Opening extract from

The Mouse and his child

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The tramp was big and squarely built, and he walked with the rolling stride of the long road, his steps too big for the little streets of the little town. Shivering in his thin coat, he passed aimlessly through the crowd while rosy-faced Christmas shoppers quickened their steps and moved aside to give him room.

The sound of music made him stop at a toyshop where the door, continually swinging open and shut in a moving stream of people, jangled its bell and sent warm air and Christmas carols out into the street. 'Deck the halls with boughs of holly,' sang the loudspeakers in the shop, and the tramp smelled Christmas in the pine wreaths, in the bright paint and varnish, in the shining metal and fresh pasteboard of the new toys.

He put his face close to the window, and looking past the toys displayed there, peered into the shop. Under the wreaths and winking coloured lights a little train clattered through sparkling tunnels and over painted mountains on a green table, the tiny clacking of its wheels circling in and out of the music. Beyond it the shelves were packed with tin toys and wooden toys and plush toys – dolls, teddy bears, games and puzzles, fire engines and boats and wagons, and row on row of closed boxes, each printed with a fascinating picture of the toy it hid from sight.

On the counter, rising grandly above the heads of the children clustered before it, was a splendid dolls' house. It was very large and expensive, a full three stories high, and a marvel of its kind. The porches and balconies were elegant

with scrollwork brackets, and the mansard roof with its dormers and cross gables was topped by tall brick chimneys and a handsome lookout. In front of the house stood a clockwork elephant wearing a purple headcloth, and when the saleslady wound her up for the watching children, she walked slowly up and down, swinging her trunk and flapping her ears. Near the elephant a little tin seal balanced a red and yellow ball on her nose and kept it spinning while her reflection in the glass counter top smiled up at her and spun its own red and yellow ball.

As the tramp watched, the saleslady opened a box and took out two toy mice, a large one and a small one, who stood upright with outstretched arms and joined hands. They wore blue velveteen trousers and patent leather shoes, and they had glass-bead eyes, white thread whiskers, and black rubber tails. When the saleslady wound the key in the mouse father's back he danced in a circle, swinging his little son up off the counter and down again while the children laughed and reached out to touch them. Around and around they danced gravely, and more and more slowly as the spring unwound, until the mouse father came to a stop holding the child high in his upraised arms.

The saleslady, looking up as she wound the toy again, saw the tramp's whiskered, staring, face on the other side of the glass. She pursed her mouth and looked away, and the tramp turned from the window back to the street. The gray sky had begun to let down its snow, and the ragged man stood in the middle of the pavement while the soft flakes fell around him and the people quick-stepped past him.

Then, with his big broken shoes printing his footsteps in the fresh snow, he solemnly danced in a circle, swinging his empty arms up and down. A little black-and-white spotted dog trotting past stopped and sat down to look at him, and for a moment the man and the dog were the only two creatures on the street not moving in a fixed direction. People laughed, shook their heads, and hurried on. The tramp stopped with arms upraised. Then he lowered his head, jammed his hands into his pockets, and lurched away down the street, around a corner, and into the evening and the lamplight on the snow. The dog sniffed at his footprints, then trotted on where they led.

The store closed. The customers and clerks went home. The music was silent. The wreaths were dim, the shop was

dark except for the dolls' house on the counter. Light streamed from all its windows out into the shadows around it, and the toys before it stood up silhouetted black and motionless as the hours slowly passed.

Then, 'Midnight!' said the old store clock. Its pendulum swung gleaming in the shadows as it counted twelve thin chimes into the silence, folded its hands together, and stared out through the dark window at the thick snow sifting through the light of the street lamp. Far away and muffled by the snow the town hall clock struck midnight with its deeper note.

'Where are we?' the mouse child asked his father. His voice was tiny in the stillness of the night.

'I don't know,' the father answered.

'*What* are we, Papa?'

'I don't know. We must wait and see.'

'What astonishing ignorance!' said the clockwork elephant. 'But of course you're new. I've been here such a long time that I'd forgotten how it was. Now, then,' she said, 'this place is a toyshop, and you are toy mice. People are going to come and buy you for children, because it's almost a time called Christmas.'

'Why haven't they bought you?' asked the little tin seal. 'How come you've stayed here so long?'

'It isn't quite the same for me, my dear,' replied the elephant. 'I'm part of the establishment, you see, and this is my house.'

The house was certainly grand enough for her, or indeed for anyone. The very cornices and carven brackets bespoke a residence of dignity and style, and the dolls never set foot outside it. They had no need to; everything they could possibly want was there, from the covered platters and silver chafing dishes on the sideboard to the ebony grand piano among the potted ferns in the conservatory. No expense had been spared, and no detail was wanting. The house had rooms for every purpose, all opulently furnished and

appropriately occupied: there were a piano-teacher doll and a young-lady-pupil doll in the conservatory, a nursemaid doll for the children dolls in the nursery, and a cook and butler doll in the kitchen. Interminable-weekend-guest dolls lay in all the guest room beds, sporting dolls played billiards in the billiard room, and a scholar doll in the library never ceased perusal of the book he held, although he kept in touch with the world by the hand he lightly rested on the globe that stood beside him. There was even an astronomer doll in the lookout observatory, who tirelessly aimed his little telescope at one of the automatic fire sprinklers in the ceiling of the shop. In the dining room, beneath a glittering chandelier, a party of lady and gentleman dolls sat perpetually around a table. Whatever the cook and butler might hope to serve them, they had never taken anything but tea, and that from empty cups, while plaster cakes and pastry,

defying time, stood by the silver teapot on the white damask cloth.

It was the elephant's constant delight to watch that tea party through the window, and as the hostess she took great pride in the quality of her hospitality. 'Have another cup of tea,' she said to one of the ladies. 'Try a little pastry.'

'HIGH-SOCIETY SCANDAL, changing to cloudy, with a possibility of BARGAINS GALORE!' replied the lady. Her papier-mâché head being made of paste and newsprint, she always spoke in scraps of news and advertising, in whatever order they came to mind.

'Bucket seats,' remarked the gentleman next to her. 'Power steering optional. GOVERNMENT FALLS.'

The mouse child was still thinking of what the elephant had said before. 'What happens when they buy you?' he asked her.

'That, of course, is outside of my experience,' said the elephant, 'but I should think that one simply goes out into the world and does whatever one does. One dances or balances a ball, as the case may be.'

The child remembered the bitter wind that had blown in through the door, and the great staring face of the tramp at the window with the gray winter sky behind him. Now that sky was a silent darkness beyond the street lamp and the white flakes falling. The dolls' house was bright and warm; the teapot gleamed upon the dazzling cloth. 'I don't want to go out into the world,' he said.

'Obviously the child isn't properly brought up,' said the elephant to the gentleman doll nearest her. 'But then how could he be, poor thing, without a mother's guidance?'

'PRICES SLASHED,' said the gentleman. 'EVERYTHING MUST GO.'

'You're quite right,' said the elephant. 'Everything must, in one way or another, go. One does what one is wound to do. It is expected of me that I walk up and down in front of my house; it is expected of you that you drink tea. And it is

expected of this young mouse that he go out into the world with his father and dance in a circle.'

'But I don't want to,' said the mouse child, and he began to cry. It was an odd, little, tinny, rasping, sound, and father and son both rattled with it.

'There, there,' said the father, 'don't cry. Please don't.' Toys all around the shop were listening. 'He'd better stop that,' they said.

It was the clock that spoke next, startling them with his flat brass voice. 'I might remind you of the rules of clockwork,' he said. 'No talking before midnight and after dawn, and no crying on the job.'

'He's not on the job,' said the seal. 'We're on our own time now.'

'Toys that cry on their own time sometimes cry on the job,' said the clock, 'and no good ever comes of it. A word to the wise.'

'Do be quiet,' said the elephant to the mouse child. 'I'll sing you a lullaby. Pay attention now.' The mouse child stopped crying, and listened while the elephant sang:

Hush, hush, little plush,
Mama's near you through the night.
Hush, hush, little plush,
Everything will be all right.

'Are you my mama?' asked the child. He had no idea what a mama might be, but he knew at once that he needed one badly.

'Good heavens!' said the elephant. 'Of course I'm not your mama. I was simply singing words I once heard a large teddy bear sing to a small one.'

'Will you *be* my mama,' said the child, 'and will you sing to me all the time? And can we all stay here together and live in the beautiful house where the party is and not go out into the world?'

'Certainly not!' snorted the elephant. 'Really,' she said to

the gentleman doll, 'this is intolerable. One is polite to the transient element on the counter, and see what comes of it.'

'Twenty-one-inch colour television,' offered the gentleman. 'Nagging backaches and muscle tension. A HEART-WARMING LOVE STORY THE WHOLE FAMILY WILL ENJOY.'

'You're an idiot,' snapped the elephant, and no one on the counter said another word for the rest of the night. Outside the window the snowflakes whirled into the lamplight and out into the darkness again; inside the shop the clock ticked slowly through the long dim hours, and the tea party in the dolls' house silently continued.

The next day the mouse and his child were sold. While the elephant walked back and forth and the seal balanced her ball and the ladies and gentlemen sat over their teacups, the father and son were put into a box, wrapped up, and carried off.

They came out of their wrappings to find the store gone and themselves under a Christmas tree with other toys around them. The tree was hung with lights and angels, and smelled of the pine woods. The fire crackled and sang on the hearth, and the children curled up on the rug with the family cat to watch the toys perform. A furry white rabbit struck his cymbals together with a tiny clash; a tin monkey played 'La Golondrina' on a little violin; a tin bird pecked steadily at the floor. And the mouse and his child danced.

Presents in bright wrappings were piled all round them, but the windup toys were not presents for the children; the grown-ups brought them down from the attic every year with the Christmas ornaments, and every year after Christmas they were packed away again. 'You may look at them,' said the grown-ups to the children, 'but we must wind them for you. Then they will not be broken, and we can enjoy them for many Christmases.'

So the mouse and his child danced under the tree every evening, and every night when the family was asleep they

talked with the other toys. The monkey complained of being made to play the same tune over and over on a cheap fiddle; the bird complained of having to peck at a bare floor; the rabbit complained that there was no meaning in his cymbals. And soon the mouse and his child complained of the futility of dancing in an endless circle that led nowhere.

Every evening the toys performed, and every day the pine tree shed more needles on the floor around them until Christmas was gone. Then the tree was thrown out and the toys were packed off to the attic with the ornaments. There they lay jumbled in a box together, in the warm, sharp, dry smell of the attic beams and the dim light of the clouded, cobwebbed windows. Through long days and nights they listened to the rain on the roof and the wind in the trees, but the sound of the living room clock striking midnight could not reach them; they never had permission to speak at all, and they lay in silence until another year had passed and they stood once more beneath the tree.

So it was that four Christmases came and went, until there came a fifth Christmas that was different from the others.

'Wind up the toys for us!' said the children as they lay on the rug by the fire and leaned their cheeks on their hands.

When the mouse father was wound up, he danced in a circle as he always did, swinging the child up and down. The room, the tree, and the faces in the firelight whirled past the child as always, but this time he saw something new: among the other presents stood a dolls' house, a little one-room affair with a red-brick pattern printed on its fibreboard walls.

As the mouse child danced by with his father, he looked through the dolls' house window and saw a very small teddy bear and a pink china baby doll sitting at a table on which was a tea set bigger than both of them. Around and around the mouse child danced, rising and falling as his father

swung him up and down, while the little tea party in the window circled past him.

How far away that other dolls' house seemed now! How far away that other tea party with its elegant ladies and gentlemen, and the elephant he had wanted for a mama! The mouse child was on the job and he knew it, but he began to cry.

No one noticed his outbreak but the family cat. She had grown used to the mechanical toys and no longer paid any attention to them, but the strange little sound of the mouse child's sobbing startled and upset her. She dabbed at the toy, arched her back, jumped suddenly sidewise, and leaping on to a table, knocked over a heavy vase of flowers. It fell with a crash, landing squarely on the mouse and his child. The vase was shattered to bits, and the toy was smashed.

Early the next morning the tramp came through the town, as he did each winter. With the little dog still at his heels he walked the snowy street past the house where the children and the grown-ups lived. He looked into the dust-bin to see what he might be able to use, took an empty coffee can and a bundle of newspapers, and went back to the junkyard where he had slept the night before in a wrecked car. Only then did he find the mouse and his child inside the papers, crushed almost flat but still holding fast to each other.

The tramp looked at the battered wrecks around him in the cold, clear sunlight. He looked down at himself in his ragged clothes. Then he sat down in the car he had slept in, and reached into his pocket for a little screwdriver. While the dog watched quietly, he took the mouse and his child apart to see if he could make them dance again. The junkyard lay silent, its wrecks upheaved like rusty islands in the sparkling snow; the only sounds were the bells of Christmas ringing in the town and the cawing of some crows, hoarse and sharp in the cold air.

All that day the tramp sat in the junkyard labouring over

the broken toy, stopping only to eat some bread and meat that he took from his pocket and shared with the dog. He was able to bend the tin bodies almost back into their original shapes, but he had a great deal of trouble with the clockwork motor. When he wound it up, the mechanism jammed, and in trying to clear it he broke some of the little cogs and bars that had made the mouse father dance in a circle and swing the child up and down. The tramp removed those parts and put the toy together as well as he could. Their patent leather shoes had been lost in the dust-bin; their blue velveteen trousers hung wrinkled and awry; their fur had come unglued in several places, but the mouse and his child were whole again.

Now when it was wound up the motor worked without jamming, but the mouse and his child danced no more. The father, his legs somewhat bent, lurched straight ahead with a rolling stride, pushing the child backwards before him. The little dog sat and watched them with his head cocked to one side. The ragged man smiled and threw away the leftover parts. Then he put the toy in his pocket and walked out to the highway.

High on a ridge above the town where snowy fields sloped off on either side, the road crossed a bridge over the railway tracks, went past the town rubbish dump, and stretched away to the horizon. The tramp set the mouse and his child down at the edge of the road and wound up the father.

'Be tramps,' he said, and turned and walked away with the dog at his heels.

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The mouse father walked forward on to the bridge, pushing the child backwards before him until his motor ran down and he could move no farther. Trains rumbled and shrieked on the tracks below. Cars and trucks shook the bridge as they roared past and vanished in the distance while father and son stood trembling.

The afternoon wore on towards evening, and the broken glass and mica of the roadside glittered in the last, low sunlight of the day. The snowy fields glowed briefly and went dark. At the dump the fires of burning rubbish smouldered, red and smoky in the dusk. The bridge lights went on, and beyond their unearthly blue glare the highway lamps spaced out the twilight to the dark horizon. A gibbous moon stared crookedly down from the cold sky until it was blotted out by clouds. Far away the clock on the town hall tolled the hours, and the mouse and his child waited in silence until they heard the twelve faint strokes of midnight.

'You see now where your crying has brought us,' said the father.

'I'm sorry, Papa,' said the child. 'I didn't mean to cry. I couldn't help it.'

The father looked thoughtfully into the night beyond the bridge, where red taillights diminished and white headlights continually approached. The wind was rising, and in the silences between the traffic, the girders of the bridge creaked with the cold. 'How strange it is to walk straight ahead!' he said.

I walked backwards,' said the child, 'but I liked it better

than dancing in a circle. What shall we do now?'

'Who knows?' said the father. 'There seems to be a good deal more to the world than the Christmas tree and the attic and the dust-bin. Anything at all might happen, I suppose.'

'But it won't,' said a soft voice close by. 'Not this evening, my lads.'

A large rat crept out of the shadows of the girders into the light of the overhead lamps, and stood up suddenly on his hind legs before the mouse and his child. He wore a greasy scrap of silk paisley tied with a dirty string in the manner of a dressing gown, and he smelled of darkness, of stale and mouldy things, and garbage. He was there all at once and with a look of tenure, as if he had been waiting always just beyond their field of vision, and once let in would never go away. In the eerie blue glare he peered beadily at father and son, and his eyes, as passing headlights came and went, flashed blank and red like two round tiny ruby mirrors. His whiskers quivered as his face came closer; he bared his yellow teeth and smiled, and a paw shot out to strike the

mouse and his child a rattling blow that knocked them flat.

'Time to be moving along now,' said the rat. He set them on their feet, wound up the father, and guided them across the bridge and up the road toward the dump. As they walked below the highway lamps their shadows swung behind them, then before, then disappeared in darkness till the next dim circled light was reached.

'Where are you taking us?' asked the father.

'To a ball,' said the rat. 'To a jolly, jolly ball at the royal palace, where we shall all drink champagne and dance until dawn. How'll that be?' He laughed softly. His voice, half pleasant, half repellent, was oddly mild and persuasive.

'Are we really going to a palace?' asked the child.

'I don't think so,' said the father. 'He's teasing us.'

'Yes,' said the rat, 'I'm a dreadful tease – famous for my sense of humour. And here we are home again, safe and sound.'

They were off the highway now, and at the dump. Stumbling over snow-covered rubbish, they followed a path through a city of rats and other vermin, where little refuse fires tended by the inhabitants threw dancing shadows on the dirty snow. Tunnels and alleyways led through the rubbish to dark and filthy dwellings. Skulking figures watched them pass, and loud rat voices all around them quarrelled, cursed, and sang. The pathway widened as they went, and little hole-and-corner stalls with rat proprietors appeared.

'Orange peels – imported and domestic! Fancy moulds – green, white, and black!' cried a wizened little vendor with matted fur. 'Bacon grease, guaranteed two months old – some with egg scraps – going fast!' He beckoned to the dressing-gowned rat. 'How about some caviar, Manny?' he said. 'Hard as a rock. Not less than six weeks old. Very nice.'

Manny Rat fingered the caviar and handed it back. 'Haven't you got any of that imported treacle brittle?' he said. 'The kind that comes wrapped in red foil?'

'Next trip my buyer makes,' said the other. He winked at Manny Rat, then continued his chant. 'Orange peels! Bacon grease! Scented soaps! Library paste!'

As the mouse and his child stumbled on they heard thin and ragged voices singing:

Who's that passing in the night?
Foragers for Manny Rat!
We grab first and we hold tight –
Foragers for Manny Rat!

The voices trailed off wearily in groans and curses.

'Come on,' snarled someone, 'keep it moving, you!'

'My spring's gone,' came the tinny reply. 'See for yourself – one end of it's sticking out of my chest. I'm done!'

'No such luck,' said another tin voice as the unseen group passed out of earshot.

Manny Rat snickered, and pushed the mouse and his child along through an evil-smelling huddle of gambling dens, gaming booths, dancehalls and taverns, all crudely built of scraps of wood and cardboard boxes. The bonfires in the alleyways threw moving shadows of the revellers large on walls of open stalls; the dancehalls thumped and whistled savagely with tin-can drums, reed pipes, and matchbox banjos, while the dim light of candles through the doors and windows sent bobbing rat shapes dancing blackly on the snow. Farther off above the general din there rose the cracked voice of a windup carousel that played a waltz with many missing notes. Beyond the rubbish mountains and the fires wailed a passing freight, its wheels faintly clacking on the distant rails.

'Hurry, hurry! Step right up!' shouted a red and black sexton beetle at the entrance of an orange-crate theatre. The guttering flames of birthday-candle stubs behind him threw his frisking shadow on the snow ahead. The beetle wore a cape made from the fur of a woolly bear caterpillar, but he shivered nonetheless.

'A scientific exhibit!' he announced to passersby. 'An education for the whole family!' He drew aside a ragged curtain to disclose, lit by the fitful candles, a headless pink celluloid hula doll wearing the faded remnants of a cellophane grass skirt. Two cricket musicians, barely kept from freezing by a nest of dead grass in a glass jar, huddled together, too cold to chirp.

'I don't like this place, Papa,' whimpered the mouse child.

'Hush,' said the father. 'Crying won't help.'

'Observe her curious motion as she sways this way and that!' urged the beetle. He wound the key in the headless doll's back, and she jiggled listlessly while the candle flames sank in the wind. 'Let's go, boys!' he said, and kicked the cricket jar. The crickets chirped once and lapsed into silence. The beetle let the curtain fall. 'There's more inside!' he yelled. 'Step up and see the show!'

'How much have you taken in this evening?' asked Manny Rat.

'Very slow tonight,' said the sexton beetle. He showed him the small end of a salami and a dead sparrow half buried in the snow.

'We haven't been burying anything on the sly, have we?' said Manny Rat, taking the salami. 'We make sure Manny always gets his cut?'

'It's been a slow winter,' said the beetle. 'I'm doing the best I can. Honest.'

Manny Rat wound up the mouse father, and they left the midway and started up a slope on which the father and the child fell many times. 'Almost there, chaps,' he said. 'Then you can rest your clockwork for a bit before you resume your duties.'

The slope levelled off. They walked through a rusty bedspring, around the skeleton of a baby carriage, and found themselves in a long, narrow space where empty beer cans, standing like elms at the entrance to a manor, made an avenue that led to the gutted and screenless cabinet of a

long-dead television set, the residence of Manny Rat.

The mouse and his child, unwound, came to a stop, while their captor sat down on the edge of the hole where the television screen had been and ate his salami. As he looked up into the night, the massed clouds lifted to reveal the sky. The moon had set; the stars were sharp and clear. Low above the horizon wheeled Orion the Hunter, and near the luminous scattering of the Milky Way, in the Great Dog constellation, blazed Sirius, the brightest star of all. Manny Rat liked dark nights best; he grimaced at the stars and turned away.

Standing as he was on uneven ground, the child was tilted at such an angle that he too saw the Dog Star, beyond his father's shoulder. He had never looked up at the sky before; indeed, he had as yet seen little of the earth, and even that little was more frightening than he had imagined. At first the icy glitter of the far-off star was terrifying to him; he sensed a distance so vast as to reduce him to nothing. But as he looked and looked upon that steady burning he was comforted a little; if he was nothing, he thought, so also was this rat and all the dump. His father's hands were firm upon his, and he resolved to see what next the great world offered.

'What are you going to do with us?' the father asked Manny Rat. 'Why have you brought us here?'

Manny Rat ignored the question, and looked back over the trodden snow towards the far end of the beer-can avenue. The mouse and his child heard the singing again, and in the dim starlight they saw, dark against the snow, an ugly young rat tough driving a group of battered windup toys ahead of him. There were more than a dozen of them, all staggering under the weight of the bags they carried on their backs. They had been salvaged from the dump by Manny Rat and Ralphie, his assistant and rat-of-all-work, and whatever mobility they possessed was due to the mechanical skill of the two rats. Once they had been kicking

donkeys, dancing bears, tumbling clowns, roaring lions, baaing goats – all manner of specialities were represented in the group – but few of them by now had all their faculties, and most of them had lost a limb or two along with fur and clothing, eyes and ears. All their trades and tricks were gone; the best that they could do was plod ahead when wound, and that not very well. They tottered up the avenue, led by a mouldy goat, both lame and blind, who with the others feebly sang:

Who's that passing in the night?
Foragers for Manny Rat!
Make your move and take your bite
After us, or stand and fight
Manny Rat!

The song faltered into silence as the foragers came to a stop at various points between the beer cans, those whose springs were not completely unwound being knocked down by Ralphie. The mouse and his child stared at the other toys, and the standing members of the group stared back in silence.

'Where'd they come from?' asked Ralphie, as he shuffled up to report to his master.

'I found them wandering on the road,' said Manny Rat, 'where they'd evidently straggled away from your squad. Aren't these a couple of your new recruits?'

'I don't think I ever seen them two before,' said Ralphie. 'But all them windups look alike to me anyhow. I never know whether I got the whole squad unless I count.' He leered at the mouse and his child. 'Wandering on the road, hey? Maybe their motor's too strong. Maybe I should work them over a little.'

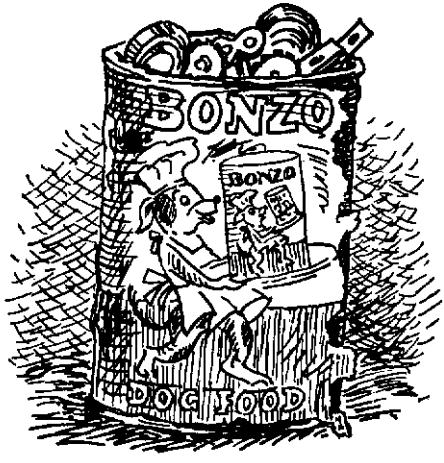
'Never mind them for now,' said Manny Rat. 'I should very much like to know who it was I heard complaining a little while ago. Something about a broken spring, I believe.'

'Him,' said Ralphie, pointing to a one-eyed, three-legged donkey. 'He got a lot to say.'

'It's nothing,' said the frightened donkey as he heard Manny Rat approach his blind side. 'I've got plenty of work left in me. I was just feeling a little low – you know how it is.'

'You're not well,' said Manny Rat. 'I can see that easily. What you need is a long rest.' He picked up a heavy rock, lifted it high, and brought it down on the donkey's back, splitting him open like a walnut. 'Put his works in the spare-parts can,' said Manny Rat to Ralphie.

The young rat deftly removed the donkey's motor-and-leg assembly and dropped it into an empty tin can that stood near the mouse and his child. BONZO Dog Food said the white letters on the orange label, and below the name was a picture of a little black-and-white spotted dog, walking on his hind legs and wearing a chef's cap and an apron. The dog carried a tray on which there was another can of BONZO Dog Food, on the label of which another little black-and-white spotted dog, exactly the same but much smaller, was walking on his hind legs and carrying a tray on which there was another can of BONZO Dog Food, on the label of which another little black-and-white spotted dog, exactly



the same but much smaller, was walking on his hind legs and carrying a tray on which there was another can of BONZO Dog Food, and so on until the dogs became too small for the eye to follow. The father stared at the can as the parts fell in with a melancholy clink; the child's back was to it.

'What about the rest of our gallant foragers?' said Manny Rat. 'Is anyone else not feeling well tonight?' No one answered. Some standing, some lying in the snow, they waited in silence, their rusty metal and mildewed plush glinting with frost.

Manny Rat turned to the mouse father. 'I can see by the way you stare that you have not been here before,' he said. 'Let me welcome you, then, to the dump, and to our happy band.' He came closer, and bared his slanting yellow teeth. 'Notice my teeth, if you will,' he said. 'Pretty, aren't they? They're the longest, strongest, sharpest teeth in the dump.' He swept his paw around the dark horizon. 'All this will belong to Manny Rat one day,' he said. 'I'll be the boss of the whole place. Is that so or isn't it, Ralphie!' He leaped suddenly at the young rat.

'You're the boss, Boss,' said Ralphie, stepping back quickly. 'Don't get excited.'

Smiling and rubbing his paws together, Manny Rat walked over to the silent squad of toys. 'What have we tonight?' he said.

Ralphie emptied the bags, heaping on the snow bread crusts, apple cores, partly-eaten pork chops, two or three unfinished lollipops, a rotten egg, half a can of anchovies, two marbles, a piece of red glass, and other choice gleanings of the local dust-bins. 'That's it,' he said. 'And I seen another busted up windup we could fix. It was over by that smashed-up folding table, towards the road.'

'Any treacle brittle?' said Manny Rat.

'The last I heard of was the other day,' said Ralphie. 'A couple of fellows pulled off a job at a grocery store. But after they got the treacle brittle they put it in the vault over at the