

'Mice?' they cried. 'What? Mice? In this building?'

'Outrageous!'

Then the people, who normally walked past each other in silence, started talking.

The caretaker said, 'I'll get those cheeky interlopers destroyed!' (He really said that – *interlopers*!)

We ran to our cardboard boxes and hid under them as well as we could.

'Now,' said Grandad, 'a cat will come.'

And the way he said 'cat' gave me goosebumps.

Until then, there had only been one dog living in the house, a greyhound, thin as a rake and an elegant bundle of nerves, and also so self-absorbed that he didn't even smell us mice.



But if a cat came into the building . . . the consequences were unthinkable. Like I said, there were no holes anywhere in that place.

Oh, what good times we'd had with old Carlo the cat and Isengrim the poodle.

But no cat came. On the contrary. The next day, the caretaker actually put a lump of bacon in the cellar.

It was all Grandad could do to stop us children from gnawing on the bacon. He explained to us how a mousetrap works. And when we didn't believe him, he poked the bacon with a stick. Snap! A metal clamp slammed down and snapped the twig in two.

At the first opportunity our family fled out of the building.

The backyard had changed too. There was now a boring, neatly-trimmed lawn. The two elderberry bushes had been hacked down and a low hedge planted in their place. The shed had been completely torn down.

In the end, we found a ventilation shaft in one of

the outside walls with a narrow crack that you could climb into. Here we were safe from cats and the caretaker, at least, but good grief, that vent was uncomfortable. It was all clad in sheet metal and there was a constant freezing breeze blowing through it.

But still, we had a roof over our heads.



CHAPTER FIVE

As there was nothing for us to eat in the building, we had to go foraging around the neighbourhood: Mum, Dad, Grandad and us mouse-children.

I often went to the station. It was a long way and not without dangers, because there were a lot of cars on the streets. But you always found lots of good things at the station: binned bread, chips and, now and then, a scrap of cheese. Sometimes, when he felt well enough, Grandad came too. Then we'd run cautiously along the tracks and the platforms where the people stood waiting for trains.

'You see those trains?' said Grandad. 'They travel all around the world.'



'Do they even go to Switzerland? To mouse heaven?'

'Yes, they go to Switzerland too.'

At least you could dream here, at the station. I imagined myself in a factory: a qualified cheese-nibbler, gnawing beautiful holes in the Swiss cheese and keeping them so neat that nobody could even see the tooth marks.

Then, in the evenings, I lay freezing in the air vent. Not even a nest of the thickest fabrics could keep out the cold draught.

Mum kept saying: 'We've got to get out of here, and fast. We have to find somewhere else!'



But where?

The old houses on Paradise Street were already home to well-established mouse families and they guarded their nests jealously.

The new buildings were often even worse than ours. Their cellars were regularly squirted with something they called Insta-kill Spray – if it got you, you'd be a dead mouse.

That was how Isolde lost her parents. One evening, Mum saw a little mouse wandering around the road, crying. She told Mum that the caretaker had just carried her parents out dead. She had no family left. So Mum brought the girl-mouse, whose name was Isolde, home to us.

Once Isolde was living with us, I generally went to the station with her. We'd got to know a snack stall at the station where there were lots of tasty things lying on the floor – chips, for example. Unfortunately, they were often spoilt with ketchup, which the humans are unaccountably fond of smearing on them.

Of course, it was much more fun to stroll around the station with Isolde than with Grandad.

We often snuggled down under the platform edge and listened to the announcements on the loudspeakers: 'Please take care on platform fifteen. The train to Paris is about to depart.'

'Paris,' I said. 'That sounds so good.'

And we would watch the train's wheels roll past.



CHAPTER SIX

And then, one Friday, just before Christmas, it happened. Isolde and I had crept onto a platform. It was already dark.

We'd found cake crumbs by a luggage carriage that was already loaded with cases and packets. They'd fallen out of a Christmas parcel that had burst open. A trail of crumbs led from the platform to the carriage.

It wasn't just hunger that drove me into the carriage – I was curious too.

While Isolde gathered up the crumbs outside, I looked around the carriage. There were piles of suitcases and parcels, and a pair of skis by the wall.

A door stood open. You could see through it into the next carriage. I slipped through.

This carriage had lots of compartments and each compartment had six seats. It was lovely and warm. I just wanted to lie down and rest for a moment before going back out into the cold.

When I woke up, everything was jiggling and juddering. I could see lots of legs and shoes. Cautiously, I peeked out from under the seat: humans were sitting there, reading newspapers. Outside the windows, lights whizzed past in the darkness. It slowly dawned on me that I wasn't dreaming, that I really was sitting in the train and that it was moving.

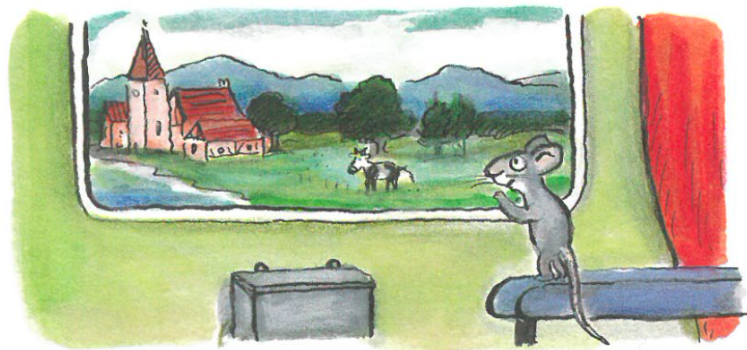
After the initial shock, I told myself that the train was bound to come back to Munich. What I couldn't have known at that time was that all railway carriages have a home station. The carriage I was sitting in came from Hamburg and had only been attached to the Munich train to replace a broken one. Normally, this carriage did the Hamburg-Cologne route. It was just as well I didn't know about that then as I sat chirpily under the seat, eating crumbs that fell from the people's

sandwiches. Now and then, the train stopped. I heard the stations being announced: Göttingen, Hanover, Lünenburg, Hamburg.

In Hamburg all the remaining humans got out. I could run at my leisure from one end of the carriage to the other. I found all kinds of tasty things: a chocolate biscuit, a lump of cheese sandwich and loads of bread and cake crumbs. There was enough food for three whole mouse families in that carriage. And there were wonderful hiding places. I made myself a nest in the cladding around a pipe.

I should just add, for the benefit of anyone planning a similar journey, that in wintertime you shouldn't get too close to the heating pipes. It's only too easy to singe your fur.

I padded out my corner with a camel-hair scarf that someone had left behind. I could see a window through a crack in the cladding, and through the window I could see the sky. So I always knew what the weather outside was doing.



CHAPTER SEVEN

Day after day, week after week, I travelled to and fro between Hamburg and Cologne. If there was nobody in the carriage compartment, I climbed up onto a seat and looked out of the window: snow-covered fields; low, squat houses; mountains, rivers, bridges; three milk cans standing at a junction. Everything rolled slowly by.

So this was the wide world. It was so beautiful.

I was only sad occasionally, when I thought about my parents and my brothers and sister, and about Isolde. It would have been so lovely to travel through the world with them, warm and full, and safe from cats.



But I didn't often have much time for sadness because there were always new people getting on. Then suitcases were shoved and heaved onto the luggage shelves and I was staring at legs – women's, men's and children's – and it was raining bread and cake crumbs again.

Soon I knew which city would be next even before the train slowed and a loudspeaker voice announced the station: Hamburg, Hanover, Bielefeld, Dortmund, Cologne and back. So it went on: out one day and back the next. And I kept on hoping that the carriage would eventually be attached to an engine that would take it back to Munich. I could already recognise the ticket inspector by the colour of his trousers and the shape of his shoes. While he clipped the people's tickets, I would sit as quiet as a mouse under a seat.

I spent a good year and a half travelling back and forth on the Hamburg-Cologne line like that – by then I knew every bridge and every barrier.

One day, there were no legs to be seen in the compartment. So I crawled out from under the seats and was about to set to work on a piece of cake that was lying on the floor when, to my horror, I saw a



woman. She was sitting there with her legs stretched out onto the seat opposite. She looked at me.

I thought: 'Now she'll scream. Now she'll call the inspector.' But she only laughed and even threw me a few cake crumbs. I made a slight bow and hastily ate the crumbs. Then I withdrew under my seat, keeping an eye on her. She was reading a book and smoking, even though it was the non-smoking section. I'd deliberately chosen a non-smoking compartment because, like all mice, I can't stand cigarette smoke.

In Bielefeld, a man got in and sat down opposite the woman. He struck up a conversation with her and asked where she was travelling to.

'Switzerland,' she said, 'to Basel.'

Switzerland, I thought, how lovely. This woman's heading to mouse heaven. The land of my dreams.

And so I decided I would get out with the woman and follow her onto the train that was heading to Switzerland. It was dark outside, which would surely help with my plan. It was certainly very adventurous to climb off the train, run across a platform and get onto another train again.



But 'nothing ventured, nothing gained', as my grandad always used to say.

I crawled back into my nest and said goodbye to all the things I'd collected over time and couldn't take with me: a glass marble, a little silver earring and a tiny dried rose.



CHAPTER EIGHT

In Hanover, the train stopped.

The woman, whose name was Verena, got out and the man passed her suitcase out to her. I clung onto one of the leather straps on the case, and so I reached the platform unseen and in one piece. There, I cowered in a shadowy corner of a little shelter.

There were humans standing everywhere, waiting for trains. Then the announcement came over the loudspeaker: 'Please stand clear on platform seven. The Intercity train to Basel will be arriving shortly. Keep well back from the edge of the platform!'

The train came in. A sleek, yellow-brown train.



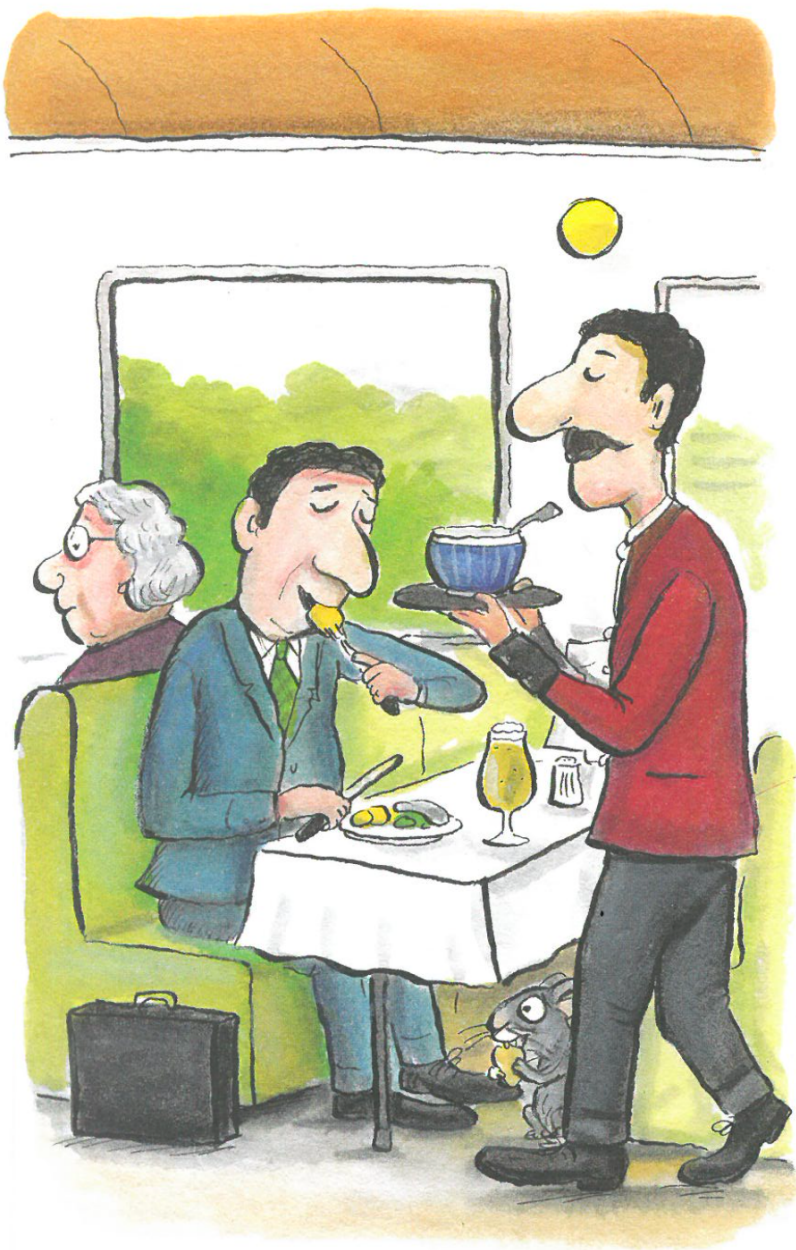
The brakes squealed, the train stopped. People got off. I saw the woman get on. I plucked up all my courage and ran across the brightly-lit platform, leaped onto the carriage step and clambered up between the enormous trampling feet. I really could have been killed. But I made it to the top unscathed.

I ran along under the heating pipes. What a difference from my old carriage on the cross-country train!

The floor was covered with soft carpet. The seats were wider and upholstered in colourful, striped velvet. It was only now that I realised how loud all the rattling and clattering had been on my old train for the last eighteen months. This train ran smoothly and very quietly. The windows were wider and the glass had a brownish tint. Outside, the lights flashed past through the night faster than I'd ever seen before. You could hear a voice over the train's intercom: 'Good evening, ladies and gentlemen, this is your driver speaking. We have now reached our top speed of two hundred kilometres per hour. I wish you all a pleasant journey.'

And then a wonderful scent filled the carriage. I cautiously followed the smell to the dining car.





Waiters in red jackets were serving people who sat at little tables. I settled down under a table and nibbled on a roast potato that a man had dropped. Unfortunately, I couldn't enjoy my meal in peace because the man's feet were constantly twitching to and fro as he ate. I had to be constantly on my guard so that he didn't kick me.

After I'd dined, I ran along the aisle of the train looking for Verena. The strange thing about this Intercity train was that almost all the humans on it were men. Most of them sat there wearing suits and ties and it was as though they had all agreed to bring small, leather briefcases along with them. It was all very posh and not nearly as much fun as my old cross-country train where everyone was mixed up together – children, men and women, old and young.

And there were hardly any crumbs on the Intercity train. The people here didn't eat in their seats. And if anyone did unwrap a sandwich, he did it sneakily, almost as if he were ashamed. They went to the restaurant car to eat. There was rubbish galore there. But getting to it was dangerous because the doors between the carriages

opened and shut electronically. You only had to pull the door handles gently and they sprang open, shutting with a hiss a moment later. But of course the door handles were far too high for me so I had to wait next to every door for someone going through it. Then, quick as a flash, I ran after them, before the door slammed shut again. I was in a constant state of fear for my tail.

This train was much more comfortable, no doubt about that, but I'd never have managed to travel undisturbed for as long as I did in my nice, old cross-country train.



CHAPTER NINE

At last the train came to a stop. Outside I heard a loudspeaker voice: 'Basel. This train terminates here. All change, please!'

I cheered. I'd reached mouse heaven. I was in Switzerland!

All the humans got off. I was the very last one to climb down from the train. It was dark outside. I hastily ran across the tracks to the courtyard outside the station, where I met another mouse. It was very shaggy and you could see right away that it often slept outdoors, that it had no home.

The mouse introduced itself. 'Wilhelm.'



'Nibbles,' I said.

Wilhelm was a true Swiss country mouse. He'd come to Basel from his farmyard because more and more cats were making themselves at home there. Here, he'd become a typical station mouse of the sort you meet anywhere in the world. They have plenty to eat so they're well-fed, but because they don't have a proper home, they look pretty shabby.

I asked Wilhelm where the nearest cheese factory was.

'Thass not far,' he said, 'but a mouse would have no chance. None of us gets in no more.'

'Really?' I asked in amazement. 'So who eats all the holes out of the Swiss cheese?'

'Oh,' said Wilhelm, 'thass just a fairy-tale. Per'aps that used to be like that but it's all machines that do that now. There's no room for us moice. Y'know,' he went on, 'Switzerland's no country for moice. It's all too neat and tidy.'

'Watch,' he said. He pointed to a woman standing by a snack stall. She'd just dropped a chip. She immediately bent down, picked it up with her fingertips and carried

it to a dustbin. The bin had a catch fastener. You'd never manage to squeeze in there.

'And I thought Switzerland was mouse paradise,' I said.

'Thass a nice old wives' tale,' said Wilhelm, and he told me how mice had to scrape by, getting hungry in this country. He'd have emigrated to France long ago if he hadn't been so scared of travelling by train.

'To France?' I asked.

'Yis,' said Wilhelm. 'Swiss moice in the know are all a-going to France.'

'Well, why don't we go to France then?' I said. And I told him that I'd spent months travelling from Hamburg to Cologne and back in an express train.

'Bootiful!' he cried. 'Let's go!'





CHAPTER TEN

We ran across the platforms until we heard an announcement saying: 'Attention, passengers for Paris. The Trans-Europe Express from Basel to Paris will shortly be departing from platform ten. Please board the train now!'

We ran to platform ten. There stood the train in a solemn shade of blue. We just had time to climb into a carriage before the automatic doors closed.

This train was even smarter than the Intercity. The seats were wide and comfortable. The headrests had white lace antimacassars on them. There was plush carpet in the corridors. I hid under the box for the

heating pipes, but Wilhelm was so amazed that he ran right out into the corridor and was almost trodden on by a human. The startled man was so shocked that he yelled, 'A mouse! Watch out! There's a mouse on the train!'

Someone called for the conductor. People popped out of their compartments. Wilhelm sat in the corridor as if rooted to the spot.

'Come on!' I shouted. 'Quick!' I ran into a compartment and crawled under the seats. Eventually, Wilhelm got away too. We hid right back against the wall.

The conductor came running and the man told him that he'd just seen a mouse, sitting as bold as brass in the gangway.

The conductor didn't know what to do. 'I've never caught a mouse in my life,' he said.

In the end, he called the train driver.

The train driver came. He was wearing a red leather strap across his chest and over one shoulder like a badge of office.

'What?' he said. 'A mouse on the train? Impossible.'



Where would it get in from? I've been driving trains for twenty years and I've never seen a mouse on a passenger train.'

He ordered the conductor to look under the seats for the mouse.

We saw two knees, then a huge hand resting on the floor, and then the upside-down face of the conductor, all red and pinched. We looked each other in the eyes.

'Incredible,' he said, and the red face disappeared again. 'There really are two mice sitting under there.'

'Catch them!' ordered the train driver.

'Catch them,' repeated the conductor. 'Certainly,' and his face appeared again.



The big hand reached out for me. I just took a little step to the side and it missed me. He was so clumsy! He tried to grab me again, and again he missed.

'Beasts!' the conductor swore. 'Filthy little beasts!'

He lay down on the floor, all the better to try and catch us.

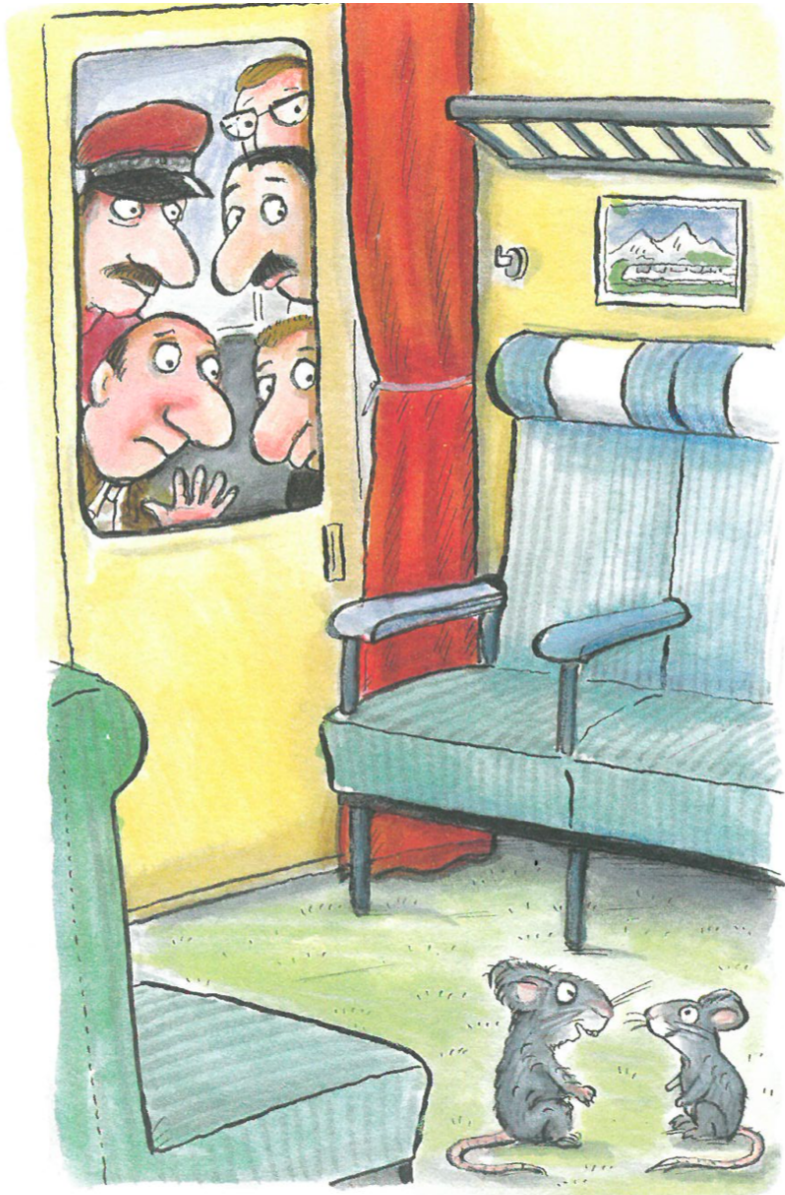
I whispered in Wilhelm's ear, 'Look out, when he swipes at you, you jump to the left and I'll run straight into his face. Attack is the best form of defence.'

The conductor stayed on the floor. There were lots of feet all around him. The conductor held his breath, concentrated hard and then grabbed for Wilhelm. But Wilhelm was quicker – he jumped aside and I ran straight at the conductor's red, sweating face. Startled, he jerked his head up. There was a resounding crack on the edge of the seat. He yelled 'Ow!' and jumped up. 'A biting mouse!' he screamed. 'That means it's rabid. It's infectious!'

Everyone ran out of the compartment and shut the door from the outside.

Wilhelm and I crawled out from under the seats.





Outside in the corridor there was a throng of humans by the compartment door, peering through the window, all of them men. They stared at us.

‘What now?’ asked Wilhelm.

‘Let them stand and gawp,’ I said. ‘They’ve probably never seen mice before. Let’s lie down under the seats and have a little snooze.’

We crawled into a corner and stretched out on the fluffy carpet. Wilhelm tossed and turned restlessly but I soon fell asleep.



CHAPTER ELEVEN

A voice on the loudspeaker woke us up: '*Attention, ici Paris, Gare de l'Est.*'

'Quick,' said Wilhelm, 'they're now comin'.'

And so they were – two glowering pest controllers came into our compartment. They got out spray cans and began to fumigate the compartment. So this was the notorious Insta-kill.

'Hurry!' I shouted to Wilhelm. 'Follow me, I know an escape route.'

I crawled into the air-conditioning pipes. I turned back one last time and saw the pest controllers shutting the compartment door from the outside



while the blueish clouds of poison filled the air.

We hastily climbed out of the carriage and hid ourselves under the platform.

Once it had got dark, we crept out of the station. Ahead of us lay a wide, brightly-lit street of the sort the French call a *boulevard*.

So this was Paris. The city Isengrim had talked about so much.

'Moice heaven,' murmured Wilhelm rapturously.

We flitted along the house walls. Chairs and tables stood in the open air on the broad pavement outside the cafés and restaurants. Humans were sitting there, in the warm evening breeze, eating and drinking.

That same evening we discovered a particularly glorious French habit. French people like to eat long, straight loaves of bread with every meal. They call them baguettes. As they eat, they break pieces off these sticks of bread. Baguettes could be tailor-made for mice, and so could the custom of tearing the bread because, obviously, they make a lot of crumbs.



'If you think about it,' said Wilhelm, 'cuttin' bread don't help us moice much.'

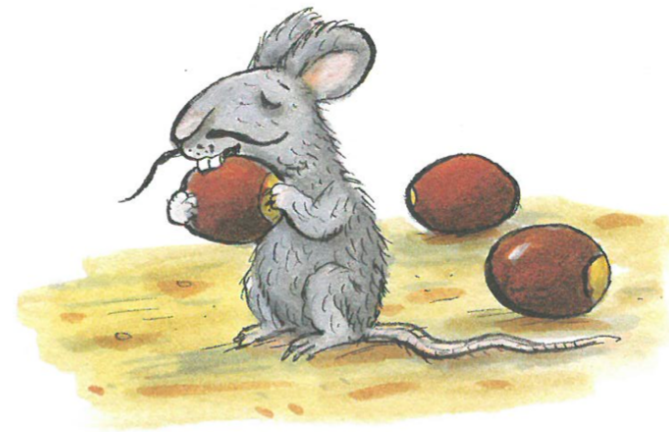
And he was quite right about that.

The French people had another wonderful habit too. There was cheese after every meal, and in so many kinds: long, round and oval cheeses, blue cheeses and white-rinded cheeses and cheeses flavoured with pepper, bay or caraway.

We learned all their names from our friend Pierre, who also categorised them into: *pas mal* (OK), *bon* (good), *très bon* (very good) and *merveilleux* (excellent).

Pierre was a true Parisian mouse. We'd met him outside a restaurant called Les Trois Mousquetaires. Pierre moved along the boulevards without a care in the world. He often said, 'Stride, do not run. People notice scurrying things. But if we walk calmly, humans will not see us.'

So Pierre strolled from restaurant to restaurant, among all the people walking past; he was always on the lookout for delicacies because he only picked up the bread that dropped everywhere as a little side-dish. His favourite foods were truffled *foie gras*, Camembert from the Côte-d'Or and olives preserved in red wine.



There were plenty of olives on the ground because American tourists mostly dropped them under the tables thinking they'd gone off.

'*Les Américains ont une culture de ketchup*,' said Pierre as he nibbled on an olive. That meant 'Americans have a ketchup culture'. Pierre was very strict on matters of taste. 'One can always learn taste,' he'd say, 'otherwise we would still be simple fieldmice, would we not?' And then he'd add, 'And one must have a love for danger.'





CHAPTER TWELVE

Unfortunately, rich as Paris was in pleasures, it held just as many perils. Never in my whole life have I seen so many cats as there were in Paris, and they were the biggest, fastest and fiercest specimens you can imagine. It was in Paris that I first understood the true meaning of the saying 'A cat in the house spells fear for a mouse.'

And the French seemed to be very fond of cats because each house was apparently home to several of them. Yet those cats were kept so short of food that mouse-hunting was always on their minds.

In only our second week in Paris, I had a dreadful thing happen to me.



I was sitting under a table on the pavement, enjoying a piece of brie that someone had dropped during their meal. Suddenly, I felt a shockwave. As I jumped up, out of the corner of my eye I saw a huge black cat hurtling towards me.

I ran for my life.

I could already feel the cat's hot breath on my neck when I spotted a cluster of dustbins on the pavement. At the very last moment, I was able to slip into a narrow gap between two bins. I collapsed, entirely out of breath. The black beast was trying to pull me out with its paw. I crawled further back. What gigantic claws it had! I found myself thinking about good old Tomcat Carlo. But what was this commotion? The dustbins were trembling. The creature was leaping at the bins and trying to knock them over! Fortunately, they were full to the brim with rubbish. The cat was in a frenzy. I think now that it was overcome by the ancient hatred that all predators feel for peace-loving rodents.

Suddenly, to my surprise, the cat just sat calmly down in front of the bins.

