

TUMTUM and NUTMEG



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EGMONT



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For Freya



Chapter One

Once there were two married mice called Mr and Mrs Nutmouse, and they lived in great style. They had a big, rambling house with a ballroom, and a billiards room, and a banqueting room, and a butler's room, and just about every other sort of room a married couple might want. (There were thirty-six rooms in all.)

The house was called Nutmouse Hall, and it

was situated in the broom cupboard of a small human dwelling called Rose Cottage. A broom cupboard might not sound a very grand place for a house, but this broom cupboard was special. It had creamy white walls, and mottled red tiles on the floor, and a tiny sash window hidden behind a curtain of honeysuckle.

But the nicest thing of all about the broom cupboard was that no human knew it was there. This is because, a very long time ago, soon after Rose Cottage was built, someone pushed a big Welsh dresser against the kitchen wall, hiding the broom cupboard door from view; and the dresser always stayed there, because there was nowhere else to put it.

It was Mr Nutmouse's great-great-great-



grandfather who first discovered the broom cupboard, when he crept beneath the dresser, and poked his nose under the door. The red tiles and the white walls looked so appealing that he decided to build a house there straight away; and the first thing he had to do was to build a big round mouse-hole so that his workmen could get in and out with all their bricks and cement-mixers. Then he fitted the mouse-hole with smart iron gates, and as soon as a mouse entered those gates he was on the Nutmouse family's territory.

Nutmouse Hall was built in the middle of the broom cupboard, and it was considered a very fine piece of architecture. The walls were made of pretty pebblestone, and there were gables on the windows and little turrets peeking out of the roof. The front

of the house faced south, so the bedroom windows caught the sun as it filtered through the honeysuckle. The smallest rooms, such as the bathrooms, were the size of a cake-tin, while the ballroom was the size of a hamper. (And a hamper-sized room seemed very big to the Nutmouses, since they were only two inches long.)

Because Nutmouse Hall was so enormous, Mr and Mrs Nutmouse did not use all the rooms available to them. Mr Nutmouse spent most of the time in his library, warming his toes in front of the fire, and Mrs Nutmouse spent most of her time scurrying about in her kitchen, making delicious things to eat.

Mr and Mrs Nutmouse had been married a long time, but they still called each other by the



affectionate pet names they had adopted during their engagement. Mrs Nutmouse called Mr Nutmouse Tumtum, because he had such a large one, and Mr Nutmouse called Mrs Nutmouse Nutmeg, because she had nutmeg hair. (Mr Nutmouse thought this was very exotic, because his family had all been greys.)

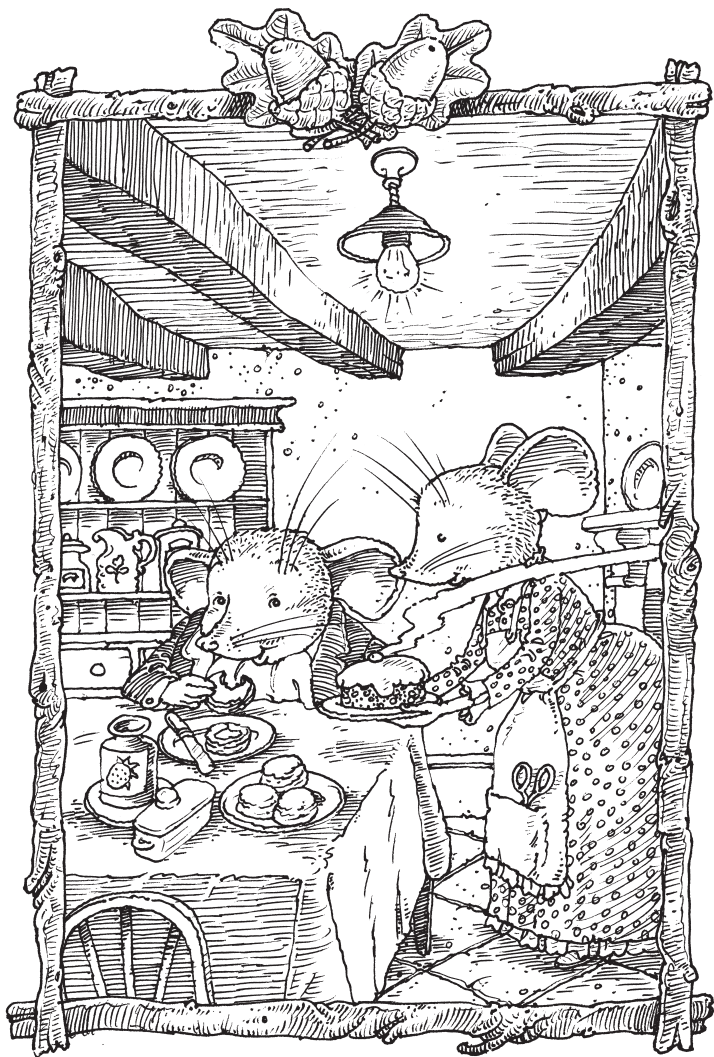
In their funny way, the Nutmouses were well-suited to each other. Mr Nutmouse was a wise, bookish sort of mouse. He never lost his temper or got agitated, and he did everything very calmly and slowly. Mrs Nutmouse was quite the opposite. She did everything very fast, and even little tasks, such as putting the icing on a cake, could get her into a terrible dither. But in her hasty way she was surprisingly efficient. The house was spick and span,

the bills were paid on time, and the food served at Nutmouse Hall was the envy of all the mice for miles around.

Mrs Nutmouse looked upon every meal as a celebration. For breakfast there would be eggs and bacon and toast and marmalade; lunch was all manner of cold meats and salads; for tea there was always a homemade cake or scone; and supper would be a delicacy, such as earwigs *en crouete*. Mrs Nutmouse had a whole shelf of cookery books, so she was never short of inspiration.

Mr Nutmouse was not as rich as his ancestors had been, and this was because he gave most of his money away. He supported all sorts of charities – charities for homeless mice, charities for arthritic mice, charities for illiterate mice, charities for bald





mice . . . he even supported a charity for mice with hiccups. So one way or another the Nutmouses did not have much money left. They did not employ a butler or a maid; and they could not afford to give banquets in their banqueting room, nor balls in their ballroom.

But since neither of them much liked balls and banquets, they didn't mind a bit; and Mrs Nutmouse was such a good housekeeper that life was splendid all the same.

But beyond the broom cupboard, where the humans lived, things were not splendid at all. Rose Cottage was owned by Mr Mildew, a widower who lived there with his two children, Arthur and Lucy. They were very poor, and they did not have nearly



so many rooms as the Nutmouses had. There was one bathroom, which was only a little bit bigger than the bath, and Arthur and Lucy shared a tiny bedroom in the attic with a ceiling that leaked.

From the outside, Rose Cottage looked very inviting. The garden was full of pear trees and wild flowers, and the honeysuckle trailed all over the stone walls, and curled along the fat fringe of the thatch. But inside it was less agreeable. Every room was rife with clutter and chaos, the walls were damp, and the plaster was beginning to crumble. The beams in the sitting room were full of woodworm, and the carpets were so threadbare you could see through to the floorboards, which were full of woodworm too. The boiler had packed up long ago, and in winter the wind howled into

the kitchen through the cracks in the garden door.

The cottage had been much better cared for when Mrs Mildew was alive, but she had died long ago, when Arthur was still a baby. He couldn't remember his mother at all, and Lucy could only remember her lying in bed looking very thin and white, with a fat doctor standing over her. Lucy had been told the name of her mother's illness once, but it had been much too peculiar a word for her to remember.

The Mildew children did not miss having a mother, because they couldn't remember what having one had been like. And yet they knew that there were certain disadvantages to being without one, and they considered living in chaos to be among them.

But Mr Mildew was such a head-in-the-clouds sort of fellow that he hardly seemed to notice how squalid Rose Cottage had become. He was an inventor by trade, and he spent all his time crashing about in his tiny study upstairs, trying to invent things. Years ago, he had invented a gadget for peeling grapes, which had been sold in a department store in London and had made him quite rich for a short time. But people weren't buying his grape-peelers any more, so now he needed to invent something else.

And as a result, he didn't think nearly as hard as he might about the housekeeping, which was why Rose Cottage was such a mess. It was all he could do to put meals on the table, and he was so absent-minded that he could never remember

which meal was which. So as often as not Arthur and Lucy found themselves eating tinned spaghetti for breakfast, and porridge for supper.

The Mildews all looked rather scruffy, for they never had haircuts or new clothes, but there was something distinguished about them too. Lucy was tall and graceful, and she had hair the colour of copper; and Arthur had blue eyes and thick black curls, and he wore glasses with a broken frame which kept slipping off his nose. Mr Mildew was the most striking of all – he always dressed in a purple smoking jacket, which was falling to bits, and he had wiry hair which stuck out of his head like insect antennae.

Less imaginative children might have been embarrassed by Mr Mildew, but Arthur and Lucy felt



proud of him because he was much more interesting and exotic than anyone else's father. And he had plenty of good points. He hardly ever lost his temper, and he never nagged them to do boring things, like cleaning their teeth, or brushing their hair, or tidying their room, or doing their homework. But it wasn't easy living with someone quite so absent-minded, and now and again they did feel a bit neglected.

And at the time this story begins they had reason to feel even more neglected than usual. It was the middle of a long, icy winter – they had known weeks and weeks of the sort of biting weather that makes it painful to be outdoors. No one could remember the village being as cold. The duck pond was frozen to its depths, the gargoyles on the church were dribbling icicles, and all the school water pipes

had frozen solid. One night, two of them burst.

This was a great drama, and it meant that the school had to be closed for seven whole weeks while something called ‘essential renovations’ took place. Most of the children were very pleased about this, for it’s not every year that one’s Christmas holiday is extended until February. But Arthur and Lucy weren’t so pleased. For if you have a father who gives you tinned spaghetti for breakfast, and a cottage so cold that the butter freezes in the kitchen, then the prospect of being stuck at home all winter long is not especially appealing.

Had they known that there were mice living such gracious lives in their broom cupboard, they might have felt quite envious. They might even have wished they were mice themselves, so that they

could move into Nutmouse Hall and live as the Nutmouses did.

And had the Nutmouses been different, they might have sniffed down their noses at the Mildews, and felt quite superior and cock-a-hoop. But Mr and Mrs Nutmouse did not feel cock-a-hoop at all. As a matter of fact, they felt rather uncomfortable. They were kind-hearted mice, and they did not think it right that they should be eating sumptuous meals in a warm house, while the Mildew children ate horrid things like tinned spaghetti in their icy kitchen.

The Nutmouses had been concerned about Arthur and Lucy for some time, and the colder the winter became, the more their concern grew. And there comes a point at which a concern grows so big that something has to be done about it.