

BLAST OFF



Musical mouse

He knows how to conduct himself! 18

Monumental faces 11

Maestro Mouse

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BENEATH THE STAGE at the Opera House, there lived a family of mice.

They had a perfectly cosy home filled with everything a mouse could need. There were giant ladders to climb and mirrors to make faces in. There were metal frames where costumes hung that made wonderful tracks for relay races, and there were shelves of masks where the mice played hide-and-seek.

One night as Mother Mouse sat at the dinner table with her five boisterous mouselings, she stopped nibbling the peanut butter sandwich she'd found on the floor of the storeroom. She twitched her whiskers and cleared her throat.

'Shoosh, children. There is something I need to tell you.' She

patted her round tummy. 'I am having more babies, which means you are now all old enough to leave home and start families of your own. I've heard that Mouse 68 who lives in the elevator shaft is looking for a husband. And Mouse 125 who lives in the organ loft is in need of a wife, but you'd best not be afraid of heights, as Mouse 125's home is very near the roof.'

The mouselings stopped nibbling their share of the dinner, which also included four pieces of popcorn and a half-chewed donut.

'Mouse Number One, you can start,' said Mother Mouse as she patted her tummy again. 'Make me happy and tell me what you are going to do with your life.'





Mouse Number One had a dreamy look on her furry face. 'I do love living here, Mother, but when our Traveller Cousins visited they told me stories about the vegetable market. It sounded so exciting. Imagine having mountains of cauliflowers to tunnel through and boxes of grapes to get lost in ... and strawberries juicier than anything we've eaten here. Oh, I can taste them all now. So, when it's time to leave, I'm going to live there.'

Not to be outdone, Mouse Number Two, who was the most mischievous mouse, piped up. 'Well, I'll be pleased to get away from here. It's always so dark. I'm going off to the zoo. Imagine the fun I'll have scaring the elephants!'

'And while you're having fun, remember what big feet elephants have,' warned Mother Mouse. 'And what about you?' Mother Mouse said to the next brown mouse at the table.

'I've been thinking of leaving home for a while,' said Mouse Number Three. 'Not long ago I found a mouse hole that looks over the harbour. Sometimes I sit all day and watch the boats. I want to be like Grandad Three-Legs. I'm going to live on a ferry, but I'll be careful not to get cornered by the ship's cat.'

'Let's hope you don't get seasick,' said Mother Mouse. 'A seasick mouse is not a good thing. Now, Mouse Number Four, I'm a bit worried about you. You've already had a few close calls. Only last week I had to prise your tail from a mouse trap again.'

Mouse Number Four popped her head out of the donut. She flicked the crumbs off her whiskers and wiggled her bandaged tail.

'Well, it's almost better, Mama,' she said. 'And I'm going to be like Daddy. I'm going to explore all the lanes in Chinatown.'

Mother Mouse shook her head.



‘An adventurer, just like your father! You know what happened to him!’ She wagged her paw at Mouse Number Four. ‘Do you know how many cats live in Chinatown?’ But her warning went unheard, as Mouse Number Four had popped her head back into the donut.

Mother Mouse looked to the end of the table where the smallest mouse with the biggest, pinkest ears sat.

‘And what about you, Mouse Number Five? You’ve always been the quiet one, scurrying away to do your own thing. What are you going to do with your life?’

Mouse Number Five was perfectly happy living where he was. His eyes glistened with tears at the thought of leaving his grand home. He loved the shapes and smells of the instruments. He knew all their names. He practised on them each day when no-one was

around. He tapped out rhythms as he scampered across the tops of the golden kettledrums. He slid up and down the long strings of the cellos, making tunes with his sharp toenails. And he swung across the wall of silver chimes until they clanged like church bells.

‘Everyone! SHOOSH!’ cried Mouse Number Five as he held up his paw. ‘Listen. Can you hear the music from the stage?’

His tail beat in time. He closed his eyes and conducted the music with his paws.

‘That’s what I want to do with my life. I want to be a maestro. Mother, I want to conduct the orchestra!’

His brothers and sisters rolled out of their seats, laughing. ‘Maestro Mouse!’ they sniggered. ‘How posh! How can a little mouse like you conduct a big orchestra?’

The smallest mouse felt his big ears blushing as his brothers and sisters teased him.

Mother Mouse called her mouselings to order. ‘Every mouse has the right to choose what they want to do. Just because your brother wants to be something different, there’s no need to be mean. Mouse Number Five,’ she said, ‘you must follow your dream.’

* * *



Later that night, when his family was asleep, Mouse Number Five squeezed through a hole in the wall into the costume workshop next door. He zigzagged through the moustaches clipped to the moustache board. He rolled in the tray of coloured jewels, and he ran along the spindles of thread till they turned like wheels.

After he finished playing, Mouse Number Five got to work. In the dim light that seeped through the window, he gathered fallen strips of fabric from the floor and carried them in his mouth up onto the cutting table.

He found a measuring tape. Balancing on his hind legs and tail, he measured his waist. Then he measured the length of his legs and finally he measured around his neck. Using tiny embroidery scissors, he cut the fabric into the shapes he needed.

He pulled a threaded needle out of a pincushion. As he stitched, he hummed the different parts of the symphony and sewed in time to the music. Mouse Number Five sewed all through the night. In the morning, when he had finished, he stood in front of the mirror. His little black eyes shone with delight. His family wouldn't laugh



at him now. He looked just like the conductors on stage in his tails and bow tie. He had even embroidered his initials—M M for Maestro Mouse—on the flaps of his tails.

While he was admiring himself, the door to the costume workshop opened. The cleaner flicked the light on.

Mouse Number Five leapt off the cutting table. His jacket tails flew behind him like wings. He scurried through the hole in the wall, narrowly avoiding the shoe that was thrown at him.

* * *

That night, Mouse Number Five forgot to have dinner with his family. He was too excited, because it was the night of the concert.

From a mouse hole at the side of the stage, he watched the music lovers stream into the concert hall and shuffle along the rising rows of red velvet seats.

As the orchestra tuned their instruments, Mouse Number Five dragged a sultana snack box towards the mouse hole. He picked up a toothpick that he had collected from a bin.

He stood on his tiny podium and wagged his whiskers. He adjusted his bow tie. The lights in the concert hall dimmed and the audience clapped as the conductor walked onto the stage.

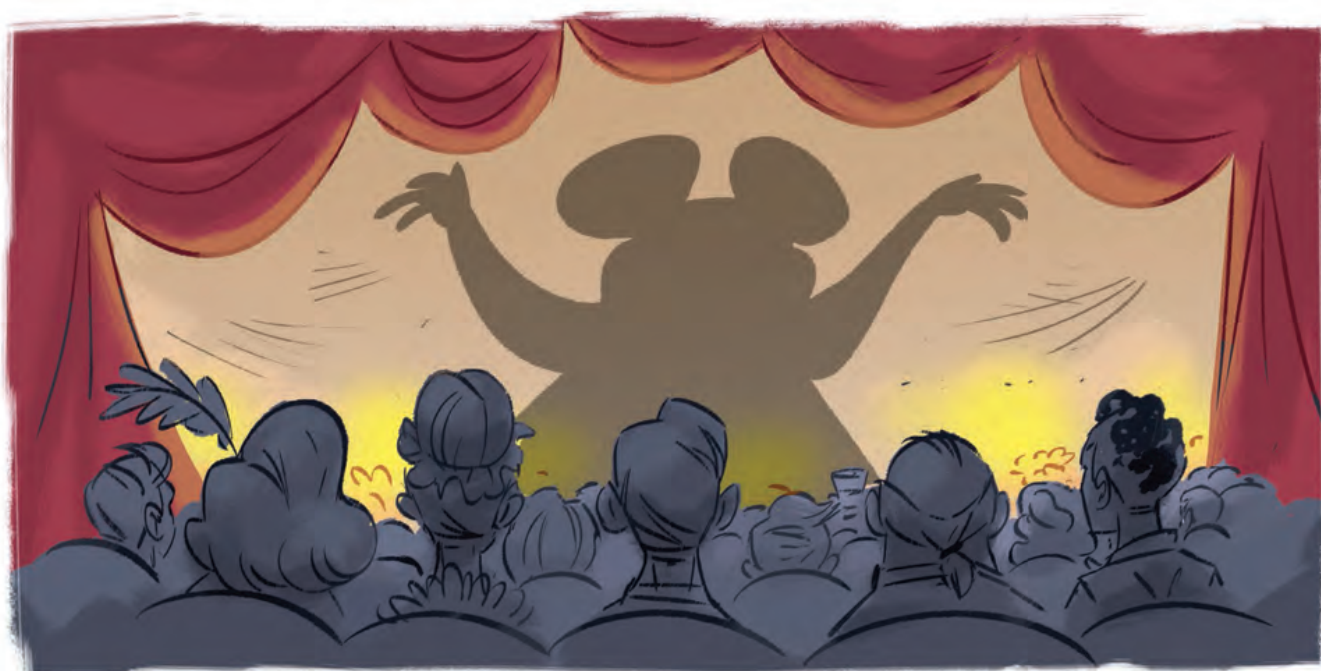
Mouse Number Five bowed to the audience. He held his toothpick baton high as the first notes rose from the orchestra.

He knew this piece well. He'd been practising it for days. It was

the conductor's job to make sure each instrument started playing at the right time.

Mouse Number Five pointed his baton at the violins. He pointed to the clarinets. He conducted the orchestra as waves of music swirled around the hall.

In the loud parts he waved his paws high and flicked out his claws to add drama. As he swayed blissfully to the softer music in the warmth of the offstage lighting, his shadow stretched long and black out of the mouse hole. It crept across the floor of the concert hall and covered the knees and faces of those in the first row. As he twisted and turned, so did his shadow, until it was the shadow of a wild, whiskery monster whose gigantic, fanged fingers rippled over all the faces in the audience.





The orchestra squeaked crazy notes and stopped playing.

‘It’s an ogre! It’s a troll! It’s a bogeyman!’ cried the music lovers as they ducked out of the shadow’s way.

The conductor turned around. ‘There’s a ghost in the Opera House!’ he cried as he fainted—*THUD!*—on top of the violin players.

Mouse Number Five jumped off his podium and his shadow disappeared. He popped his head out of the mouse hole and watched the conductor being carried across the stage.

‘Is there a conductor in the house?’ one of the musicians called to the audience.

‘This is my chance!’ squeaked Mouse Number Five as he squeezed out of the mouse hole.

He sprang onto the podium and scooted to the top of the music stand.

A violinist tried to swat him with his bow.

A drummer tried to flick him with his stick.

A trumpeter tried to blast him away ... *BBBRRRRR!*

The audience stamped their feet and shouted, ‘We want a REAL conductor, not a MOUSE! We want our money back!’

Mouse Number Five was shaking. He had to keep going. It was his dream. It was who he wanted to be.

He looked across at the conductor who was propped up against the piano leg. He was beginning to regain consciousness.

‘I am Maestro Mouse!’ he squeaked, but the audience was booing and hissing louder—too loudly for him to be heard.

He picked up his baton and tapped it on top of the music stand.





He pointed to the bassoon player in the back row to start playing.

The bassoonist sniggered at the mouse and blew a fluffy sounding *Ffffert*.

It was a terrible note. Maestro Mouse twitched his whiskers in disapproval. Then he took a deep breath, rose up on his toes and lifted his baton.

The bassoon player adjusted his glasses. He looked from his music score to the mouse and shrugged his shoulders. As Maestro Mouse flicked his baton to start playing, the bassoonist blew a beautiful, breezy *bzzzzzzz* that drifted over the audience.

The audience stopped shouting. One by one, the musicians joined in until the drums thundered like a storm, the flutes trilled like canaries and the harp ruffled like a waterfall. As Maestro Mouse beat

his tail to keep the musicians in time, glorious music swirled around the concert hall.

The audience gasped. Then they whooped and whistled.

'Bravo! Bravo! You *are* a maestro mouse,' they called as the last notes fell silent.

Maestro Mouse turned to the audience. He placed his paw over his heart and bowed.

As the lights went on in the concert hall, the music lovers gave Maestro Mouse a standing ovation. But it was the tiniest chorus of clapping from the side of the stage that Maestro Mouse loved most. It was the clapping of his mother, his four brothers and sisters and all the mice who lived in the Opera House. ■



No matter how little you be, you can still make a difference!
Yes indeed!