

Petunia's Great Adventure

By Emily Cameron

The King of Mouseland peered through a small crack in the wall at the top of the great marble stairs, gazing down at a young little girl who was wearing a long, purple, swishy nightgown that sparkled in the early morning sunlight. The miniscule old mouse himself wore a fine jeweled golden crown perched on top of his small gray head, and a light blue cape tied around his shoulders which fell down until the white tips of it gently brushed the floor whenever the mouse walked. But the girl who stood at the bottom of the stairs looked even more beautiful than him. The king thought again. Perhaps since that wonderful girl was a princess who got everything she wanted, of course she would look better. After all, the King of Mouseland had only stolen the tattered piece of cloth from the princess's chest of drawers and he had made the crown and the cape all by himself, and he had to admit, he was not someone who was good at making things. The crown was made out of some tinfoil he had found on the ground, and he had painted it gold. What he had made was not very professional, but it sort of looked nice, and at least the "gold" crown wasn't heavy.

But now, as the wrinkled mouse stared through the crack, looking at the princess, he felt that his clothes were the most horrible things you could imagine. The sparkles, the red rubies, and the silky feeling of the nightgown made the King of Mouseland's mouth water. Oh, it was so beautiful, and it was only a nightgown. Nightgowns were usually not slightest bit fancy, but this particular one the princess was wearing had all of the things most nightgowns didn't have. Why, they didn't need the sun if they had this! The nightgown had more light than anyone could imagine! The King of Mouseland, who was sometimes called the Mouse King, stared and stared at the princess, wishing he could have such a brilliant dress like her's.

Suddenly, the mouse remembered why he had such disgusting clothes, because almost about four years ago, something tragic happened. The Queen of Mouseland had been strolling merrily around mousetraps, carefully pulling bits of cheese from some of them, when a black cat appeared and killed her. The Queen of Mouseland had been so good at making things for the Mouse King, but she could never make things again now that she was dead. She had made one thing for her husband a long time ago, a small plaid shirt, but the same black cat that had killed her

ripped it up that night she died. A single tear dropped onto the King of Mouseland's tiny foot. Oh, how he missed the Queen. He had loved her, and he still did.

As the Mouse King thought about his dead wife, a little stout mouse with a bow tied around her large ear was standing in front of a grown-up mouse that was very tall and wiry. This tiny mouse's name was Petunia. Her fur was a light shade of brown, slightly lighter than mud. She had a dark pink nose that was short and wide and bulging eyes that were black. Petunia looked very cute, but if you asked her to do something, like send a letter to someone, she would somehow always end up being caught in the black cat's teeth, the same cat that had killed the Queen of Mouseland, and would always have to be rescued by a very angry Mouse King. Petunia was an orphan, for her parents had been killed by the human Queen, the princess's mother, who had squished them both with her two very large feet. Petunia had been called to tell the Mouse King something.

"Now, don't you mess anything up," said the adult-mouse, whose name was Walter, wagging a long finger at Petunia, who was nodding vigorously. "All I want you to do is tell the King it is time for breakfast," Walter added for the hundredth time.

"Of—of course," stammered Petunia, pleased that she was out of the mouse orphanage.

"Tell me what you will say, then," Walter said irritably. He was annoyed *she* had to be called, because he didn't like clumsy little Petunia. He wanted to beg the orphanage directors for some other mouse, but knew better than to do so. Walter was the Mouse King's servant who told the King what time it was and what he needed to do now.

"Well, okay, so I'll say, 'King, it's time for breakfast,'" Petunia said promptly. "Then I'll walk him back to the Mouse Village and lead him into the King and Queen's castle."

"Yes," Walter said. "Now hurry off!"

Petunia sprinted down the sidewalk, repeating what she had to say to the Mouse King in her head. When she reached the end of the street, she

dashed through a small hole that lead out of the Mouse Village and into the tunnels the mice builders had made. Not hesitating, she ran down the tunnel and finally skidded to a halt, panting. She was at the top of the stairs. Petunia glanced around. Where was the King of Mouseland? She scurried over to a small hole in the wall and looked around.

There wasn't any sight of the King, but suddenly a sweet, musical voice reached little Petunia's ears that made her stop worrying. Filled with wonder, Petunia's big eyes scanned the room below her. And she saw the Princess, now dressed in an amazing, glittering dress and wearing brilliant, gold crown (not made out of tinfoil). Petunia's jaw dropped. She had never seen anything so beautiful.

"Oh, Father," the Princess was saying, sounding and looking hopeful, "I would *love* to have three little mice for my birthday next week. It would be lovely to, at last, have something to keep me company, Father. Maybe some mice from here, Father, one that lives here, in the castle, maybe you could capture some and give them to me?"

Petunia looked around some more and saw the princess's father, King Edward, who was wearing a gold crown like the princess and a long, red cape with a large, silver "E" on the back. Inside, he was wearing a blue shirt that shimmered with large diamonds. Then Petunia realized what she had just heard. *Oh, Father, I would love to have three little mice for my birthday next week.* Mice? Had the Princess said the ones that lived here in the castle, like Petunia? Did she mean she wanted her father to capture three mice here and give them to her for a present on her birthday? Horrified, Petunia waited for King Edward's answer.

"What—what about a new dress, dear?" he stammered. King Edward hated catching mice, everyone knew that. It *was* a little difficult, Petunia had to admit. She waited for the Princess's answer.

"No, I have enough of those." Petunia's heart sank. Three little mice would be gone from the Mouse Village in a week. She could only hope it wasn't her that became the one of the princess's pets. "I want three mice, Father."

“Well, alright,” said the King. “Very well, then.” Petunia squeaked worriedly.

Then Petunia remembered why she was here - to tell the Mouse King it was time for breakfast. She scuttled off, not wanting to hear any more. Suddenly, she bumped into something furry. It was the King of Mouseland. “Oh!” cried Petunia. “You Majesty, time for breakfast and—and I must tell you something else. The Princess—she wants three mice for her birthday—from here, in Mouseland!”

§§§

Word spread that the princess’s birthday was coming up and she wanted three mice. The Mouse King heard snatches of what other mice were saying, like “terrible, terrible” and “damn Princess, wanting mice” and sometimes even “oh, please, I hope it’s not my children.” But the Mouse King had always liked the Princess, because she had such beautiful dresses. He sometimes got a little angry when he heard mice cursing the princess. He was worried that she would take three of the most important mice, but every princess got lonely sometimes and wanted some friends, like little, furry rodents. . . .

The bossy old adult-mouse, Walter, was the only mouse who didn’t seem worried that some of his friends would be taken by King Edward in a matter of days. He was angry, but not with the *princess*. He was angry with poor Petunia, who was in trouble for telling the Mouse King more than Walter had asked.

“You could have told me and I could have told the King of Mouseland!” Walter roared as soon as he stepped into Petunia’s dormitory at the mouse orphanage. He was outraged that Petunia hadn’t told him about the Princess wanting three mice. Then he could have told the Mouse King about it, so it would look as though he had heard the princess’s conversation with her father. Maybe after that he could be the King’s favorite for keeping his pink ears open. And Petunia had told the King herself, so *she* was the King’s favorite, instead of Walter!

“Walter,” said the orphanage director sharply, “don’t be so harsh.”

“I can be as harsh as I like!” bellowed Walter, spraying spit all over the white carpet.

“I’m—I’m sorry, M-Mr. Walter, I d-didn’t know y-you wanted—wanted me t-to tell—tell you about the—the princess,” stuttered Petunia.

“Doesn’t surprise me,” growled Walter. “You never know anything.”

“Don’t bully Petunia, or you will leave!” shouted the orphanage director firmly. And before Walter could finish shrieking “stupid” to Petunia, she shooed him out of the room.

Later on that day, Petunia snuck out of the orphanage and skidded down the sidewalk, heading for the last house on the street. When she reached the green front door, she rapped eagerly and waited.

The door creaked open and an elderly mouse appeared. He observed Petunia through his spectacles which were perched on the tip of his nose, and then raised his eyebrows in surprise, and his wrinkled face split into a wide smile. “Petunia, dear,” he said in a rather raspy voice. “Come in.”

Petunia stepped inside the little house and glanced around the room. It was dusty and made her sneeze. Large cobwebs flapped as warm wind blew through the smudged windows. Ripped and torn sofas were scattered around here and there. A wooden staircase led up to the old mouse’s room.

“Sir, I was wondering if you knew anything about princesses,” Petunia said hopefully.

“Ah,” sighed the mouse, whose name was George Wonderwire, closing his bloodshot eyes. “Yes. I do know about princesses. I can tell you five things about them, if you like.

“One—every single princess is beautiful. And they all wear crowns.

“Two—Princesses love to laugh. They can sit in front of a fire all day and listen to jokes their friends make up. They love to laugh.

“Three—most princesses are kind, sweet, and gentle. They smile all day and have good manners.

“Four—most princesses don’t have sisters or brothers.

“And, finally, five—every single princess will get lonely sometimes, because, like I said, they don’t have brothers or sisters,” George finished, his eyes still closed, his paws folded neatly in his lap. He used to be a friend of Petunia’s father. He always treated Petunia as if she were his daughter, because he was sorry that Petunia’s father was dead. “And now,” George said, with a sad smile, “I must ask you why you are not in the orphanage.”

Petunia’s rosy cheeks turned a rather dark shade of crimson. “Erm, well—” She couldn’t explain. “I—just—you know—well—I—”

George chuckled, and warmth spread through Petunia’s little body—she liked that laugh. “Don’t worry, I won’t tell the directors,” he chortled. “But you’d better get back to the orphanage before they find out that you’re missing.”

He watched Petunia go as she hurried off, unable to think about anything else except the five things George knew about princesses.

“C’mon, Lizzie,” Petunia pleaded the next morning as the sun steadily came into view, shining brightly and spreading warmth and light over the castle.

“No,” Petunia’s best friend replied stubbornly, crossing her pudgy gray arms. She didn’t want to explore with Petunia. She didn’t want to get into trouble for being out of bed at the crack of dawn. She just wanted to stay in the orphanage.

“Please, Lizzie, pretty please with a lump of cheese on the top!” begged Petunia. She had woken up at five o’clock that day, for she wanted to see if there was anything to do around the castle. And she didn’t want to be caught out of bed, so she would have to go early in the morning. Petunia had woken a very grumpy Lizzie up, saying “let’s go” and explaining hastily what they were going to do - Look for an adventure, explore, and maybe even spy on the princess. But Lizzie didn’t want to go, for she wasn’t the kind of adventurous mouse Petunia was.

“Well,” said Lizzie thoughtfully, picking a spot on her chin, “well, I do like cheese—hmm—okay, since you said ‘Pretty please with a lump of cheese on

top,' I'll come, only because I like cheese and I like that saying and you're my best friend."

Petunia beamed at Lizzie. "Oh, I can never tell you how *pleased* I am, Lizzie," she smiled. She and her friend carefully tiptoed downstairs, clutching each other's hands, and snuck out of the orphanage. The wooden houses towered over the little mice as they strolled down the deserted streets, with their black cloaks billowing out behind them.

The sidewalks were empty and dark. Lizzie was whimpering and whining with her hood over her head. "Are you sure that the directors of the orphanage won't . . . punish us for sneaking out of the Mouse Village?" she asked worriedly.

"Well, no," admitted Petunia. "If we get back before everyone wakes up we shall be okay, and they won't know." She half-grinned at Lizzie as they strode over to the tunnel. The Mouse King's castle was standing boldly next to them. The lights inside were off.

Petunia was cheerful and happy. She crawled into the tunnel with Lizzie following her. They dashed through quickly and came out the other side at the top of the stairs. The place was pitch-black dark. Both mice couldn't see a thing, but that didn't discourage Petunia. She was so busy scanning the grand dining room below that she didn't notice two yellow eyes appear out of the darkness.

But Lizzie did. She let out a terrified wail and tugged at Petunia's arm. "What?" hissed Petunia, annoyed.

"That!" cried her friend, and she pointed at the eyes. They were getting bigger—no, the creature who owned them was coming nearer.

Petunia snorted. "Stop being such a baby," she said. "Those are only yellow crystals hanging down from the ceiling."

Before they knew it, there was a high, strangled scream that came from the direction of the eyes. It was the cat. It leapt into the air and landed right on Lizzie. There was a horrible crunch. Petunia didn't know what to do. Should she run away? Or should she try and help her friend? The second choice

was unwise, but Lizzie was Petunia's best friend. She couldn't leave her there to suffer.

She flew over to the cat, whose left paw was pinning Lizzie to the ground, and sank her teeth into its arm. The cat hardly noticed for he was so strong. He pushed her to the ground with his right paw and pinned her to the ground, too. She struggled helplessly, and soon gave up. She looked at her unconscious friend and screamed, "HELP! SOMEONE, PLEASE, PLEASE, HELP! ANYBODY!" There was no answer. Petunia's voice was loud to her, but mice are small and they do not have big mouths for screaming. No one heard her. Petunia, determined to be saved, shrieked, "HELP!" once more. And this time, someone did hear her.

§§§

The King of Mouseland was sleeping comfortably in his four-poster bed, which was really made out of a matchbox. He was lying on his side, mouth open. A string of drool was clinging to his lower lip. Suddenly a high-pitched, desperate voice reached his ears. "Help!" it cried. He opened his eyes and blinked. He thought he had only been dreaming, and no one needed help. He snuggled down under the blanket and was about to fall asleep again when there was another shrill, "Help!" followed by a very faint moan of pain. The puzzled Mouse King rubbed his eyes tiredly and swiveled his big ears in the direction of the voice. "Help, please, help!"

The voice seemed strangely familiar. Oh no, not Petunia. She couldn't be in trouble with that vicious cat again. The elderly mouse kicked back his blanket, got out of bed, put on his cape and his crown, and swiftly headed out of the castle. He strode briskly down the street, crawled into the hole to the outside, and dashed through until he came to the other end. He climbed out and glanced around in the darkness. The air was chilly. It was still very early.

He began to run toward the stairs when he bumped into something. Something huge. Something furry. Something with glittering eyes. It could only be the cat.

"Reeorrrrowl!" snarled the cat. "Reeeeorrrrowl!"

From next to the Mouse King came a terrified voice. “Your Majesty!” it said. It was Petunia. “Help! This cat has—”

Before she could finish her sentence, the cat meowed loudly. The Mouse King screamed as the beast shoved his ugly face in front of him, showing sharp, yellow teeth. The Mouse King turned to run away, but the cat clamped its jaws down on his tail. The Mouse King, dangling from the cat’s mouth, squeaked as the horrible animal raised its head. Petunia, under the cat’s paw, struggled free and hurried over to the cat’s tail, grabbed it, and clambered up. On the cat’s back, she rushed over to his head, and leaned against his left ear, gasping for breath.

Then something terrible happened. The cat shook himself furiously, trying to get Petunia off his back. Petunia seized the cat’s ear and held on for dear life. She could see the smooth, polished floor below her. If she fell, she could break her neck or even be killed. She held on as the cat kept shaking himself angrily.

“AHH!” screamed Petunia.

“HELP!” wailed the Mouse King.

The cat couldn’t open his mouth to bite, or else the Mouse King would fall and scamper away. So the beast stalked into the human king’s room, leapt lightly onto his bed, and dropped the Mouse King onto his stomach. The cat shook himself so violently that Petunia dropped off the cat’s ear and landed next to the Mouse King. The cat went away and returned with Lizzie, who looked as though she had broken her neck.

“What?” King Edward had woken up. “Oh! Mice!” He grinned sleepily at his cat. Then he looked at the three mice on his lap. “One brown mouse, one gray mouse, and one paralyzed one.” The cat purred as the King stoked his back gently. “Good job completing your mission,” he added the cat. “And you finished it just in time, too. Two days later is the Princess’s birthday!”

Lizzie groaned. She couldn’t move her body. She was in so much pain that she began to cry. Tears rolled down her cheeks. Petunia curled her arm around her friend’s shoulder and glanced up at the cat, a look of burning hatred on her face.

The King climbed out of bed and put the three mice in a small cage on a table in the corner of the room. Then he got back into bed and fell asleep.

Instantly Petunia began to talk. “We have to get out!” she cried, throwing herself frantically against the cage door. “The doctor at the Mouse Village has wheelchairs. We need to get back there to get one for Lizzie, and so he can fix her up. And I need to get out for two reasons. First, the orphanage director will scream her head off at me if I don’t return there before the sun rises. Second, I am scared of people. I’ve heard of little kids picking up mice by their tails. I don’t want that. Your Majesty, you need to get out because you need to rule the Mouse Village!”

“Hush!” ordered the Mouse King. “We will get out. Let’s try to open the cage door.” Petunia nodded, tears pushing against her eyelids.

Lizzie watched as Petunia and the Mouse King walked over to the edge of the cage and saw a little hole on the floor. Petunia pushed aside the wood shavings and poked her head through. The Princess must have had a mouse before that had gnawed the hole in the bottom and made a tunnel. Petunia pulled her head out and put her feet in, then her body, and last her head until she was entirely inside the tunnel. She fell down, down, down the tunnel until, suddenly, her feet hit something hard and rough, like wood. She glanced around and gasped with amazement.

She was standing in a room about the size of a large shoebox. Furniture was all around her—beds and bedside tables and mirrors. A hole with a ladder sticking out of it was in the corner. Petunia stood, stunned, for a moment, and then climbed down the ladder. She was in another room, with chairs and tables and couches. There was even a tiny TV! She saw a pink door next to her. She climbed back up the ladder and looked up at the ceiling. The tunnel she had come down was above her. She shouted, “Come down! It’s okay!” A moment later, the Mouse King almost landed on top of her as he burst out of the tunnel. Suddenly, Petunia gasped. They had forgotten Lizzie! She was paralyzed now, so she couldn’t go down the tunnel. “Lizzie!” breathed Petunia. The Mouse King clapped a hand to his mouth.

“We can get her later,” said the Mouse King. “Where are we?” He looked around suspiciously and screamed in horror.

“What?” cried Petunia, jumping into the air. “Why did you just scream?”

“That!” shouted the Mouse King, pointing a trembling finger at a small bed in the corner. He winced and closed his eyes.

At first, Petunia couldn’t see anything. But then, she saw a mouse’s skeleton in the bed, and she screamed, too. “Let’s go, let’s go!” she yelled, and ran over to the ladder when she bumped into something. She shrieked with terror and threw her arms around the Mouse King, frightened. The King blushed and pushed her away. Then he yelped when he saw what Petunia had bumped into. It was a brown mouse, who was looking at them. His eyes drooped and so did his whiskers. His fur was ruffled and there were some patches where there was no fur at all. His mouth was twisted into a strange smile.

“Hello,” he greeted Petunia and the Mouse King.

Petunia’s answer was a shriek; the Mouse King’s was a terrified stare.

“I see you have come to my home,” he continued in a raspy voice. “Come with me. I will show you around.”

Petunia and the Mouse King didn’t move.

“Don’t be scared,” he said. Petunia’s eyes traveled nervously over to the mouse skeleton in the bed. “Oh,” croaked the old mouse. “That is my dead son. He—he passed away several months ago. Follow me and I will explain everything—where you are and what is happening.”

“Look,” said Petunia at last. “Um—we don’t have much time. Can you just tell us how to get back up to that cage?”

The smile faded slightly on the mouse’s wrinkled face. “Of course,” he replied sadly. “Of course,” he repeated.

Petunia, seeing the unhappy look on his face, quickly said, “And you can tell us where we are?”

The mouse’s face brightened. “Okay,” he said cheerfully. “Please follow me.” He led Petunia and the Mouse King down the ladder and out the door.

They were still in the human King's room. He was snoring away in his bed. Above them, there was the black table. Behind them, was a doll house. Petunia walked forward and saw the most amazing sight ever.

The cage was perched on top of the table. There was a small pipe that came out from the bottom of the table and it went down until it went inside the top of the dollhouse. "Let me tell you about this," said the old mouse. And he began.

"Well, I was a free mouse that lived in this castle until the Princess caught me and put me in this cage on the table. It had pipes for me to run through and everything. But I wanted to be free. I was a very smart mouse. I gnawed a hole through the bottom of the cage and right through the table. Then I stuck one of the pipes through. The Princess had stored her dollhouse under the table. I went down the pipes and landed on the floor, next to the dollhouse. I gnawed a hole through the top and put the pipe in. I climbed back up to the top and pretended to eat my food when the Princess came back. When she went away, I grabbed a handful of my food and put it down the pipe. Then I went down myself and lived in the dollhouse, coming back up whenever the Princess came to check on me. A few days later, my son got caught and found the pipes. He went down and found me. But he had a terrible stroke. He died right in front of my eyes, in the bed. It was horrible. And there was nothing I could do." The old mouse was crying. "There. I have told you my story." Tears flowed down his face like a little river. Petunia felt sorry for him. She wiped a tear from her eye.

"Please, tell us how to get back up there so we can get Lizzie," begged Petunia.

"Ah. I had trouble getting back into the cage. Let me show you." He walked over to one of the table's legs and climbed up. He was an elderly mouse, but a fantastic climber. He looked like he had years of practice. Even Petunia couldn't climb that well. She stared at him, mouth hanging open, as he squeezed his thin body through a space in the metal bars and managed to get inside. He saw Lizzie, who was been lying, weeping, on the floor. She yelped with surprise when she saw the mouse. He picked her up and put her through the hole. She screamed as she landed in the dollhouse. The

mouse went down after her, climbed down the ladder, opened the door, and walked outside. “Thank you,” said Lizzie, Petunia, and the Mouse King all at the same time.

“You’re very much welcome,” replied the old mouse.

“We must go,” said the Mouse King. He looked at Petunia. Outside, the sun was just beginning to rise.

“I hope to see you again. Please visit any time,” the old mouse sighed. “Oh, and my name is Mr. Skitt.”

“Bye, Skitt,” Petunia said.

“How can I ever thank you, Skitt?” asked Lizzie.

“Good-bye!” said the Mouse King, who was holding Lizzie. He and Petunia started to walk toward the open door, when suddenly the princess burst into the room. The three mice dived behind one of the table’s legs. Skitt hurried inside his house. “Father!” the Princess panted, shaking the King awake. King Edward blinked sleepily. “I actually want a silk dress for my birthday. If I were a mouse, I would not want to be captured.”

King Edward shook his head sadly. “I am sorry, dear, but tomorrow I will be very busy and will not have time to go to the dress store. And besides, I already have three mice.”

The Princess’s voice sank in disappointment. “Oh, okay,” she sighed. “May I see the mice, please?”

“Over there,” said King Edward, nodding his head toward the empty cage. Petunia stifled a laugh as his mouth dropped open in horror. “Where are they? Have they escaped?”

“Yes,” murmured Lizzie under her breath.

“Shush!” whispered Petunia.

“Oh, well, I guess you’ll just have to buy me a silk dress then,” said the Princess happily. She smiled.

“Alright,” grumbled the King. Petunia couldn’t help herself—she burst out laughing and fell to the ground in a fit of giggles.

“Petunia!” growled the Mouse King through clenched teeth.

“Did you hear something?” asked King Edward.

“No,” the Princess replied. “Well, I must get back to bed. Sorry if I disturbed you.” She strode off briskly, humming a tune.

The Mouse King, Lizzie, and Petunia all left the room. As they walked down the hall and came toward the hole next to the stairs, Petunia tripped on a long, thick, black rope. No, no, it wasn’t a rope. It was the cat’s tail. The cat had been sleeping right in front of the hole. The ugly animal woke up instantly. He meowed. Petunia hurried forward, crawled inside the hole, pulled the Mouse King, who was still holding Lizzie, inside, and sighed with relief as the cat snarled angrily and stalked away. They all crawled through the tunnel in silence until they reached the Mouse Village. The Mouse King took Lizzie to the doctor, who said she was only temporarily paralyzed. Petunia hurried inside the orphanage and managed to get back into bed before the director woke up.

That had been a great adventure!