

THE FAMILY MUNG

A Story about Marmots

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Published by Ernst A. Kölliker

Verlag A. Francke AG., Bern

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The Family Mungg awakes

The Sun rose over the Zackengrat and cast its first rays onto the Alpine meadow, which still lay stiff in the frost of night.

Look, look! called the Sun's rays. Glug glug! replied the little stream as it did its best to gurgle under its cover of ice. A playful morning breeze rippled through the parched grass, which was already beginning to turn green, where the snow left a space. In the shelter of the hollow bloomed Crocus and Azalea.

Amidst the scree and stones a head with yellowish white fur popped up. Nothing suspicious? Its black eyes peered cautiously around. No, the coast was clear. Mrs. Mungg took a chance and heaved the rest of her furry coat out of the dark tunnel. She rubbed her sleepy eyes with her forepaws and looked thoughtfully around her. Still snow? Yes, of course. But in the sky there stood once again her great friend, the Sun.

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Look! what comes hopping there out of the wood? Friend Hare, already on his travels? No, there's nothing to fear, there can be no people more careful on earth than Munggs and Hares.

The little Hare pricked its great ears boldly and crouched under the crooked branch of a Larch, which up here was an outsider, defying wind and weather.

"Had a good sleep?" he asked. "How's your family?" By way of answer there appeared under the house door, one after the other, Father Mungg, Hup and Hop, their sons, and somewhat reluctantly, Grandfather Mummel. He was already old and blinked undecidedly into the light.

The boys stole hastily away, plucked hungrily at the meagre grass and chewed it with their sharp teeth. They used their forepaws for this and ate with such good manners, like all Marmot children.

Then they played:

Fox in his den,
Let's get him then!

It was great sport to fall upon a large stone, which stood for the Red Enemy and could be sent tumbling over and over. The unfortunate truth is that Reynard was always the stronger. Had he not last Summer stolen away their little Marmot sister?

Meanwhile the Munggs conversed with Father Hare. Mummel asked:

Sir Hippity Hare in grass so fair
How goes it with him and Madam Hare?

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“Very well, thank you”, answered the Hare. “We have two children and will have more.

Hare children, girl and boy,
Three times six – and four times, joy!

But how scrawny you have become, my friends.”

“Scrawny indeed!” replied Mrs. Mungg angrily. “You sleep for seven Moons and aren’t scrawny... You should see us again in Autumn, when we return from the Summerhouse, round, thick, fat and handsome!”

“Perhaps Sir Hippityhop will visit us in the Summerhouse”, said Father Mungg. He thought it very refined to possess his own Summerhouse. However, the Hare considered that he would rather stay close to the little mountain villages with their vegetable gardens. He sent greetings to his cousin, the White Hare, instead.

Down below, at the wood’s margin, shone a red glow. The Family Reynard set off on its morning patrol.

A piercing alarm call... The Munggs tumbled with their whole family into the villa, and – *hippity hippity hop hop hop* – their friend the Hare disappeared into the valley.

Already the Sun stood high overhead and looked down upon a deserted Alp, where nothing stirred apart from the parched grass in the wind.

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Winter still

This warm day was followed by frosty weather. The Sun crept behind clouds, it began once again to snow, and the Crocus meadow appeared to have altogether lost the joy of its Sunday best. The Windflowers stood with closed eyes at the entrance to the House Mungg, whose inhabitants had withdrawn to the inner quarters. At the end of the long gallery there opened up a large chamber, in which it was pleasantly warm and very quiet. No Winter storm, however fierce, could disturb this deep sanctuary.

Once again, the family lay in cosy twilight. They knew these moods of the weather and possessed themselves in patience. The Munggs’ calendar displayed just two entries:

Sunny days – days of light,
No Sun – cold, nothing right.

Mrs. Mungg had been the first to use her claws to break open the walled up entrance. Now and then she slipped along the hallway and peered longingly into the grey of the clouds. Was

the Sun also sunk back into its Winter sleep? The best they could do was to roll up together again and to sleep through their gnawing hunger.

They made curious musicians, dreaming here in anticipation of Summer. They could growl, but they mastered before all else the art of whistling. In the course of his adventurous existence Mummel had produced many rhyming couplets, and he liked to say:

Proper Marmots always bustle,
So they, in proper key, can whistle.

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All change

The Sun was now stronger, and from day to day the patches free from snow on the south slope grew larger. Amidst moist stones Snowbells drooped; with special haste had they pushed up on their slender stems through the snow, and now they rang out their little bells of lilac – delicately fringed – over the white expanse.

The whole meadow awoke. Frogs croaked in the stream, Blue butterflies fluttered over the moist ground, shining Beetles looked out early for Sow-thistle and Wild Lettuce, on whose leaves they could live handsomely all Summer long.

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Once again, the Grasshoppers – street artists all – tuned themselves up, much to the annoyance of Mummel, who found their uncontained jumping indecent. He himself sat so modestly on his broad hind paws – why did they need to shew off their red legs and hop even onto his fur?

“Chirp, chirp,” sounded their song.

“Twerp, twerp”, scolded Mummel.

But his carefree companions only stared at him insolently out of their black eyes – set like pearls in a horsehead. On the high Summer Alp there were none of these gymnastic displays, thank God!

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One fine morning they moved house. “We’ll leave the house cleaning to Autumn”, said Mother Mungg. “There are no more visitors, and there’s enough work to do at the Summerhouse.”

The family tramped briskly up the cliff, through fields of Rhododendrons, which were getting ready to flower, and on to wide spreading Juniper bushes. A little brook ran silver and cheerful

over mossy stones. “We’ll take breakfast here”, called Father Mungg, as he was already munching on some nourishing leaves.

Soon the whole family was feasting; only Mummel kept watch. He sat there with the seriousness of an old soldier of the reserves and pricked his ears attentively. Halt! What scurried there before his paws? A Mouse! – A little grey Mouse! It trembled from head to tail and stood in the middle of the sunny rock on its hind legs.

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“Our lodger from the Summerhouse!” called the Munggs joyfully. The little Mouse had requested in Autumn that she might over-Winter in the protection of the chamber and had laid in provisions. What could now be wrong?

“The Fox!” stammered the Mouse. “He is lying in wait before your door!”

The outcome of this report astonished even the little Mouse herself. The Family Mungg tumbled head over paws into the nearest Burrows.

Mummel was the first to dare the light of day again. One after the other the rest appeared.

Great was the horror. They could be captured any time by one of their worst enemies! What to do?

“My place is higher up. Let’s escape there by side paths”, suggested Mummel. “The large boulders will protect us. You, Madam Mouse, go ahead and wave your tail if any danger threatens!”

So it was done, and happily they reached the khonde of Grandfather’s house. It was quite true – down below, Rufus was laying siege to their rightful familial abode!

“Careful now, boys! That shameless thief can take us from behind any stone! No one go into the open, please!” Hup and Hop were confined to their room; quite apart from that, no paw dared to put out of doors. Still and deserted lay the Alp. Only Mummel did not let the Red Enemy out of sight for a single moment.

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But then, something happened. Along the mountainside slipped a dark shadow; sharp eyes spotted the young Fox, who lay in wait, oblivious to all else; as fast as an arrow it swooped, sunk its claws into the red fur, and whoosh! it soared high up into the air. Two valleys further on the prey was placed at the feet of the Eagle’s children. It was an unusual delicacy. It is not so easy to catch out the sly young of the Family Reynard.

They are saved! They breathe again, leave their villas, shyly at first, then more boldly. This event must be discussed. Uncles and Aunts toddle past; from their shrewd little eyes shines joyful astonishment.

“Did you see how he got Rufus?”

“Hard to believe, what a good turn he did for us.”

“Nice of the Eagle!” called the Mungg boys, who had not liked being confined to their room.

“Very nice”, adds Mummel. “If it had been you instead of Rufus, Good Night to you both!”

“Danger and death from morning ‘til late”, sighs Mother Mungg and examines her all too careless sons anxiously.

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The Alp

Now at last they could move in properly. Creepers of Rock Thyme constricted the door to the Munggs’ sitting room; the walls had grown mossy. A flat rock served here too as the preferred place to rest for young and old. “Cleaning first!” ordered Mrs. Mungg. “What else are paws for? Come, dear husband, come, boys!” Hey, how last year’s earth and dirt fly out of the Burrow! How fresh grass is brought in! They want to have it clean and comfortable; Mrs. Mungg is expecting the joys of motherhood.

Their relations live in a wide neighbourhood. “Good Morning, Sir Cousin and Madam Cousin! Did you sleep comfortably through the Winter? Where are you hurrying off to, Hup and Hop? Have you found some pretty Marmot girls? Are you looking for a home of your own?” The meadow can be tempting for that too. It resembles a soft carpet, strewn with fine Mosses, Grasses and low Bushes. In sunny spots the white flowers of the Mountain-avens have already withered; yellow-green Lichens signal afar in the Sun.

This little Alp lies in deepest solitude and ends in a scree slope that is steep as a roof. On the side where the Zackengrat towers up, there hangs in its folds a little glacier. There the Mountain Goats make their Summer home. They rest under the protection of the overhanging cliff wall on a narrow strip of Grass, from which they survey their whole domain without hindrance or let. The peak up above the cliff sends each Winter an avalanche thundering down. This is the Mountain Goats’ sled run. The avalanche settles there, as high as a house, towering up on the snow left from the previous year, which no Summer can melt away.

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With the first rays of morning the tribe skips down the cliff and breaks its fast in the peace of the sunny Alpine meadow.

“Good morning, Family Mungg, already awake?”

Mummel sits on his khonde and looks forward to a spectacle, which promises fresh entertainment every day.

“Fall in for exercise!” orders Mrs. Mountain Goat, “one, two, three!” She skips light-footedly ahead of her loved ones, lowers herself over the upper edge of the snow cliff on her hind legs, and glides skating downhill. “Little kids, which of you will follow me? What – no one dares?” But the brave ones are game. They tumble over themselves, begin anew... and rest in the shadow of the rocky pulpit, when school is out.

There was also opportunity to convey to the White Hare his cousin’s greeting. “Already changed your Winter coat of white?” asked the Munggs. “Grey like the stones!” shot back the Little Hare. “Even the Eagle will hardly spot me! How well is this question of coats determined!”

O horror, if the Eagle should appear! The Choughs knew that his eyrie hung on the cliff wall behind two high mountain chains, but he undertook extensive journeys, and one could never be certain of his visits. He loved water and liked to bathe in mountain tarns. Despite Mummel’s shrill whistles of alarm sorrow had returned to several Mungg families.

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Peregrina

When the Sun stood at its highest, a daughter was born to the Munggs. They called her Peregrina, because scarcely had she opened her eyes, blind from the nest, then already she was sniffing her curious little nose around outside.

In vain did they tell her about the Fox, who had snatched her little sister, about the Eagle, who swooped so arrow-swift, Peregrina went off to explore, despite all warning. She discovered the most delicious leaves and understood that her highest duty lay in munching herself to a round little belly as quickly as possible.

Mother Mungg lived in constant fear for her youngest. “Let’s accompany her on her escapades!” suggested Papa. “She needs to learn the secret of our emergency exits and escape Burrows, how to hide quickly in danger!” Peregrina proved an able pupil, and her parents realised that this sort of instruction achieved far more than nervous prohibitions.

The aged Mummel was very proud of this granddaughter. He could not marvel enough over her musical giftedness and her blessed appetite. He said in contentment:

Noodle thick – not underweight,
Littlest Mungg, you’re simply great!

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Grandfather Mummel liked to rest appreciatively on his khonde. The warmer the stone, the greater his contentment. He adored the Sun and loved the play of shadows.

From above came early in the morning the light. It passed from the peak over the Zackengrat, embraced Munggenheim lovingly and advanced slowly down the valley. When the brightness rose high again on the facing cliff, Mummel blinked into the golden Summer day. It was a diversion, if shadows cast by clouds brushed over the sunny meadow. They resembled giant birds, before whom there was no need to fear.

Night crept up again from the valley. Before it reached Mummel's residence, the Sun's rays fell slanting into the sombre hallway, which Mummel happily tramped through, while the shadows clashed overhead.

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Thieves

The meadow had now kindled all its lights; little Sunroses, Clover and Golden Hawk's-beard bloomed, as if tomorrow might be already too late. Families of Gentians were deep blue like the sky of Summer; all around, the cheerful little faces of the Tansies conveyed their greetings. There was a garden full of sweetly wafting Orchids, Daisies and Violets; densely pressed, the host of little Bellflowers pealed. They had settled by the stream and bordered it like a blue ribbon. Up above, in the shadow of the cliff, the last Azaleas faded. The rock pulpit was a world in itself. There lived the Edelweiss. They had occupied the whole ground, with great stars, attractive and distinguished. "Our relatives!" the Munggs would boast. "Just compare the velvet cushion inside our paws with their woolly little flower heads! Couldn't we be cousins?"

Hup and Hop had meanwhile got their Marmot girls and had established their own household. On the far side of the stream lay two empty dwellings, which could easily be rebuilt. Derelict passageways were cleared, new galleries installed. As skilled master builders the pair of brothers took care for escape tunnels, which opened in all directions. "We can leave the garden alone", said Hup. Silver Thistles stood wide open to the Sunlight; there was a bed of glowing Wood Pinks, and fine red Houseleek flowers sat on their green rosettes. Two flourishing Rock Jasmines burned like little fires in a place of moist stones.

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In addition, they had made a discovery! Hop had stepped with his paw on an old Puffball, which burst like a small firework. Many of these swollen globes stood in the short meadow grass; it was great fun to do them all in.

Shrill whistles tore the brothers from their game. The whole of Munggendorf in alarm! Hup and Hop reached an escape tunnel, which by many turns led to their grandfather's residence. Mummel sat ready in his drawing room. He bared his yellow teeth and seemed angry.

“Smoke-beasts” he said darkly. “I could smell them from afar. Two-leggers! Stinking smoke pours from their muzzles. Once I saw them close up...”

“Was that when they plundered your Winter quarters?” asked Hup. It was always nice and creepy to hear the old stories told over.

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“We had scarcely settled into the beginning of the Long Sleep”, explained Mummel, “when a great paw seized us. I woke up and bit it. The beast cried out and let me go. I fled like lightning, up and away. At the end of the escape tunnel I had to watch as my family was dragged away – in a sack!” The Marmot boys shivered.

“And then?”

“Then the chamber was empty and cold. It stank of the foul smoke. I was afraid and fled. Uncles close by had already sealed their doors. However, I slipped in through a postern and lay down with the others. Just think, how you would freeze like that alone!”

Hup and Hop reflected on this for a while, but then curiosity overcame them, and they wished, taking all precautions, to observe the Smoke-beasts for themselves. Two little black noses pushed cautiously out of the concealed tunnel. There strolled the Two-leggers to the stream... they took sacks from their humpbacks and unpacked...

The Alp seemed as if dead. Even the mountain wind held its breath.

The Mountain Goats had taken flight up the scree slope; Hare and Snow Grouse sought protection amidst the stones; every Mungg terrace stood abandoned. Only a Butterfly remained perched on the Knapweed, and the Choughs circled hungrily around the water.

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The two Monsters had set up camp; they fed, set fire to sticks of wood, and now there arose in blue rings the awaited smoke. What would happen next? Hup and Hop eavesdropped, ready for flight.

They did not seem so dangerous, these Two-leggers! They looked around, climbed the rock pulpit and suddenly let out loud cries. How eagerly they fell to their knees!

They had discovered the Edelweiss.

What did they think to do then? Must the poor ground be plundered completely? Already their paws could scarcely carry more prey.

They returned to their feeding place and tied up the bunches, so that Hup and Hop, by simply looking, thought to suffocate. Now, to boot, they rinsed the poor flowers in the stream, as if they were brooms.

The whole Alpine meadow looked on, as what had been its exquisite possession left dangling in two backpacks down the valley.

This day too came to its close. The Sun set behind the Zackengrat; in the sky of clear crystal drifted clouds that glowed red...

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A rainy day

The next morning it rained. Mummel heard the monotonous falling of the drops when he awoke. He blinked sleepily into the grey twilight, raised himself half up and yawned!

If I wet my paws today,
Sir Fox will steal me swift away.

He curled back up and continued to dose.

Day was reluctant to dawn. Clouds shrouded the mountains; swathes of mist drifted idly around.

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The Alpine meadow was in grief. It was as if the sky were weeping over the events of the previous day.

Everything lay desolate and idle amidst the gentle patter of the rain; only the stream swelled angrily up and washed before it the corpse of an Edelweiss, cast heedlessly aside, so that it might offer it decent burial in the sand along its bank.

Over the ground lay thick mist. O sorrow! Now there stood here nothing but Edelweiss families that had been torn, one from the other. Unhappily, many tender roots had also perished. Entire tribes disappeared, destroyed!

There remained individual stars in fissures and on high cliff edges. They had looked upon the pillage and wondered that their great friend in heaven, the Sun, should cast his rays so dispassionately over this evil deed.

“Our poor cousins”, said the Pussytoe, a close relation of the Edelweiss, “I had always envied them so!”

“They left me alone too”, sighed the unassuming Buckler Mustard. “It’s seldom good to stand out too much!”

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Autumn

A storm had gathered over the mountains, with thunder and lightning. It had left in Munggendorf a cool breath. Although the sky was still blue, in the early morning there arose from the dewy ground a light mist, which lay over the meadow like a veil.

The khondes of the houses were no longer so hot; the brown coats of their in-Burrowers no longer so toasty warm inside.

The cliffs began to take on the colours of Autumn; Bilberries and Cowberries flamed with a fiery red.

“Munched up”, said Peregrina and glanced contentedly at her little belly, which resembled a small beer keg and almost scraped the ground. But there was one adventure still in store for Miss Mungg. She strolled at leisure from her house, made visits to uncles and aunts, and found herself, all of a sudden, behind a boulder on the bank of the stream, face to face with a small creature that was strange to her.

Both stood on their hind quarters, stock still, and examined each other. This stranger was slender. It wore an attractive, light-coloured coat, but there was something crooked about its eyes, which Peregrina did not especially like.

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“What short thin legs you have”, she thought, almost in sympathy. Alas, she had not yet spotted their sharp claws. And quick as lightning the creature had its pointed snout at her throat.

Peregrina defended herself, scratched and bit. Her yellow teeth were already properly long and powerful. After a short battle she turned her assailant to flight. The creature had left behind bloody tufts of fur, but Peregrina appeared also plainly the worse for wear. She hobbled back home, as quickly as her trembling paws could carry her; horror possessed her still in every limb.

This daughter, otherwise so daring, had only one wish: home to Mother!

Thank God, Mother is not taking her time on a visit to a neighbour; she is dozing on the khonde, and at sight of her child lets out a piercing whistle. Father and brothers hasten up; even the Mouse scurries out of her dark corner. Poor Peregrina, what has happened? So Peregrina makes her report. The animal was slender? with an attractive coat? Take Care In Whom You Trust! For sure, it was a Weasel. “Heaven help us!” shudders the Mouse. “My most fearsome enemy!”

“You too were in great danger, my little one”, says Father Mungg tenderly. “How fortunate it is, that you are already so big and strong!”

“That comes from a lot of munching”, acknowledge her brothers.

“Munching is proper”, moralises Mother Mungg, “but foresight still better!”

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Winter sets in

One morning the first hoarfrost settled. The Choughs circled over the meadow, and suddenly the whole flock shot chattering down the valley. Below, in the little village, they said: “The seers of weather are coming; soon it will be snowing.”

On the same day the sky clouded over. Swathes of mist drifted in. Mrs. Mungg fluffed up her coat and sat before her residence, irritated by the icy wind, which chilled her to the bone.

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“Time to sleep”, she yawned.

“Why don’t the Mountain Goats sleep?” wondered her little daughter.

“They aren’t master builders like us”, explained her Mother. “How could they excavate a house in the earth, and how would they fit inside? For this reason they have a warm Winter coat. It is true that we have it easier.”

Snow fell overnight. Peregrina retreated to the hallway in shock; but then she peered curiously into the blinding brightness. So this was Winter, of which the other animals spoke – ugh, how cold!

Indeed, the Sun soon put away again its earlier bounteousness; the charming array of flowers had perished; the Summer was over.

Now, early every morning, hoarfrost settled, and the leaves lost ever more their good taste. Nor were they so hungry any more.

“Time to sleep”, admonished the aged Mummel.

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The Family Mungg chose a cloudy day for the remove. In close order they tramped down the cliff.

Down below, the Autumn Crocus was already in flower. “Now you’re coming at last”, said their purple goblets, moist from the mist, “we’ve been awaiting you for a long time.”

Peregrina rummaged curiously through the Winter quarters. How huge the chamber, how long the hallway!

The Sun was kind enough to shine for the Autumn house cleaning. Once again there were hours for rest, when they enjoyed the warmth and the contentment of being awake.

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But one gloomy day the whole family retired to the sleeping chamber. They had become many. Hup and Hop brought along their Marmot wives. Then the entrance was carefully walled up. Grass, Moss and Earth were joined strongly together. "You can never be careful enough", said Mummel, in memory of his early misadventure.

It was quiet as death in the Burrow; the furry coats snuggled close against each other. Peregrina pressed her fat little belly between Father and Mother. Already half asleep, she courageously bared her yellow teeth from time to time...

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Ice crystals, blown in the wind, danced out of the blue-grey sky. They fell and settled like Stars on the roof of the House Mungg.

And then it snowed in earnest.

H. Kasser: Familie Mungg. Eine Murmeltier-Geschichte (1940)

trans. R. L. Hewitt: The Family Mungg. A Story about Marmots (2021)

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Children's Books with Marmots (and a White Hare)

Richard L. Hewitt

Kamuzu Academy, Malawi

2020 – 2022

<http://pia-roshardt.snakeshead.org>

<http://family-mungg.snakeshead.org>
