

The Mouse Who Loved Jane Austen (A Story)

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nce upon a time there lived, in the library of a small town in the Home Counties, a mouse of sense, elegance and cultivation. Her name was Harriet Price.

Harriet's consuming passion was the novels of Jane Austen. She read them during her leisure hours (the Chapman edition, of course). The librarian, Miss Pritchett, couldn't understand why those volumes never needed dusting, as they were borrowed only by the discerning few. Colonel Patch, a regular patron of the library, congratulated Miss Pritchett on her diligence and care, and Harriet, overhearing this,

was unable to suppress a sigh. Yet she was happy to sense a kindred spirit in the Colonel, even though his visits always meant that *Persuasion* would be out for a few days. Harriet suspected that he sought solace in it for a romantic *contretemps* in earlier life; and, as one who had herself been widowed very young, she sympathised with all her heart.

"You ought to broaden your mind!" said Harriet's cousin Matthew, who lived in the children's section and grew fat on the crumbs, sweets and potato crisps he found there in spite of Miss Pritchett's vigilance. "Try reading James Joyce, now! *Ulysses*! or *Finnegan's Wake*! That's what all the students borrow – and you can bet they eat most of the time they're reading. There's some point in reading books like that. Come out of the eighteenth century and live!"

Harriet's delicate sensibilities were pained by the well-meant vulgarity of her cousin. She reminded herself, however, that even Jane Austen's heroines sometimes had relations who were not perfectly well-bred; and in an effort to widen her intellectual horizons, actually enlisted Matthew's help to manoeuvre the bulky *Ulysses* into such a position that she could turn the pages with her paws.

The merest quivering of her whiskers betrayed her growing indignation and bewilderment as she read. Harriet did not like to admit that she could not find her way round a sentence; and Matthew, who had lingered out of curiosity to observe her reactions (though he had not read *Ulysses* himself), was somewhat embarrassed when she asked him to explain the meaning of "snot-green." So ended Harriet's assay of James Joyce – but Matthew, who had a coarser stomach than his cousin, retrieved a baked bean from the page before Harriet closed the book with the nearest she could manage to a bang.

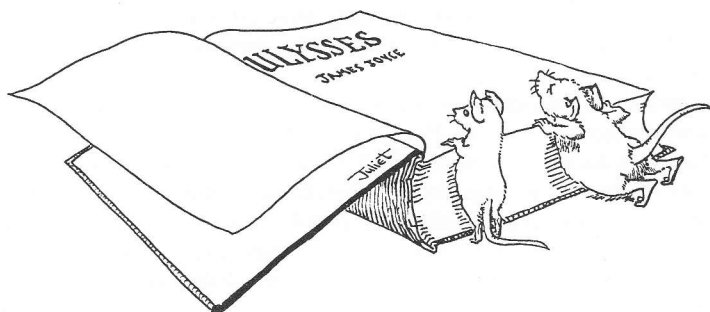
Harriet did justice to Matthew's good intentions, however, and was fond of her cousin, though—even if the memory of Horatio had not interposed—there was no possibility of her ever feeling for him what a Fanny felt for an Edmund. She visited the children's department sometimes when there was a story-telling session, curling up on Matthew's shelf behind a row of books of socially responsible fiction which nobody every took out ("pill-gilders," Matthew called them in his rather robust way), and listening in peaceful enchantment while the storyteller—a very pleasant young woman—read from the Narnia Chronicles, or even, on one unforgettable occasion, from *At the Back of the North Wind*.

To some it may be a matter of astonishment that there were only two mice in the library; to others, that there were any at all. Miss Pritchett was not to blame. Her gimlet eye was constantly on the watch for non-human visitors, and the fame of her mousetraps, tantalisingly baited with cheese, had spread so widely among the neighbouring mice that none would now venture within the library walls. Only Harriet and Matthew, who suffered from a hereditary tendency to migraine, were proof against the temptation of the mousetraps. Once or twice Matthew had all but succumbed to a whiff of Cheddar; but a gentle reproof from his cousin had always dissuaded him from taking the fateful step. As for Harriet, the very odour of Camembert was anathema to her. Only when Miss Pritchett one day switched to peanuts was she ever seriously in danger; but she remembered in time that peanuts could also trigger a severe attack, and summoned her reserves of fortitude.

One of Harriet's worst moments came when Mrs. Withersniff, an overbearing woman who had come to find an improving book for her grandson, saw Matthew's tail whisk round the corner of a shelf; he had lingered too long in the effort to prise a half-eaten gobstopper from the back of a William book.

"Miss Pritchett!" boomed Mrs. Withersniff. "I distinctly saw a mouse's tail vanish round that corner!"

"Oh, I hardly think so, Mrs. Withersniff," replied the librarian, concealing her annoyance as best she could. "I am most careful to exclude vermin from the premises."



Vermin!!! – Harriet, listening with bated breath behind *Mansfield Park*, could hardly believe her ears. Was she, on one side descended from harvest mice of the greatest delicacy of form and feature, on the other from a long line of prize-winning pet mice (she still kept some of her great-grandfather's championship ribbons in the matchbox which served as her *escritoire*) – was she to be classed with cockroaches and beetles? Her dignity was sunk indeed!

She had less to say for the lineage of her cousin Matthew, who was on his mother's side descended from very ordinary field mice – but Matthew had never bothered much about his dignity, and would probably rub shoulders with a rat if it were small enough (Harriet shuddered at the very thought). But safety, not dignity, was the issue now; and it was clear that in the present exigency she would have to depend on her own resources. Indeed, she would have her work cut out to persuade Matthew to behave with common prudence, especially if, under the irritation of Mrs. Withersniff's complaint, Miss Pritchett should show greater ingenuity in the matter of mousetraps.

An anxious, wearing week followed, Harriet succeeding with the greatest difficulty in prising her cousin away from a large lump of what she had heard Miss Pritchett describe under her breath as rat poison.

"That'll show the old goat I mean business!" hissed the librarian between her teeth, her professional blood thoroughly up. Harriet, though surprised by such language from a woman of refinement, was glad to be forewarned. But the almost omnivorous Matthew was inclined to dismiss the whole thing as propaganda.

"Couldn't I just eat the outside of it? I'm sure if there's anything nasty, it'll be in the middle," he said plaintively, and Harriet was at last forced to bribe him to abstinence by promising to tell him, yet again, the story of their grandfather's heroic escape from his cage. She sometimes suspected that it was not simply a taste for titbits which made Matthew choose the children's section for his home.

Worse was to follow. At the end of the week Harriet overheard Miss Pritchett saying on the telephone that she was thinking of importing a cat into the library. The time for strenuous measures had arrived.

After much reflection, it seemed to Harriet that only one course of action was open to her. She must appeal to Colonel Patch, trusting to those qualities she had always remarked in him: a kind heart, a keen sense of honour, a chivalrous attitude to women and, of course, the common bond of their interest in Jane Austen. These factors, she devoutly hoped, would be enough to bridge the gulf between the species.

Luckily *Persuasion* had been in its accustomed place on the shelf for some time, and Harriet calculated that the Colonel's next visit would not be long in coming. And so it proved; two days later the little mouse heard, with a fast-beating heart, the Colonel's well-known tread approaching. He was safe for a good browse before he actually took the book out, so Harriet had time to nerve herself for her task.

She had chosen *Sense and Sensibility* as her vantage point, hoping, perhaps, that some of Elinor Dashwood's resolution would rub off onto her



small admirer. When she could no longer delay—for the Colonel’s shifting foot and muttered “Hrrmph!” announced his imminent departure—she scrambled on top of the chosen volume and uttered a shrill squeak. It was meant to be the opening of a well-thought-out speech, but breath and courage for a moment failed Harriet together.

Only, however, for a moment. While the Colonel was looking about, in a puzzled sort of way, and wondering if his hearing aid had developed an electrical fault, Harriet nerved herself afresh.

“Colonel Patch!” she said—still, it must be admitted, with a tendency to squeak, but that perhaps was to be expected.

There is something in the sound of one’s own name, however faint, that commands attention. Colonel Patch looked again—and saw, to his astonishment, the tiny rounded form of a mouse, sitting up and spreading out her front paws to attract his notice.

“Good gracious me!” said the Colonel. “Did you address me—ah—madam?”

“Indeed I did, Colonel,” Harriet replied, steadying her voice to its normal well-modulated tone. “I want to appeal to you as a gentleman—as an animal and a brother.”

The Colonel gave an almost imperceptible start; but as one who had withstood enemy fire with intrepidity, he soon regained his self-command. Courteously he inclined his hearing aid in Harriet's direction.

"We have a further bond," she continued, with a flutter, "in our enthusiasm for the novels of Jane Austen" (she politely ignored the fact that his interest was limited to one volume), "and I feel sure you will not hesitate to assist one who unites the characters of harmless bibliophile and gentlewoman in distress."

The Colonel was not accustomed to be addressed by mice in such, or indeed in any language; but he rallied his faculties with aplomb.

"And how may I assist you, madam?" he enquired.

"My name is Harriet Price, Colonel—Mrs. Harriet Price," said Harriet, thinking it best to put the situation on a proper footing before she opened matters more fully. "I live here in the library, as does my cousin. We are clean, quiet and unobtrusive" (as far as Matthew was concerned she crossed her toes and devoutly hoped she was not stretching the truth too far), "and in this environment we are able to indulge our literary tastes in peace. I have, indeed," she said with lowered eyes, "written a short article for a scholarly journal, but my handwriting, though—I flatter myself—very neat, is so tiny as to make submission difficult."

"My dear Mrs. Price!" exclaimed the Colonel. "You astound me, ma'am! I had no idea that our humble library was such a repository of scholarship. And if I might ask the favour of reading your article, I have a powerful magnifying glass at home; I could, indeed, have the manuscript enlarged on a copier and typed for you."

"That would be delightful, Colonel Patch!" said Harriet. "Let me see—I have it hidden inside the cover of the *Minor Works*—ah, here it is. "'As Creepmouse as You Like"—Coarseness of Language and Sensibility in Tom Bertram.' I have sometimes flattered myself that *Persuasions* might be interested in my few modest paragraphs."*

Colonel Patch took the proffered pages and secured them carefully in his wallet, inside the pocket which held his credit cards.

"But what is distressing you, Mrs. Price?" he asked, reflecting that Harriet had not attracted his attention, at considerable risk to herself, in order that he might read her manuscript.

"A certain Mrs. Withersniff," she began, "a woman endowed with a very powerful voice. . . ."

"I know what you mean, ma'am," sighed the Colonel. "Mrs. Withersniff is very well-meaning, I've no doubt, but whenever she addresses me I get unpleasant vibrations in my hearing-aid. But I interrupt you; please go on."

Harriet noticed that his eyes were beginning to water, and his breath to wheeze. Could the Colonel be falling ill? she thought, alarmed.

"I was just going to say that Mrs. Withersniff caught a glimpse of my cousin a short time ago, and made herself so unpleasant to the librarian in

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consequence that Miss Pritchett is thinking of installing a cat in the library on a permanent basis.”

“A cat!” the Colonel exclaimed in horror. “Good heavens! Something must be done!”

“Yes, indeed,” said Harriet. “And, quite apart from the predatory tendencies of the feline, there is the danger that my cousin Matthew, if he can find so much as a darning-needle, will try to engage her in single combat—he models himself far too much, in view of likelihoods and probabilities, on Reepicheep, the mighty mouse of Narnia.”

“Military sort of chap, eh?” said the Colonel, pleased. “Plenty of bottle.”

“Bottle?” repeated Harriet in amazement.

“Courage, ma’am, courage.” The wheezing was much more perceptible now. “You can be sure, Mrs. Price,” he said, wiping his eyes, “that I shall do my best to prevent this invasion, for my sake as well as for your own. You see”—he wished there were some way of putting this delicately—“I have, most unfortunately, an allergy to fur; so we can make common cause without Miss Pritchett’s having the smallest knowledge of your personal difficulties.”

For herself and Matthew, Harriet was relieved; but she was hurt that, however blamelessly, she had occasioned the Colonel distress. The tears even rose to her eyes, but she reflected with thankfulness that in all probability Colonel Patch could not see them.

“My dear Colonel,” she faltered, “I am most grateful for your assistance—but truly concerned that I should have inconvenienced you in any way.”

“A trifle, dear lady,” wheezed the Colonel. “Your own fur is of so fine a texture that the inconvenience is really nothing. But I shall go and speak to Miss Pritchett without delay—I’m sure she will prove obliging.”

Harriet thought it highly likely—in fact, she had sometimes suspected that the librarian cherished a certain *tendresse* for Colonel Patch. At any rate, she certainly preferred him a thousand times to Mrs. Withersniff! And, watching with her bright little eyes round the corner of the bookshelf, it did not seem to Harriet that she or her new ally would be disappointed; Miss Pritchett positively radiated geniality.

One danger, at least, had been averted, and Harriet trusted that no greater peril would present itself in the near future to disturb her tranquillity. The difficulty of continuing her friendship with Colonel Patch—which Harriet hoped very much to do—presented quite another problem, and she decided to do her best to solve it in the many hours of reflection which were at her disposal.

In the meantime, she promised herself a few evenings of quiet celebration with *Pride and Prejudice*.