the thirteenth. The end of this story, as I heard it in New Orleans, was that to this day nothing more ever has been seen or heard of the ship or the crew!

Twenty-five years later, *The Chicago Tribune* continued the tradition with a

Friday-the-13th form of the legend featuring wifely warnings,

A hardy sea captain by the name of Isaac Harvey fought [the superstition]. He laid the keel of a ship on Friday the 13th back in the days when the superstition was rampant. Then he began building his ship on the 13th despite the supplications of his wife. Thirteen miles out on its maiden voyage, the ship foundered and sank. [Keegan, 1973]

Today the *Friday* legend happily sails on seas of newsprint and pixels and in the pages of [The Sea Hunters: True Adventures with Famous Shipwrecks](#), Cussler's and Dirgo's 1996 bestseller and its subsequent editions. There, the ship owner — a penurious Scot living in Liverpool in 1894 — bears some resemblance to Howard Pyle's Wilmington shipbuilder, who also neglected to insure his vessel. Naturally, questions remain about the tale of the *Friday*. Though much has been shared over the decades about the vessel's creation, the legend itself has a somewhat murky origin. Was the yarn also in place in Britain in the early 19th century or is its inception American? Do still earlier forms float unseen in American and British writings from the 18th century?

Whatever the answers, though the doomed *Friday* may have been lost on its maiden voyage, it's safe to say that its nearly 200-year-old legend is assured a successful venture into the 21st century.

A list of references and a collection of other Friday-legend forms, including those briefly mentioned in this piece, can be found at <http://www.carolinalore.com/friday.htm>. Thanks go to Brian Chapman for his interest in and help with this project.

Notes and Queries

Kiss May Have Been Fatal For Quebec Teen

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I don't know if this would be of any interest, but there is a news item of the last few days that strikes me as something that will enter the tradition.

An autopsy will be performed on the body of a 15-year-old girl in Quebec's Saguenay region who officials believe died from an allergic reaction to her boyfriend's kiss. The girl was allergic to peanuts, and while she did not actually consume the nuts herself, officials believe she reacted after kissing her boyfriend who had eaten peanut butter. The apparently fatal kiss took place last Sunday in Jonquière, Que. Although an adrenaline shot was administered almost immediately, the teen did not recover, Montreal newspaper *La Presse* reports. The girl was rushed to hospital, where she eventually died after suffering respiratory failure.

CBC News

http://www.cbc.ca/story/canada/national/2005/11/25/peanut_kiss051125.html

Penguin Story

Gillian Bennett

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The following story was printed in the *Boston Globe* (2 December 2005). It also appears in Rodney Dale's *The Tumour in the Whale* (p.134). I'd be glad to hear of any other versions.

Penguin Story is a Fishy Tale

The story goes like this: A 12-year-old boy with autism visits the New England Aquarium and gets lost in the crowd.

When his mother finds him, he seems agitated. So she takes her son home and puts him in a bath to calm down. When she checks on him, she finds a penguin splashing with him in the tub. The boy admits that he slipped the penguin out of the aquarium in his backpack.

The engaging tale is, however, an urban myth that in some variation has circled the globe for years, aquarium officials say. In an attempt to squash it once and for all, aquarium officials invited reporters yesterday to a penguin head count.

"This week, I got a call from Fayetteville, Ark., about the penguin abduction," said aquarium spokesman Tony LaCasse. "I even got a call from California. We figured we had to do something."

LaCasse speculated that the myth was hatched close to the release of the documentary "March of the Penguins," which became a summer hit. With the release of the DVD this week, calls about the myth poured into the aquarium again, LaCasse said.

All 61 penguins residing at the aquarium are safe and accounted for, LaCasse said. They waddle around an ocean tank with steep walls and zip through water, kept at a chilly 50 degrees, so fast they appear to be flying. No child could scale the tank railing, LaCasse said, drop 6 feet into the water, scoop up a penguin, and leave, at least not without being noticed.

MEGAN TENCH

Publications News

From William Hansen.

The Journal of Folklore Research is launching a venture we call JFR Reviews (jfr), in which reviews of books and other media for disseminating scholarship of interest to folklorists are delivered to a list of subscribers in the form of e-mail messages. Our goal is to provide a rapid and inclusive forum for reviewing these products, and we are now gathering names for our list of subscribers. We will start sending out reviews in January 2006.

The jfr service is free, and anyone may subscribe. To have your name added to

the list of subscribers, please send a message to jfr@indiana.edu with the word "subscribe" placed on the subject line. For more information about this venture, you may consult the Journal of Folklore Research website (<http://www.indiana.edu/~jofr/>).

Frédéric Dumerchat and Philippe Véniel, ***Forêt de Chizé : Attention Puma !***, La Crèche (79260, France), Geste éditions (www.gsteditions.com), 2005, 144 pp.

Via Véronique-Campion Vincent

From 1995 to 1997, the forest of Chizé - Deux-Sèvres, France - was put under close watch after a group of hunters reported the sighting of a puma in October 1995. Several other witnesses saw the animal; its existence was an important subject for the media, particularly the regional press. Impressive control measures were taken by the administration (préfecture) of the Deux-Sèvres district: beats were organized; the forest was closed to visitors. However the Beast was never caught.

The authors' inquiry about that mysterious big cat lasted from 1996 till 2004. They met and recorded witnesses and important parties concerned by that case, they consulted and read the press and official documents. They present the debates that took place and the numerous hypotheses elaborated and hotly discussed about the Beast. They focus on a presentation of the arguments of the opposing parties: witnesses, believers and skeptics accepting or rejecting the Beast's existence.

This case is not isolated. For over forty years numerous similar big cat cases have been reported in several countries. France and the region of Poitou-Charentes, in which the Deux-Sèvres district is located, are also concerned by these big cat sightings. The authors discuss several comparable Beasts cases, and connect them with the surge of the new pets - snakes, spiders, big cats - and with the introduction, real or imagined, of other Beasts such as lynxes and wolves.

Next Issue

**Deadline for submissions
June, 2006.**

**Next issue out
August 2006**

*Send contributions to <Foaf tale-
news@aber.ac.uk>
clearly marked "Contribution."*

From the Editor

The present editor of *FOAFtale News* wishes it to be known that:

- (1) anybody is free to send a contribution, and it will not be refereed. However, the editor has discretion to refuse an item if she considers it unsuitable for any reason.
- (2) there is no house-style and there will be no editorial intervention in any text sent in. It is up to contributors to check spelling and grammar. Original spelling and punctuation (US or British English) will be retained and may therefore vary between items.
- (3) authors retain their copyright, and reserve all rights.
- (4) clippings from newspapers should note bylines and sources.
- (5) this policy may change if a new editor is appointed.

FOAFtale News (FTN) is the newsletter of the International Society for Contemporary Legend Research. We study "modern" and "urban" legends, and also any legend circulating actively. To join, send a cheque made out to "ISCLR" for US\$30.00 or UK£20 to Mikel J. Koven, Department of Theatre, Film and TV, Parry-Williams Building, Penglais Campus, UWA, Aberystwyth, Ceredigion, SY23 2AJ, UK. Institutional rates available upon request. Members also receive **Contemporary Legend**, a refereed academic journal. Some back issues of **FTN** are available on-line at <http://users.aber.ac.uk/mikstaff/>. **FOAFtale News** is indexed in the **MLA Bibliography**.

This newsletter is called **FOAFtale News** for the jocular term current among legend scholars for over twenty years. The term "foaf" was introduced by Rodney Dale (in his 1978 book, **The Tumour in the Whale**) for an oft-attributed but anonymous source of contemporary legends: a "friend of a friend." Dale pointed out that contemporary legends always seemed to be about someone just two or three steps from the teller — a boyfriend's cousin, a co-worker's aunt, or a neighbor of the teller's mechanic. "Foaf" became a popular term at the Sheffield legend conferences in the 1980s. It was only a short step to the pun "foaftale," a step taken by a yet-anonymous wag.

FOAFtale News welcomes contributions, including those documenting legends" travels on electronic media and in the press. Send queries, notices, and research reports to a maximum of 3000 words to the Editor; clippings, offprints, and citations are also encouraged.

The opinions expressed in **FOAFtale News** are those of the authors and do not in any necessary way represent those of the editor, the contributing compilers, the International Society for the Study of Contemporary Legends, its Council, or its members.

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