

Chapter 7

“The Best Laid Schemes o’ Mice.....”

An impish breeze idled with the pages of Time’s records. Its meddling laid bare all that had caused the rumours and gossip that Hitch had met with in the park-owner’s garden. It happened like this.

All that was known of the French mouse at first was that he had arrived. Indeed that is all that would have been known of him at all, probably, if he had not taken ‘French leave’.

Born and reared in very modern mouse-quarters, he always had plenty to do. Handled, petted, and fed tit-bits by the boys, his self-confidence grew. Having met with the French boy’s mice, during the English boy’s visit, he had gained a wider experience of mouse matters. At the end of the long and interesting journey to this country, he felt himself to be a widely travelled mouse and wondered what new and exciting things would happen to him.

The house into which he was put lacked style, but it was warm and dry and the food was good. Sure that this was a temporary arrangement, he waited patiently for his new adventures to begin. The days and nights went by and nothing happened. Still he had no quarrel with the food, he was exercised, but he grew bored. For many hours at a time there was little if anything to do and worse, there was no company. Being of an enquiring turn of mind he had soon examined the full extent of his quarters; knew every grain and wood knot, every wire of the grill set at the front and was quite familiar with the door and its catch.

Late one evening for the want of something to do, he gnawed at the catch several times. It gave way. In the time it takes to twitch a set of whiskers he was outside. This looked more promising and he was quickly away to find new interests.

Finding a well-beaten track he followed it and came upon another traveller. He hailed the fellow. To his surprise, not knowing how strong



was his French accent, he was answered in his own tongue. This French was as odd as his English, but nevertheless he understood what was said.

The English mouse fell in beside him and relieved at finding company the French mouse poured out his history; mentioning at the end how pleasant it was to hear his native language.

"I was fortunate enough to pick it up from a French chef," proudly the English mouse replied. "Few have that chance. Starting life as I did, in the back premises of the Golf Club Hotel, gave me a great advantage I fancy. I do not only speak French but have a fund of American phrases from American visitors. The kitchens had all the latest gadgets too, so I understand things, whether they be mechanical or electrical."

So the French mouse was left in no doubt that his companion held a high opinion of himself and that it was the only opinion that mattered to him. That he often made mistakes was discovered later. Some were vast but he felt that this was in no way his fault.

As they went along he explained that he was on the way to a meeting where a matter of great importance was to be discussed.

"I do not want to be late for without me matters will not have proper attention and the right course of action will not be shaped. If you are interested, come along and be introduced to everyone. With me to sponsor you, you are bound to be accepted."

By this time they had left the out-buildings of the workshops far behind and were threading the streets of Blinkers Wink.

"Meeting places that there are," the guide went on, "are The Bull's-eye – we never meet there for fear of being seen. The Cat-on-the-Fiddle—don't care for that at all, always afraid of being hornswoggled."

When the French mouse looked puzzled, he said shortly:

"You know, bamboozled, gammoned, swizzled?"

Vague understanding dawned in the eyes of the French mouse and he ventured, "Treaked?"

"Tricked, just so," was the reply. "Now the Bee's Knees and the Ant's Ankle are both too small and any way they are rather low joints, so we gather at the Hole-and-Corner and hold the meetings either in the Hole or in the Corner. Here we are now. By the way I'm Wurzel Wiseacre," he said, as if the name was on every lip, and led the way into an inn. They came upon a whole throng squealing and squeaking to make themselves heard.

"Oh, here's old Wiz-Wits," jibed one of those present.



“Pass the cheese and wine, propose the toast,” sniggered another.

“We are not here on some light matter,” pompously reproved Wiz-Wits, to use the nickname by which he was generally known. “This cat business could be grave.”

A few ears quivered at the last word.

“Oh come,” rejoined a third, “that foolish kitten is hardly a C A T.”

“Yes,” added a fourth laughing, “its name might be Copper but its too silly to be a policeman.”

“A scatty cat, a nutty cop,” chanted yet another and the chant was taken up by many.

“The Nutty Cop of Knotty Cot...The Nutty Cop of Knotty Cot.”

Wiz-Wits was not having this, particularly as he had not thought of it. He looked round for something to win their attention, found it and made a pun:

“Let me present mous-ewer...te-he-te-he,” giggled Wiz-Wits, tickled by his own wit, while a number of his listeners looked pained, “Mous-ewer Le Sourir.”

“Ow you do,” said the French mouse, giving a tweak to his black beret and bowing. “Forgeeve me eef I make ze small zing right. I am La Souris. Only ze mouse– La Souris, nevaire ze smile– le sourir, can run undaire, what say you, ze cooker?”

At this, wide grins spread over the faces, of the company. Wiz-Wits had ‘goofed’ and ever after this the French mouse was known as Smiler.

Being the centre of attention was as heady as the strong wine of his own country to Smiler. He aimed to stay there.

“Theese cat you say of, ’e ees young ees ’e non, but ’e veell older grow?”

Written large in the eyes of the muster was surprise that anyone should think it worth mentioning something so obvious. Smiler though, rapidly followed his first question with another:

“Veel ’e be so stupide then? ’e may grow wise!”

Everyone’s attention was riveted as he described, with some help with the language from Wiz-Wits who would not be left out of anything for long, what had happened to one of his ancestors.

In those days the mouse-quarters had been poky and limiting and life in them safe but boring. With a few following him this daring young mouse broke out. For a time they lived as a guerrilla band behind the

skirting boards. They raided for crumbs left by the children who boarded and who brought out biscuits, crisps and chocolate to help them wait the time to their meal. Like the children, they grew fat and slow on this diet. There was a well fed kitten about at the time that did no more than paw at playthings and sleep in the sun. To smell C A T lent excitement to the raiding, with nothing really to fear, or so they thought. Time passed, the kitten grew and the day came that showed them he was no muff but a master. The few that were left gave themselves up to finish their days in safety.

A silence followed this blood chilling account, broken by shrill squeaking as their own risk burst upon them. There was not a hair that did not bristle, not a whisker that did not quiver. That kitten must go. They were relieved and thankful they knew of the danger before it was too late to do something about it. Very thankful, until one in a hollow voice asked:

“But WHAT CAN we do about it?”

A second silence fell, longer than the first and louder. Smiler shrugged his shoulders as he lifted his eyebrows, the way the Frenchman has of showing he could make a suggestion but others might not think it any good.

Every eye said, “Try us!”

“I know a leetle of these Copper. Ze proprietaire non much like 'im. If you make shame to fall on 'im, 'e go.”

As the idea took hold, murmurs of agreement grew loud. The lunatic fringe were all for doing things so wild, nobody else would give them an ear. One who had said nothing up to now voiced what was in many minds. It must not be traced to them, whatever it was. They must think of something for which only the cat would be blamed. There was the rub; nobody could think of anything.

Wiz-Wits trying to look as if he was working something out stared in front of him, when a very small mouse wavered in a very small voice:

“Couldn't we dig in the flower beds?”



Seeing the worth of this, Wiz-Wits in a flash, took it over as if it were his own.

“We all know that it is because cats have the habit of digging that we have not had one here to worry us before now. The owner may not mind the o-d-d dig or two after all, since he’s allowed him to come here. If we make it look as though he has been digging a great deal...er...untidy digging,...er...that is...the cat I mean.” A fidgeting in the audience and the sight of little furrows appearing between the eyes of his listeners whipped him into an unusual burst of inspiration, “...AND BURYING THINGS HE STEALS. He’ll be out of here faster than he can peel open those gooseberry eyes of his.”

“Dogs bury things, not cats,” argued one.

Wiz-Wits was not going to be defeated so easily:

“As there is no dog, blame is bound to fall on the cat,” he said witheringly.

No one could better the idea anyway and on it being put to the meeting it was carried. Everyone felt the need to be doing something and wanted to be thought willing. Heads were put together to decide what they could steal.

“Those plastic dolls from the stations...take some time to collect them and meanwhile what’ll we do with them?...Hide ’em under the platforms ’til we’ve enough...Won’t they be missed right away?...Won’t matter...If we don’t take enough they might not be missed at all...We’ll need all the help we can get on the night to do the burying...I’ve got family and friends on the golf course; they’d help...good thinking, a lot of us have...Still going to be a big job though, we’ve to hump them to the flower-bed to bury them.”

Hushed, they pondered the problem.

“Supposin’ we borrow a train, or trains.” This came from one of a pair so fat, they seemed to roll rather than run.

The idea was staggering. They were really getting somewhere now. Out of the realms of possibility and into the sphere of fantasy, some feared. It was plain the speaker was serious, though.

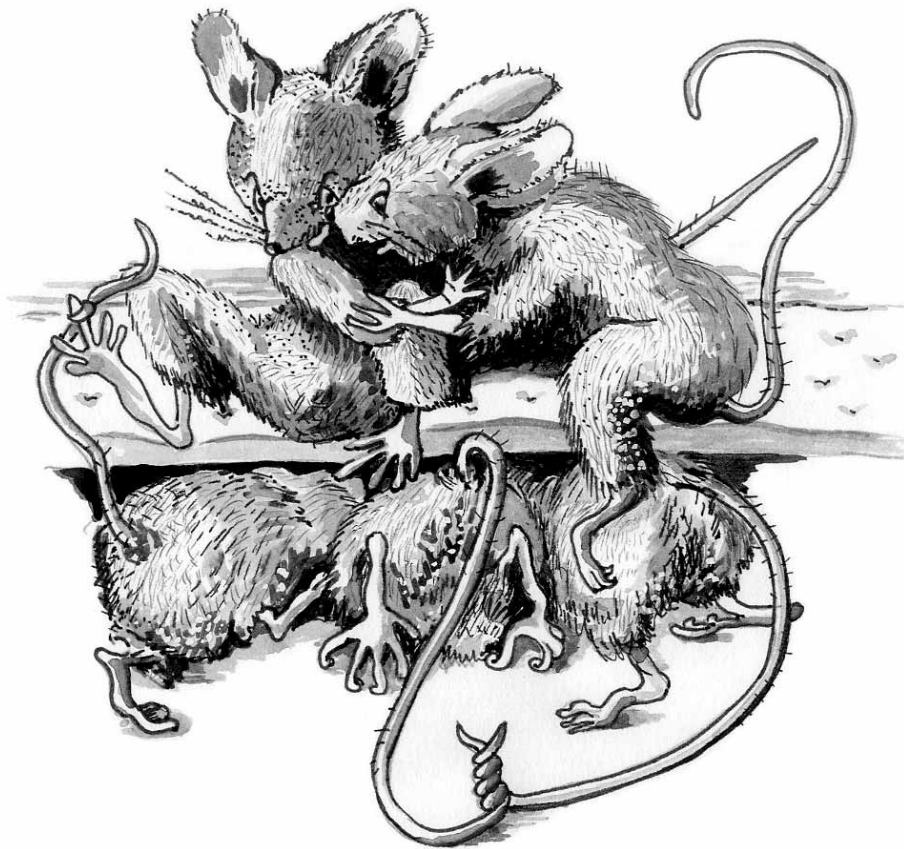
“Our place is in the ‘Cabin’. We know exactly what the man at the controls does; the hours we spend watching him... His wife is a wonderful cook.” He rolled his eyes heavenwards at the thought and ran the tip of his tongue round the edge of his mouth. “It’s worth every minute of watching,” he sighed. “We’d best try with just one train first,” he came back to the matter in hand. “Will need a bit of practice and help with the switches.”

So the mouse-mischief was plotted. Soon they were carrying out part of the scheme. Small bands of mice, with much puffing put their loot out of sight under the platforms and a picked team learned what to do in the Cabin.

It was during the almost moonless part of the month when Hitch was keeping an eye on things in the gardens, that they dared to test the tricky part of their plan. They brought out a train, ran it and put it back unnoticed by anyone who mattered they thought. It was this train going

through Holly Hocks Halt and Bentwhistle Tunnel, that so puzzled Holly. Press-ganged into being the crew, several mice 'grew cold feet' and tried to back out of the venture. They said there were no lights by which to see what to do. When it was pointed out that they usually worked without lights, preferring even the darkest nights, they argued that that was different, it was doing what came naturally. If they thought that was the end of the business they underrated Wiz-Wits. Spurred on by the success so far, he had another of his rare brainwaves. Glow-worms, they were the answer and he sent a party to Spooks Spinney for as many as could be coaxed to come and help.

Though the trial run of the train was a success, there had been a few nasty moments as the train approached Bentwhistle Tunnel. It hooted! Everyone gasped 'OWL' and clutched his neighbour or bolted beneath the seats. One regaining his breath squealed at another:



“Don’t meddle with those levers,” and was surprised when the other denied touching anything.

Afterwards, there was much laughter and banter at this too. All was explained by a mouse who had been standing alongside the track. The hoot had made him jump, but he had seen a rod, fitted to the engine, flick a switch by the track.

When Wiz-Wits learned this he did not appear to take much notice, but when there was no one there to see him he had a look at it. The power was off so he tried it and found it easy to manage.

Now they finished the plan. They decided which flower-bed would be best and worked out how to manage the digging. Leaders for the working-parties at the stations were chosen and runners picked to carry messages between parties. When helpers from the golf course arrived on what was now called ‘Nutty Cop Out Night’, they would be sent where they were most needed.

When the time came to muster this task force, Wiz-Wits pointed out that it needed someone skilled in leadership. Hence he would go and take a couple of lieutenants. There was little to go wrong here now, he was sure and they could manage without him. Few disagreed with that! When a hitch did arise in fact, Smiler quickly suggested a way round it.

Copper spent his nights cosily indoors it was belatedly discovered. How could he be blamed then for the crimes they were plotting to pass off as his? Smiler, during his escape from the back of the workshops, had noted a line of white overalls hanging in a row along with overcoats and boots. These gave him an idea. If he were to lay traces to make it look as though the inner offices were mouse-ridden, the cat would be pressed into service in the hope that at least the smell of him would frighten off the invaders. First the pockets of those overalls would soon become as fretted as the best French lace, even if the owners mistook it for ‘broderie anglaise’. Trails laid from the garden and the yards then, would make it obvious that the cat must be allowed to go in and out easily. Thus the silly creature would have no alibi. When he had done his work Smiler would send a message. Satisfied they had thought of everything, they awaited word from Wiz-Wits that he had drummed up a band of strong and able

volunteers. Then all would hold first class tickets on the express train to the end of the line and Liberty Hall.