

The Young Man and the Mouse

By *WILLIAM SAROYAN*

From *Dear Baby* (Faber, London)

A WEEK of drinking turned the young man's fancy to mice, *the* mouse, the one and only, the mouse of all mice, the city mouse, the brilliant mouse, the genius of mice, the Great Northern Hotel mouse.

He, or it, arrived one night prancing in the manner of an overjoyed retriever. The mouse came fearlessly to the young man and dropped the money at his feet. The money was four ten-dollar bills which the mouse carried in its mouth. The mouse carried the money so dexterously, or rather so magnificently, so thoughtfully, so delicately, that not even slight teeth marks impaired the beauty of the money. The young man picked up the money casually, examined it, and studied the mouse, which stood by in perfect harmony with everything.

The young man moved two paces and also stood by in perfect harmony with everything.

"Well," he said. "This *is* delightful."

He looked at the mouse thoughtfully.

"Stealing, eh?" he said.

The mouse nodded the way a clown nods when he acknowledges the commission of some petty but delightful crime.

"All right," the young man said. "I believe in live and let live. You bring me money this way so I can live and I'll try not to improve your morals. If you want to steal, that's all right with me."

This arrangement appeared to be all right with the mouse, which continued exploring the rooms of the hotel, going to those places where travelling people, or retired army officers, or people taking a shower, like to leave their folding

money. Almost every day the mouse returned to the room of the young man to deposit various foldings of American currency: sometimes tens, sometimes fives, sometimes a five and a couple of ones, and one day four ones, which was a crisis and a bitter disappointment to the young man, who was drinking a great deal.

"Live and let live, of course," he said to the mouse, "but you can do better than that. Now, let me explain. This number. That's ten; that's good. Get that kind when you can. This is five; half as good. If you can't get tens, get fives. This is a two; bad luck. Don't leave them, but they aren't so good. This is one; awful. Try for tens."

THE mouse accepted this simple instruction and was lucky enough to enter rooms where guests who were having showers had left big folding money lying around here and there, so that for many days the young man lived pretty much like a king. He bought clothes. Odds and ends. Ate well. And drank exceptionally well.

THE work of William Saroyan, the well-known American short story virtuoso, has been called *bizarre, exasperating, sentimental, and vital*, but it is commonly agreed that it is important in its prodigious variety and that none of it is like anybody else's. Born in Fresno, California, in 1908, of Armenian parents who had emigrated to the United States, he began his literary career at the age of nine. It was frequently interrupted by odd jobs until he was twenty-two; since then his contributions to American magazines total more than those of any other living writer, and many successive volumes of his short stories and plays have appeared.

By permission of the author

The mouse, however, lived on very feeble fare. Old stockings.

"Now," the young man said one day to the mouse, "this may get around. Folks may begin to get suspicious. There is no law against a mouse stealing money, and you'll always be innocent according to the statutes. There isn't a jury in the country that would convict you. But some busybody somewhere may take a long-shot chance and set a trap. They're horrible things, but very attractive outwardly. Cheese is involved. With only one of these pieces of paper which you have just fetched I could buy, I believe, close to twenty pounds of the finest cheese imaginable—which, I dare say, you wouldn't like. They'll try to attract you with cheap cheese. Ten cents a pound. Something like that. Something I haven't eaten in months. Don't be a fool. Don't get taken in. Don't swoon and move into the trap because the smell of the cheese is so wonderful. I'm counting on you to stay in good health."

The mouse had never heard.

Cheese? Traps?

He didn't know. It was all very exciting.

Money, for some reason, he *did* know. It didn't smell good. It was tasteless and official, but even so.

THE young man might have furnished the mouse a little cheese, but he was afraid that if he did the mouse would cease to appreciate anything but food. That, he didn't want. It would be better for the mouse to fend for itself.

"But," he said clearly, "stay away from little pieces of cheese artfully attached to gadgets which appear to be perfectly static and harmless. Once you swoon, you're a goner. It may mean death."

Death?

The mouse hadn't heard.

The drinking continued. Many times the mouse went away and returned with money, but one day the mouse

didn't return. Soon the young man began to be poor again. He began to be a little worried, too. First he worried about how he was ever going to be able to keep up appearances without money, but little by little he began to worry about the mouse. In a psychic or alcoholic way, he was able to trace the mouse's course from his room two days ago to where it had fallen into a trap.

THIS was room 517, one floor down, two doors to the left. The room was inhabited by an old woman whose children sometimes took her to Larchmont for week-ends.

It was a little difficult getting in through the window, but he made it, and sure enough in the corner of the room was the mouse. The old woman was in Larchmont.

The young man burst into tears.

"I told you," he wept. "You see what happens? Now look at you. Here. Let me get you out of this damned gadget."

He got the mouse out of the trap and carried it carefully in the palm of his left hand to his room, taking the elevator and weeping.

The elevator boy burst into tears with the young man, but suggested heat and quiet.

Heat and quiet were provided the mouse, and five cents' worth of cheese, which the mouse did not wish to eat.

This frightened the young man.

"Those ungodly people," he said again and again.

The mouse watched the young man quietly for five days and five nights, and then it died.

The young man wrapped it carefully in hotel stationery, appropriately white, and carried it to Central Park, where he dug a small grave with the toe of his right shoe, and buried it.

He returned to the hotel and checked out, complaining bitterly about the type of people inhabiting the world.