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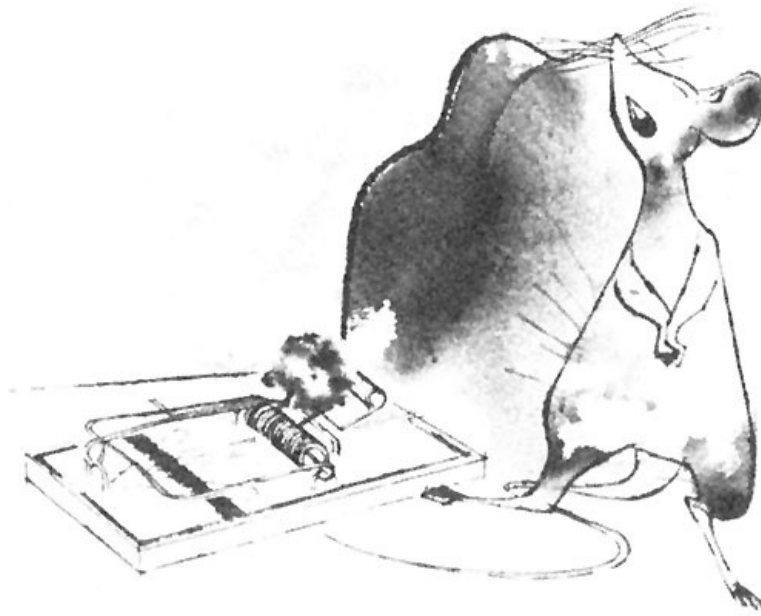
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CHAIN OF COMMAND



By **STEPHEN ARR**

Illustrated by **ASHMAN**

By going through channels, George worked up from the woodwork to the top brass!

“**G**eorge,” Clara said with restrained fury, “the least you could do is ask him. Are you a mouse or a worm?”

“Well, I have gone out there and moved it every night,” George protested, trying to reason with her without success.

“Yes, and every morning he puts it back. George, so long as that trap is outside of our front door, I can never have a moment’s peace, worrying about the children. I won’t go on like this! You must go out and talk some sense into him about removing it at once.”

“I don’t know,” George said weakly. “They might not be happy to find out about us.”

“Well, our being here is their own fault, remember that,” Clara snorted. “They deliverately exposed your great-great grandfather Michael to hard radiations. George,” she continued fervidly, “all you have to do is to go out and ask him. I’m sure he’ll agree, and then we’ll have this menace removed from our lives. I simply can *not* go on like this another minute!”

That, George knew, was a misstatement. She could go on like this for hours. He stared at her unhappily.

“Yes, dear,” he mumbled finally. “Well, maybe tomorrow.”

“No, George,” she said firmly. “Now! This morning. The very moment he comes in.”

He looked at her silently, feeling harried and unsure of himself. After living here so long, they’d observed and learned human customs and speech—they’d even adopted human names.

“George,” she pleaded, “just ask him. Reason with him. Point out to him that he’s just wasting his time.” She paused, added, “You’re intelligent—you can think of the right things to say.”

“Oh, all right,” he said wearily. But once he had said it, he felt better. At least, he would get it over with, one way or another.

As soon as he heard the swish-swish of the broom outside his home, he got up and walked out of the front door. He saw that the trap was still off to one side, where he had pushed it the night before.

"Hello," he shouted.

Swish-swish-swish went the broom, busily moving dust from one part of the room to another, swish-swish-swish. The man looked tremendous from so close a view, yet George knew that he was just a little, bent, old man, a small specimen of the species.

George took a deep breath. "*Hello!*" he bellowed with all his strength.

The janitor stopped swish-swishing and looked around the room suspiciously.

"*Hello!*" George shrieked. His throat felt raw.

The janitor looked down and saw the mouse. "Hello yourself," he said. He was an ignorant old man and, when he saw the mouse shouting hello at him, he assumed right away that it was a mouse shouting hello to him.

"*The trap!*" the mouse bellowed.

"Stop *shouting!*" the janitor cried, annoyed. He liked to think as he worked, and he hated loud noises. "What about the trap?"

"My wife doesn't want you to put it by the front door any more," George said, still speaking loudly, so that the janitor could hear, but at least not bellowing so that it tore his throat. "She's afraid it might hurt the children."

"*Will* it hurt the children?" the janitor demanded.

"No," George replied. "They know all about traps—but my wife still wants it removed."

"Sorry," the janitor said, "but my orders are to put a trap by every mousehole. This is an atomic plant, and they don't want mice."

"They do, too!" George said defiantly. "They brought my great-great-grandfather Michael here themselves and exposed him to hard radiations. Otherwise *I* wouldn't be here."

"I can't help it," the janitor snapped. "I have to obey orders."

"What will I tell my wife?" George shouted.

That stopped the janitor. He had a wife of his own.

"I guess I can take it up with the supervisor," he finally said.

"All right," George shouted. "*Thanks!*"

The janitor picked up the trap and moved it over to the front door. He watched, interested, as George promptly pushed it several inches along the wall. Then he turned and busily swish-swished more dust around the room.

"Well, what did he say?" Clara asked George as soon as he came back into the house.

"Said he'd take it up with the supervisor," George said, settling down in an armchair.

"George," she ordered, "you get up this instant and make sure that he really does!"

"Look," George pleaded, "he said he would."

"He may have been lying," Clara said promptly. "You go right up to the supervisor's room and see."

So, George reluctantly heaved himself out of the chair and ran through the mouseways in the wall until he came to the mousehole in the supervisor's room.

At that moment, the janitor came in and the supervisor looked up, annoyed. He was a fat man, with stubble on his cheek, and he walked with a waddle.

"There's a mouse in room 112 who doesn't want a trap by his front door," the janitor said simply.

"You're crazy," the supervisor said.

The janitor shrugged. "What should I tell him?" he asked.

"Tell him to come up here and speak to me himself," the supervisor said, feeling very clever.

"I'm right here," George cried, stepping out of the mousehole and neatly side-stepping the mousetrap beside it.

"There he is now," the janitor said, pointing.

"My God!" whispered the supervisor, who'd had some education. "A hallucination."

"No, a mouse," the old janitor corrected.

"My wife wants the trap removed," George patiently explained. "She's worried the children might

blunder into it."

"Do *you* see him, too?" the supervisor asked the janitor incredulously, still whispering.

"Sure," the janitor replied. "He's the one I was telling you about, from room 112."

The supervisor stood up unsteadily. "I don't feel very well," he said in a weak voice. "I think that I'd better talk this over with the Administrative Officer. It's a policy matter."

"You come along, too," he said hastily to the janitor, who had turned to leave. "I'll need all the support I can get." He waddled out, followed by the janitor.

"*What should I tell my wife?*" George shouted, but they didn't answer, so he went down and told his wife that they were discussing it with the Administrative Officer. And, as anyone could have guessed, a short time later he pushed his head out of the mousehole in the Administrative Office.

He was a bit late, just in time to see the door close on the supervisor and the janitor. So he shouted, "*Hello!*" as loud as he could.

The Administrative Officer looked down and saw him right away. He was a thin pale man with tired eyes.

"Go away," he said spiritlessly, "I've just told two people that you don't exist."

"But my wife wants that trap removed—it's dangerous for the children," George complained.

The Administrative Officer almost shouted to hell with George's children, but basically he was a decent man, even if an overworked one, and he caught himself in time.

"I'm sorry," he said sincerely, picking up some letters that he had already read, "but we've got to leave the traps."

"Then what will I tell my wife?" George demanded.

That stopped the Administrative Officer, too. He buried his head in his hands and thought for a long moment. "Are you sure you *really* exist?" he asked, finally raising his head from his hands.

"Sure," George said. "Do you want me to bite you to prove it?"

"No, you needn't bother," the Administrative Officer said. And then he buried his head in his hands again.

"Technically," he said, speaking through his fingers, "it's a security problem."

With an air of relief, he picked up the phone and called the Security Officer. There was a bit of spirited conversation and then he hung up.

"He'll be right down," the Administrative Officer told George.

Shortly thereafter, the door violently swung open, and a tall man with piercing eyes entered. "Hello Bill," he said quickly. "How are you feeling?"

"Hello, Mike," the Administrative Officer replied. "I feel like hell. This is George. I just called you about him."

"Hello!" George shouted.

"Hello!" the Security Officer shouted back. "I couldn't find any record of you in the files. Have you been cleared?" he added with a note of urgency in his voice. "Fingerprints, A.E.C., C.C.C., C.A.I., F.B.I.?"

"No!" George shouted back. "My wife wants the trap by our front door removed. She thinks it's dangerous for the children."

"Has *she* been cleared?" the Security Office countered in a loud voice.

"Why is everybody shouting?" the Administrative Officer asked peevishly. "I've got a headache."

"No," George answered.

The Security Officer's mouth tightened into a thin, grim line. "A major lapse of security," he snapped. "I'll check into this very thoroughly."

"Will you remove the trap?" George asked.

"I can't, until you're cleared," the Security Officer said, shaking his head. "I certainly won't authorize any action that could be later construed as aiding the entrance of spies or subversives into the plant."

"How old are you?" the Administrative Officer asked George.

"Fifty-six days," George replied without hesitation.

"Under twelve years," the Administrative Officer pointed out to the Security Officer. "No clearance required."

"I don't know," the Security Officer said, shaking his head. "There's no precedent for a case like this. I'll be damned if I'll stick my neck out and have that trap removed. I know, I'll send a request for an advisory opinion." He turned and walked toward the door.

"What should I tell my wife?" George called after him.

"Tell her that I'm asking the A.E.C. for an opinion, with carbon copies to the Defense Dept. and the F.B.I."

"Don't forget Immigration & Naturalization," the Administrative Officer said. "There might be a question of citizenship."

"The hell there is," George said. "*Lex locis*—I was born here."

"Well," the Security Officer said as he walked out, "one can't be too careful."

So, George went and told his wife and, the next morning, he was on the train for Washington. Being telepathic, as all this generation of mice were, he already had contacted some mice who had an 'in' in the government buildings.

All the way down on the train, he worried about chasing all those carbons in the bureaucratic maze of Washington, but he needn't have.

As soon as the Security Officer's report was received, the A.E.C. sent a battery of psychiatrists to the plant. After the psychiatrists reported, they, in turn, were sent to another battery of psychiatrists. After that, the A.E.C. called a top-level conference of the Defense Dept., F.B.I. (Dept. Just.), Fish & Wildlife (Dept. Int.), Public Health (Dept. Welf.), Immigration & Naturalization and Alaskan Affairs. The latter turned out to be a mistake.

This had taken two weeks, and George had lingered in the walls, impatiently waiting for his chance to testify. Of course, he was in telepathic communication with Clara. He knew that his family were all well, that Clara had made friends with the janitor, also that the trap was still there.

The janitor no longer put cheese in it, and he didn't set the spring any more, but he still followed his orders and so, every morning, moved it back by the door of the little mousehouse.

A fat Washington mouse guided George to the mousehole in the conference room. George looked inside and sniffed the smoky air distastefully.

There were seven men seated at a long table, with a glass of water in front of each. This was a liquid that even George knew was hardly designed to lubricate the way to a quick agreement.

"*Bomb* them, I say," the General cried, smashing his fist down on the table. "Hit them hard with atomic weapons. Hit them *now*, before *they* have a chance to strike first."

"But that's one of our best plants," a civilian from the A.E.C. protested. "We don't want to blow it up, not for a few paltry mice."

"Couldn't we send them to Alaska?" the man from Alaskan Affairs asked timidly, wondering what he was doing there.

"How about traps?" the man from Fish and Wildlife said. "We have some honeys."

"But *that's just it!*" George said in a loud voice, and they all turned to look at him. "My wife would like that trap by our front door removed. She's afraid that it might hurt the children."

"*Who* are *you*?" the man from Immigration & Naturalization demanded sharply.

"I'm George," George said. "It's my house that has the trap in front of it."

"What are you doing *here*?" the man from the F.B.I. demanded. "Spying on a closed meeting!"

"I'm *not* spying!" George exclaimed. "I just came to ask you to please remove the trap."

The man from the F.B.I. looked at him with something close to pity. "It's not that simple any more," he said. "Don't you realize what a threat you comprise?"

"No," George said, scampering up the leg of the table and walking to its center. "We're not a threat to anybody. We're just mice. It's not our nature to be a threat to anybody."

Then, as he looked around the table at the seven huge faces that surrounded him, he immediately

saw that they were all scared half to death because he was a mouse, and he had a sudden premonition that he would not come out of the meeting alive. So he opened his mind to let his family and all the other telepathic mice hear everything that was happening.

"Don't tell me you don't fully realize," the Fish and Wildlife man demanded sarcastically, trying to hide his terror beneath a blustering tone, "that from one mouse, your great-great-grandfather Michael, there must be now at least twelve billion descendants—or six times the human population of Earth!"

"No, I didn't know," George said, interested despite himself.

"Don't tell me it never occurred to you," the man from the F.B.I. said, shaking a finger at him, while George could see that he kept the other hand on the revolver in his pocket, "that you mice have access to and could destroy every secret file we have!"

"No, it didn't," George said, shrinking from that huge, shaking finger. "We mice would never destroy anything uselessly."

"Or that you could cut the wires on any plane, tank, vehicle, train or ship, rendering it completely inoperable!" the General broke in, slamming a meaty palm down on the table so hard that George was thrown over on his back.

"Of course it never occurred to me!" George said, climbing rockily back on his feet. "We mice wouldn't think of such a thing. Don't be afraid," he pleaded, but it was no use. He could feel the panic in their breasts.

"Didn't you ever consider that you could cut every cable, telephone line, power line, and telegraph line from the States to Alaska?" the man from Alaskan Affairs said, just for the sake of saying something. Then, to show his bravery and defiance, he took his glass of water and emptied it on George. It was ice water, and poor George, dripping wet, began to tremble uncontrollably.

"I suppose you never considered that you could sabotage and blow up every atomic plant we have," the man from the A.E.C. said, before George even had a chance to answer Alaskan Affairs. And, working himself into a rage to overcome his fear, he emptied *his* glass of ice water on the trembling mouse.

George began to weep. "It *never* occurred to me," he sobbed. "We mice aren't like that."

"Nonsense!" the General said. "It's the unchanging law of nature. We must kill you or you will kill us. And we'll start by killing you!" The General roared louder than all the rest because he was the most frightened.

His hand, huge and terrible, swept swiftly down on poor, wet, weeping George. But the General really didn't know mouse tactics very well, because George was down the leg of the table and halfway to the mousehole before the huge hand struck the table with a noisy bang.

And poor George, frightened half out of his wits, scooted into the mousehole and ran and ran without stopping, through the mouseways as fast as he could, until he reached the train. But, of course, the train was no longer moving. All the telepathic mice had cut every cable, telephone line, power line and telegraph line, had also cut the wires on every plane, tank, vehicle, train and ship. They also had destroyed every file in the world.

So George had no alternative but to walk back to the plant, which had been preserved as a memorial to great-great-grandfather Michael.

It took him three weary weeks to make it, and the first thing he noticed when he got there was the trap in front of the door. Naturally, there was no bait in it and the spring wasn't set, but the trap was still there.

"George," Clara said to him the moment after she kissed him, "you must speak to the janitor about the trap."

So George went outside right away, since he could hear the janitor swish-swashing the dust around.

"*Hello!*" he shouted.

"Hello yourself," the janitor said. "So you're home again."

"My wife wants the trap moved," George said. "She's afraid the children might get hurt."

"Sorry," the janitor replied. "My orders were to put a mousetrap by each mousehole."

"How come you didn't go away with all the other people?" George shouted up at him.

"Stop shouting," the janitor said. Then, "I'm too old to change," he added. "Besides, I have a farm down the road."

"But haven't they stopped paying you?" George demanded.

"What's the difference," the janitor countered, "money can't buy anything any more."

"Well, what will I tell my wife about the trap?" George asked.

The janitor scratched his head. "You might tell her that I'll take it up with the supervisor, if he ever comes back."

So George went inside and told Clara.

"George," she said, stamping her foot, "I can't go on with that trap out there! You know that supervisor won't come back, so you've got to go out and find him."

George, who knew that there weren't many people around anywhere any more, walked over to his favorite easy chair and sat down. "Clara," he said, as he picked up a book, "you can leave or stay as you wish, but there is nothing more that I can do. I've wasted a full month over that trap without accomplishing a single thing, and I'm not going to start that business all over again."

—STEPHEN ARR

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