

Mariska and Meowska - The Dancing Cats
By Diana F. Johnson

Mariska and Meowska, two very Russian cats belonging to Madame Marova had much to do each day for Madame Marova's Ballet school, located in the Near North side of Chicago - right across from the Water Tower. Many children took ballet lessons at M. Marova's school. And Mariska and Meowska worked hard helping M. Marova teach the wonderful ballet steps which the children were taught to string together carefully and lovingly into beautiful dances.

It was wintertime and the school was busy practicing for the winter ballet they always gave for parents and friends. Out of the windows the piano beat, beat and the thuds of toe shoes could be heard through the frosted windows.

The warm cheery light and the shining mirrors glinted like sparkling chandeliers as the snow whipped round corners on the faces of young dancers who came puffing up the old stairs to the second floor studio. As usual, Mariska and Meowska were sitting daintily at the foot of the couch near the fire place ablaze - the flames leaping and crackling like flame dancers mimicking the children who stood in first position waiting for the class to begin. Each boy and girl, dressed in black leotards with the hand on the barr® ready to start the lesson. When M. Marova would take her baton and tap the piano. And old Peter would strike up the waltzes on the Upright piano in the corner of the studio. And the children would smile at themselves in the mirror. At the tap of the stick Mariska and Meowska would leap down from the couch and take their position at the head of the line - tails up straight and tall - whiskers perked. Heads up. The cats pointed their clawed feet. One, two Plie...

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"Second position, Class," M. Marova sang out loudly above the music. The cats moved into second position with all four feet turned out with ease. And the piano played, the children did their exercises, while the smell of homemade soup cooling in the tiny kitchen wafted and twirled about the studio.

Outside, it grew even colder. Parents would be coming to pick up their children. A gray sky crowned the scene.

The studio served the dancing teacher and her cats as an apartment too. Off the main dance studio, small bedroom, hand carved bed and dresser. Colorful costumes and many toe shoes lined up in her closet. The tiny kitchen had stain-glass windows in the old building like precious jewels in warm candlelight.

The dressing room had low benches with mounds of lamb's wool fit into toecaps to pad the toe shoes so the girls would not hurt their toes when they stood up on them. M and M danced and danced with the children as the moon peeked out from behind the gray darkening clouds.

After the arm exercises; they began the leaps across the room and turns - this was the most fun for the two cats jumped from shelf to shelf of the bookcases. And landed softly on top of the piano scarf - a green and red woven fringed shawl, which covered the piano. There was a small light over it.

At last the turns came . . .

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And when it was over, the rehearsal began for the Christmas ballet. It wasn't the nutcracker; but a story of a magical queen of the dolls who every night came to life and danced about a toyshop, touching each doll with her magic wand and then each would spring to life and do a lovely dance. There was a Jack-in-the-box, two Chinese dolls - Mandarin style, Russian boy and girl danced. At Midnight with the stroke of 12, of a large Grandfather clock, all of the dolls stopped dancing and turned back into dolls. Motionless, the queen stood frozen until the next night. In the morning many children came into the shop to see the dolls and some purchased them. Always the shopkeeper replaced the dolls that were sold.