

DOUGLAS ENGLISH

"WEE TIM'ROUS
BEASTIES": STUDIES OF
ANIMAL LIFE AND
CHARACTER

Douglas English

**"Wee Tim'rous Beasties": Studies
of Animal life and Character**

«Public Domain»

English D.

"Wee Tim'rous Beasties": Studies of Animal life and Character /
D. English — «Public Domain»,

Содержание

PREFACE	6
MUS RIDICULUS	7
THE STORY OF A FIELD VOLE	23
THE APOLOGY OF THE HOUSE SPARROW	36
Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.	40

Douglas English

«Wee Tim'rous Beasties»: Studies of Animal life and Character



THE BLACK RAT SAT BACK ON HIS HAUNCHES, PRICKED UP HIS EARS, AND LISTENED.

PREFACE

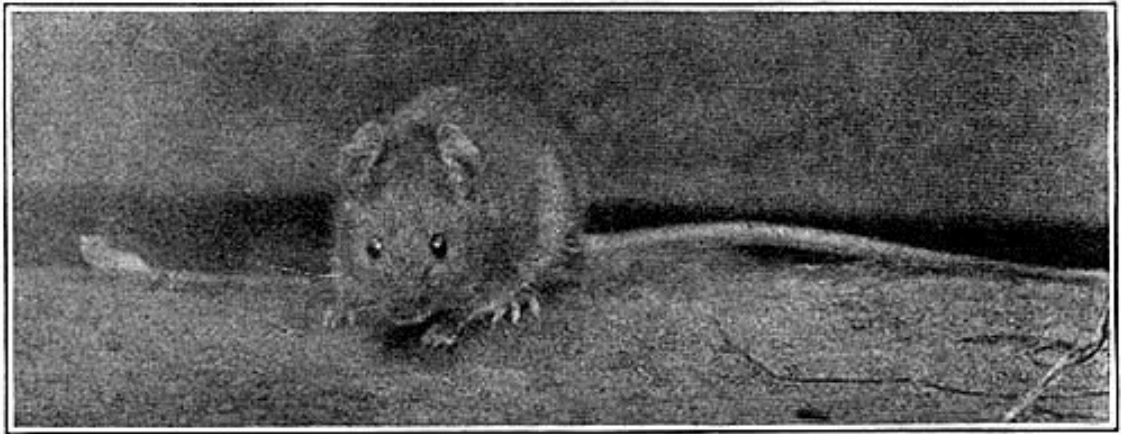
For permission to include in this volume "The Awakening of the Dormouse," "The Purple Emperor," "The Harvest Mouse," and "The Trivial Fortunes of Molge," I have to thank the Editor of the *Girl's Realm*, and for "The Story of a Field Vole," and "The Passing of the Black Rat," I am indebted to the courtesy of the Editor of *Pearson's Magazine*.

DOUGLAS ENGLISH.

Hawley,

Dartford,

September, 1903.



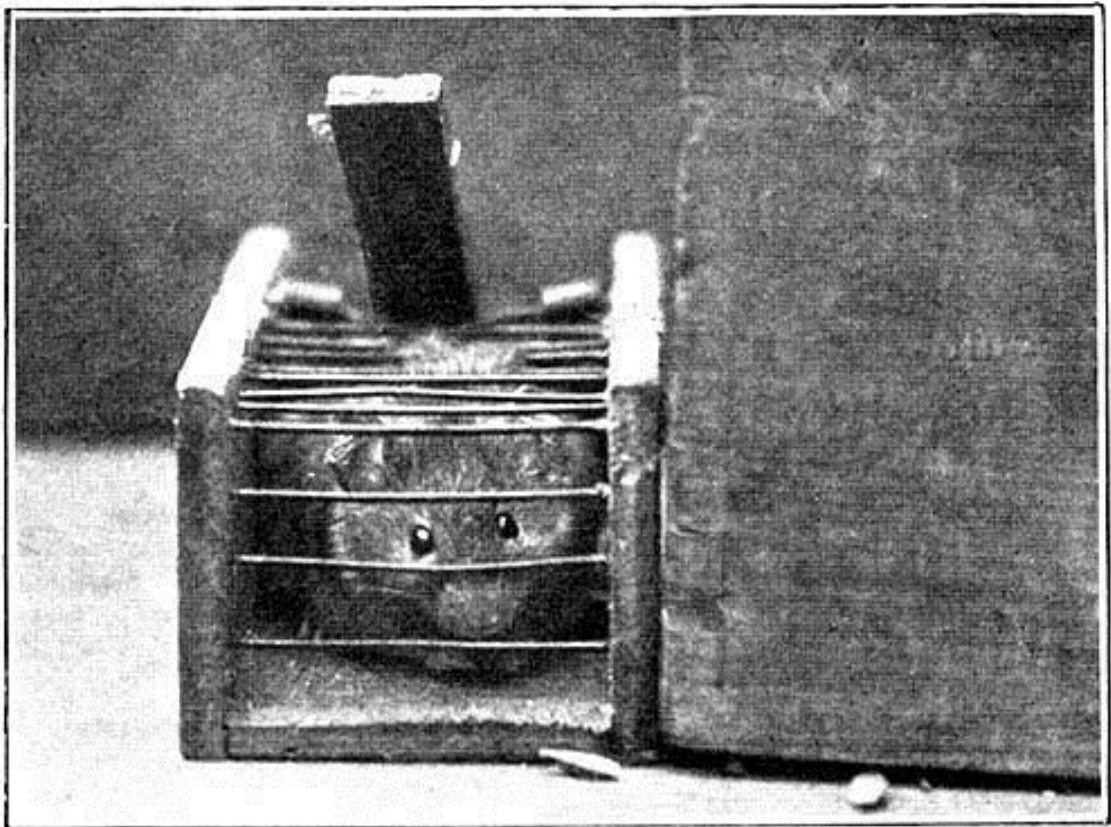
MUS RIDICULUS

Mus ridiculus! The taunt had been flung at him by a stout field-vole, and, by reason of its novelty as well as of its intrinsic impertinence, had sunk deep into his memory. He had felt at the time that "Wee sleekit, cowrin', tim'rous beastie" was but a poor rejoinder. But he knew no Latin and chose what was next in obscurity. Besides, he was a young mouse then, and breathless with excitement.

The scene rose vividly before him—the moon shining grimly overhead, and the mouse-folk stealing from the half-threshed stack across two fields into the farmstead.

Since that night he had never entered a wheat-stack, for fear of the leaving of it. For there are some things which, from a mouse standpoint, will not bear repetition.

There had been a grey, slanting ghost-swish above, and his brother had vanished skywards from within an inch of his side. He had turned to stone before two ice-cold eyes, and realized the honest yard of snake behind them. A stoat had passed him with its mouth too full to snap—and all within two fields.



MUS RIDICULUS!

Mus ridiculus! The vole was not so far wrong after all, for could anything, whose intelligence was otherwise than laughable, be in his present plight? In front of him were three horizontal wires, above him were nine more, on either side an upright wooden wall, behind him a slanting one, whose lower extremity nipped his tail. On the floor lay innumerable crumbs of evil-smelling cheese.

When the door of the trap had clicked behind him, he had naturally been startled. His fright, however, was due not so much to his surroundings—he was used to close quarters—as to the forcible restriction of his tail. Still, the cheese was within easy reach, and he had determined to enjoy it.

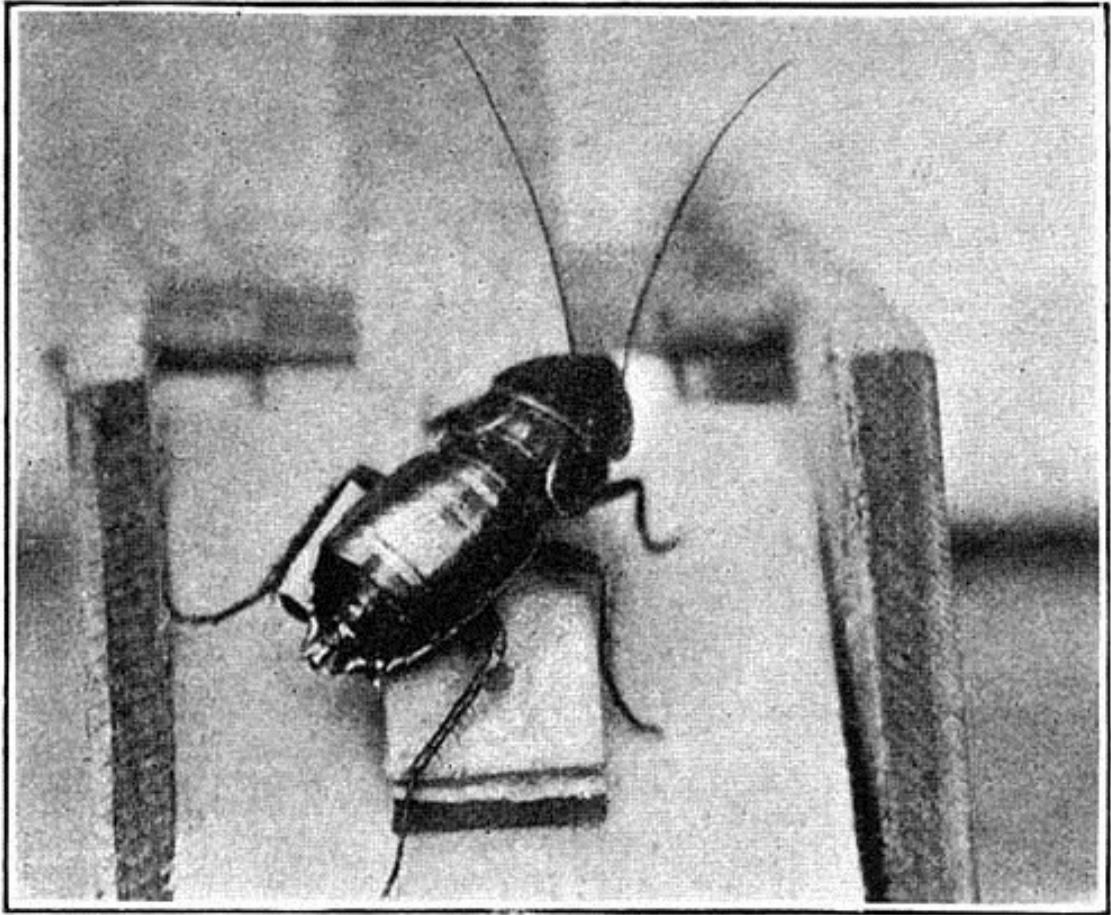
Indeed, he ate his full. Now, cheese on an empty mouse stomach acts as an intoxicant. He had fallen into a drowsy slumber, crouched in a back corner of the trap, and so he slept for an hour.

His awakening was gradual, but rude. It was due to a steadily increasing discomfort in his tail. It was not the first time, however, that he had realized that a long, tapering tail has its disadvantages as well as its uses. As a controllable balancing-pole, there is probably nothing to equal it. As a parachute, it serves its purpose in a precipitate leap. As a decoy, it frequently disturbs the enemy's aim. But, when once it is firmly jammed, it is liable to congestion, and this is what awoke the mouse.

At first he was inclined to treat the matter lightly. He had been caught by the tail often enough, after all. He tried the normal methods of release. Swinging round on his haunches, he caught the offending member between his two fore-paws, so as to ease it out by gentle side-shifts. Then he brought his tongue into play as a lubricant. Then he simply pulled. By this time he was fairly awake and could feel.

It was unfortunate that a door banged above him, for, mouse-like, he leapt forward with all his leaping strength. The leap freed him, but at a price, and the price was his tail, or, rather, all that made a tail worth having. For the first half-inch it proceeded soundly enough, a series of neat, over-lapping, down-covered scale-rings, then, for the next two-and-three-quarter inches it presented all the naked hideousness of an X-ray photograph. It was not so much the pain he minded as the indignity, and he surveyed himself with gloomy disgust. There was, however, just a grain of consolation. With an imprisoned tail, escape was impossible. Now that he was free to move, there was surely a chance of squeezing through those bars. He must take heart and gird himself for the struggle. No mouse, however, if he can help it, enters upon a serious undertaking ungroomed. So he sat back on his hind legs and commenced an elaborate toilet. First he licked his tiny hands and worked them like lightning across and down his face. This he continued for a full minute, until his whiskers bristled like tiny needles, without a speck of dust throughout their length. Then he combed the matted fur of his waistcoat with his teeth, and smoothed and polished it until every hair was a gleaming strand of silk. Finally he turned his attention to his back and sides, twisting his body cat-fashion to reach the remoter portions of himself.

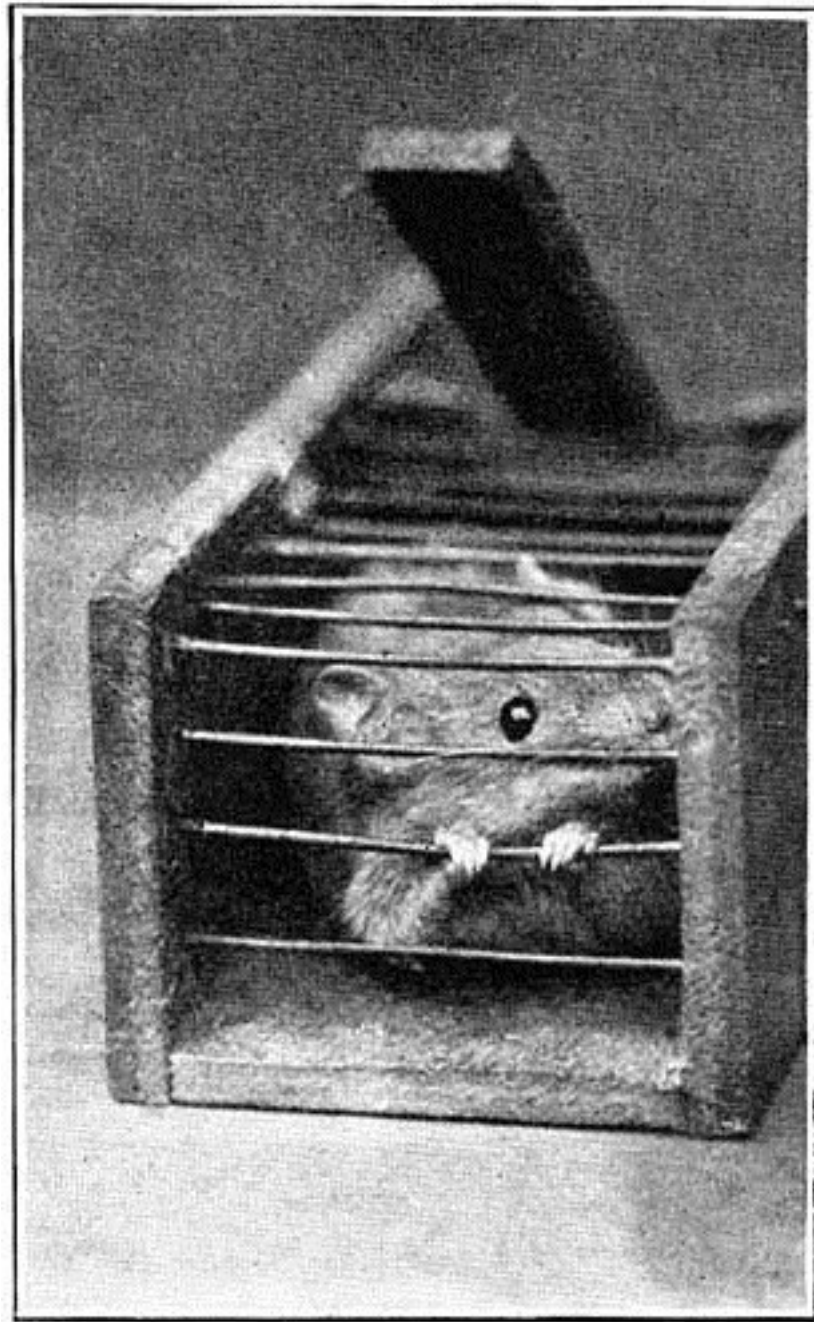
Once, in the middle of his operations, he stopped with a jerk and sat up motionless, save for a tremulous quiver of his muzzle. There was certainly something moving close at hand. Long before the faint vibration had reached his ears, his whiskers had caught it and flashed their danger-signal to his brain. It was only a cockroach, however. As it came in sight, he snapped at it viciously through the bars, and squeaked at its precipitate flight. Not that he grudged it the cheese crumbs, but his nerves were on edge, and it had frightened him.



IT WAS ONLY A COCKROACH, HOWEVER.

Body, head, and feet alike, were sleek and resplendent before he caught a glimpse of his disreputable tail. He was dubious as to whether polishing would have any beneficial effect on its appearance; but the stump, at any rate, must be healed, and to do this he set to work with nature's remedy. Taking the stripped portion in his fore-paws—for, to his astonishment, he found that he could not move it otherwise—he pulled it gently between his hind legs up to his mouth. It parted like a pack-thread. Somehow he felt indifferent. A rigid, lifeless tail was little use, after all. He was bound to lose it sooner or later, and he was too old to care what the other mice might think. Besides, as the father of a hundred and fifty, he was surely entitled to set the fashion. He licked the stump until it felt easy, shook himself once or twice, gave his whiskers a final polish, and prepared to walk out.

He felt sleek enough to squeeze through anything—confident, too, though just a trifle thirsty. It must have been the cheese, for the hot taste still lingered in his mouth, and he loathed the sight of the remaining fragments. He flicked them into a corner and carefully surveyed his position. The bars stretched at even intervals, above and in front. He tried each one separately and found that, with one exception, they were fixed and immovable. The exception was number three from the front above him. It was easily distinguishable from the others, for a curved wire swung free from its centre. When he gripped his fore-paws round it, he felt it twist in its sockets. Why did that curved wire rattle about when he touched it? Those from which he had stolen so many dainty morsels in the past had seemed fixtures. Perhaps he had gone too recklessly to work this time. He had certainly been extremely hungry. Anyhow, the bar from which it hung was loose—he would work that clear of the wood in no time, and so gain freedom.



HE TRIED EACH BAR SEPARATELY.

He raised himself on his hind legs and commenced gnawing vigorously at the socket-hole. The position was a terribly strained one, and time after time his teeth slipped and met with a scrunching jar upon the metal.

Then he leaped up and swung head downwards, gripping the bars with all four feet. In this position he could at least nip the cross-piece, and worry it with his teeth. Every muscle of his small body was strained to the utmost. The bar rattled in its sockets, slipped round once or twice, bent the merest trifle, and—jammed immovable as the others. He felt that he was wasting his strength, and dropped sullenly to the floor. He had never been so thirsty in his life; yet, true to his instincts, he started to wash his face and smooth his draggled fur afresh.

This time it was a harder task, for his mouth was parched and tender, and his fingers ached with exertion. Still, he managed to put his whiskers into proper trim, and pulled himself together, with every sense alert for the air-current which should betray some outlet.

He explored every cranny of his prison, slowly and calmly at first, then with increasing anxiety and speed. By using all his strength, he raised the door a tail's-breadth. For fully an hour he struggled at this chance of exit. Five times he forced his nose under the sharp wood edge, and sobbed as it snapped back, mocking at his failing strength.

It was not until he was sick with weariness, and mad with thirst, that he lost his head. Then he flung himself recklessly in every direction, bruising his poor body against the unyielding bars, desperate, grimy, pitiable.

Nature intervened at length, and lulled him into a semi-conscious, dream-bound indifference.

There was something to be said for the stack-life, after all. All good stacks come to an end, but, while they last, it is honey for the mouse-folk. Picture to yourself the basement of a wheat-stack, occupied by a flourishing mouse colony—five hundred tiny souls, super-abundance of food, and no thought for the morrow. The companions of his youth stole into his dream with all the vividness of early impressions. The long-tailed wood-mouse—a handsome fellow this, with great black liquid eyes, and weasel colouring; the harvest-mouse, that Liliputian rustic to whose deft fingers all good mouse-nests are indiscriminately assigned; the freaks, white, black, and nondescript; and, finally, the great brown rats.



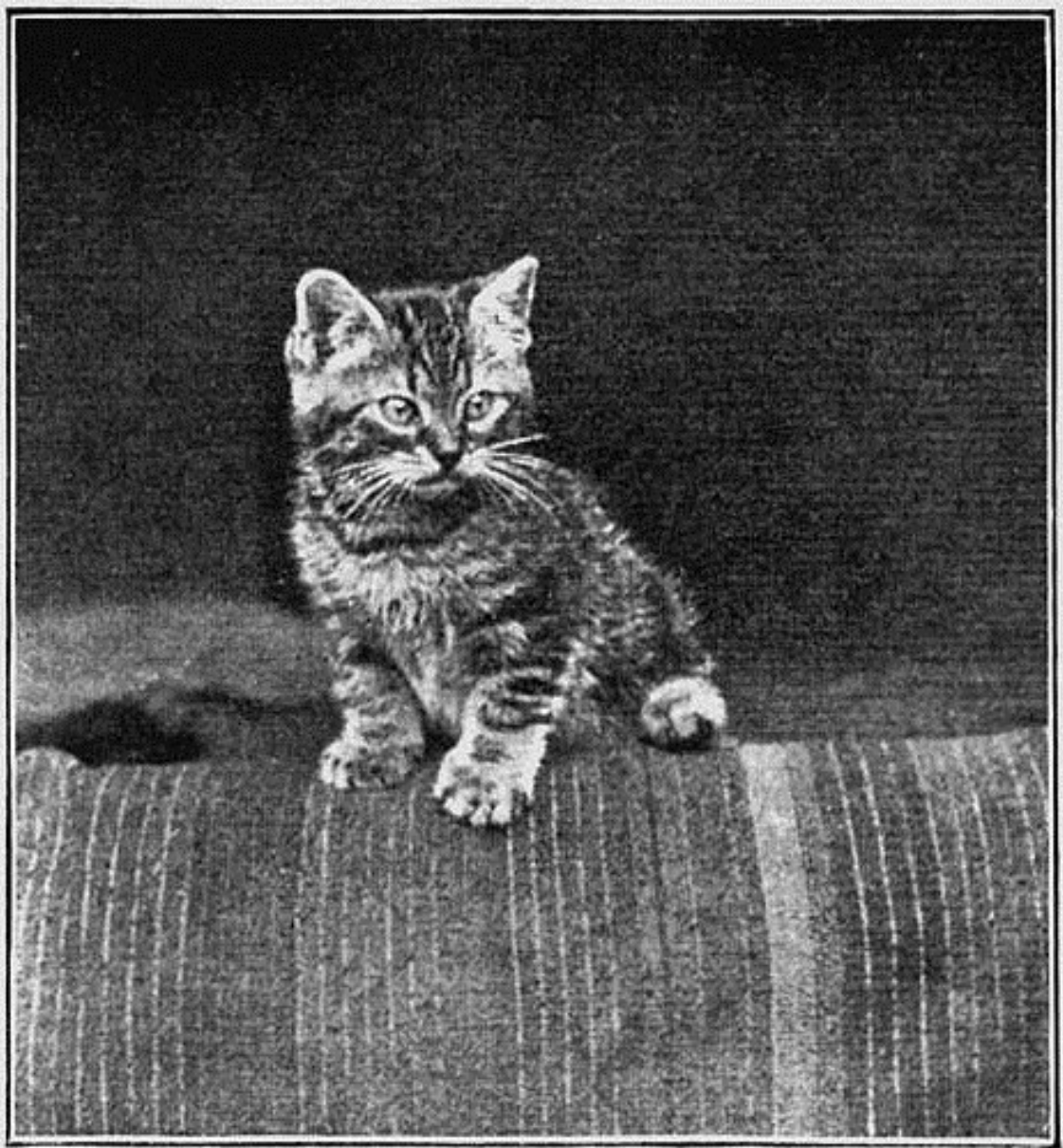
THE HARVEST MOUSE, THAT LILIPUTIAN RUSTIC.

In the presence of the latter he had always felt nervous, but he had recognized their usefulness. Had he not seen four of them combine and rout a weasel? In the midst of plenty they were harmless enough, at least they had never molested him. Moreover, they were the main tunnel builders, and it was refreshing for a mouse, who had wormed his way through two yards of powdery corn-husks, to find a run where he could stretch his limbs and scamper.

And what wild scampers those were! For free, unimpeded, safe racing, there is nothing to touch the rat tunnels of a wheat-stack.

He was a fortnight old when he first ventured out into the unknown. He remembered but little of his earliest sensations, only the vague comfort of nestling with six companions under his mother's soft fur, and the vague discomfort caused by her occasional absence. But that first journey was unforgettable. The maze of winding burrows, the myriad eyes peering at him through the darkness, the ceaseless patter of tiny feet, before, behind, and on all sides, the great brown rat sniffing dubiously as it passed, the jostling, the chattering, the squeaking. He had been a proud mouse when he had returned, and told his faint-hearted brothers what the great world outside was really like.

It was a bluebottle that roused him. It floundered heavily against the bars, crawled through, and brushed across his nose. No! he was not dead yet, but the bluebottle soon would be. He leaped at it, and, to his amazement, fell short and missed. Yesterday, he had cleared a flight of stairs with one light-hearted bound, and left a bewildered kitten at the top. He sank back heart-broken, and the bluebottle circled solemnly overhead, buzzing, buzzing, buzzing.



AND LEFT A BEWILDERED KITTEN AT THE TOP.

Buz-z-z-z! whir-r-r! He was back in the wheat-stack once more, listening to the dull humming of ten thousand bluebottles. From without came the sound of heavy tramping feet, whirring wheels, rough, human voices. The wheaten mass rocked and vibrated above his head: half the runs were choked, and he, with twenty more of his kind, sat cowering in a corner of the foundations. Nearer and nearer came the voices, for the thrashing had commenced at sunrise, and now, as evening approached, three-parts of the stack were gone. Only once had he ventured to the edge of his shelter and looked out. A pair of grinning jaws crashed against the outlet, and snapped within a hair's-breadth of his nose. It was his first sight of a terrier, and he realized that to break cover was certain death.

Death, indeed, was very busy outside. Every minute a dog's yelp, the shout of its master, and the dull thud of a bludgeon, told plainly enough the tale of some unhappy rodent's dash for freedom. And so the sun went down blood-red.

It was midnight, however, before the remnant gathered themselves together, and agreed on flight. The trek was headed by an old brown rat. Of the dozen that survived it, he was the only mouse.

Better, after all, to have never finished the journey, and, yet, why should he complain? He had lived longer than most, and had had his supreme moments.

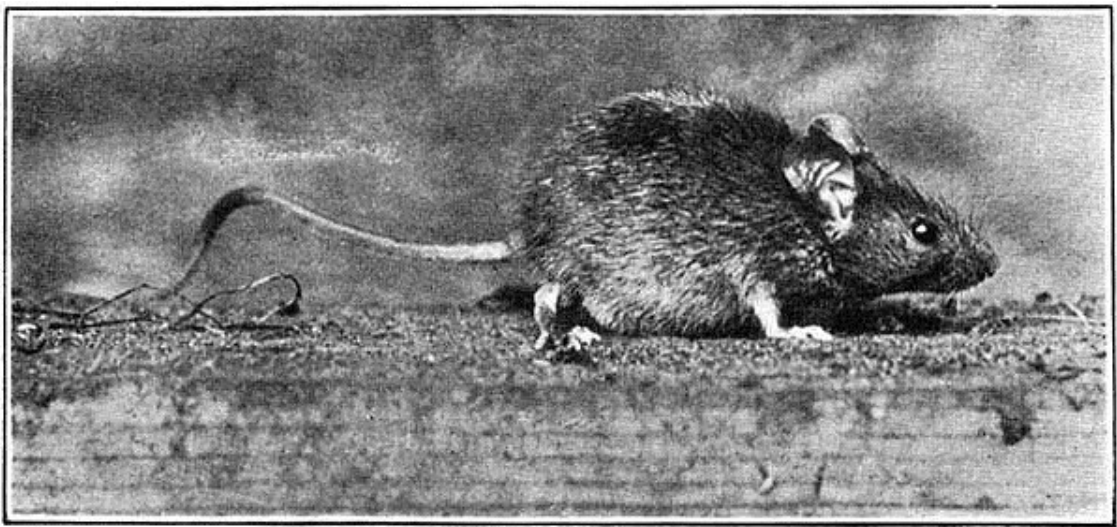
"The mouse behind the mouldering wainscot shriek'd."

He had been dozing behind the wainscot in the dining-room, and the squeak of irritation had been due to a passing spider. The apt quotation reached him through the panel.

"*Squeaked*, surely?" The correction came in a soft, woman's voice.

"No, *shrieked*; I am certain of it."

"Squeaked, I think; a mouse doesn't shriek."



HE RUSHED OFF TO TELL HER BEFORE HE SHOULD FORGET IT.

"Ah, but this mouse had a poetic licence."

"Look it up."

"I will."

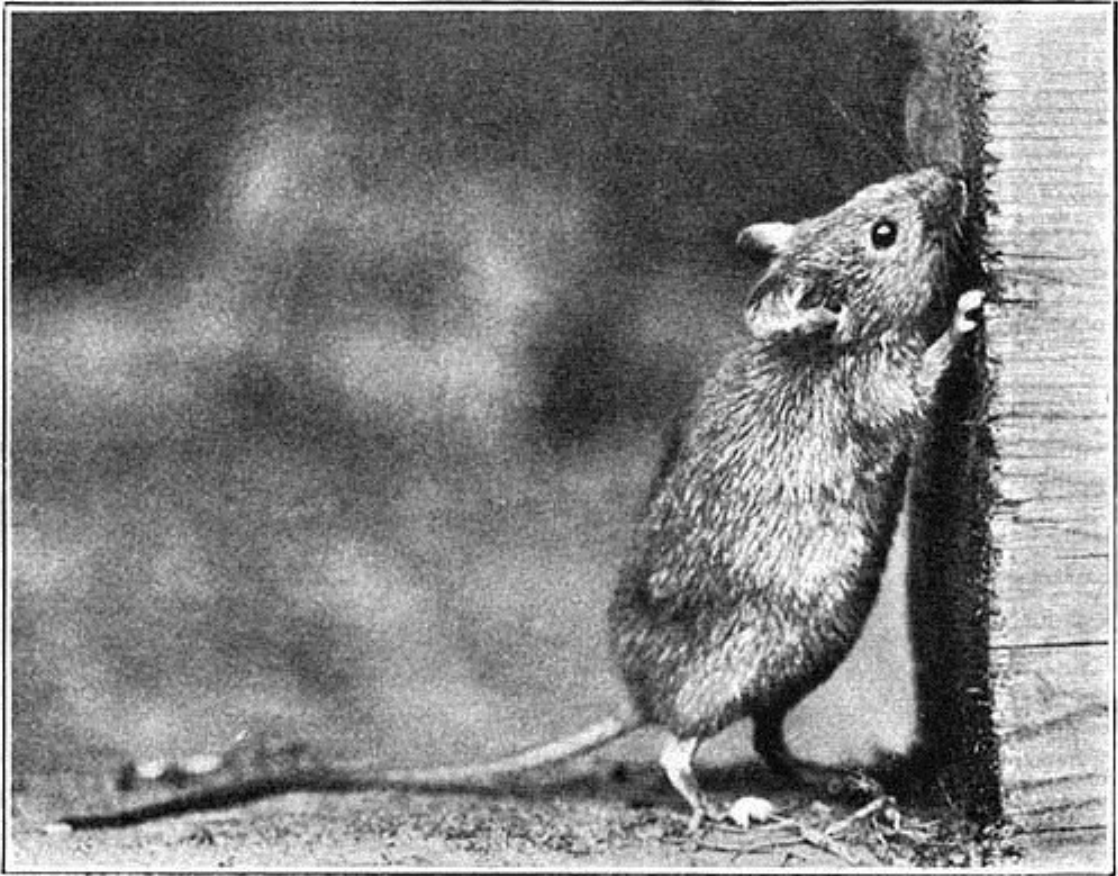
The book was taken from within two inches of where he sat.

"Shrieked' it is."

It amused him vastly, for he had never shrieked in his life.

"Do you like mice?" It was the first voice speaking again.

"Hate them—smelly little things."



SHE WAS A VERITABLE QUEEN AMONG MICE.

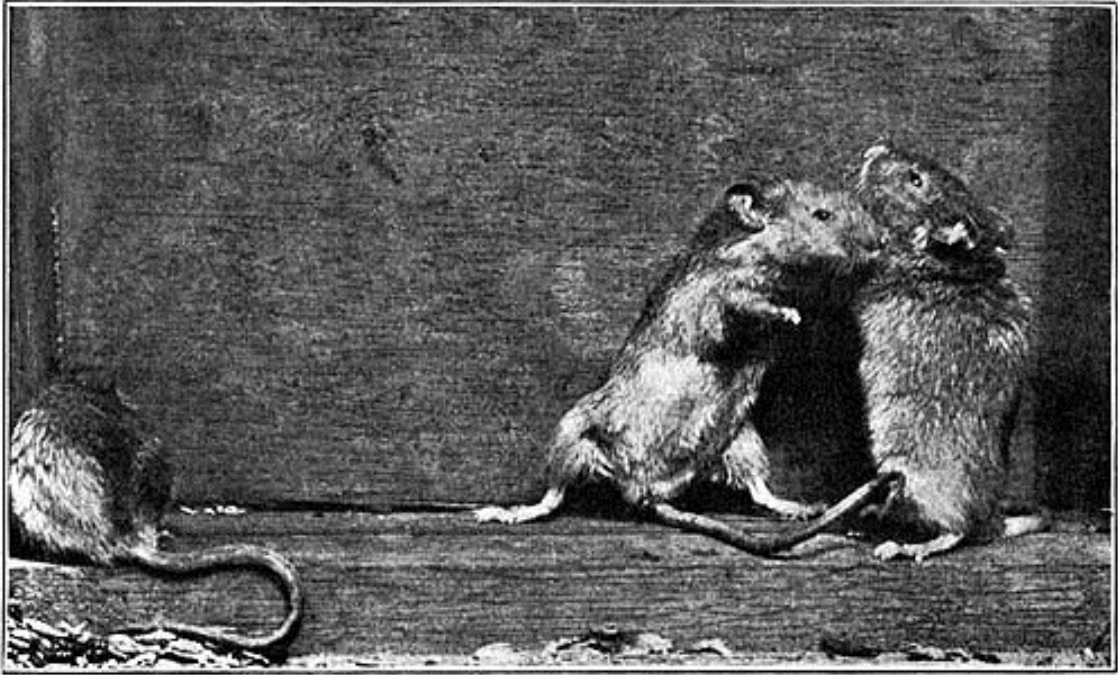
“Do you remember that thing of Suckling’s?—

“‘Her feet beneath her petticoat,
Like little mice, ran in and out,
As if they feared the light.’

“Pretty, rather, I think.”

“What’s pretty?”

“Oh, I don’t know—your feet, I suppose.”



HE HAD FOUGHT FIVE SUITORS TO WIN HER.

He felt disappointed. Surely it was the feet that profited by the comparison. Still, he knew that the whole conversation would amuse his wife, and rushed off to tell her before he should forget it.

He had been rather anxious about her of late. Only the previous evening he had peeped from behind the bookcase and seen her backed into a corner, and defying six feet of solid humanity with brandished paws. Behaviour of this kind was courageous, but unmouselike, and would assuredly get her into difficulties.

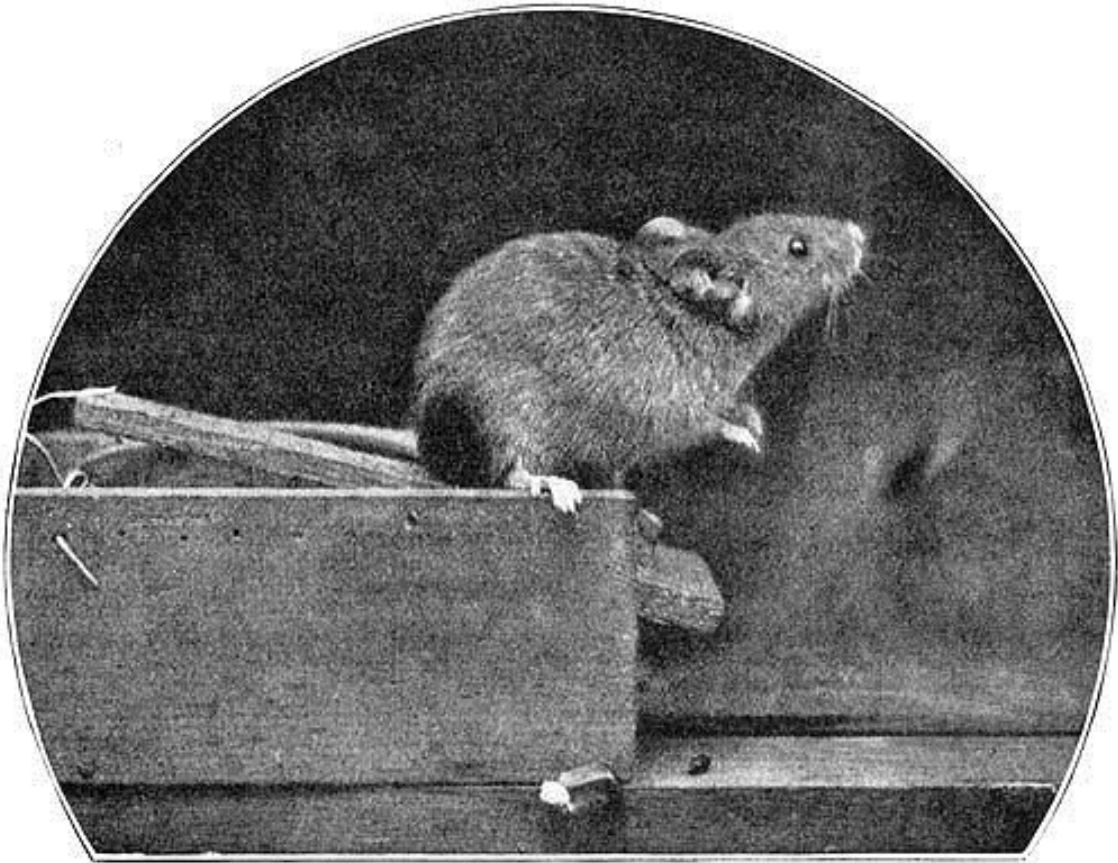
He found her in the midst of tiny wisps of paper, thread, and wool, that had been her chief concern for three days past.

"Did you ever *shriek*?" he cried.

"No," she replied; "but I shall do if you can't be less clumsy."

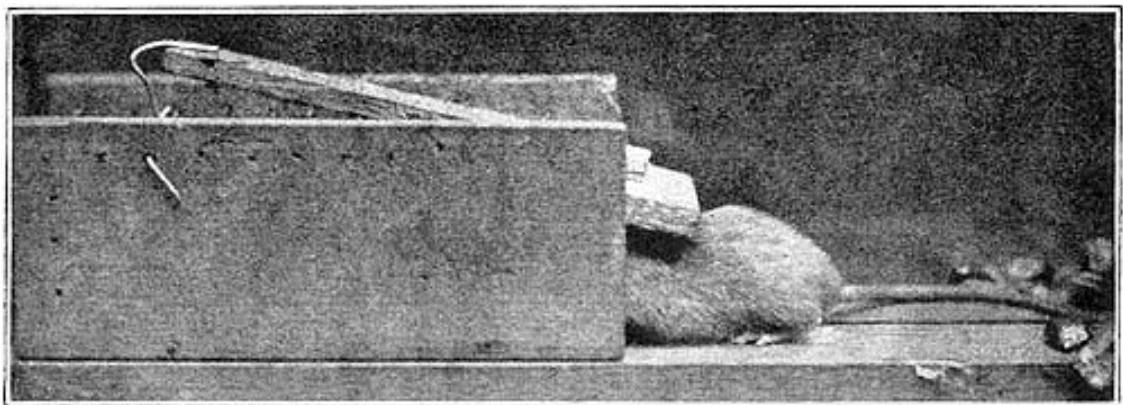
He looked at her in amazement. Then the truth burst upon him. He was the father of seven, and was awkwardly seated upon three of them.

She had been a good wife to him, this first. He had three especial favourites, the first, the third, and the sixth, but it was unquestionably the first that he had been the most proud of. She was a veritable queen among mice, and he had fought five suitors to win her. The madness of it! He had gone from basement to ceiling, challenging all and sundry who ventured to dispute his claim. But she was worth it. All he knew of house-life he had learnt from her. It was she who showed him the way to rob a trap. First she would sit upon the spring-door and satisfy herself that it was not lightly set, then with flattened body she would steal beneath it, and push, instead of pull, the bait.



FIRST SHE WOULD SIT UPON THE SPRING-DOOR.

Under her guidance he learnt every nook and corner of the rambling house, the swiftest ways from garret to cellar, the entrances and exits of the runs, their sudden drops and windings, and all the thousand intricacies of architecture that make life under one roof possible for both mice and men.



THEN WITH FLATTENED BODY SHE WOULD STEAL BENEATH IT.

He learnt, moreover, from her that fighting the cat was merely a game of patience, and that even the human male has a warm corner in his heart for the mouse that is bold enough to approach him.

And yet she fell a victim to the cat herself. It was out of pure bravado that she crossed its tail to prove that a cat with its eye on a mouse-hole has no eye for anything else.

He, too, had been in the cat's clutches once. It was hardly to his discredit. He had been with his wife at the time, had heard the sneaking footfall, and was in the act of pushing her into shelter when he felt himself pinned down.

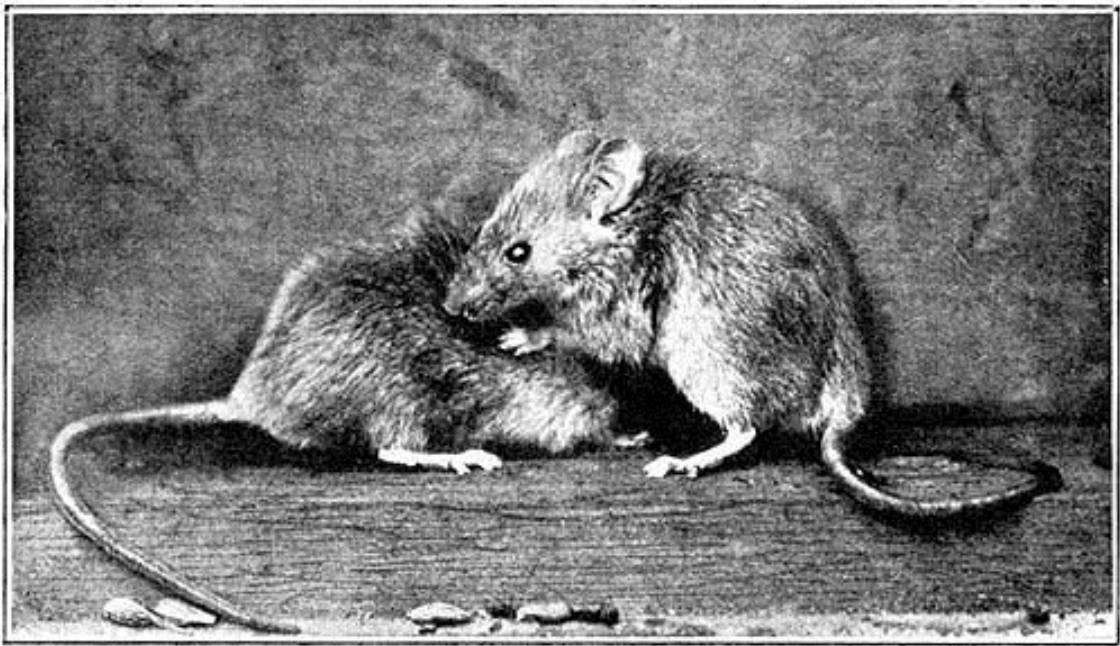
The moment the cat's paw touched him he had relaxed every muscle and feigned death. The ruse succeeded. The cat loosened her hold, and he had a two-yard run before he was pinned afresh.

Then he was flung into the air and caught like a ball, dashed aside and caught again, and swung, and twirled, and shaken, until he was too dazed to move a limb, and lay, a yard away from his tormentor, staring stupidly into her eyes. Yet he had received no mortal hurt.

He owed his rescue to a human hand, and the hand smoothed his poor draggled coat, and pushed him inside his hole, while the cat complacently purred. For two long hours he lay just within the entrance, exhausted, but unattainable, and for two long hours the cat sat waiting for his reappearance. Whenever he raised his head their eyes met.

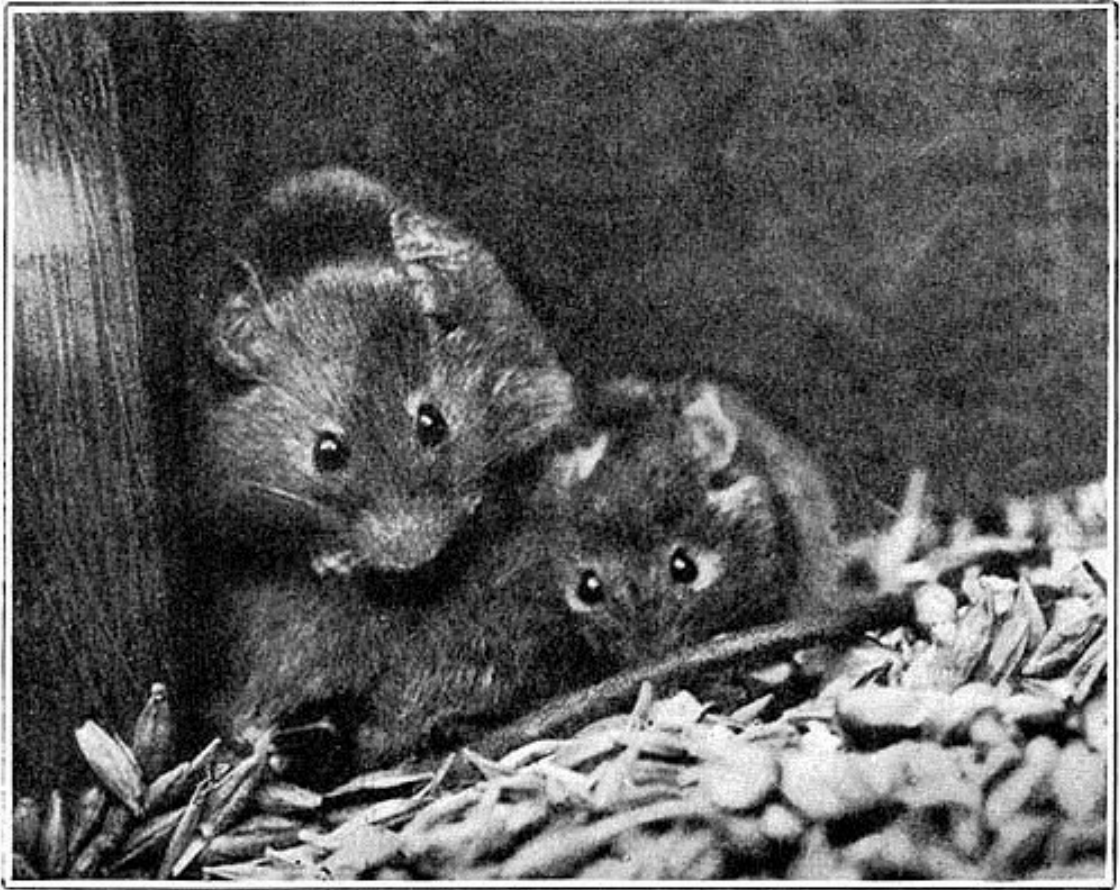
Their eyes were meeting now. Consciousness returned to him for a few seconds, and in those few seconds his blood turned to water, even as before. She sat on the window-ledge outside. Her muzzle was pressed against the glass, and he could trace the snarling curl of the lips, which just revealed her teeth. He cowered back as far as possible. Sooner or later she would find her way inside—and then?

He had only once been actually caught, but he was very near it in the corn-bin. Now, a house-mouse has no right whatever in the corn-bin, and yet it was a point of honour with the house-mice that they should visit their stable relations at least once a week. It was the love of excitement, more than the love of corn, which impelled them.

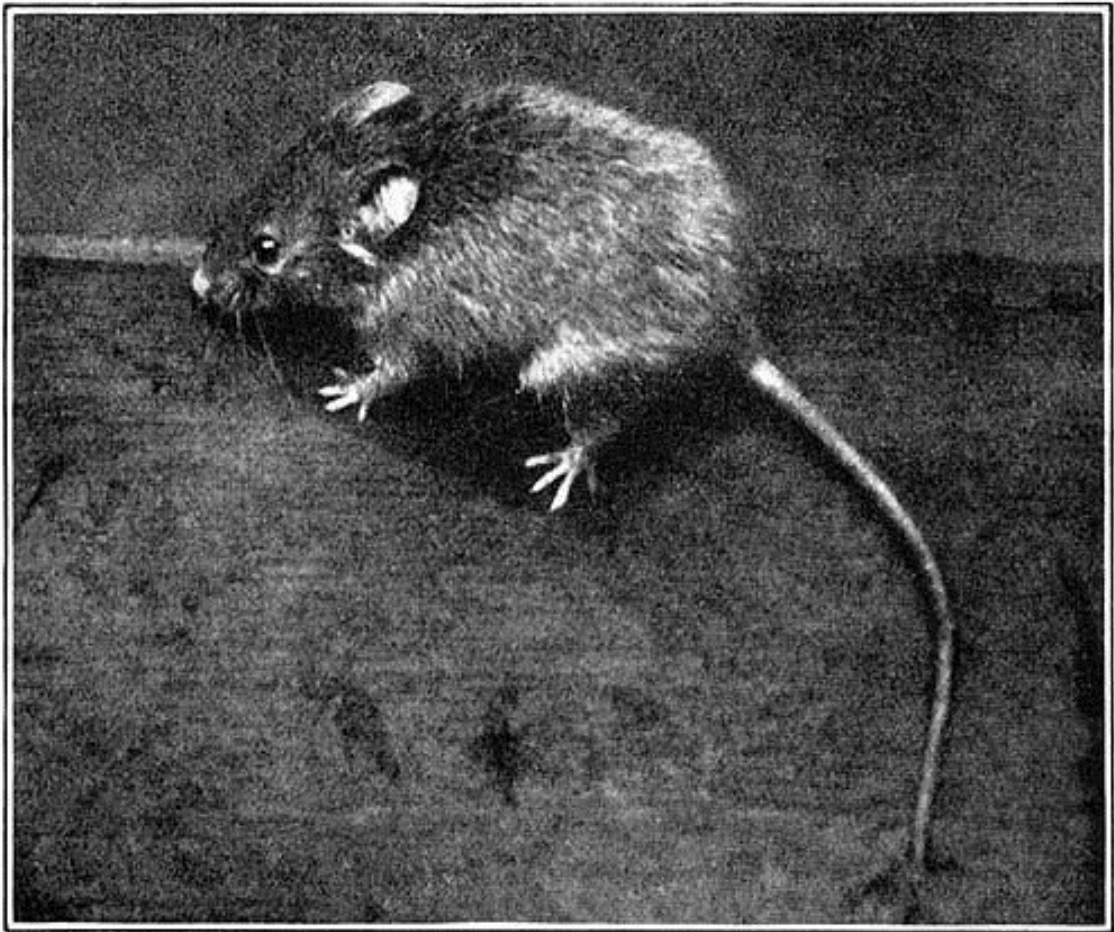


WAS IN THE ACT OF PUSHING HER INTO SHELTER.

Crossing the yard was always risky work, whether one skirted the shadowy side of the wall, or made a bold dash in the open. Then the simplest way into the storeroom was through a hole in the corner of the window-sill, and to reach this meant a clamber along a half-inch ledge, with the certainty of falling into the water-tank if one missed one's hold. Finally, the stable itself was the training-ground for the household kittens.

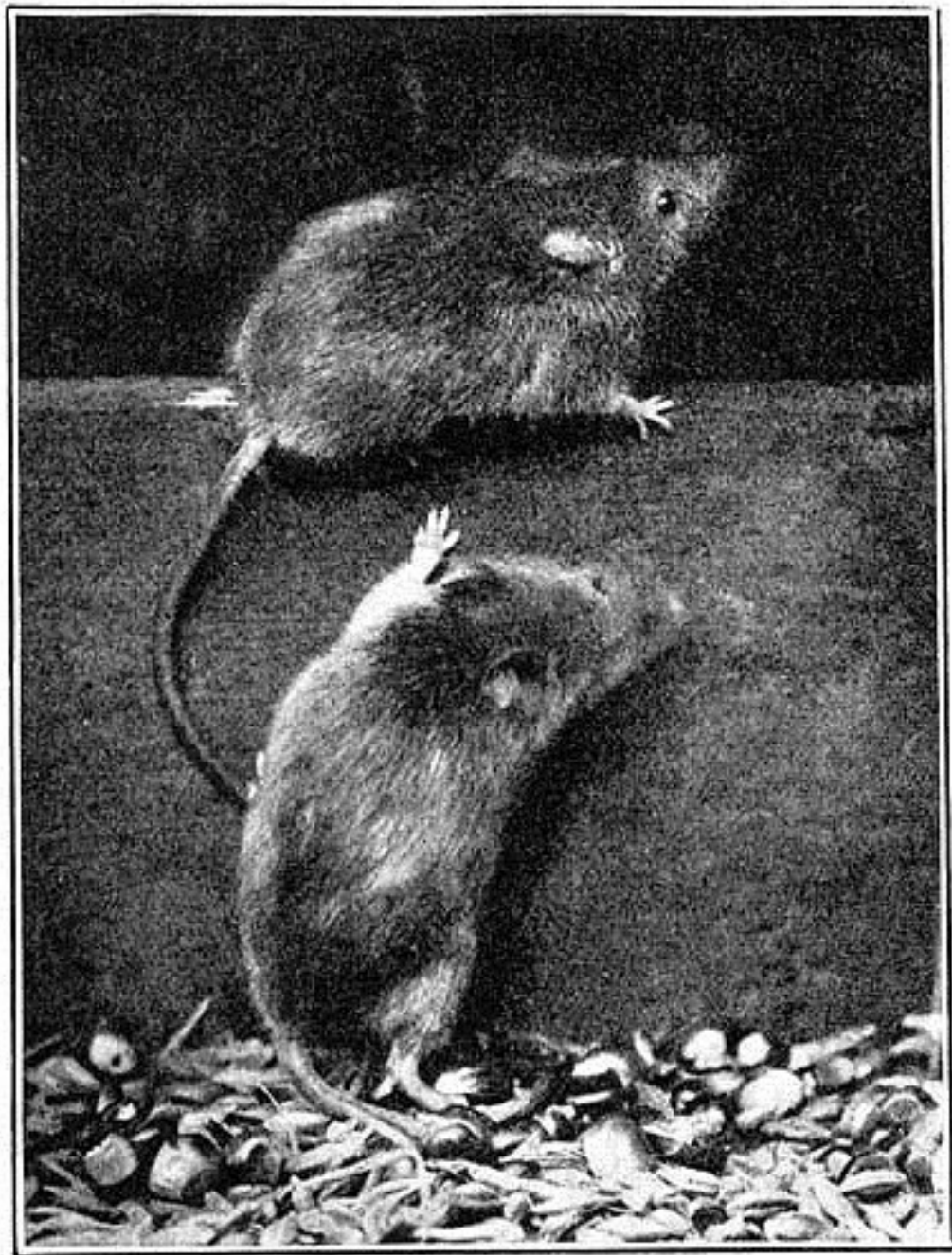


THEIR STABLE RELATIONS.



A CLAMBER ALONG A HALF-INCH LEDGE.

It was not a kitten, however, but a dog that so nearly terminated his career. There must have been thirty or forty mice in the corn-bin at the time. The lid was suddenly flung open, their eyes were dazzled by the blaze of an upheld lantern, and, before they could realize their position, a terrier was amongst them, dealing out scientific murder. Fortunately, he, with one companion, had been where the corn was highest, and a frantic scramble had landed them over the edge of the bin and down behind it. But, from where he lay, he could hear plainly enough what was happening. The mice were leaping in every direction against the polished sides of the bin, missing their footing and falling back into the terrier's mouth. His final recollection was of five and twenty small corpses laid out in a neat row upon the stable floor. Perhaps half a dozen of his companions had escaped by burrowing in the corn.



A FRANTIC SCRAMBLE LANDED THEM OVER THE EDGE OF THE BIN.

He awoke with a start this time, for the trap had suddenly turned up on end. The door was standing open, but a shadow hung across it, and the mouse felt the shadow—*and shrieked.*



THE STORY OF A FIELD VOLE

His earliest recollections were somewhat confused, nor is this to be wondered at, for he was one of eight, and in the same hole lived another family of seven, fifteen tiny creatures in all, of the same age and outwardly indistinguishable.

Under such circumstances it is difficult to retain one's individuality, let alone one's impressions. Moreover some little time had elapsed before he really *saw* his companions. Not that he was long actually blind,—that is the prerogative of the carnivora, but his career commenced some feet below the surface of the earth, at the termination of a long winding burrow, and a full fortnight had elapsed before he eluded his mother's vigilance, and, after a clumsy scrambling ascent, beheld for the first time the tall green grasses which shrouded the entrance, and the blue of the sky peeping down irregularly between them.



HIS FIRST SENSATION WAS ONE OF EXTREME COLD.

His first sensation was one of extreme cold, for his fur was at this time little better than down; Nature's brilliant colouring only dazzled and frightened him; his tender skin shrank from contact with the sharp-edged herbage, and, after a short blundering excursion, he was glad to scuttle down below once more.

His next effort was more successful. His fur had thickened, and, like all good voles, he had the sense to defer his exit until the evening. Still, even when he had reached the mature age of three weeks, the murky, warm atmosphere below ground proved more seductive than any other, and he spent the greater portion of his existence there, sleeping, nest-making, or fighting with a companion over food.

The making and re-making of the nest was learnt on kindergarten principles. At first he was employed in softening slender grass filaments, by dragging them through his teeth; then he learnt to intertwine them, and sat in the middle of an ever-growing sphere of delicate network; finally, like his mother, he tackled large, stiff grass stems, biting them into short lengths, and splitting them, or letting them split themselves, lengthways. By the time he was a month old, he was an expert nest-builder, and, given the material, could build a complete nest for two inside the hour.

On the score of meat and drink he had no anxieties. A marshy meadow had been selected by his forbears for colonization. The burrow terminated outwardly on the bank of a half-dried watercourse, and, within its recesses, was all manner of vegetable store—seeds, bulbs, leaves, clover, and herbs in fascinating variety and profusion. Nor was there any lack of greener food. Bog-grass surrounded the burrow, and the most succulent portion of bog-grass is the most easily attained.

He soon learned to reach up on his hind legs and gnaw the standing plant. The management of a dry and slippery corn-ear at first presented some difficulty, but, as his muscles strengthened, he found himself able to sit up on his haunches and hold it squirrel-fashion in his fore-paws, nibbling, to begin with, at the pointed end, which is the best way into most things. Once, as the family were grubbing together, a nut turned up at the back of the pile. After a desperate conflict, he secured it, but, the tough shell was too much for him. It takes a red vole's training to reduce a nut.



NIBBLING, TO BEGIN WITH, AT THE POINTED END.

So the weeks passed on, and he grew thicker and sturdier and more furry. He was never graceful, like his cousin the red vole, for his face was blunted, his eyes small, and his tail ridiculously insignificant. Nor could he cover the ground with the easy swinging jump that makes one suspect relationship between the red vole and the wood-mouse. Still for a common, vulgar, agrarian vole, he was passable enough, and could hold his own, tooth and nail, with his nest-fellows.

He was five weeks old before he commenced to go out foraging on his own account. He never ventured far, but contented himself with timorous excursions along the banks of the watercourse, crouching amid the undergrowth, and ready, at the first scent of danger, to glide with flattened body back to cover. Sometimes he accompanied his mother on her visits to distant portions of the

colony, but the old vole more often left her octet behind, and then he would lie huddled up with his companions, waiting for the squelching sound of her footsteps, as she returned across the mud, and quarrelling in anticipation of what she would bring.



READY, AT THE FIRST SCENT OF DANGER, TO GLIDE BACK TO COVER.

Now and again a different sound would reach the hollow—the dragging tail swish of the water-vole, or the fussy scramble of some belated moorhen. These he soon learned to distinguish from the stealthy, broken, hanging footfall of the beast of prey. When that was heard, both he and his companions would crouch together in the darkest corner of the burrow and hold their breath.

Once such a sound stopped abruptly and close at hand; a faint foetid odour permeated from without, and he felt instinctively that the enemy was at the gate. The danger passed, but that night the old vole failed to return.

The night following the same sound came, and ceased. This time, however, the silence was succeeded by a fierce scratching, and he soon realized that the entrance to the nest was blocked, and that something, bigger and stronger than he yet knew of, was working its way nearer and nearer. There was a clatter of falling stones and earth, and the “something” was whirling in their midst. Wild confusion followed. The whole interior of the nest seemed occupied by a swift-circling, curling, sinuous form.

Small as he was, and crouching as only a vole can crouch, there was no escape from contact with it. Three times the hot loathsome breath hissed over him, as he lay flattened to the ground. Then, as the lithe body swept round, he was flung aside, and, by a lucky chance, found himself opposite the outlet. In an agony of terror he scrambled up the shaft, and concealed himself in an adjoining grass-tuft. He was sick, and dizzy, and bruised all over.

Scarcely had he recovered sufficient coolness to look about him, when the object of his terror emerged with dripping jaws, and he was enabled, for the first time, to form an opinion of the arch-enemy of vole-kind.

To avoid the bird of prey, a vole need only remain below the surface; to avoid the little gentleman in black, he need only rise above it; but from the grim pursuit of the weasel, bent on meal or murder, there is no escape.

Terror-stricken as he was, he could hardly help admiring the easy supple swagger of the creature's movements. She held her broad browed head erect, the bristles pointed like needles from her blood-streaked muzzle, grit and pluck could be traced in her every movement, and, in her eyes, universal defiance.

Down the dark watercourse she went, twisting her lithe chestnut body S-wise in and out of the coarse grass-clumps. A frog leaped before her. In a flash she had flung herself upon it, her white teeth clicked together in its brain, and she sauntered slowly out of sight, bearing her latest victim in her mouth. It was hideous. To eat vegetables was natural enough, but to eat living, quivering flesh! A sickening faintness crept over him, and it was full an hour before he could leave his shelter.

Very cautiously he retraced his steps to the familiar entrance, and stopped to listen. A flood of moonlight burst through the clouds, and his trembling shadow danced ink-black before him. He was a clear mark for every kind of foe, yet he still paused irresolute. It was too horribly silent below. A clumsy whirring beetle alighted at his feet and stumbled heavily down the hole. Another followed. He turned and fled, blindly, recklessly, anywhere to escape that exhaling reek of murder.



HE STILL PAUSED IRRESOLUTE.

Away from the watercourse the grasses grew shorter and more slender. It was easy, but risky going. Small pyramids of soil dotted the ground in different directions, some massed together almost in circles, others at wider intervals. At the edge of one of them he stopped and commenced idly burrowing with his fore feet. For a few inches the light, crumbling earth yielded easily to his efforts. Then the floor seemed to subside beneath him, and he found a shelter ready made. Two narrow rough-hewn tunnels led from beneath the centre of the heap. He rested for a few minutes, then started to explore one of them.

It could hardly be described as a burrow, for, at intervals, it was half choked with earth-falls, and he had to work his way through them. In direction it was fairly straight. After a few yards progress he found its termination. It opened on a larger tunnel running at right angles to itself.

The sides of this latter were smooth and polished, smoother even than those of the approach to the old home. It was wide enough for two voles to run abreast in. The straggling grass-roots which hung overhead proved it of trifling depth. Indeed, the roof was very thin, in places hardly solid. Through these the moonlight seemed to filter down, forming dull bluish patches on the floor.

From the main road passages branched out at intervals. He turned into one of them. The sides were rough and crumbling, and it came abruptly to an end. He soon retraced his steps, but paused when he had regained the meeting of the ways. Something was approaching along the main tunnel. He took the wisest course, and crouched within the shelter of the side gallery. A crimson pointed snout, a huge paddling foot, and a dark shapeless mass passed in quick succession before his eyes, and vanished in the darkness.

As it swept by, the foot caught the crumbling edge of his retreat, covering him with a shower of light mould. For the second time he experienced the sickening, paralyzing agony of fear. This was succeeded by an irresistible impulse to break cover. He sprang into the main shaft once more, determined to take advantage of the first outlet. A shadowy blue glimmer shone before him, and he quickened his pace towards it. Suddenly the light was extinguished, the walls of the tunnel seemed to cave in around him, in front of him he heard a dull, choking gasp, and he found his nose in contact with a warm, palpitating velvet body.

This time his nerve failed him completely, and he lay absolutely motionless, conscious, with only a dull indifference, that death stared him in the face. But death seemed slow in coming, and, as he lay, his indifference changed to a fierce longing, first for a speedy end of it all, then for life at any price. Slowly and with difficulty he lifted his head; the dark mass lay silent alongside of him, and the faint movements had ceased. He could trace the creature's hind foot, it was rigid and cold. Then the truth burst upon him. He had nothing to fear—the owner of the foot was dead.

Still, he could scarcely move his limbs, for the soil lay thick and heavy around him. After a prolonged effort he disengaged his fore feet, and started to scratch himself free. On one side of him lay the dead body; he worked vigorously along it. He was checked, however, by an obstacle beyond his strength. The body was enclosed by a tight-fitting ring, and on this he could make no impression.

Fastening his tiny fingers in the fur on one side, and scraping with his free fore-paw on the other, he forced his way upwards. The soil grew lighter above him, and in a few minutes he had reached the upper air, and lay panting on the surface.

He then tried to pick up his position. The mole-run had brought him some two hundred yards, nearly to the edge of the marshland. Across the boundary rose a small plantation. Here he determined to seek shelter. He had but fifty yards to go, and started to glide stealthily from tuft to tuft.

On all sides the ground was alive with tiny insects. The larger kinds seemed mostly to be sleeping. He ran full tilt against a drowsy butterfly, sweeping its close-folded wings through half a circle, as he passed. They sprang back with a jerk, but the insect itself remained motionless. Grasshoppers clung to every other grass-stem; their eyes were dead and staring. Here and there he saw a spider gripping its support and waiting for the sunrise.



HE TRIED TO PICK UP HIS POSITION.

Once he found himself confronted by a bloated toad. The amphibian surveyed him solemnly, but never moved. A low hiss whistled through the grass. He crouched in terror while four feet of grass-snake undulated by. A shrewmouse broke cover in front of him, followed by its mate. The air resounded with shrill defiant squeaks as the two bunchy velvet balls rolled over one another out of sight.

So he worked his way along towards the boundary; pausing at intervals to gnaw at the growing plant-stems, or to sit on his haunches and nibble some fallen seed which took his fancy.



VOLE-LIKE THIS LATTER WAS, YET HE WAS NO ORDINARY VOLE.

It was close to the plantation that a familiar movement in the grass seemed to betray the presence of a near relation. Hastening towards it he found himself confronted by a total stranger. Vole-like this latter undoubtedly was, yet he was no ordinary vole. Delicate chestnut fur, brilliant white feet, a whitish waistcoat, and a paste-coloured two-inch tail proclaimed the red vole at once.



In size there was little to choose between them, and they sat gazing at each other for some moments stolid and undismayed. Yet, despite the equality of fighting weight, he felt himself somehow the inferior creature. His thoughts ran on the old legend of the field-vole who mated with a wood-mouse of high degree, and whose descendants to this day bear the marks of their noble origin. So, when the stranger turned and leapt lightly into the undergrowth that fringed the wood, he humbly tried to follow.

That was no easy matter, for, where the other jumped, he could only scramble, and on the flat he felt himself hopelessly outclassed. Still, once beyond the outskirts of the wood, the tangled thickets gave way to something less luxuriant, and he could sight his leader more frequently. All at once he checked himself, and, with a sudden access of natural caution, flattened himself to earth. He had blundered into the red-vole community.



A WOOD-MOUSE OF HIGH DEGREE.

Five small active forms were gliding hither and thither among the fallen leaves. They were too busy to notice him, and were evidently working with some method, for, at intervals, one or the other would make his way slowly to a definite spot, and then return light-footed to his task. He edged a little closer to observe them. Then the meaning of it flashed upon him. They were nut-hunting.

Sometimes the nut was carried in their mouths, sometimes rolled along the ground, sometimes wedged between the chin and fore-paws, but, when they reached their goal, it seemed to vanish.



SO, WHEN THE STRANGER LEAPT LIGHTLY INTO THE UNDERGROWTH.

Of this there could be but one solution. The nuts were being taken to a burrow-entrance. Curiosity overcame him, and, seizing a quiet moment, he slipped down the burrow. It plunged abruptly for about a foot, passed under a curving root, squeezed between some small root branches, and terminated in a double compartment. Three nuts hit him from behind as he descended.



HE HUMBLY TRIED TO FOLLOW.

To his left lay the nest, a mass of feathery grass and mosses. He slipped into it, and, as he cleared the shaft entrance, the three nuts followed with a rush. He lay there quiet until his eyes had become accustomed to the semi-darkness.

Then he perceived that he was not alone. The right-hand portion of the hollow held a lady tenant. She had her back to him, and was busily employed in the storeroom. He could just distinguish that the farthest recess held a great pile of nuts, and that her business was to collect the nuts as they toppled down the shoot, and stack them in as small a space as possible.



SHE PAUSED, AND HE SAW HER SNIFF SUSPICIOUSLY.

Suddenly she paused, and he saw her sniff suspiciously, she swung round, and he was discovered. He had barely time to back into a corner, before she was upon him, and at the first nip, he knew that he had met a better vole. Over they rolled, scratching, biting, tearing. Her sharp, chisel teeth met in his ear and tore the half of it away. The blood blinded him, but he stuck grimly to his task.



SHE SWUNG ROUND, AND HE WAS DISCOVERED.

Physically he was at an immense disadvantage. His clumsy movements availed but little against the fierce agility of the red vole. Time after time he snapped at her and missed; for, even as he aimed, she could swing her lithe body round and leap upon him from behind. Nor, when they grappled, could he retain his hold on her. Against the leverage of those powerful hind legs he could do nothing.

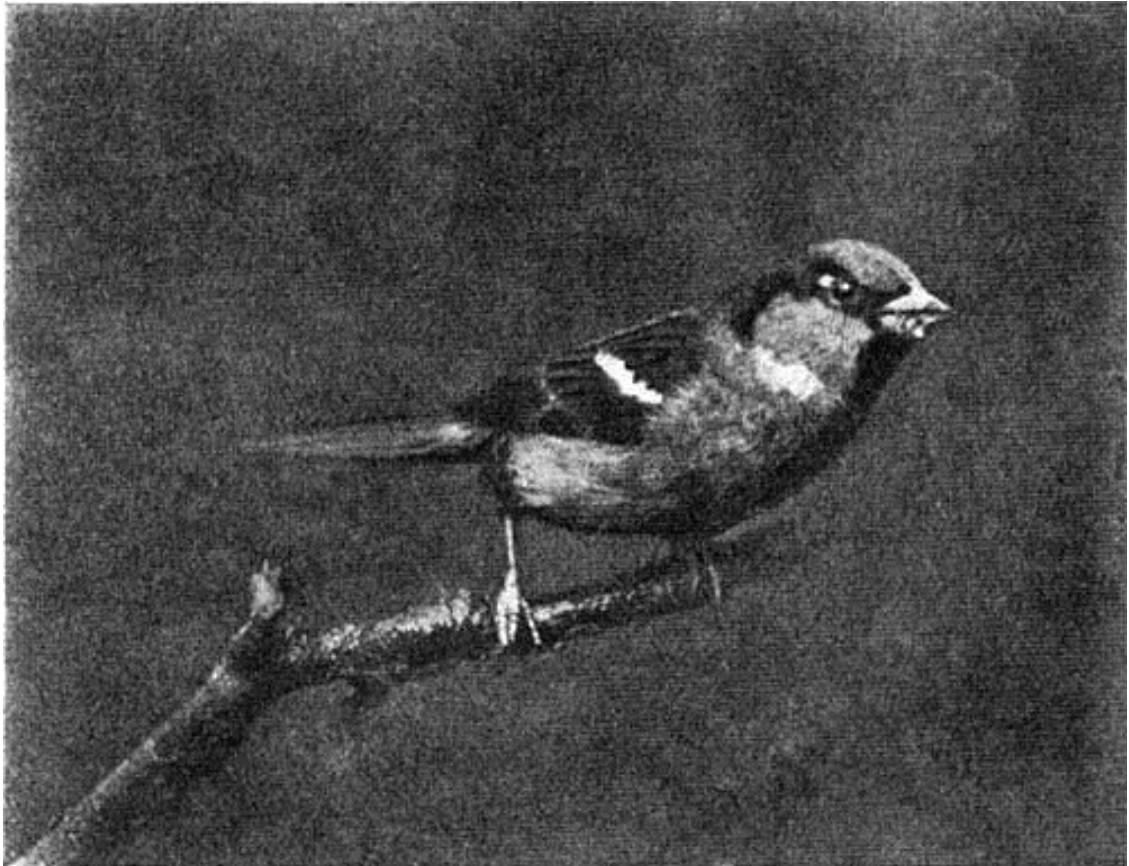
His cause, moreover, was a bad one. Was he not the intruder? and when was ever mercy accorded to such among four-footed things? His strength was fast failing when he fled, hotly pursued, up to the open once more. He only exchanged one foe for four. Lacerated, faint, and bleeding, he crouched, waiting for their attack. It was a short and savage one. An owl hooted above, the red voles rushed to cover, but he remained behind.

He had only really felt one bite. A pair of razor teeth had nipped his spine, and—he had hardly noticed a dozen other wounds. He was terribly thirsty, and struggled to reach a dewdrop which hung above his head, but his hind legs were paralyzed and powerless. Gradually his eyelids drooped, and he sank slowly over on one side. It was growing very dark and very cold.

THE APOLOGY OF THE HOUSE SPARROW

[Note.—It would not be morally profitable to describe how I learnt Sparrowese. The language of the sparrow is the language of the gutter. I have Englishized it throughout.]

"I was the odd egg, for one thing," said the sparrow. He was speaking with his mouth full, as usual.



HE WAS SPEAKING WITH HIS MOUTH FULL, AS USUAL.

"What on earth do you mean by that?" I replied.

He laughed offensively. "Do you know anything about sparrows?" he sneered.

I confessed I did not know much.

"I never knew any one write about them who did," he went on. "What was I saying when you interrupted me?"

"You said you were the odd egg," I replied. "What *is* an odd egg?"

"Do you know what a *clutch* is?" His intonation was insolence itself.

"A clutch," said I, "is, I believe, a sitting of eggs destined to be simultaneously hatched."

"Perhaps you may have noticed," said he, "that in our family"—his every feather bristled with importance, and the white bars on his wings were beautifully displayed—"we do not confine ourselves to a single monotonous pattern of egg."

"A string of variegated sparrows' eggs was one of my earliest treasures," said I.

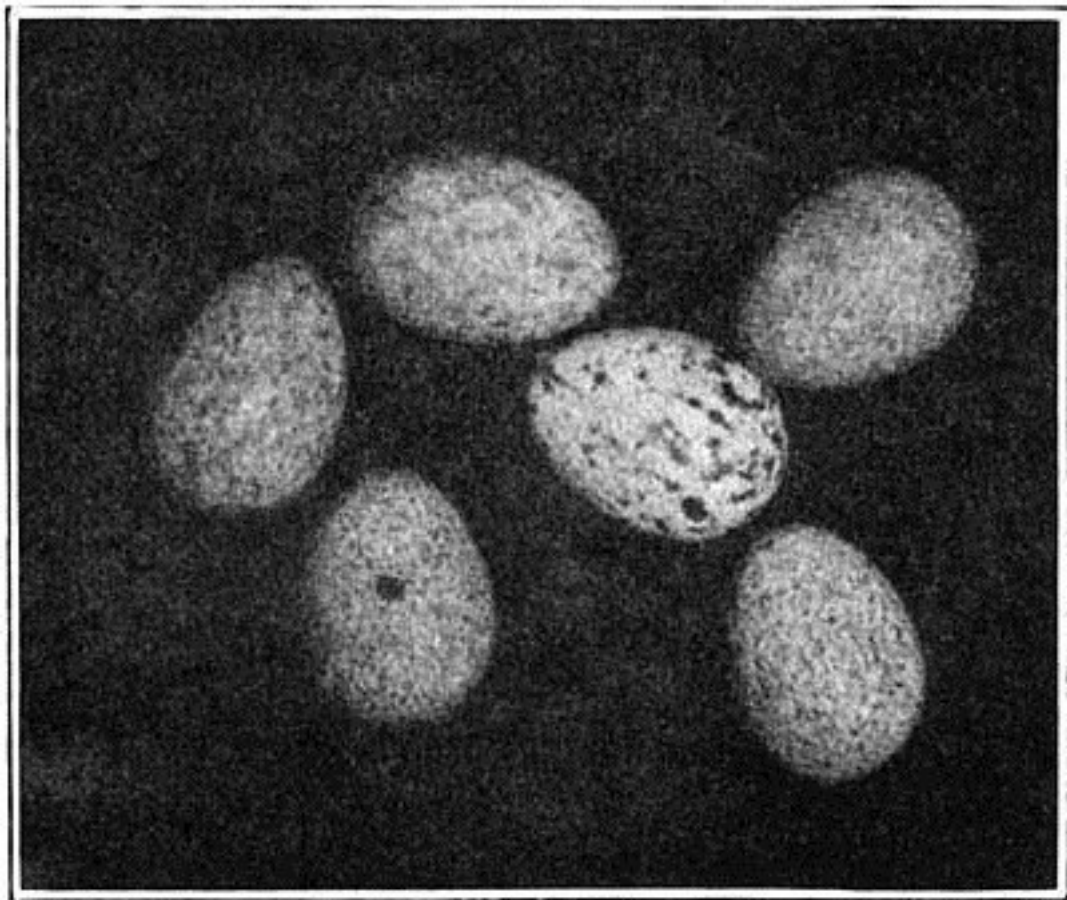
"Well, then, if you know that much, and don't know what the odd egg is, you must be a fool," said he.

It is hard to be insulted by a sparrow, and, as it is, I have toned down the expression, but I preserved a meek silence.

"Any one," he went on, with bland condescension, "who has seen a few clutches of sparrows' eggs, and has not noticed that there is an odd egg in each clutch, must be an uncommonly poor observer."

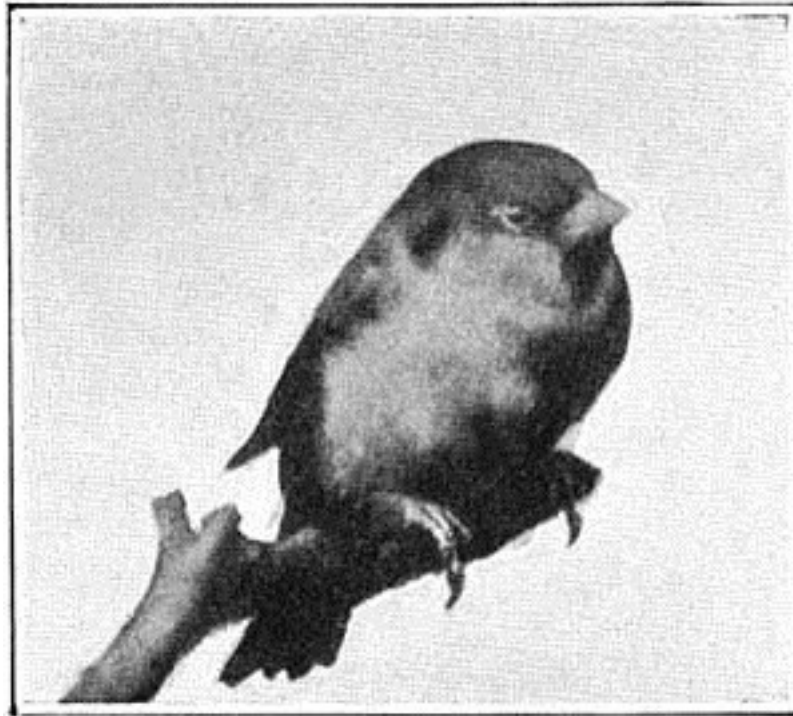
"It is not in the books," I ventured to protest.

"Books!" he screamed, "books! What do the people who write books know about sparrows? And yet, do you know that there has been more ink spilt over sparrows than over any other bird? that laws innumerable have been passed concerning sparrows? that associations have been formed to exterminate sparrows? that—that—that—"



THERE IS AN ODD EGG IN EACH CLUTCH.

The excitement was too much for him; he had been keeping time with his tail to this declamatory crescendo. With the last effort he cocked it a shade too high, lost his balance, and landed, considerably ruffled, some four feet beneath his own reserved and particular twig. His eye was on me, and I felt it too serious a matter for laughter. He made what was evidently intended for a dignified ascent, choosing, with minute exactness, the steps he had originally employed on my approach. It was a full minute before he broke the silence, and for that full minute I had to preserve my gravity.



IT WAS A FULL MINUTE BEFORE HE BROKE THE SILENCE.

"Have you any clutches by you?" he said at last.

I had, and fetched them.

"Now," said he, "look at that one, four dark and one light; look at this, four light and one dark; and at this, six light mottled, and one among them with a few black spots."

I had to admit that it seemed true.

"True," said he, "of course it's true. Didn't I tell you that I was the odd egg myself?"

"Well, *one* of you had to be the odd egg, I suppose?"

"Wrong again," said he. "What you don't seem to realize is, that the odd egg is nearly always addled; in my case it wasn't."

"Then, in your case," said I, "there was one more mouth to feed than your parents expected. How did they take it?"

"Mother kept it quiet as long as she could," said he.

"And father?"

"Father didn't find out for a day or two, and when he did, he pushed one of my brothers over the side of the nest—he did holler for his life!"

The little beast was actually chuckling at the recollection.

"He hung head downwards by one leg, and wouldn't let go till father dug his beak into him."

"Brutal," I murmured.

"Brutal! not a bit of it. You can't feed more than a certain number of nestlings; besides which, there wouldn't be room in the nest. As it was, I fell out before I could fly."

"What happened then?"

"Why, the old folks came and fed me, and helped me back again the shortest way up the bark. Brutal, wasn't it? A martin wouldn't do that."

"Which reminds me," said I, "that you were not born in a martin's-nest. Are trees the fashionable quarter just now?"

"They've come in more since thatched roofs went out," said the sparrow. "It's tree or martins'-nests nowadays."

"You do really drive away the martins, I suppose?"

“Yes,” he sniggered; “poor, dear little martins! Look here,” said he, and his voice changed from a snigger to vicious earnest. “We sparrows are just about sick of being accused of bullying martins. White of Selborne started it, but he didn’t know what it would lead to. Would you like to know the truth of the matter?”

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

Текст предоставлен ООО «ЛитРес».

Прочитайте эту книгу целиком, [купив полную легальную версию](#) на ЛитРес.

Безопасно оплатить книгу можно банковской картой Visa, MasterCard, Maestro, со счета мобильного телефона, с платежного терминала, в салоне МТС или Связной, через PayPal, WebMoney, Яндекс.Деньги, QIWI Кошелек, бонусными картами или другим удобным Вам способом.