THE TRAIN MOUSE



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Illustrated by Axel Scheffler

Translated by Rachel Ward



ANDERSEN PRESS



CHAPTER ONE

'Where did you go for all that time?'

'Did you really go to Paris?'

'Where did you hide on the train?'

I get asked the same questions every day, and then I have to tell everyone about my adventures all over again. I'm even receiving letters now, asking me the easiest way to travel to Paris.

So, to save having to keep explaining it all, I've decided to write my story down.

I'm an ordinary house mouse and my name's Stefan. But everyone calls me Nibbles. How did I end up with such a funny nickname? Well, when I was very young,

I had a habit of gnawing tree trunks, just like a beaver. My parents were puzzled. Sometimes my father wondered if I was even a proper mouse at all. But then, as I got older, all the gnawing suddenly stopped. I must have realised that my little mouse-teeth could never fell a tree.

I was born in the city of Munich in Germany, on Paradise Street. In case you were thinking I made that name up, you can have a look at a map of Munich and then you'll see: *Paradise Street*. It's a real street. But, sadly, the house I was born in is no longer there.

It was such a beautiful old house, surrounded by new, and very tall, buildings. Behind our house there was a little courtyard and, in the yard, there were two elderberry bushes.

We, the mouse family, lived in the cellar of the house: my mother, my father, my grandfather and my brothers and sister. My brothers are called Big Tooth, Short Tail and White Paw, and my little sister is Lilyfey.

Above us lived an old man whose name was Mr Ehlers, and he had a cat named Carlo. Sometimes you could hear a dreadful screeching and barking in the yard.



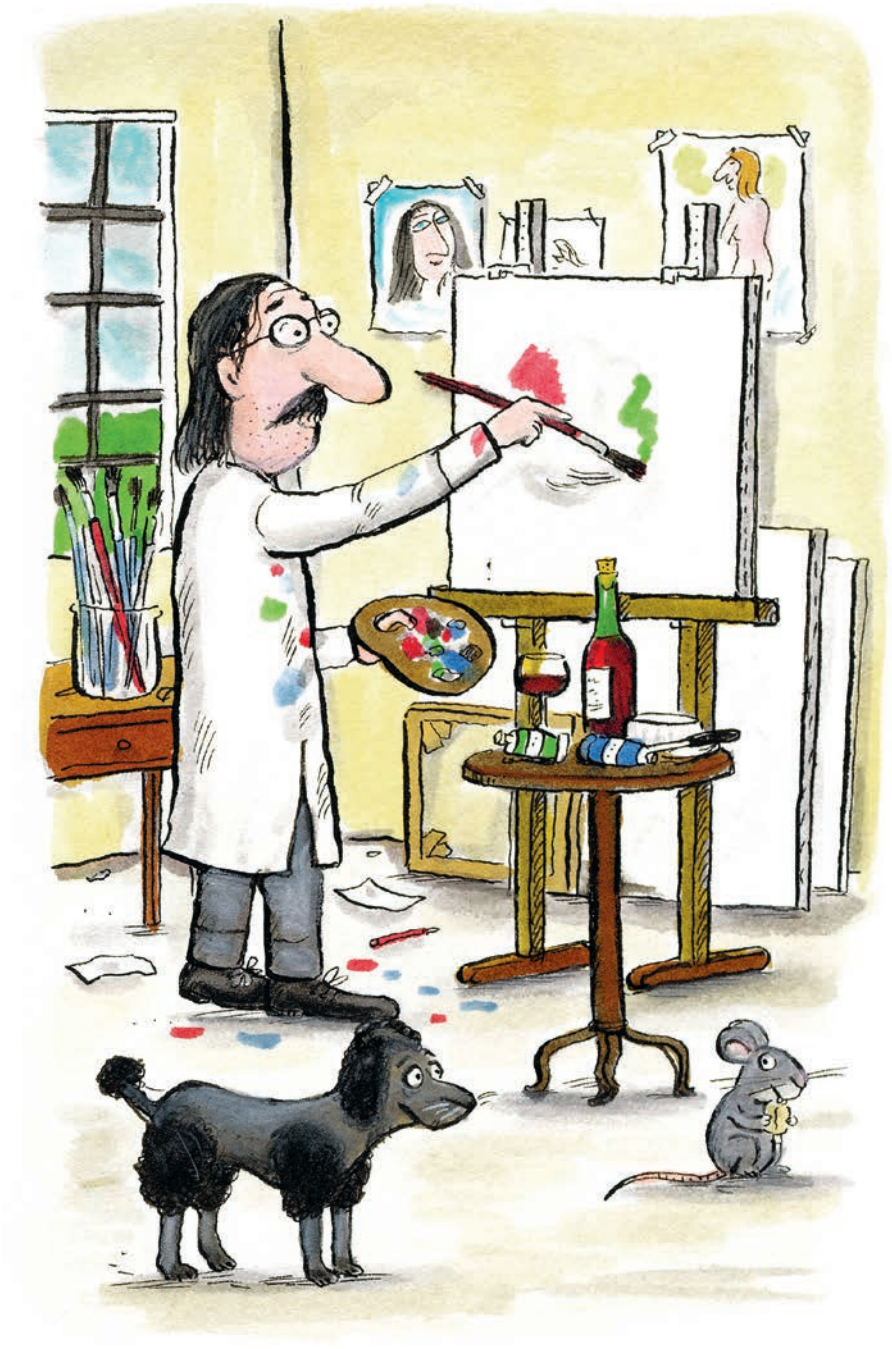
That meant that Isengrim had come down and was chasing Carlo.

Isengrim was a poodle and he lived in the attic with an artist called Mr Kringel. Mr Kringel painted pictures and liked to eat cheese and white bread. That made him very popular with us mice. Isengrim used to be in a circus and he'd seen a lot of the world. He could walk on two legs and sometimes, if we mice-children asked him, he'd do a somersault for us. He was very friendly to us mice and got on well with all kinds of creatures – except cats. He hated cats. And that wasn't just because he was a dog. There was another reason for that.

You see, Isengrim had spent two years performing in the circus with a cat. The cat lay in a pram wearing a baby's bonnet and Isengrim, who was wearing a little white dress, had to push her around the ring. Although the cat would always hiss nasty remarks at him, no fur was allowed to fly: he just had to keep on pushing her around in a circle in front of the whole audience.

Then, one evening, he could contain himself no longer. She'd whispered: 'My goodness, Isengrim, you look so silly in that short dress with your crooked legs.'





So he'd let go of the pram and sprung at her. The cat leaped out of the pram and ran into the rows of seats. Isengrim chased her through the circus tent. The people jumped up, laughing and screaming.

Isengrim wasn't allowed to perform any more after that, and the ringmaster sold him to Mr Kringel.

That was why Carlo the tomcat suffered – for the malice of the circus cat. Isengrim was normally calm and friendly, but his eyes glittered dangerously whenever he spotted Carlo: 'A cat is a cat – they're all the same,' he'd say furiously.

We agreed with him.

But Carlo was really old by then and, to tell the truth, he was very friendly. My grandad sometimes said, 'Leave old Carlo alone, he's worn his claws right out these days.'

Grandad and Carlo had grown up together in the house on Paradise Street.

Grandad also used to say, 'Once upon a time, in the old days, Carlo was a very dangerous mouser. He used to sit outside a mousehole for hours, quiet as a mouse himself. And then, when you thought he couldn't

possibly still be there and you crept out, his claws would strike, as fast as lightning. That's how I lost all my brothers and sisters.'

Then Grandad would sit silently for a moment before continuing, 'Carlo almost got me once. I was just about able to dive into a mousehole, but I didn't pull my tail in in time – *tcha* – and he bit it off.'

And every time he told us about the dangers of cats, he'd hold up his stumpy tail as a warning: 'Cats are dangerous.'

But, like I said, Carlo had grown old by then. And old Mr Ehlers bought him plenty of meat from the butcher. So the cat spent most of his time sitting sated and sleepy on the windowsill, warming his old paws in the sun.

But sometimes – only rarely – the passion for hunting would seize him. Then he'd suddenly run after one of us mice, but only slowly, as if he were dreaming. All the same, we mouse-children were only allowed into the yard if Grandad or Isengrim was there.

Then Grandad would sit in the sun too, beside Carlo but not too close, and the two elderly animals would chat, talking about how things used to be.



CHAPTER TWO

The days passed, one much like another. Mum and Dad grated cheese in Mr Kringel's dining room. Grandad dozed beside Carlo in the sun. And we sat around and were sometimes bored. Then we'd go to Isengrim and ask him to tell us about the wide world. About Paris, where there were so many kinds of cheese. And about Switzerland, which was heaven for mice.

Isengrim said, 'You know the cheese with the big holes, don't you? That's Swiss cheese. And do you know how the holes get into the cheese?'

Isengrim paused for a moment, every time. And,

although we'd heard the story plenty of times before, we'd always answer: 'No.'

'The holes are skilfully gnawed out by Swiss mice,' Isengrim would say solemnly. 'So skilfully that there's not the smallest mousy toothmark to be seen.'

And all our little mouse-mouths would water.

'In Switzerland,' Isengrim continued, 'mice are highly-esteemed artisans called cheese-nibblers, but they have to pass an exam first.'

Mice must live a glorious life in Switzerland, we thought, but life was so monotonous here in the yard with the tired, old cat. Then we'd sprawl around wondering who we could play a trick on.

'Come on,' I said to my brother White Paw one day, 'let's play bullfighting with Carlo the Cat.'

'Let's not,' said White Paw. 'For an old tom he can still be pretty speedy sometimes.'

Carlo lay dozing in the sun. I crept quietly up to him. Then I darted forward and pulled one of his whiskers. '*Olé!*' I cried.

The cat leaped up, hissed and arched his back fearsomely. He must have thought Isengrim had been



taunting him. Then he saw me and spat, 'Was that you, titch?'

'Yes, old Tom,' I laughed. 'You can't catch me!'

'Even the pipsqueaks are cheeking me now,' he snarled as he pounced.

My goodness, his teeth seemed huge all of a sudden!

I zig-zagged wildly away. The cat ran after me.

I climbed over a crate. The cat cleared it in one bound. He could still jump so far! I ran across the yard

to the shed. I could already hear the cat wheezing right by my left ear as I slipped through a little crack in the shed. The boards shook under the impact of Carlo's head as he crashed into them.

'*Olé!*' I shouted.

But soon Carlo's taloned paw came through the crack. I was slightly alarmed at how far he could stretch it. I had to jump away from the paw as it swung to and fro. But he couldn't grab me that way, so he sat down in front of the crack. After a while, he disappeared.

My brother yelled something, but I couldn't hear what he was saying. I thought to myself, Wait a moment longer and then you can creep out. I whistled a little song to help drive away the fear. In the end I plucked up the courage to peer out of the crack. And I saw the cat's shadow on the ground. He'd climbed onto a branch hanging down from the elderberry bush and was hiding up there.

At long last, Grandad arrived and I heard him say, 'Carlo, be sensible and come down from that branch. If you jump from there, you'll probably break a paw. At our age we can't jump like we used to.'

'We'll see about that,' answered Carlo angrily.

'Don't let a child annoy you. It was just a silly practical joke,' said Grandad.

'It's the principle of the thing,' spat Carlo. 'I won't be made a fool of by any mouse, let alone a little whippersnapper like Nibbles.'

And Carlo kept on sitting there on that branch.

So that was why I was still cowering in the shed when evening came and it got cold. I thought about how nice it would be to be sitting in the cellar with my brothers and sister, eating some of the cheese that Mum and Dad had brought from Mr Kringel's attic.

Then old Mr Ehlers came and called: 'Carlo!'

He spotted him in the elderberry bush and called, 'Silly old chap, what are you doing up there? Climbed up and can't get down again, eh?'

Old Mr Ehlers lifted the cat from the branch. I saw the old tom stalk stiffly into the kitchen where his food bowl was.

Carlo had barely vanished into the house when I heard Dad's voice by the crack. 'Come out,' he called.

He took me down to the cellar. 'What a silly thing

to do. Leave old Carlo alone and then he'll leave us be and we can all live in peace.'

I had to go straight to bed after supper as a punishment. I lay in my warm nest and felt glad that I'd escaped from the draughty old shed in one piece.

Grandad dropped in on me and told me about the old days when hardly anyone had a fridge. People still had larders in those days, and the cheese lay in the larders wrapped up in damp cloths. Those were the days!

I soon drifted off to sleep.



CHAPTER THREE

Apart from little adventures like that, we all lived peacefully without a thought for tomorrow. And so week after week passed, and month after month. Until one day there was a great uproar in the house.

Mr Kringel the artist was painting placards instead of pictures. They said: *THIS HOUSE STAYS* and *SAVE THIS CONSTRUCTION FROM SENSELESS DESTRUCTION!*

Mr Kringel hung the placards out of the windows. In the evenings, he had meetings with old Mr Ehlers. They both went quite red in the face, what with all the wine and the excitement.

Old Mr Ehlers kept saying, ‘We have to resist!’

‘They can’t just treat us however they like,’ said Mr Kringel.

But then, three weeks later, the artist moved out. When Isengrim came to say goodbye, he told us that the artist had bought an old house in the countryside. He planned to paint in peace out there. That was a serious blow to us because we had lost our breadwinner in that fan of red wine and French cheese.

And then, one day, old Mr Ehlers began packing up his things too.

Carlo the cat came to take his leave of Grandad.

He said, ‘We’re moving to what they call a new-build. On the ninth floor!’

‘Oh, how nice,’ I exclaimed, ‘you’ll have a great view of the world.’

But Carlo muttered sadly, ‘I won’t be able to jump down into the yard from up there. And I won’t be able to lie on the windowsill either.’

That afternoon, the removal van came. The cupboards, chairs and beds were carried out. And when the flat was empty, old Mr Ehlers climbed into the van and then, last of all, Carlo the cat got in. Old Mr Ehlers sat with him on his lap. We waved the van off until it vanished round a corner. Grandad suddenly had something in his eye.

It was the first time we’d ever slept alone in the house.

The next morning, we were woken by a hideous crash. The walls shook. The plaster fell from the ceiling. Cracks appeared in the walls. We rushed out of the house in horror. Outside was a digger, crashing a big iron ball into the house walls. The rubble was loaded onto lorries and driven right away.

Dad ran down into the cellar, although Mum begged him not to, and rescued what he could of our lovely nests.

We moved into the shed that was now standing empty in the dusty backyard, and had to watch our beautiful old house being torn down in just a few days.

It was wet and cold in the shed because the November wind howled straight through the cracks.

‘We’ll have to stick it out here,’ said Dad, ‘and wait. They’re sure to build a new house.’

We'd already seen that happen three times on Paradise Street. They tore down old houses and built new ones, huge concrete blocks with lots of little windows.

We scraped through the winter on the breadcrumbs the builders dropped. We were all bitterly cold and our fur grew scraggly and dull; we could even count our ribs.



CHAPTER FOUR

The new building was finally ready in the spring.

Removal vans drew up and brought the new tenants. We slipped inside while the movers were heaving a heavy wardrobe in through the door.

When we saw the building from the inside, our disappointment knew no bounds: it was all concrete – ceiling, floors, walls and everything. Not a hole anywhere, not even a crack to hide in. All smooth and cold.

And we could no longer get out through the front door because it had an electric exit button which was way out of our reach. So we had to creep around as best

we could under a few forgotten boxes that the movers had abandoned in the cellar.

Not even Mum and Dad had any idea how many families lived in this new building. And the strange thing was that we hardly found any rubbish.

'Where there are people, there's rubbish,' said Grandad. 'That's the mouse's bread and butter.'

There was rubbish. But the people tipped it into a waste-disposal chute and it vanished into a container in the cellar. And we couldn't get into the room with the container.

Soon, we were even hungrier in the new building than we'd been in the draughty wooden shed. At least then we'd had the builders' crumbs.

One evening, Mum reached a decision. She crept very cautiously up the cellar steps and ran down a long corridor. But suddenly one of the flat doors opened, a woman came out and switched on the hallway light.

The woman almost stepped on Mum's tail and froze. Then she screamed: 'Miiiiiiice! Veeeeeermiiin!'

The caretaker came running. Other tenants darted out of their flats.

