



## CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

But what a disappointment when we reached Paradise Street!

The mice in the air vent at the flats weren't my family but strangers. They said that my family had moved to the countryside six months earlier. Grandad had got rheumatism from the draught in the vent and Lilyfey had been coughing continually. But nobody knew exactly where they'd gone. They had secretly climbed onto a truck belonging to a farmer who drove through the streets every Thursday selling potatoes.

They told me Dad had said, 'Better to set off into

the unknown than live in this cold new building where we've got nothing to bite or chew.'

The strange mice invited us to stay. They shared the little bit of food they had with us.

It was unpleasantly cold in the air vent, even on a warm autumn day. There was a fierce draught and the metal-lined pipe was slippery and uncomfortable.

The people in the house still threw their rubbish down the chute, where it vanished into the container in the cellar, never to be seen again. The mice told us how hard it was to gather enough food in the local area. I asked them why they didn't go to the station during the day any more.

They said that the route was too dangerous now. Since I'd been away, a motorway had been built, and you'd be risking your life if you tried to cross it when it was busy.

I showed Wilhelm the spot where the old shed used to stand. The lawn in the yard was trampled and brown.

We couldn't possibly stay here. Train travel is much more comfortable and more interesting. But on the other hand, I desperately wanted to see my parents and



brothers and sister again, and Grandad and Isolde too, of course.

Wilhelm and I decided to wait until the farmer came and then we could climb aboard his truck. Maybe then we'd be able to track my family down.

Thursday finally came and that morning we heard shouts of 'Potaaaatoooes, eeeeighty ce-ents a kilo!'

The farmer was coming in his truck.

The truck stopped in the street outside the building and women and men queued up with bags and boxes. The farmer weighed out the potatoes on his scales. It wasn't that easy to get up to the truck unseen because most of the humans were just standing silently, staring into space. I thought about Pierre: *stroll, don't run.*

So, although our hearts were pounding, Wilhelm and I walked calmly across the pavement, past the waiting people and over to the truck. Then we climbed up the tyres and ducked under the tarpaulin.

The truck was full of sacks of potatoes. There were potatoes all over the floor. We hid right at the back, behind a sack by the driver's cab.

The truck set off again, but kept on stopping.

We listened as the farmer shouted out again and again: 'Potaaaatoooes, eeeeighty ce-ents a kilo!'

We heard him drag the sacks across the truck, then the sound of potatoes pouring out and the scrape of his scoop with which he heaped the potatoes on the scales. 'Four euros,' the farmer would say.

We watched with horror as people were buying vast quantities of potatoes and taking them away. The longer it went on, the more he stopped, and the more he sold, the nearer the farmer came to the sack behind which we were hiding. Finally, there was just one potato sack left. The farmer stopped again, got out of the truck, grabbed our sack and shook it out. We just about managed to leap behind two large potatoes. Now he wouldn't spot us.

But then the farmer began to gather up the potatoes lying around on the floor and to sell those too. Then he drove on and I thought, If he stops now and sells the last potatoes, he'll reach for our ones too.

But he didn't stop again; he drove out of the city. He drove like a demon, braked, lurching off again. We had to jump this way and that to keep out of the



way of the potatoes rolling around the floor, or we'd have been squashed.

Oh, how gloriously calm and comfortable train travel is! All the bends and bumps and the stink of petrol made me feel dizzy at first, and then ill. Much longer and I'd have been sick. But then the truck stopped. We'd arrived at a farm.

By the time we climbed out of the truck, dusk was falling.



## CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

'What now?' asked Wilhelm.

'We'll have to ask,' I said.

'Watch out, lad, there be a cat round here,' said Wilhelm, sniffing.

But all we could see was a bat, flitting past overhead. I called out to her and asked if she knew of a mouse family that had moved out from the city about six months ago. The bat flew round a corner and waggled her wings, which presumably meant 'No'.

'Uh-oh!' cried Wilhelm. 'Cat!'

The cat had crept quietly up on us and was now only a leap away. We dashed to the closest hole in the







ground we could find. But it was so shallow that the cat could easily have scooped us out with its paw. We crouched down and flattened ourselves to the bottom as much as possible.

This cat was obviously not as sophisticated as the Parisian cats because it just sat by the hole and waited.

‘Let it wait,’ I whispered.

Time passed. Every time I peeped cautiously out of the hole, I saw the cat sitting outside.

‘It ent gone,’ said Wilhelm, ‘is it?’

We waited ages and ages.

We were starting to think we’d have to starve in the hole if there were several cats on the farm, as Wilhelm



thought, and they were taking it in turns to keep watch.

Then suddenly, we heard a wild barking and the cat hissing.

I carefully put my head out of the hole and saw a dog chase the cat up a tree. The dog stood at the bottom, barking up at it. It was a poodle. Didn’t I know him? Yes, I did: it was Isengrim!

‘Isengrim!’ I cried, running over to him. ‘Isengrim!’

It was some time before he heard me, he was barking so loudly and so determinedly at the cat, which was sitting up in the tree, spitting down at him.

‘Hello,’ he said in the end, ‘who are you?’

‘I’m Nibbles! Don’t you remember?’

‘Oh,’ he said, ‘so you’re the lost son! Your parents will be overjoyed.’

‘Do you know where they are, then?’

‘Yes,’ said Isengrim, ‘of course. They live at our place now.’

‘Our place?’

‘Yes, Mr Kringel the artist and I live in a little house here in the village. Mr Kringel bought it back





when our house on Paradise Street was being torn down. It's just back there. And there are no cats in the house – thanks to me, you know,' he added proudly.

I turned to my companion. 'This is my friend Wilhelm; he's from Switzerland.'

'Nice to meet you,' said Isengrim. 'Now, come with me.'



## CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

We walked down the village street behind Isengrim. We saw various cats, but they all kept their distance or jumped hastily up onto walls. Finally, we came to a little old house. There were two elderberry bushes in the garden. Isengrim showed us the entrance to the cellar.

‘They live down there,’ he said.

We climbed down and found the whole family having their supper. Grandad, Mum, Dad, my brothers, my sister and Isolde – they were all there.

Oh, what joy!

Everyone squeaked with delight and we hugged and

they bombarded me with questions: ‘Where have you been all this time? Why did you go off on the train like that? Why does Wilhelm talk so funny? Where have you sprung from?’

But Mum said, ‘Let them eat in peace now. We’ve got all the time in the world for talking.’



