

A LITTLE FRIEND.



THE hardest animal to kill that I know is the mouse. Its vitality is far from great; it will die of fright if caught uninjured in a wire trap; a slight squeeze will crush it; but all the same, I maintain

that it is a hard animal to kill. Paradoxical this: but once the little thing is caught, its graceful proportions, bright beady eyes, soft rounded ears, fine fur, and innocent, inoffensive looks, all rise as special pleaders before the individual who would condemn the pretty thing to death.

The mouse, then, is hard to kill; but necessity knows no law, and while ridiculing as childish and absurd those people who shriek with alarm at the sight of the pretty little animal running across a room in the twilight, the fiat must go forth, and if he invades our homes the mouse must die.

Why? Because he goes straight to the flour bag or tub to devour and destroy, eats through papers of sugar, nibbles candles, gnaws his way right into that Stilton sent you as a present, and generally does so much mischief, and makes so much noise, that you set one or other of the many traps that have been invented for his extermination, and catch him readily, for he is far less suspicious than his relative, the rat.

I have tried most of the plans for entrapping our little friend, who is so affectionate that he will not be said nay. I have had cats, and found the remedy far worse than the disease, for—pace good assertors to the contrary—the presence of a cat does not drive away mice from a house, and as to the catching powers of that sleek feline purrer, no doubt they are great, but they are very little exercised by a well-fed cat, who is really a gross impostor, making so much fuss over the capture of one mouse, that you might imagine the whole race had been exterminated.

One of the best traps is the spring block full of holes, in which some half-dozen garrotting wires are held open in their places by tying with threads; bait of cheese or the like is placed out of reach within, and this being only to be obtained by gnawing, the mouse finds it just to its taste, gnaws through the

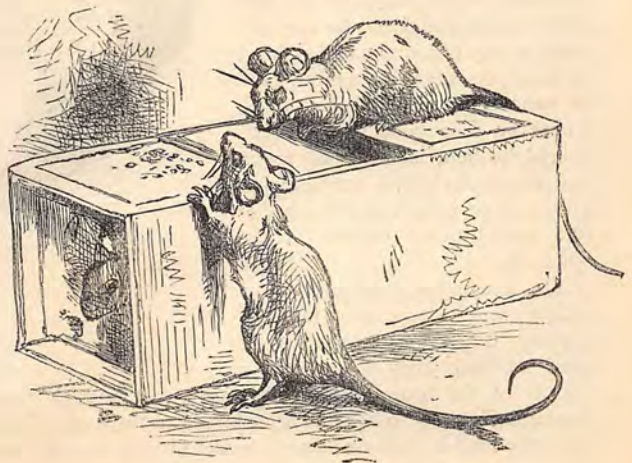
thread, and—dies. Waterton's plan is good. The old naturalist suggested the taking of a large brown earthenware jar, rubbing it inside with rank-smelling grease, and sinking it flush with the earth, when the mice, attracted by the grease, spring in and cannot spring out. A capital pitfall, but not available for indoor use.

If you openly declare yourself the foe of the tiny domestic mouse, he shuns you naturally enough; but if you are of a social disposition, and disposed to study his ways, he soon becomes accustomed to you, and will walk into your room in the most fearless way, showing an especial tendency for the interior of the kitchen fender, where Mary is too fond of shaking her supper-cloth. Here *Mus*, with his bead-like eyes and rounded ears, will run about at a tremendous rate, turning himself into a miniature kangaroo, and sitting up on his hind-legs, use his fore-paws like hands, to which, in fact, they strangely assimilate, having four fingers and a little badly-developed thumb, very different to the long fine toes of his hind-feet. This kangaroo-like aspect is much greater than might be imagined, especially when the little animal progresses in a series of playful bounds.

Not long since, a medical friend, residing in Gower Street, invited me to come and see his mice—two which came out regularly every night from behind the wainscot into the dining-room, ran along the carpet to the window-curtains, up the soft woollen fabric to where the canary-cage hung, and then and there had a hearty meal of seed.

It might be imagined that there is something musical in canary-seed, for after their feast first one and then the other would oblige the company with a song—a veritable song, mind, like that of a bird, and one which was at first attributed to the canary, until it was seen that the winged minstrel was reposing in the shape of a ball of feathers, while the vocalist was the mouse.

This song was a very agreeable twittering, exactly



like that of a young cock-bird in spring, when he seems to be busy rehearsing for the full bursts of

sary, though, with these little creatures, for, tiny as they are, their muscular strength of jaw is astonishing, and they can drive their keen teeth through the piece of skin they nip with lightning-like rapidity.

A striking peculiarity of the common domestic mice is the way in which they will migrate. For months, perhaps, the house may swarm with them, so that they become a perfect nuisance. Then all at once, and without warning, they go no one knows whither and are forgotten, till some night the old familiar scratching and gnawing are heard, and the old runs are full.

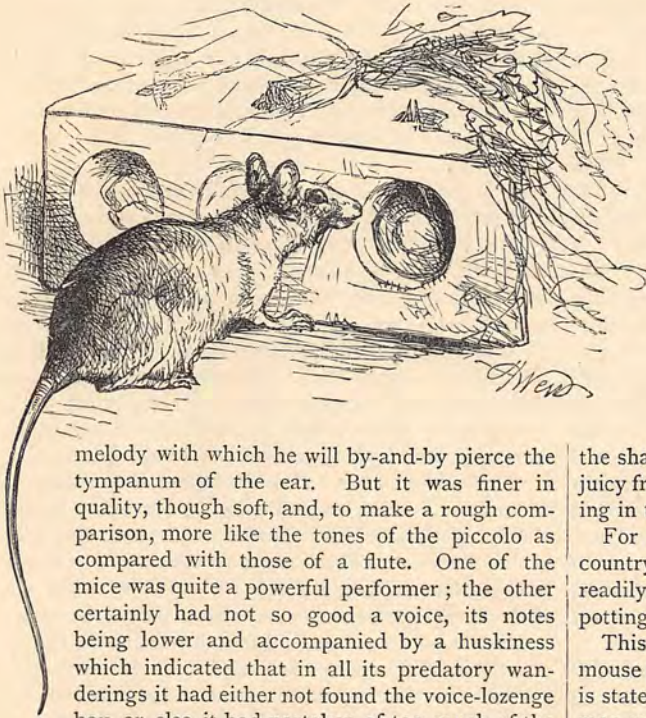
Now, if this occurred in the country it would be easily explainable, for they would be only participating in the habits of our little enemy the rat, and their cousins the field-mice; but this is the case in busy London, where there are no temptations in

the shape of coppice and hedgerow, milky young corn, juicy fruit, sweet nut, or tender peas and beans swelling in the garden ready to come up.

For the field-mouse has its migrations, and in a country place, though it rarely enters the house, takes readily to barn, stable, or (most loved of all) the pits, potting-sheds, and apple-lofts of a large garden.

This mouse—the wood-mouse, or long-tailed field-mouse (*Mus sylvaticus*), as it is called by naturalists—is stated by them to be “a little larger than the common mouse.”

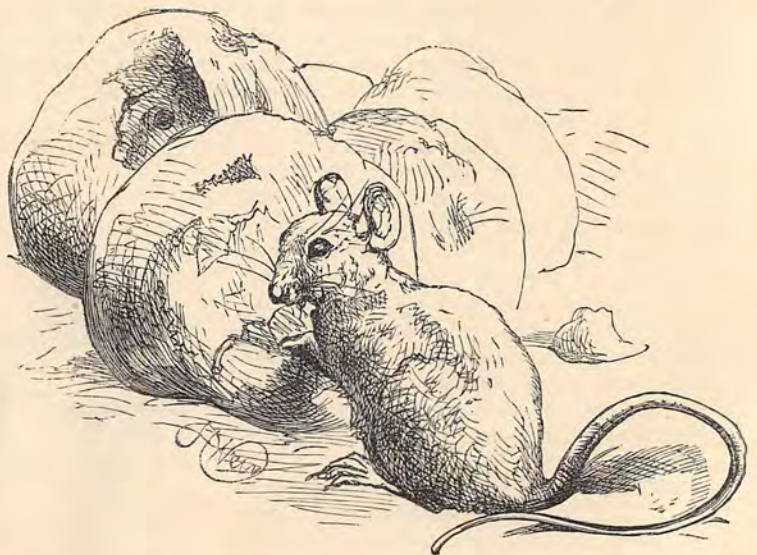
Perhaps habitat has something to do with the case—good feeding, pleasant climate, and the like; for in place of being a little larger than the common mouse, those I have caught by the dozen are at least double, often three times, the size of the ordinary mouse of



melody with which he will by-and-by pierce the tympanum of the ear. But it was finer in quality, though soft, and, to make a rough comparison, more like the tones of the piccolo as compared with those of a flute. One of the mice was quite a powerful performer; the other certainly had not so good a voice, its notes being lower and accompanied by a huskiness which indicated that in all its predatory wanderings it had either not found the voice-lozenge box, or else it had partaken of too much of the outer coating of the seed.

This singing power of the mouse has often been remarked, and is by some writers attributed to a disease of the vocal organs, probably from its being so rare; but the fact seems to be that it is the natural result of the tiny animal being a dweller in close proximity to a loudly-singing bird, to whose calls it responds with one of its more shrill squeaks, and then by degrees, possessing a strong imitative faculty, acquires the power of modulating its little voice till it produces a very fair copy of the bird's song. The proof of this would not be very difficult to any one who cared to keep as tame pets a few dozen mice, even as some children keep white mice. Three or four good singing-birds should be kept in the same room, and the probabilities are that out of the little rodent family one or two would prove adepts in the vocal art.

This keeping of white mice seems of late years to have fallen into disrepute. Like the white rabbits one used to have, they are simply a variety of the brown ones, which are easily enough tamed sufficiently to become accustomed to their cage and take food from their owner's hand. Care is neces-



our hearth and wainscot. Lighter in colour—being of a warm brown, creamy white beneath, and with a fur that is finer, more sleek and shiny—they are also

slighter in build and greater in activity. While the sun shines warmly they are out-door animals, burrowing under ground, and storing their nuts, corn, peas, and beans for the winter; but when autumn begins to give place to bleak winter, they seek the out-buildings in troops, and then woe betide those stored-up Ribston Pippins, those Russets, those Golden Knobs that you have in the apple-rack side by side with the heap of filberts and Kentish cobs! They will have the nuts first, carrying them off behind the boards and under the floor, the heap diminishing you know not how. At last, lest the unknown thief should take the rest, you carry them to a safer place; and then the poor apples!

First they are eaten into merely for the sake of their ripe brown pips, and then, as time goes on and the pips are finished, the apple itself is eaten, till there is nothing left but a wall of skin; and the only comfort



you have is that the mice must be getting very fat and sleek. There are bounds to patience, and even that of one who loves animals can be tried too sorely. War was commenced, and in a tiny iron-toothed trap made on the principle of those for rats about a dozen of these marauders of fruit expiated their crimes.

Crimes? Well, what else can you call them, in a garden already robbed to denudation by robins (well named), by thrushes and blackbirds, of its strawberries and black currants and gooseberries, and by sparrows and starlings of its cherries? Was not this enough, without the great field-mouse coming and saying, in acts if not in words, "Yes, these are two very choice rows of Windsor beans!" and "Ah, what fine, succulent, juicy Perfection peas these are!" and then, just as they are swelling and putting forth their

tender germs, altering your style of planting for one in accordance with the mousey taste? You planted them neatly and carefully in rows ready to come up. Mouse prefers them all in one hole just below the surface, ready to go down when hunger demands. The field-mouse is really then a little pest in your garden, and the mischief he can do almost incredible. Catch him you can when he takes refuge in, or rather attacks, your covered stores; but in the garden Waterton's plan comes best, though one does not care to be disturbing one's smooth borders by planting pitfalls. Poison is often advocated, but it shall not be recommended here, since it brings its own Nemesis, and only too often by slaying some creature for whose delectation it was never meant.

The rustic in Sussex threads a bean, and attaches the thread to the stick, which holds up a brick; and, if cleverly set, the mouse pulls down the brick upon his devoted head. The little steel trap is the best gin for the pea and bean thief, however; though the great thing in catching these mice is in finding new places and cunning plans for setting the destroying machine.

This article must not conclude without some words about the other British mouse—the smallest quadruped we have. This beautiful little creature, say the naturalists, has "three simple molar teeth in each jaw, with tuberculated summits, the upper incisors wedge-shaped, the lower compound and pointed," and so on and so on. Of it, however, I can say but little. Its pretty cricket-ball-shaped nest I have never yet found suspended from three stalks of corn, and woven of leaves and panicles of grass. This is a pleasure to come; while for a lengthened description of its habits I must refer the reader to some natural history work. The above is no fable, but a truthful description of the habits of the town and the country mouse.

GEO. MANVILLE FENN.

