

The Manger Mouse

A Christmas Story

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HE HUDDLED IN THE COLD outside the kitchen door. The black night was pierced with stars but he couldn't see them. He could only feel the thin chill of the night wind, and loneliness, loneliness, and not knowing where to go, what to do, for he could hardly see. He was so small his eyes were scarcely open. His soft gray coat was rumped and he trembled. He had no mother, no brothers and sisters; the cat had got them all, finding the nest in a heap of rags behind a water jug, but he had squeezed into a crack in the wall and the cat had missed him. He still felt a terror, a desolation, a sort of numb blindness.

But that was long ago--or so it seemed to him--and he had been hiding, scuttling from place to place, so hungry he was weak with it, and the noises all about him, the comings and goings, made him tremble--camel bells, shouts, loud human voices, the bleating of goats, the barking of dogs, rude comments from the donkeys in the yard. He had known nothing of all this. He had never been out of the nest, where his mother had cared for all her young with painstaking concern, cleaning them and cleaning them, teaching them to wash themselves, watching for every intruder, warning them of dangers, of the cat. "And the owl at night," she said, "if you stray from the wall. Stay, stay, stay by the walls; never, never, never in the open lest you be seen. And keep clean, keep clean, so you will give no scent." And she had licked them and taught them to wash their whiskers with their paws and behind their ears and all over, even their little long tails. But that was long ago, was over, and he was lost and alone.

There were heavy steps inside, approaching the door, and in an instinctive frenzy he moved, scuttling along the wall and ducking into the nearest opening, the entrance to the cooling room, with a cistern and jugs of milk set in it to chill. A low pan of milk was left to sour on a bench just inside. He ran to the bench, up the leg, following his nose--and put his forepaws on the sill of the pan, and his silvery whiskers quivered, his tiny pink tongue licked, he stuck his pointed face in, he drank and drank. Then a lantern flashed. In terror he leapt--into the pan--and crawled out all milk, to run wildly along the bench, down the other side, along the far wall, through a doorway, and he was, had he known it, in the stable.

There, it was suddenly quiet. He sat, a milky little mess, against the wall inside the door. His heart beat wildly, and he trembled all over. Still, there was a quietness, and a strange light, no glaring lantern, yet he could see. The wide arch of the entrance was open to the stars, and they quivered in the sky. On the far side the oxen stood in their stalls, shaking their heads now and then, munching their suppers, and next to them the sleepy goats had folded their legs and lain down. Overhead the doves sat in a row on the rafters; he had trouble seeing them, his eyes were so stuck up with milk, but he could make out white forms in the dark and hear coos. Doves--his

mother had said--were not to be feared--and on another rafter perched the hens, muttering softly to each other now and then. They will come at you if you steal their corn--she had said.

At the back of the stable there was an empty stall freshly filled with hay, and a manger. He could see that. He wondered if there was feed in it. The animals ate from mangers. Maybe he could too. But he was all stiff from the drying milk. How could he possibly get himself clean! Frantically he began to wash himself, little paws sweeping down over his head, feet wildly scratching to free the sticky tufts of fur, tongue and teeth working on the matted white of his belly, all to no avail, but he must--he must!

So he didn't hear at first the humans coming in the door, and the slow step of a tired donkey. It was the sudden brightening that stopped his frantic efforts, and he froze in his alarm, huddling against the wall. It was a woman person and a man person, and another with a loud familiar voice, saying, "This is all I can offer." The man answered softly. Then the lantern was hung on a hook on a beam. The donkey was tethered with the goats, who made no comments for once. The woman sank onto a bed of straw in the empty stall, after the man spread out his cloak for her. He said in a low voice he was going to fetch water and some supper, and he went out into the night.

Now the quietness was filled with brightness--not the lantern, something else. And it didn't glare, and one didn't want to hide from it. It did not threaten, it did not taste of danger but of peace. The light seemed to come in from the sky, as if an enormous star hung outside, but he could only see the dark sky and little stars winking. The doves cooed softly now and the hens ruffled their feathers and made musical conversation with one another, while the rooster stood up on his perch and kept his silence--this was no dawn light, he knew: this was star light, though most astonishing star light, and he would not be deceived.

Then the man came back, and the mouse huddled against the wall, exhausted by his efforts to clean himself, strangely at peace, and after a while he slept, his head tucked down and his tail curled around him, looking like a little sticky burr rather than a soft mouse, and smelling of goat's milk...

WHEN HE AWOKE he did not know where he was. It was as light as day and yet the light was not daylight. (It was heaven light, he used to tell his grandchildren and great grandchildren.) The animals were all awake. The doves peered down from their perch, the hens for once were silent and cocked their heads to see better. The rooster stood guard right above the stall where the woman lay. The goats were all kneeling and so were the oxen. And there was a strange crying sound, sad yet sweet, afraid yet full of vigor. It was a new Baby, a new Being in the world, it was *the* Baby, the longed-for Child, the Messenger from Heaven--and the creatures knew it even if the world did not. A big moth fluttered in to settle on the woman's shoulder. She stirred and gave the Child to the man. He folded Him tenderly against him, and then laid Him in the manger. The owl floated in on silent wings and found a watching place above the oxen--no one flinched, no one rushed to hide, no one feared.

Then the archway was full of shepherds. Off came their hats and down on their knees they went. The lady smiled. The man beckoned, and they came to see the Child. They laid bread and

cheese, and a wooly fleece, beneath the manger. They left, quiet as they had come, but their running footsteps could be heard on the road.

After that villagers began to come, in twos and threes, shyly, quietly, in awe, bringing milk, and porridge, a soft blanket woven of fine wool, a circlet of little bells to jingle in the Baby's hand, apples, an orange for the mother; all these lay at the foot of the manger.

When they had all gone a deep hush fell, the light winked down a little. Then the mouse looked round. Beside him sat the cat.

The cat was not looking at him. The cat was looking at the manger where the Baby lay. The mouse did not feel even a quiver of fear. He looked back at the manger. He looked again at the cat. He looked at the owl in the rafters. He thought, "I am not afraid."

Finally the cat spoke: "Why were we chosen to witness this? Out of all our kind, why were we chosen--you from the race of mice, I from the feline? I am cursed with the lust and need to kill in order to live or else be subservient to man, and you to be hunted all your days. Yet here we witness the dawn of the new Paradise, would men only see it and believe it!"

The mouse crouched, speechless, beside the cat. He could not put in great words all that crowded his heart. Finally he said: "I would like to see the Baby. But I am all stuck up with goat's milk. I am sure I smell most unseemly. And I cannot clean myself."

The cat turned his head and looked at him. He sniffed the air. Then he spoke very softly and tenderly: "Would you grant me the privilege of cleaning you, oh Mouse? It would cleanse *me* of a little of my guilt. And while I don't favor goat's milk, I would gladly clean you up."

The mouse crept around in front of the cat. He looked at him fearlessly, then he bowed his head meekly and submitted. With rasping yet gentle tongue the cat began to lick. The little mouse toppled left and right under the licks. The cat laid a soft paw on the back of the mouse to steady him, and worked his way carefully all the way to the end of the little long tail. Then the mouse fluffed up his fur and the cat washed his own face and paws vigorously.

At last they were done. They sat side by side against the wall. Then together they moved, right across the floor, to the manger. The cat made one graceful leap to the foot, where he stood, staring in awe at the Child. The mouse scurried up the end and sat beside the cat, and they both looked and looked. They were there when the Kings came, but they did not know it. They were there all night, till finally the cock, not to be fooled by anything, knew that the everyday dawn had come, and filled the stable with his crowing.

"That cock is a conceited fellow," said the cat, as they climbed down together. They went off to the same place by the wall and sat in silence for a long time.

"You look and smell much better," said the cat.

"Thank you," said the mouse.

"Where are you going to live?" asked the cat.

"I don't know. I have hardly begun," said the mouse.

"May I make a suggestion?" said the cat.

"Please," said the mouse.

"That manger," said the cat. "If you would set up your domicile in or near that manger, then never, never would the old lust seize me and the old power overcome me. Dear mouse, I bear guilt enough. In this place, by that manger, you will be safe, that I promise."

"I will do that gladly," said the mouse. Then he was quiet for a moment. Finally he said, "I am a small mouse, and very young. But what we have seen, we have seen. Does it not speak of a Day to come, when the Dawn breaks, and a new Time is born, and we need not fear? Is there not Eden waiting for us?"

"Yes," said the cat. "Of that, I am sure."

They sat in silence for a while. Then the cat rose, stretched, and quietly went away. The mouse pattered across the earthen floor to the foot of the manger. There he carefully dragged together bits of hay and straw, making a little round nest quite neatly disguised. He crawled in and turned round and round. The lady reached over and laid some crumbs from the new loaf, and a bit of cheese, in front of his door. He lifted his head to thank her, then laid it down again. The manger mouse was asleep.

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