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Opening extract from
The Rescuers

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Chapter One

THE MEETING

“LADIES AND GENTLEMEN,” cried the Chairwoman Mouse, “we now come to the most important item on our autumn programme! Pray silence for the secretary!”

It was a full meeting of the Prisoners’ Aid Society. Everyone knows that the mice are the prisoner’s friend – sharing his dry breadcrumbs even when they are not hungry, allowing themselves to be taught all manner of foolish tricks, such as no self-respecting mouse would otherwise contemplate, in order to cheer his lonely hours. What is less well known is how splendidly they are organised. Not a prison in any land but has its own national branch

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of a wonderful, worldwide system. It is on record that long, long ago a Norman mouse took ship all the way to Turkey, to join a French sailor-boy locked up in Constantinople! The Jean Fromage Medal was struck in his honour.

The secretary rose. The chairwoman sat back in her seat, which was made from beautifully polished walnut shells, and fixed her clever eyes on his greying back. How she would have liked to put the matter to the meeting herself! An enterprise so difficult and dangerous! Dear, faithful old comrade as the secretary was, had he the necessary eloquence? But rules are rules.

She looked anxiously over the assembly, wondering which members would support her; there were at least a hundred mice present, seated in rows on neat matchbox benches. The Moot-house itself was a particularly fine one, a great empty wine cask, entered by the bung, whose splendid curving walls soared cathedral-like to the roof. Behind the speakers' platform hung an oil painting, richly framed, depicting the mouse in Aesop's Fable in his heroic act of freeing a captive lion.

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“Well, it’s like this,” began the secretary. “You all know the Black Castle...”

Every mouse in the hall shuddered. The country they lived in was still barely civilised, a country of great gloomy mountains, enormous deserts, rivers like strangled seas. Even in its few towns, even here in the capital, its prisons were grim enough. But the Black Castle!

It reared up, the Black Castle, from a cliff above the angriest river of all. Its dungeons were cut in the cliff itself – windowless. Even the bravest mouse, assigned to the Black Castle, trembled before its great, cruel, iron-fanged gate.

From a front seat up spoke a mouse almost as old and rheumatic as the secretary himself. But he wore the Jean Fromage Medal.

“I know the Black Castle. Didn’t I spend six weeks there?”

Around him rose cries of “Hear, hear!” “Splendid chap!” and other encouragements.

“And did no good there,” continued the old hero gravely. “I say nothing of the personal danger – though what a cat that is of the Head Jailer’s! –

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twice natural size, and four times as fierce! – I say only that a prisoner in the Black Castle, a prisoner down in the dungeons, not even a mouse can aid. Call me defeatist if you will—”

“No, no!” cried the mice behind.

“—but I speak from sad experience. I couldn’t do anything for my prisoner at all. I couldn’t even reach him. One can’t *cheer* a prisoner in the Black Castle—”

“But one can get him out,” said the chairwoman.

There was a stunned silence. In the first place, the chairwoman shouldn’t have interrupted. In the second, her proposal was so astounding, so revolutionary, no mouse could do more than gape.

“Mr Secretary, forgive me,” apologised the chairwoman. “I was carried away by your eloquence.”

“As rules seem to be going by the board, you may as well take over,” said the secretary grumpily.

The chairwoman did so. There is nothing like breeding to give one confidence: she was descended

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in direct line from the senior of the Three Blind Mice. Calmly sleeking her whiskers—

“It’s rather an unusual case,” said the chairwoman blandly. “The prisoner is a poet. You will all, I know, cast your minds back to the many poets who have written favourably of our race – ‘*Her feet beneath her petticoat like little mice stole in and out*’ – Suckling, the Englishman – what a charming compliment! Thus do not poets deserve specially well of us?”

“If he’s a poet, why’s he in jail?” demanded a suspicious voice.

The chairwoman shrugged velvet shoulders.

“Perhaps he writes free verse,” she suggested cunningly.

A stir of approval answered her. Mice are all for people being free, so that they too can be freed from their eternal task of cheering prisoners – so that they can stay snug at home, nibbling the family cheese, instead of sleeping out in damp straw on a diet of stale bread.

“I see you follow me,” said the chairwoman. “It is a special case. Therefore we will rescue him. I

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should tell you also that the prisoner is a Norwegian. Don't ask me how he got here, really no one can answer for a poet! But obviously the first thing to do is to get in touch with a compatriot, and summon him here, so that he may communicate with the prisoner in their common tongue."

Two hundred ears pricked intelligently. All mice speak their own universal language, as well as that of the country they live in, but prisoners as a rule spoke only one.

"We therefore fetch a Norwegian mouse *here*," recapitulated the chairwoman, "dispatch him to the Black Castle—"

"Stop a bit," said the secretary.

The chairwoman had to.

"No one more than I," said the secretary, "admires the chairwoman's spirit. But has she, in her feminine enthusiasm, considered the difficulties? 'Fetch a mouse from Norway' – *in the first place!* How long will *that* take, even if possible?"

"Remember Jean Fromage!" pleaded the chairwoman.

"I do remember Jean Fromage. No mouse

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worthy of the name could ever forget him," agreed the secretary. "But he had to be got in touch with first, and travelling isn't as easy as it used to be."

How quickly a public meeting is swayed! Now all the chairwoman's eloquence was forgotten; there was a general murmur of assent.

"In the old days," continued the secretary, "when every vehicle was horse-drawn, a mouse could cross half Europe really in luxury. How delightful it was to get up into a well-appointed coach, make a snug little nest among the cushions, slip out at regular intervals to a nose-bag! Farm carts were even better; there one had room to stretch one's legs, and meals were simply continuous! Even railway carriages, of the old wooden sort, weren't too uncomfortable—"

"Now they make them of metal," put in a mouse at the back. "Has anyone here ever tried nibbling steel plate?"

"And at least trains were speedy," went on the secretary. "Now, as our friend points out, they are practically impossible to get a seat in. As for motorcars, apart from the fact that they often carry

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dogs, in a motorcar one always feels so conspicuous. A ship, you say? We are a hundred miles from the nearest port! Without a single mail coach or even private carriage on the roads, how long would it take, Chairwoman, to cover a hundred miles in a succession of milk floats?"

"As a matter of fact," said the chairwoman blandly, "I was thinking of an aeroplane."

Every mouse in the hall gasped. An aeroplane! To travel by air was the dream of each one; but if trains were now difficult to board, an aeroplane was believed impossible!

"I was thinking," added the chairwoman, "of Miss Bianca."

The mice gasped again.

Everyone knew who Miss Bianca was, but none had ever seen her.

What was *known* was that she was a white mouse belonging to the ambassador's son, and lived in the schoolroom at the embassy. Apart from that, there were the most fantastic rumours about her: for instance, that she lived in a porcelain pagoda:

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that she fed exclusively on cream cheese from a silver bonbon dish: that she wore a silver chain round her neck, and on Sundays a gold one. She was also said to be extremely beautiful, but affected to the last degree.

“It has come to my knowledge,” proceeded the chairwoman, rather enjoying the sensation she had caused, “that the ambassador has been transferred, and that in two days’ time he will *leave for Norway by air!* The Boy of course travels with him, and with the Boy travels Miss Bianca – to be precise, in the Diplomatic Bag. No one on the plane is going to examine *that*; she enjoys diplomatic immunity. She is thus the very person to undertake our mission.”

By this time the mice had had time to think. Several of them spoke at once.

“Yes, *but—*” they began.

“But what?” asked the chairwoman sharply.

“You say, ‘the very person’,” pronounced the secretary, speaking for all. “But is that true? From all one hears, Miss Bianca has been bred up to complete luxury and idleness. Will she have

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the necessary courage, the necessary *nerve*? This Norwegian, whoever he is, won't know to get in touch with *her*, she will have to get in touch with *him*. Has she even the necessary *wits*? Brilliant as your plan undoubtedly is, I for one have the gravest doubts of its practicalness."

"That remains to be seen," said the chairwoman. She had indeed some doubts herself; but she also had great faith in her own sex. In any case, she wasn't going to be led into argument. "Is there anyone," she called briskly, "from the embassy here with us now?"

For a moment all waited; then there was a slight scuffling at the back as though someone who didn't want to was being urged by his friends to step forward, and finally a short, sturdy young mouse tramped up towards the platform. He looked rough but decent. No one was surprised to learn (in answer to the chairwoman's questioning) that he worked in the pantry.

"I suppose you, Bernard, have never seen Miss Bianca either?" said the chairwoman kindly.

"Not me," mumbled Bernard.

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“But you could reach her?”

“I dare say,” admitted Bernard – shuffling his big feet.

“Then reach her you must, and without delay,” said the chairwoman. “Present the compliments of the meeting, explain the situation, and bid her instantly seek out the bravest mouse in Norway, and dispatch him back here to the Moot-house.”

Bernard shuffled his feet again.

“Suppose she doesn’t want, ma’am?”

“Then you must persuade her, my dear boy,” said the chairwoman. “If necessary, bully her! – What’s that you have on your chest?”

Bernard squinted self-consciously down. His fur was so thick and rough, the medal scarcely showed.

“The Tybalt Star, ma’am...”

“For Gallantry in the Face of Cats,” nodded the chairwoman. “I believe I remember the incident... A cat nipped on the tail, was it not, thus permitting a nursing mother of six to regain her hole?”

“She was my sister-in-law,” muttered Bernard, flushing.

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“Then I can’t believe you’re not a match for Miss Bianca!” cried the chairwoman.

With that (after several votes of thanks), the meeting broke up; and Bernard, feeling important but uneasy, set off back to the embassy.

At least his route to the Boy’s schoolroom presented no difficulties. There was a small service lift running directly up from the pantry itself, used to carry such light refreshments as glasses of milk, chocolate biscuits, and tea for the Boy’s tutor. Bernard waited till half-past eight, when the last glass of milk went up (hot), and went up with it by clinging to one of the lift-ropes. As soon as the flap above opened he nipped out and slipped into the nearest shadow to wait again. He waited a long, long time; he heard the Boy put to bed in an adjoining room, and a wonderful rustle of satin as the Boy’s mother came to kiss him goodnight. (Bernard was of course waiting with his eyes shut; nothing draws attention to a mouse like the gleam of his eyes.) Then at last all was still, and forth he crept for a good look round.

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In one respect at least rumour had not lied. There in an angle of the great room, on a low stool nicely out of floor draughts, stood a porcelain pagoda.