

THE COMING OF ARTHUR

by Mary Tummon

(from *MASQUERADES '93*)

A sudden flash of lightning lit the inky sky with a simultaneous crack of thunder, and the storm which had been threatening all afternoon broke with a downpour of torrential rain, sending pedestrians rushing for shelter, and Mouse into a convenient basement, accessed from an alley. He knew most of the hiding places around the tunnel entrances, and loved basements - that was where people Above threw '*gizmos*' when they no longer wanted them (*and sometimes when they did, but that didn't bother Mouse!*)

For a few minutes the noise of the downpour blotted out every other sound, but as the rain eased he heard a funny little chattering coming from a bin in a corner. His eyes gradually grew accustomed to the darkness, and when a little light came through the delivery hatch he saw a small greyish animal with a black and white muzzle and a ring-striped tail. Realizing it was only a kitten, he put his hand into the bin to pick it up, whereupon it promptly bit him.

"Bad kitty," he said. "Hurt Mouse."

The little creature backed into a corner, and showed its teeth, apparently ready to defend itself if necessary. Mouse sucked his finger for awhile, and then put his hand in his pocket and found a dried-up piece of bread. He offered it to the kitten who grabbed at it eagerly, and started gnawing at it in desperation.

"You're hungry," said Mouse. "Wish I had something else."

After the rain had stopped Mouse carefully lifted the delivery hatch and peered out. The alley was deserted, but he climbed out quickly nevertheless, not wishing to be seen. It was then that he saw the pathetic bundle of wet fur lying against the wall, and realized that this must be the kitten's mother. '*No wonder kitten was hungry,*' he thought, turning the carcass over with his foot. '*No food.*'

Father's reactions and Mary's annoyance meant nothing to Mouse, once he had made up his mind. Slipping back into the basement, he found a length of strong string, and making a noose, slipped it over the kitten's head, getting bitten again. He took off his jerkin and wrapping the kitten up in it firmly, climbed through the hatch and made for the nearest tunnel entrance, gaining his own chamber without meeting anyone.

Thus began what was known in the Tunnels for several months as '*THE REIGN OF TERROR.*' or '*DAVY CROCKETT, YOU HAVE A LOT TO ANSWER FOR.*'

The first couple of weeks passed without incident. William thought Mouse was drinking more milk than usual - that should have aroused his suspicions early on, since Mouse was not a milk lover - and bread and cheese kept disappearing rather mysteriously. However, the first '*incident*' was when a toddler by the name of Tricia, sitting placidly in her playpen, had her apple snatched from her fist by a furry animal. Tricia, not one to suffer indignity silently, raise her voice in a howl, bringing Mary rushing to her aid.

"Kitty took apple," Tricia sobbed repeatedly, but Mary said comfortingly that she must have imagined it, since

'Kitties' did not eat apples.

After that no one knew where the '*gremlin*' would strike next. Mary discovered all her knitting had been reduced to a tangle of chewed wool. Candles were discovered in unlikely places, all bearing teeth marks; both Father and Vincent discovered chess pieces scattered over the floor on several occasions with no identifiable cause. *(On the first occasion, Vincent suspected Father of deliberate sabotage, but it happened too often for him to entertain that idea for long.)*

This state of affairs lasted for several weeks. Some of the younger children said they had seen an animal in the tunnels, but the older ones laughed at them and said they had imagined it. However, it was not imagination when they found their school books torn and shredded, and neither was the reprimand they had from Father, whose own imagination did not stretch beyond the first explanation that came to mind. Vincent did notice that Mouse was keeping very quiet, but decided to enjoy the lull whilst it lasted, knowing full well how disruptive Mouse could be when he felt like it.

The year wore on towards the end of October and William began making plans for Halloween - a fancy dress party for the children in the afternoon, when adults were there strictly by invitation only, and another party *(fancy dress optional)* in the evening for the tunnel community and Helpers from Above. The children would have pumpkin lanterns, toffee apples and other party food, mostly on sticks, with bobbing for apples, a bran tub and other games. The adults would have more sophisticated food, plus some rather good wine that had been recommended to William by a friend from his former life. William carefully drew the corks and left the wine to '*breathe*.'

The children's party went with a real swing - even Mouse put in an appearance. Sebastian was a hit as usual - the older children trying to catch him out and the younger children full of wonder at the astonishing things he could do with eggs, doves and a large white rabbit.

The children's party wound down and the smaller ones were taken off to be bathed and put to bed. Tricia seemed to have got a lot of toffee in her hair. William gathered up the remains of the food and took it back to his kitchen.

Elizabeth, who had painted the masks for the party, and helped generally, went back to her wall full of ideas but came to a sudden stop at the sight of both her mural and the floor. The mural was streaked with paint from about two feet from the floor, and the floor itself was a mess of squeezed tubes and spilt paint. Some very unsteady paw prints led from the wall down the tunnel.

"Father, Vincent, Mary - anyone?" cried Elizabeth. **"Come quickly!"** It is really too bad, especially since paint is so hard to come by ..."

Her cries were interrupted by a roar from the kitchen. William came out at a run, brandishing a rolling pin. **"My wine!"** he cried. "If Mouse has done this he has no more treats - **EVER!**"

By this time a crowd had gathered, including some of the Helpers who had arrived early, in order to help. William's wine had all been spilt, the bottles lying on their sides, some broken and the wine running over the delicate pastries he had spent so much time preparing. He looked at the ruin of so much hard work and felt like weeping.

"Surely Mouse would not do this," said Vincent. "He is not destructive."

"I suggest," said Elizabeth grimly, "that we follow the trail of paw prints and settle this now."

The paw prints led back down to the room of the children's party and there, lying in the barrel, bobbing about

with the apples, was a multicoloured, furry creature, with a blissful expression on its face.

"That is a racoon," said Sebastian. "Be careful, they can be vicious."

"I don't think this one will be," said Vincent. "It has drunk too much wine to care!"

"It certainly looks happy," said Father. "But I think Mouse has a lot of explaining to do."

"Don't be too hard on him, please," said Vincent.

"You indulge him too much," replied Father. "He must learn to consider other people."

"Well, Mouse," said Father. **"What have you to say for yourself?"**

"My kitten," said Mouse. "Name's Arthur."

"I don't care what its name is, you can't keep it down here, and anyway, it isn't a cat, it's a racoon."

"Arthur will die if he goes Above. Please, Vincent!" Mouse turned to the one person who always supported him. "Arthur stay?"

Vincent looked at Father and Father looked at him. "If he stays," said Father eventually. "You must make certain he stays in your chamber. I do not want a repetition of the last few months and, if I hear of, or experience, any more of this animal's mischievous ways, then out it goes."

"Mouse keep Arthur safe," said Mouse. "Take back to chamber."

"No," said Vincent. "The first thing you must do is get all that paint off its fur, some of it might be toxic."

"Paint stripper!" said Mouse.

"Not paint stripper," said Vincent. "Scissors! You will have to cut all the paint away and hope the fur grows properly again."

Arthur woke up twenty-four hours later with the racoon equivalent of a hangover and had he known it, without a great deal of fur. Mouse and Vincent had taken the opportunity to cut away the paint encrusted fur whilst he was still out cold.

Mary took pity on the little animal and made him a coat out of an old cardigan until his fur grew again. Elizabeth retrieved the mural by incorporating Arthur into it, streaks and all, and William, whose good nature always triumphed, gave Mouse little tidbits for the invalid. The Reign of Terror was over, but forgotten? Not a bit of it.

END