



THE Christmas Mouse

by Lanier Ivester

I was hanging garland when the call came in. I've taken many memorable phone calls over the years while hanging garland. Once it was my mother, inviting us on a post-holiday trip to London; another time it was the sad news of an old friend's not-altogether unexpected passing.


This time, it was my mother-in-law, Janice.

"I caught one," she said, rather breathlessly. "I threw an old quilt over her, and I've got her in a carrier. She's wild as a haint, but Harold can meet you halfway, if you still want one."

The "one" in question was a kitten: a tiny, tabby Manx who had been born in my in-laws' cellar. I had seen the flicker of a hindquarter dart out of sight the weekend before as we prowled about in the cool, damp shadows, flashlights in hand, seeking the nest of kittens whose feral mother Janice had been feeding faithfully. Yes, I already had two cats. And I had never even heard of a Manx, much less laid eyes on one of their tail-less, rabbit-like forms until that day. I did a bit of research as soon as we got home—evidently the Manx is known among its devotees as the "cat-dog" on account of its staunch loyalties and amiable nature. My mind was made up. I had to have one of those kittens.

After the handoff in a church parking lot off I-20, I sat in my car for a moment, peering anxiously down at the terrified scrap of wide-eyed fur huddling in the corner of the carrier. Suddenly, my heart was torn. I loved her already—had loved her from the moment Janice told me she was mine for the taking. But the trust of a creature cannot be forced, and this one seemed decidedly opposed to the idea of humans in general and of me in particular.

"Oh, Lord," I whispered, "please don't let this be a heartbreak."



Back at the Ruff House I placed the carrier in the upstairs bathroom, along with a litter box and a bowl of softened kibble. Janice had urged me to wear gloves and with good reason. As I tipped back the lid of the crate a small streak of grey and black exploded out of the top. Litter flew in all directions. The kibble was overturned in a soggy, splattered mess. With the frenzy of a squirrel, the kitten climbed the bath towels, the wooden paneling, the shower curtain. At length she took refuge behind the sink pedestal, exhausted and stunned. I looked into her round, frightened green eyes with a stab of compunction.

“All right, little one,” I said. “I’ll give you a minute.”

I was a study in tragedy when Philip came home.

“It’s not going to work,” I lamented. “She hates me.”

“Aw, she just needs to get to know us,” Philip replied. “She’s never been around people before.”


Philip, having known and been known by cats all his life, was our resident expert, so I followed him meekly up the stairs and looked over his shoulder as he opened the door. The kitten was crouched behind the sink, and upon sight of Philip, she hunched down even further as if to make herself invisible. One tiny corner of a lip curled up over one tiny, sharp tooth.

“Let me have a chat with her,” he said, spurning the gloves I offered and pulling the door closed behind him.

After that, silence within. For five anxious minutes I waited outside until I could stand it no more. I cracked the door and stared down in amazement. Philip was lying on the bathroom floor, feet stretched out toward the tub, head tilted back toward me in an upside-down grin. On his stomach reposed a Manx kitten, paws tucked neatly beneath her trim white bib, green eyes gazing up at me with mild interest. Philip stroked her head and a faint purr thrummed from the depths of her small chest. I dropped onto my knees bedside him and scratched her gently behind the ear. She leaned into my touch and closed her eyes, purring even louder.

“I’m going to name her Lucia,” I said quietly. “I don’t think St. Lucy would mind.”

Indeed, when my friends came for Lucia buns and tea on the saint’s feast day later that week, they each got a glimpse of Lucy’s green eyes gleaming out from the shadows beneath the woodburning stove—a glimpse and no more. Lucy would end up being the most



affectionate cat we'd ever had, a little grey ghost of devotion haunting all the best hiding places in the house, but her favor, with a very few notable exceptions, was reserved for us alone. Looking back, I am convinced that there must be some special benediction upon a Christmas cat—especially one christened for so loving a light-bringer as St. Lucy. Our Lucy was gentle, meticulously deferential to the other cats, and possessed of uncanny instincts as to when one might need the lightest tap of a paw on the tip of their nose, or a little rumbling ball of warmth beside them on a cold winter's night.

Though she seldom ventured from under the stove that first year, she delighted us on Christmas Eve by becoming sociable enough to inspect—and fall asleep in—the silver-plated ice bucket I had just opened from Philip. By the next Christmas, however, Lucy was an established member of the household. She had her own spot allocated on the sofa for naps with her cat siblings, Calvin and Josephine, and our Australian Shepherd, Caspian, was her particular friend. And when we sat in the den in the evenings she was in my lap, rather than under the stove.

That year, I decorated our tree, as always, with homemade gingerbread men and delicate twisted tin icicles. One night, as we were enjoying an after-dinner glass of wine by the fire, one of the icicles tinkled to the floor. Instantly three pairs of pointed ears pricked to attention and three pairs of lustrous eyes were trained upon the tree.


We both laughed, and I thought nothing of it until the next day, when I noticed one of the gingerbread men was missing a foot. Caspian knew better, but that never stopped him from helping himself as soon as I walked out of the room. This one, however, was at eye-level. He would have had to stand on his back legs, and would likely have knocked the tree over, or, at the very least, displaced a few ornaments, to sample that foot. And why stop there? I had known him to gobble entire gingerbread men, ribbon hanger and all, in less time than it took to shout, “No!”

It was puzzling. And all the more so that evening as we sat again before the fire, admiring our tree.

“Hey,” Philip said, “that gingerbread man is missing an eye.”

“Yes,” I replied. “And that one over there has lost a hand.”

I cast an eye toward Caspian, who was snoring near the woodburning stove. Calvin, Josephine, and Lucy, on the other hand, were alertness itself. I recalled that I'd found Lucy



that very afternoon, sitting at the foot of our tree and staring up into its starry branches, as ardently as the Little Match Girl gazing upon her heavenly fir. Just at that moment there was a whisper of needle-fall near the trunk. Josephine leapt to the floor, her long, half-Siamese tail twitching feverishly. Lucy, who had no tail to twitch, flicked her whiskers and uttered a sound like a cross between a growl and a chirp.

I got up and went over to the tree to investigate. Parting the branches, I squinted into the fragrant maze of silvery boughs, where, to my surprise, a pair of beady, black eyes stared back at me. The pink nose quivered anxiously, but the little brown body was perfectly still.

“Philip!” I cried, “It’s a field mouse!”

Caspian barked, and all three cats advanced. In terror, the mouse scurried down the tree, but with lightning reflexes, Josephine darted beneath the lower boughs. I stooped to snatch her just in time as we heard it scurry back up again, dislodging needles and ornaments as it went.

“What are we going to do?” I wailed. “These cats are going to tear this tree to pieces—if Caspian doesn’t get to it before they do!”


Already Caspian was sniffing around the other side, and even our gentlemanly old Calvin, long-since retired from his mousing career, was pacing stealthily. Only Lucy remained calm, fixing her attention upon the topmost branches of the tree. She let out another cheep, but otherwise sat quite still.

The best we could hope for, we agreed, was to shut the animals out of the room and try and catch the mouse by some innocuous means. I collected the cats and stowed them in the dining room, while Philip went in search of a box and a bit of string. It was a rather clichéd solution, to be sure, but I was adamantly opposed to anything less benign. While Philip propped up the box with a forked twig, I procured a bit of cheddar from the fridge. Then, threading the string into the kitchen and closing the French door into the den, we sat down on the floor and watched.

“How long do you think it’ll take?” Philip asked with a yawn.

“I don’t know,” I replied. “In the cartoons it’s pretty expeditious.”

After another few moments we decided that cartoons were an unreliable source for life skills. There was only one other option, and that as time-honored as it was simple. Calvin, we



agreed, was too slow, and Josie too reckless. The only hope for the mouse lay with our gentle Lucy. As long as we could catch her after she caught the mouse.

We didn't have to wait long to find out: within moments of installing her at the foot of the tree—and with less injury to ornaments than I thought possible—Lucy gained her quarry. The mouse uttered a shrill squeak as she seized it by the scruff of the neck and dove with it under her stove.

“You guard the door,” Philip whispered, nudging it open, “and I'll sneak up on Lucy.”

Before we had a chance to either guard or sneak, however, Lucy astonished us by streaking across the room and shooting out between our feet. Astonished, herself, no doubt, by her first-ever catch, she scampered across the kitchen like a maddened rabbit. Caspian barked from the dining room and Josephine's paw flailed ravenously from the crack beneath the door. Lucy turned the corner on two legs and vanished into the shadows of the back hall.

In the end, we cornered her under the clawfoot tub in the master bath. With her white bib heaving and her green eyes wild, Lucy dropped the mouse, which scuttled across the tile floor to the relative cover of the shower curtain. It was short work then for Philip to throw a towel over the frightened creature and scoop it up in his hands. We both admired the dark eyes, feverishly bright with love of life, the soft brown fur, the perfect, pink, shell-like ears.

“I'll take him up to the cemetery and let him go,” Philip said. “The cats never go that far.”

I agreed. The northwesternmost corner of our property seemed like a safe place, and as we tugged on our boots and set out into the frosty night, I was flushed with saintly satisfaction. Marching across the pasture, feet crunching in the dry grass, I made up a lovely anthropomorphic tale about a field mouse named Jeremy who found the real meaning of Christmas in the house of his archetypical enemies and his descendants abounded in gratitude unto the third and fourth generations . . .

And that, my son, Jeremy said, pulling the littlest mouse onto his lap and leaning in close to the fire, is how I came to know that humans aren't all bad. There's a spark of the original Idea alive in them yet. Grace-bearers, I tell you. Or, as they used to call them back in the days when cats didn't try to eat us and nuts and berries abounded all the year round, Undergardeners.

When we reached the cemetery, Philip stooped and gently peeled back the towel. The mouse trembled. Then, with a decisiveness unlooked for amid such disparate odds, it sank its teeth into Philip's exposed thumb, sprang from his hands, and clattered lightly away among the fallen leaves.

Look not for gratitude, in other words, where only duty has been required.

Or, perhaps, I reflected the next evening, sitting by the fire with Lucy in my lap, perhaps the mouse—and all the cats, dogs, goats, sheep, lizards, finches, chipmunks, crickets, nuthatches, possums, garter snakes, yellow-bellied sapsuckers, wolf spiders, spring peepers, grey squirrels, red-tailed hawks and every other creature, seen and unseen, that shared life with us on our farm—had more to say to us than that. Maybe there was more grace for us in their winged and scaled and fur-bound forms than we could ever hope to bestow on them. We were, after all, the ones who introduced the murderous tooth and the tearing claw in the first place. That the creatures of earth should sidle alongside us with their nests and burrows and occasional Christmas tree invasions—that they should deign, in fact, to be domesticated by us at times—was a wonder and a great compliment.

I stroked Lucy's head, and as she lifted her lovely, green-eyed gaze to mine I thought up an alternate ending to my theoretical little story.

And that, my son, the field mouse said, snuggling comfortably with his family among piles of thistledown, is how I came to know we must bear patiently with those great, lumbering beasts called humans. They sometimes manage to do the right thing, even if they do it badly, and I suppose they just don't know any better all the rest of the time. But how Creator must love them. Why else would He take such pains with the poor, foolish creatures?

