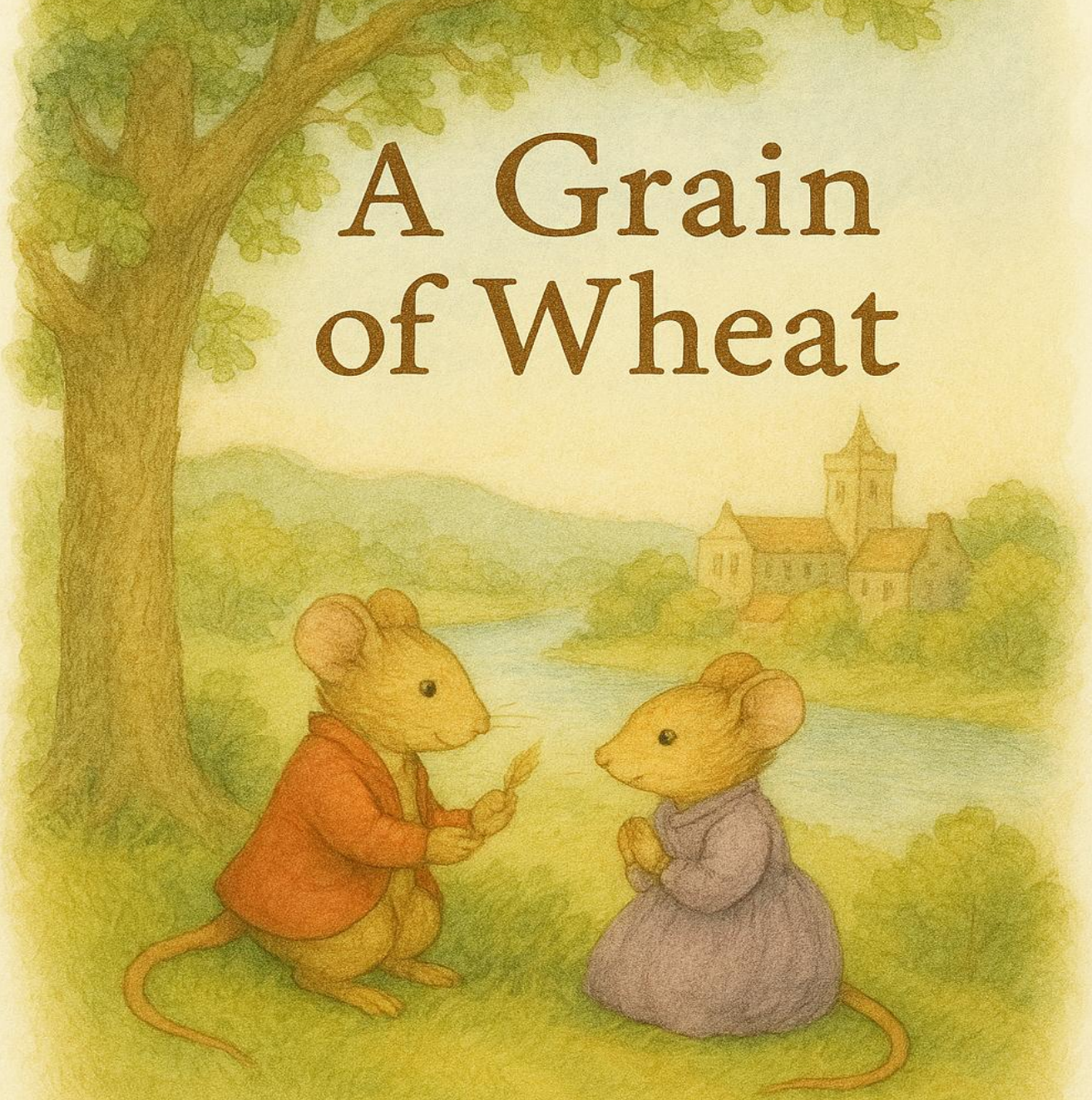
A Grain of Wheat



Vahagn Aslanyan

To Ashot

who knows that life is not a fairy tale...

Inspired by Beatrix Potter's children's stories, Grimms' original fairy tales, and Andrzej Sapkowski's short story "A little sacrifice". All illustrations are AI-generated in Microsoft Copilot.

The book in the crawlspace

Several years ago, when I moved to North West England with my family, we rented an old Victorian house which didn't have a cellar, but a crawlspace instead. Soon after moving in – in November when the weather became quite cold – the house got infested with mice. They were cute but had to be dealt with – they can spread diseases among other things – which the landlord did.



A month or two after this I heard some noises from under the floorboards. So I went down into the crawlspace to check if everything was in order there. I didn't find the source of the noise, but I did encounter something rather peculiar.

There was a mouse nest made of insulation and some debris, probably from the recent infestation. Although, I can't really tell an old nest from a new one, so the nest could as well have been from a previous infestation; in the end it couldn't have been the first time mice got into that 130-year-old house.

The nest was empty or, to be more precise, there were no live mice in there. There was a curious object next to the nest resembling a book. I took it with me when crawling out of the crawlspace. It was tiny, perhaps the size of my thumbnail. Armed with a magnifying glass and a pair of tweezers, I closely examined it and spotted some handwritten text and even some illustrations on its tarnished pages. The text was barely perceptible and hard to decipher. But you don't find such a thing in your crawlspace every day, do you?



I talked to my friend Reid Morley, who is a rare book dealer and has all sorts of books in his store. He laughed at my story, but his professional curiosity got the better of him and he agreed to have a look. He had some device – I can't remember the name now – like a microscope, that he used to magnify the text enough so we could recognise the letters and some words. Of course, both of us expected it to be just a scribble, but it was written in English and did

actually make sense. I was astonished and so was Reid. In his entire career he hadn't come across such a strange book. The closest he had seen were some miniature Bibles – known as Thumb Bibles – that were popular several centuries ago. But this was not a Bible.



Even though we could now see what was written, the handwriting was quite terrible, even worse than some of my students' handwriting. So we spent long days and nights reading and deciphering it.

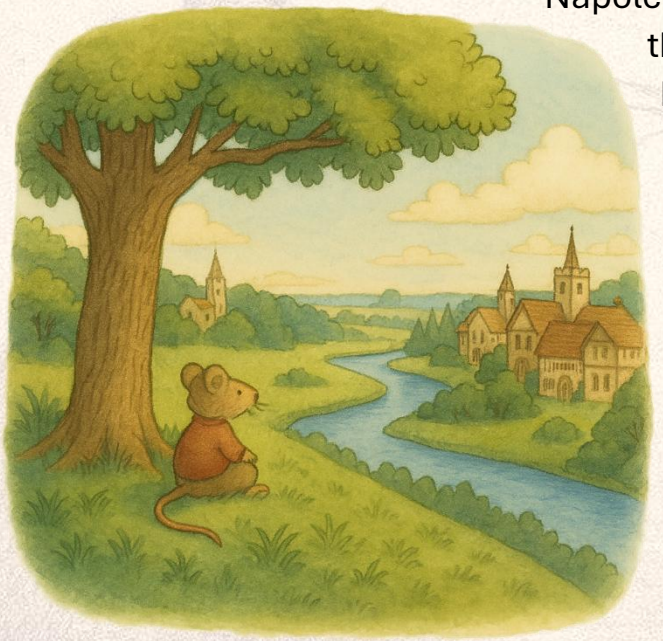
I spent some time putting the text in that book into a coherent narrative, and it ended up being a compelling story. What's more interesting is that the author claimed it was a true story.

Reid recommended that I publish it as a children's story. I must admit, contributing to children's literature is something I have had in mind for quite some time. But I have never written anything due to my lack of imagination and talent, so this looked like a perfect opportunity. Thus, I am now presenting the story from the book here, writing in third person, and including all the original illustrations – with minimal alterations – and adding a few myself.



The little dwellers of Stopford Library

Napoleon was sitting under a large oak tree on Norris Hill in north-west Stopford and looking down onto the Cheeseshire Plain. He was pondering whether fieldmice were happy in the forest. He could clearly see the river from there and the distant spire of a building on the riverbank. Then he turned his gaze towards the old buildings of the town and ran across the tall grass towards the Old Library.



Napoleon lived with his family behind the wainscots in the Old Library. His father, Homer, chose that place as he was fond of books of which there were plenty there. He could read, which is extremely uncommon among house mice, and even taught his son to read and cherish books. Napoleon's mother was also fond of books; she liked chewing them, although Homer did not approve of that.

“I think I know how to finish what you started, dad,” said Napoleon.

“Forget about it, Napo! You’ve been obsessed with that idea lately. You know nothing can be done without the complete recipe.”

“Exactly! I know how we can find the recipe.”

“You do?” asked Homer with suspicion, “As far as I remember, you chewed a large chunk of that page. Like your mom! Nothing could be recovered.”

“Dad, I was just a baby then. I couldn’t understand its importance,” muttered Napoleon remorsefully.

“I know, I know. It’s my fault, I shouldn’t have left it out.”

“Anyway, I know where to find the missing page. Come, I’ll show you.”

Napoleon and Homer squeezed through a crevice in the wainscot and scurried across the floor and the stairs up to the rare book section of the Old Library. Both knew where to find the book they were after.



Napoleon lit the candle and helped Homer put the book on the reading table. It was *Poisons and the Protection Against Lethal Drugs* by the famous alchemist Jabir ibn Hayyan.

Homer checked for the umpteenth time that the critical page was indeed damaged beyond repair. Then Napoleon opened the book on page 147 and showed a handwritten annotation to Homer. The note stated that in the recipe for the essence of mandrake one can replace three parts of mandrake root with one part and another part of wolfsbane. To support this claim, it referred to a copy of that same book held in Stonegate Abbey library which, according to the note, was published one year after the first edition and contained a number of small revisions.



Homer looked at Napoleon with excitement, but the look on his face quickly turned sinister.

“Stonegate Abbey is too far. The road is treacherous. We don’t even know if what’s written here is correct. Don’t… just don’t.”

“We must try, dad. You have put your entire life into it. You have done most of the work; together, we can finish it.”

“Napo, I said it’s too dangerous.”

“Dad, every month thousands of mice die from rodenticides. If we find the antidote…”

Napoleon couldn’t finish the sentence, for he got distracted by his mother’s squeaks from downstairs. It turns out Napoleon’s little sister, Joan, had taken a bite from a poison bait. “Worry not,” said Homer, “the poison is designed to kill only after a few doses, so that mice will get accustomed to it and eat more. Everything is going to be fine.”



The map

Later that night Homer took Napoleon to the rare book section again.

“What a coincidence, eh? My cousin would say this was a sign from Mother Nature. Well, I don’t believe in signs, but the poison, even a single dose, can… Your sister is too young.”

“Dad, just show me the map, and I’ll set out before dawn.”

“So be it!” Homer agreed reluctantly, still thinking whether there could be another solution. He climbed up one of the bookcases, pushed an atlas of Cheeseshire down onto the table, slid his finger vertically through the table of contents, found the right page, and opened the atlas.



“This is the map of Micechester South,” Homer explained. “This is Stopford, here is the river, and the Stonegate Abbey is right here, in the south.”

“I think I could see the Abbey from the hill today.”

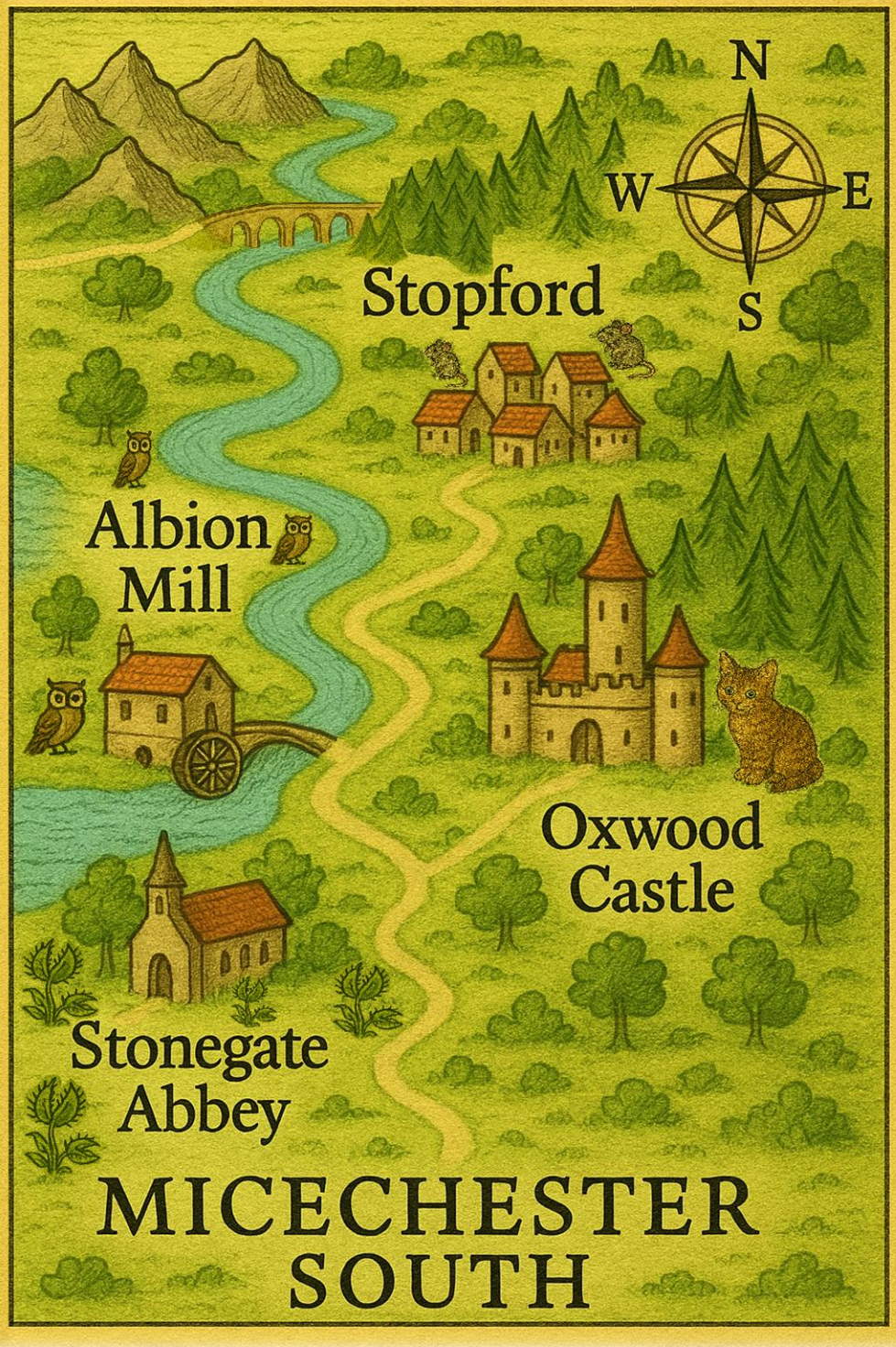
“Yes, you can on a clear day.”

“Listen carefully, Napo,” Homer carried on, “take a boat from here, the river will take you all the way to Albion Mill, very close to the Abbey. Get off there and spend the night in the mill. Should have plenty to eat and replenish your stamina. Come the morning, cross the river over the bridge, and walk the rest. I have never been inside the abbey, so can’t tell how to navigate there. My friend Sebastian, the old librarian here, once mentioned that the abbey plan was displayed near the entrance. That’s where you start; locate the library and go look there. Surely, I don’t need to tell you how to use a library catalogue…”



“On your way back, walk to Oxwood Castle first, stay there for the night. Be careful, they have plenty of cats in the castle. There are regular stagecoach services from the castle to the town. If you can quietly sneak in, it will save you a lot of time. If everything goes smoothly, you should be back in four to five days.”

“Now, sit here and copy this map of Micechester South, so you can use it on your way. And don’t forget your compass!” added Homer.


N
W
E
S
Stopford
Albion
Mill
Oxwood
Castle
Stonegate
Abbey
MICECHESTER
SOUTH

The mouse in the tree hollow

Napoleon set off early in the morning, shortly before dawn.

He had never ventured far from Stopford. The farthest he had been to was the viaduct in the north, and he went there with his father. Now he was all alone, on a treacherous journey.



The first part of the trip was supposed to be easy. Napoleon would just row downstream until he reached the mill. Everybody knows that rowing downstream is as easy and enjoyable as eating a piece of cake at a birthday party. He didn't even have to row, as the current would carry him, but he wanted to go faster and save time.

As he was rowing, to keep himself occupied, Napo softly hummed a nursery rhyme to himself that he had read in "Tommy Thumb's Pretty Song Book".

Hickory dickory dock.
The mouse ran up the clock.
The clock struck one,
The mouse ran down,
Hickory dickory dock.



After a few peaceful hours, Napoleon heard a hooting sound; he had company… and dangerous company at that. He was scared but stayed calm. After all, he had read *A mouse's guide to owls and hawks* and knew that bright light frightens owls. So he took out a small mirror from his bag and used it to direct the sunlight towards the owl. It worked; the owl flew away.



Not for long though, and Napoleon knew that. He knew he was exposed on the river; he had to go into the woods. He rowed towards the bank and jumped out of the boat. He

heard another hoot, this time much louder. The owl was close. Napoleon ran and hid in tall grass under trees. The owl landed on a nearby tree trying to spot him. Napoleon froze in his place, lest his movements give away his location. The owl, however, heard his breathing, and swooped down right on him like an arrow. Napoleon had quick reactions though and managed to escape. He ran deeper into the forest without looking back but he could feel the owl was following closely behind him. He couldn't run forever, he had to find a place to hide, which isn't easy when one is running as fast as one can.

But it is exactly in this kind of situations that good luck comes into play. Napoleon's good luck was a cute little mouse who squeaked to him from a small tree hollow. He quickly ran towards the hollow and disappeared from the owl's field of vision.

"I would never think that my guardian angel would be so pretty," said Napoleon after catching his breath for a minute, "I thank you, miss!"

"Good thing you were faster than the owl. For a moment I thought..."



“So did I,” replied Napoleon, “but I am safe and sound thanks to you.”

“I am Napoleon, but you can call me Napo. May I ask your name please?”

“I am a fieldmouse, I don’t have a name,” she blushed, “What does your name mean?”

“My father gave me my name. He learnt to read human letters – the symbols they use to write things down – and read many books and didn’t chew any. Napoleon was a human general, quite a prominent one, so my dad named me after him.”



“It’s a shame names are not as common among mice,” Napo carried on, “We have a lot to learn from humans. All of them have names, each and every one. Although there are far fewer people than mice.”

“All right,” he continued, “now we just need to wait out for the owl to get tired and leave, then I‘ll be on my way.”

“You can stay… if you like.”

“That’s very kind of you, but I wouldn’t want to trouble you. Besides, I am myself in a hurry…”

While they were waiting, Napo told everything about his mission. The other mouse listened to him in amazement, and she was captivated by the idea of reading and writing. She thought if she accompanied Napo on his journey, he may as well teach her how to read. So they decided they would set off together once it was quiet outside.



“If we are travelling together, we should think of a name for you,” Napo declared and, after thinking for a moment, added, “How about Josephine? It can be shortened to Jo…”

“That’s a nice name. Thank you!” she replied, smiling beneath her whiskers.

Albion Mill

After some time – it's hard to say how much time had passed – Napo and Jo carefully ventured out of the tree hollow. Napo pulled up his map, checked his compass, and pointed towards the river. Once they reached the riverbank, it wasn't hard to find the boat. They pushed it back into the water and rowed peacefully until they reached the mill.



"We will spend the night here. We should be able to find plenty of wheat or barley, and get some rest," said Napo.

Albion Mill was an old watermill and was easy for mice to infiltrate. It was of course full of mousetraps, but Napo was well trained and cautious, so he masterfully avoided all the traps and led Jo safely to the upper floor, where they hid in a corner and ate some delicious barley and pumpkin seeds that Napo fetched for them.

Three blind mice

In the middle of the night, Napo and Jo woke up from loud screams. They looked down from the upper floor and saw the most bizarre scene. Three mice were running after the miller's wife who was screaming like a seagull and running towards the door with a carving knife in one hand and something else in the other. Upon a close look, Napo and Jo noticed that the mice didn't have tails, they were cut off. The miller's wife was actually holding their tails in her hand. She managed to flee to the miller's hut, which was adjacent to the mill, and slammed the door behind her, leaving the three mice inside the mill.



Napo quickly went down and squeaked to them.

"Who is there?" asked one of the mice, trying to figure out where the squeak came from.

"Over here," replied Napo raising his tail and immediately realising it could be considered mean; he should have raised his paw instead.

“Where are you? Who is that?” exclaimed the second mouse.

“Can’t you see me? I’m right next to you!” said Napo.

“Are you a mouse?” asked the third mouse.

It was then that Napo figured out that not only were the three poor mice tailless, but they were also blind.

“What are the chances?” whispered Napo in astonishment, “Exactly as in ‘Deuteromelia’.”

He then guided the three blind mice to the upper floor, where Jo was waiting cautiously. They gave them some of the barley grains and pumpkin seeds they had stolen earlier that day.



The tale of the three blind mice



According to the three mice, they tried to eat a certain plant, but when they started chewing it, some fluid from it got into their eyes and burnt them. After asking a few questions, Napo concluded that it must have been a giant hogweed whose sap is known to cause severe skin irritation – especially if exposed to direct sunlight – and can cause blindness.

The mice went on to say that, since then, they had been living near the watermill and stealing food from the miller's hut. The miller's wife warned them not to steal any more but as they wouldn't listen, she decided to take revenge. So one night, which happened to be the night when Napo and Jo were staying there, the miller's wife grabbed the carving knife from her kitchen, crept up on the three blind mice in the dead of night, and cut up their tails in their sleep... We know the rest.

"She warned us," said one of the blind mice, "but we didn't listen."

"Maybe we deserve this," replied the other blind mouse.

“We had the longest tails of all mice. They flowed behind us like ribbons in the wind, but not any more,” added the third mouse.



“Well, we couldn’t see our tails since the accident anyway, so no point in dwelling on that.”

“If we stay here, she may do something far worse.”

“Come with us then,” replied Jo. “We will help you find a new home.”

“If we are travelling together,” said Napo, “you will need names. How about Hugh, Nick, and Tom, in any order?”

The mice squeaked with excitement at the thought of having names. In no time, they decided who gets which name.

“There are so many traps here,” Jo wondered. “How come you haven’t been caught in one if you can’t see them?”

“He-he,” laughed Nick, “the miller always uses peanut butter as bait. He doesn’t know we are all allergic to peanuts.”

Early in the morning, before dawn, the five mice set out for Stonegate Abbey. When they were crossing the river on the bridge, they heard an owl’s hoot.

“Quick! To the hole yonder!” squeaked Jo pointing to a small crevice on the bridge. She and Napo quickly squeezed into the crevice, but because the three mice were blind, they couldn’t see where the hole was, so they scurried for cover in random directions. The owl swooped down on Hugh and seized him with its sharp claws.

Luckily, for exactly this kind of occurrence, Napo had a small crossbow in his bag. He quickly grabbed it, loaded a bolt, aimed ahead of the flying owl to make up for its movement in the air, and fired.



Good thing he had mastered archery. The bolt hit the owl’s tail, causing it to lose balance and drop the blind mouse. Fortunately, the mouse fell into the river, just behind the wheel of the mill where the water flow was slow. Hugh wasn’t harmed – just frightened – and easily climbed out with some help.

A speckled frog sat on a log in the river, who had been thoughtfully watching them, jumped into the water and croaked, “Ribbit.”

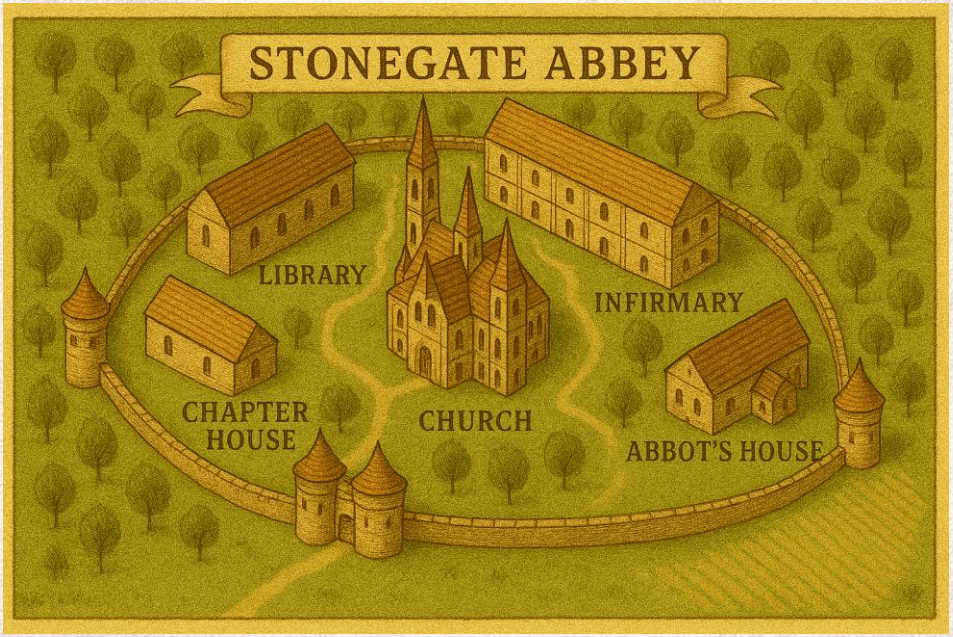
Stonegate Abbey

Napo looked at his map, then used his compass to find north. He knew that north was at the top of the map, which was indicated by an upward arrow with the letter N in the corner. Stonegate Abbey was below Albion Mill on the map, which meant they had to go south. South was opposite north, and there was a downward arrow with the letter S. Jo was always fascinated by Napo's exceptional intelligence. She didn't know any other mice that could read a map, let alone use a compass. The closest she had seen was her aunt who once chewed an old map and kept bragging about that everywhere.

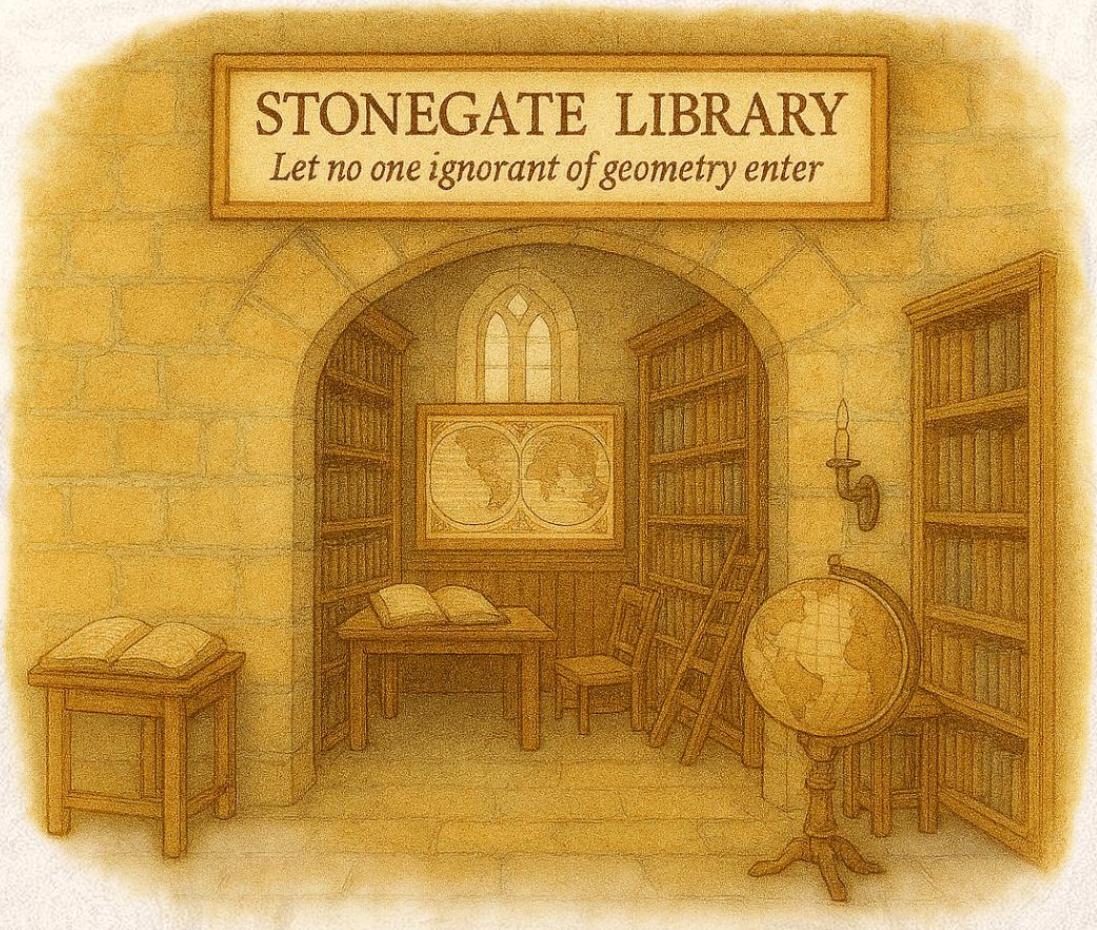


Stonegate Abbey was an imposing medieval complex. Napo and Jo's jaws dropped, for they had never seen anything like that before. The three blind mice hadn't seen such a grand structure either, but their jaws didn't drop.

As Homer had pointed out, the map of the abbey was displayed near the entrance. The library was in the north-west corner, and the book they were looking for would surely be there. They didn't find an obvious way to get into the library from the ground, so they climbed up the wall and entered through one of the windows. It was summer, and the windows were open.



Stonegate Library



Once they reached the bookshelves, the three blind mice started chewing some books, but Napo told them off.

“How are you going to find the one you’re after among so many books?” asked Jo, looking hopeless.

“Same way people do,” Napo replied, “Libraries have catalogues itemising all the books. If we find the catalogue, we can also find the book.”

Finding the catalogue wasn’t hard; after all Napo knew his way around libraries. *Poisons and the Protection Against Lethal Drugs* was indeed mentioned in the catalogue. The publication year was one year after the copy in Stopford library, so everything looked promising so far.



While searching for the book, Napo spotted the library’s truly magnificent collection. It included Euclid’s *Elements*, John Dee’s *De Heptarchia Mystica*, Alibeck the Egyptian’s *Grimorium Verum*, Aristide Torchia’s *The Nine Gates of the Kingdom of Shadows*, Albertus Magnus’s *The book of*

secrets, and *The wonderful world of insects* by an unknown author.

However, when Napo found the exact place where the book ought to have been, he only found a slip with the book's title and with a note: "Cornelius Agrippa, alchemy lab".



The alchemy lab happened to be right in the crypt beneath the library. When the mice peeked inside, it appeared empty. The room was peculiar and fascinating, filled with various curiosities: a still, alembics, cucurbits, vials, and shelves lined with minerals, salts, vitriols, oils, and mysterious spirits.

There were three books on the workbench, one of which was open. After examining them Napo concluded that the open book was the one he was after – a translation of Jabir ibn Hayyan's *Poisons and the Protection Against Lethal Drugs*.



With Jo's help, he started turning the pages to find the section on rodenticides. He was hoping to find the relevant page, copy the necessary information, and quickly flee the lab without being detected. But he realised that crossing fingers doesn't help when he heard an old man's angry voice, dashing at them and yelling, "Don't chew my books, you pesky rascals!"

In similar circumstances Napo would usually flee quickly but now he couldn't just leave. After all, her baby sister's life was at stake. So he turned to the old man and spoke solemnly, "I apologise for the trouble, and would like to assure you we are not chewing your books, and do not want to cause any harm. I am Napoleon of Stopford, son of Homer of Stopford. Are you by any chance Dr Agrippa?"

“I am,” said Cornelius Agrippa with conspicuous surprise, “How do you know?”

“I read your name on the slip in the library.”

“You read? How can you? Here, read this passage of the book.”

Napo read two sentences. Agrippa was astonished, Jo was fascinated, Napo was proud, the three blind mice were hungry.

“Who did you say your father was?”

“Homer of Stopford, who lives in Stopford Library, and who taught me to read.”



“So it was true after all,” replied Agrippa chuckling, “he was right.”

“Who?” asked Jo.

“Who taught your father to read?” asked Agrippa.

“The late librarian of Stopford, Sebastian. My father was his pet mouse.”

“Right!” exclaimed Agrippa, “I knew Sebastian. He told me about teaching his pet mouse how to read and write, but who would believe him? It was him who gave your father that prominent name, Homer… So, it turns out, there is a generation of mice who can read and write?”

“Well, not really a generation. So far it’s just my father and me, but we intend to teach other mice too.”

“What’s your name again?”

“Napoleon.”

“Well, Napoleon, in such a situation I would usually drive the mice away, to say the least, but this is not a usual situation. So tell me, why are you here?”



After hearing Napo out, Cornelius Agrippa helped him find the relevant page, copy the formula and the ingredients, and even offered all the mice some breadcrumbs and water, and let them stay in the crypt until the morning.

Agrippa's carnivorous plants

In the morning, before the mice left the abbey, Agrippa warned them, "Beware of the carnivorous plants in the abbey garden. There are flytraps, trumpet pitchers, and sundews."



"They can't harm mice though, can they?" asked Jo with a frightened face."

"Well, the small ones can't. But these are giant plants. I brought some seeds from the New World several years ago and did some experiments with them. The result was giant carnivorous plants, who could eat not only a mouse but even a rat."

"These plants," Agrippa carried on, "naturally live in acidic bogs, where there is much water but little nutrients. So they evolved into carnivorous species trapping and digesting insects, and thus getting nutrients. The ones we have here are far more dangerous because of my experiments. For instance, a standard flytrap would have its traps open and would lure insects by its sweet nectar and bright colour. Once an insect lands on a trap and touches the trigger hairs two or three times, the trap rapidly shuts capturing the prey. My

flytraps, on the other hand, can feel the heat radiation from nearby animals, and can move the traps to actively catch the prey."

"That's scary," said Tom, "what happens to the trapped insect or animal?"

"The plant eats them... But worry not, I have a map showing their exact locations and safe paths. Stay on the path, and you have nothing to fear."

"Napoleon," added Agrippa before bidding them farewell, "I wish you success in your bold endeavour. I invite you to visit me again and use our books, when things get better at home of course."



The mice thanked Agrippa and left. They formed a row and held each other's hands, so nobody would stray from the path. When they were safely out of the garden, they sat to relax a little bit. But Nick, who always seemed to be hungry, started sniffing a sweet scent in the air.

"Smells like a tasty treat!" he exclaimed with joy and ran towards the scent. The smell was coming from a trumpet pitcher though, which the mouse couldn't see. He climbed the pitcher-shaped leaf of the

plant and started licking the sweet wax at the top. Then, as it usually happens in these cases, he slipped and fell into the pitcher.

“We should go pull him out,” said Jo.

“No!” cried Napoleon, “If we try, it’s more likely we all will end up as plant food. There are downward-pointed hairs inside the pitcher that prevent the prey from escaping. Let’s instead try to cut the pitcher open and free him.”



“Don’t move!” shouted Napo to the trapped mouse, “When you move, the plant produces a lot more digestive fluid. If you don’t move, you will be relatively safe until we free you.”

But the mouse kept squeaking and writhing.

“I said don’t move!” yelled Napoleon then, turning to Tom, asked, “Is he only blind or also deaf? Stop squirming!”

After a little struggle, Nick stopped wriggling, and Napo could eventually chop the pitcher down and free him. The plant had produced only a little digestive fluid in the meantime, thanks to the mouse staying still upon Napo’s advice. After a quick bath in the garden pond, Nick was as good as a blind tailless mouse could be.

Finding north

The next destination was Oxwood Castle, north-east of Stonegate Abbey.

“We had better avoid the main road,” said Napo. “We will head east, cross the road to the woods, then turn north and get to the castle.”

Deep in the woods, just when they were meant to turn north, Napo realised his compass was missing – perhaps left behind in the abbey.



“We are lost!” squeaked Hugh, Nick, and Tom when they figured out what had happened.

“Do not despair, my friends,” said Napo in a calm voice. “Why don’t you go take a nap under that big mushroom yonder, while Jo and I use this stick instead of a compass.”

Napo stuck the stick in the ground in a glade where its shadow would be unobstructed. He put a stone at the end of the shadow to mark its location. After some time, when the shadow had moved a noticeable distance, he put another stone at its end.

“The line formed by these two stones, which is unique in our world,” he explained to Jo, “indicates the east-west line. That’s because the sun moves from east to west.”

“But you explained to me that the motion is circular,” asked Jo, “so the line will keep changing depending on the time of the day.”

“That is a shrewd observation indeed,” replied Napo, “but you should remember that as the sun moves, it also goes up and down, making the shadow shorter or longer. At noon it reaches its highest point. This means that the ends of the shadow of this stick will almost form a line, rather than a circle.”



“This is of course not entirely accurate,” added Napo, “but it will do for now. Once we know the east-west line, the rest is easy. Stonegate Abbey, which is where we came from, is roughly to the west. So this is west and that is east.”

“If we face east, north will be on our left,” added Jo who had learnt that from Napo the day before.

“Good thing we have the sun,” Jo carried on, “what would we do at night?”

“Well, we could use the stars to find north at night. I read about it in *The Book of Fixed Stars* by Abd al-Rahman al-Sufi.”

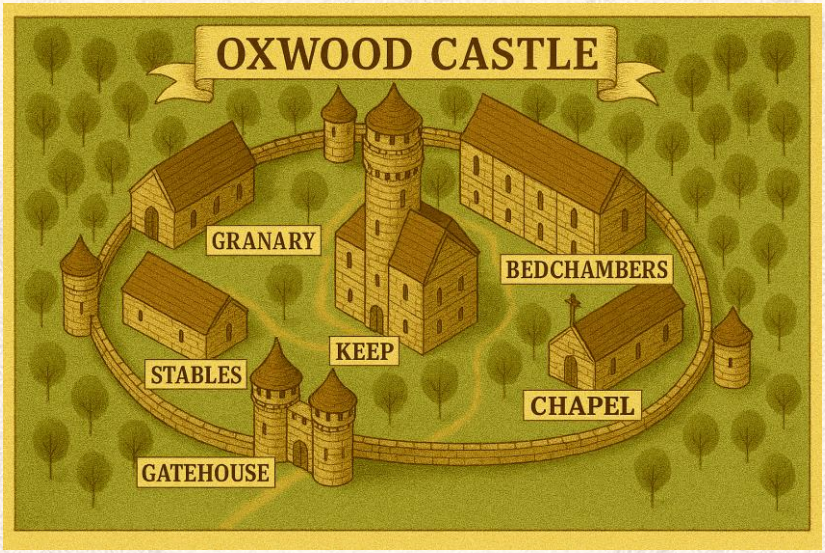
Jo was once again astonished by Napo’s intelligence.

Oxwood Castle

Oxwood Castle was a magnificent example of medieval English architecture. Once a Royalist fortress during the Civil War, its stone walls still whispered untold stories. The five mice arrived there three days after Napo left Stopford. With a little luck, they would reach Stopford the following day.



The plan was simple: sneak into the granary, eat as much grain as possible, replenish their supplies, stay the night in a quiet nook, keep the blind mice out of trouble, get on the stagecoach next morning, and enjoy the ride to town. Everything went according to plan. Almost... Everything save for keeping the blind mice out of trouble.



As was well known, and as Homer warned Napo, there were plenty of cats in the castle. And as it was natural to expect, most of the cats were deployed in and around the granary. There were also lots of traps scattered throughout. But for Napo, who was far smarter than the cats, it wasn't hard to find a relatively safe route to the granary which would avoid the cats and the traps. After all, any old building

has crevices in walls that would be safe havens for small critters like mice; the real challenge is to find them.

In this case there was no need to climb up the walls, they easily got under the floorboards through air bricks. The gaps between the floorboards were large enough for a mouse to squeeze through but definitely too small for cats. An ideal hideout with an escape route.

Napo instructed the blind mice to stay put and cautiously went up to the ground floor with Jo and managed to sneak past the cats and get some food without being detected. After a short while everyone was full and ready for sleep. Tom, however, the blind mouse who hadn't been in any trouble yet, craved for a drink.

It so happened that the inn and the brewery were right next to the granary, so Tom could feel the sweet smell of cider from their hiding place. He then decided that he could quietly sneak out, get into the brewery, take a sip of cider, and return to the hideout before anyone noticed. But when he was leaving, he accidentally stepped on Jo, because he was blind and couldn't see her. Jo woke



up and, seeing that the mouse was up to mischief, followed him hoping to bring him back to safety. Just as she reached him and squeaked his name, several cat paws landed on them, seizing both. Yes, such a disaster is bound to happen when a blind mouse forgets that he is blind.

The cats formed a circle around the two mice, looking at them and trying to figure out how it's best to split two mice between four cats. Luckily, they weren't that smart, and the discussion took quite some time and caused some commotion, which woke up Napo and the two blind mice.



Napo panicked for the first time during his journey. Hugh and Nick hadn't seen him like that before, since they actually hadn't seen him at all. But that's not the point; Jo was captured, and he had to do something about it.

Napo’s bold move

The cats figured out each of them was entitled to half a mouse, but they couldn’t decide whether it was better to split the mice vertically or horizontally. In the end, they chose not to eat them – they already had dinner anyway. Instead, they would play with them, which is something cats enjoy more than anything else, and in the morning, they would turn in the mice to the authorities for a reward.

Seeing the dire situation Jo and Tom were in, Napo did something which no mouse had done before and which most mice would describe as extremely foolish and extremely brave. He went up through the gaps between floorboards, climbed up a wooden table and squeaked loudly to the cats.



The cats were so confused that they didn’t attack immediately. Napo was counting on that, and he used that break for his advantage.

“Hear me out, most respected cats,” said Napo, “I am a mouse, and you are cats. You are the predator; I am the prey. Yet, I call upon you not to violate the Law of Mother Nature. If you were hungry and wanted to eat these mice, and also eat me, that would be in accordance with the Law. However, you are torturing these mice, just for fun, and plan to turn them in. To whom? To humans! That’s not the Law. The Law confirms that every creature has the right to life, and this can be violated by another creature only if not doing so would itself violate the Law. That is, if you were hungry and had to eat, eating a mouse wouldn’t violate the Law as not eating at all would put your life at risk. If you are defending yourself and, while doing so, harm another creature, that is allowed by the Law. On the other hand, if you are not hungry – and you are well fed here so you shouldn’t be hungry – then eating or, even worse, torturing another creature, such as a bird or a mouse, is a gross violation indeed.”



The cats knew about the Law, although they didn’t often follow it.

“He is actually right,” meowed one of the cats, “we will answer for all our doings before Mother Nature one day. We are not humans, after all, they don’t respect the Law.”

“What are you talking about?” said another cat, “That’s nonsense. We should catch the new mouse too.” And it quickly put its paw on Napo’s tail.

“If you don’t respect the Law,” Napo carried on, “you should at least act in your best interest. Humans have used traps to catch mice. But they aren’t very effective, so they keep cats. But they have now invented a dangerous thing, a poison that kills rodents. It is far more powerful than traps, and it may exterminate the population of mice on our planet. Now think about it. If there are no mice, humans won’t need cats.”



“How do we know you are telling the truth about this poison?” asked another cat.

“Here!” Napo took the map of Micechester South and the recipe of the antidote out of his pocket and showed it to the cats, and told the whole story. “If you let me go, I will

find a cure, so the poison won't exterminate mice, and you will have plenty to catch."



The cats started meowing indiscernibly. Some were convinced, some sceptical.

"Silence!" commanded a mighty voice suddenly. It was Archbishop, the leader of the cats.

"Very well, little mouse," he said to Napo, "if you can read and write, we will give you the benefit of the doubt. We will release these two mice, but we will keep you, and will turn you in to humans in the morning. The Law also states that if you need to survive to rescue your race from extermination, then the Mother Nature will save you. If you are so smart, you can haggle with humans too. So we leave everything to Mother Nature. If you agree, we will not be violating the Law."

"No!" exclaimed Jo, "Don't do that. You must flee and save your sister."

“I agree,” Napo said to Archbishop, “but I need to pass the map and the recipe to my friends, so if I don’t survive, they can take these to my father.”

“Agreed,” declared the cat leader. “Release the two mice, and put this one’s tail in a trap, lest he flee at night. Don’t touch him. Come the morning, I’ll hand him in myself.”

The situation was dire, but Napo didn’t despair. He waited until the cats lost interest in him – which they did because their leader forbade them from touching him – and when he was alone in the corner, his tail firmly caught in the trap, he whispered to Jo, who was waiting below the floor.

“Go get the knife from my bag,” whispered Napo to Jo.

“What do you intend to do?”



“Whatever is necessary. Go fetch the knife.”

When Archbishop went to take Napo in the morning and realised what had happened, after a moment of pondering, he declared pensively, “We must respect and protect the Law.”

Stopford

The departure point for all stagecoach services from Oxwood Castle was the stables. The mice heard one of the coachmen announce, “This is the 192 service to Oak Grove via Stopford.” They quietly sneaked under the carriage and climbed up onto a wooden beam and patiently waited for the coachmen to whip the horses.

“There is an abandoned farm near Stopford – the Shaw Fold farm. I think it would be a convenient place for you to settle in,” Napo told the three blind mice. “It’s quiet and safe. Never seen any cats, owls, or carnivorous plants there.”



Hugh, Nick, and Tom looked happy with the offer.

“You have been very kind to us,” said Hugh to Napo and Jo.

“We wouldn’t have survived without you,” squeaked Nick.

“We will always remember that,” added Tom.

“We are unworthy servants; we have only done our duty,” replied Napo.

The 192 service was passing through the Shaw Fold farm. The three blind mice bade farewell and jumped off the coach. Napo and Jo promised to visit them later and help them settle in, as soon as Napo’s sister felt better.

“I have never been to a town,” Jo said excitedly as the stagecoach entered Stopford, “So many buildings!”



“Yes, a lot of buildings. The best ones are terraced houses – at least semidetached – where the crawlspace is common between the houses. It means you have access to all of them, and not just one, and it’d be harder for the owners to seal all the entrances as it

requires collaboration with each other which humans aren't good at."

"I am a house mouse, and I am used to living in buildings," Napo continued, "but I have some longing for nature. Maybe I should move in with the three blind mice to the Shaw Fold farm."

Napo and Jo arrived safely at the Stopford Library where Napo's family was waiting impatiently. Joan was quite unwell, as Homer suspected she might be, and her mother was so worried she kept chewing books all the time.



Upon arrival, Napo and Homer went to the study and spent the whole night examining the recipe for the antidote and making experiments. The antidote was ready in the morning. The only problem was that they didn't know if it would work, or even if it was safe. But they didn't have a choice, they had to try.

Mother Nature seemed to be on their side, for Joan's health improved rapidly over the next few days. She responded very well to the antidote, which became a habit in her later life; when she grew up, she worked as a lab mouse in the biology department of Micechester University.



Joan learnt to read and write, and even composed a ditty, that she often hummed under her nose while playing with her toy mouse.



I'm a cute little house mouse,

I eat barley, wheat, and also ham.

The library's my beautiful house,

I read books – I don't chew them.



Jo stayed with Napo's family in the library for several months. She learnt how to read and write, as she hoped, and read many books, and wrote one. She helped Homer and Napo produce more antidotes so they could help other mice in their community.

But after a while Jo felt somewhat troubled in the hustle and bustle of the town and decided to go back to the woods where she first met Napo. They visited each other quite frequently though and occasionally paid a visit to the three blind mice at Shaw Fold.

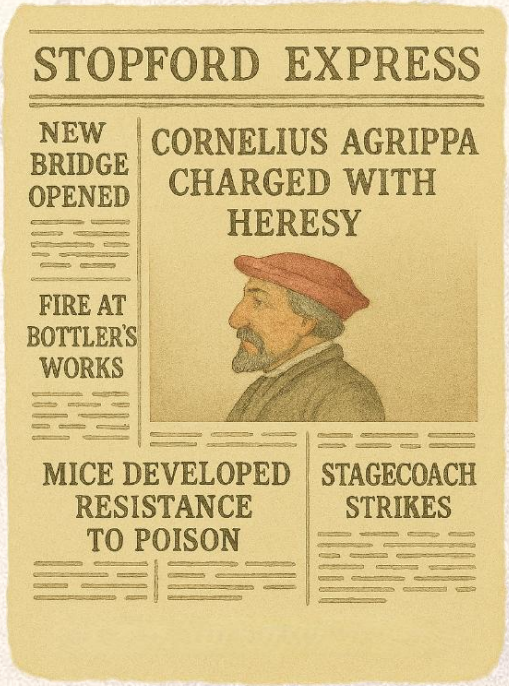
Napo established a school and taught literacy to many mice. He became known in the mouse community as the Teacher. At some point he went back to Stonegate Abbey to study the available literature and even took some lessons from Cornelius Agrippa.

The plot

As it usually happens in such situations, however, there were some mice who weren't happy with Napo's achievements and popularity. These mice wanted to get rid of him, but they weren't clever and didn't know how to do that.

Things changed when Cornelius Agrippa was accused of heresy and persecuted by the church. This made headlines in the Stopford newspapers. The mice who didn't like Napo read about Agrippa and learnt something new from humans.

An opportune moment arose when, due to heavy rains, the river overflowed, destroyed some of the mouse nests, and drowned several mice. A prominent mouse in Stopford – Napo's aptest pupil who, after reading Shakespear's *The Tragedy of Julius Caesar,* named himself Marcus Junius – assembled the mice in the wake of this disaster and gave a remarkable speech.





“As we mourn the loss of our friends,” he started, “we must ask ourselves why this disaster happened, and why right now. I will tell you why. We are mice, not humans! We are not supposed to be literate, as literacy is against the Law. Using the antidote is also against the Law. We hide in our nests during the day and venture out only at night. That’s how Mother Nature has created us. Light is not for us. Mother Nature created us for the simple way of life, not for copying humans. This flood was a punishment exacted upon us by Mother Nature for these transgressions. Look at humans... look at the disasters that constantly befall them – wars, outbreaks, famine, earthquakes – all of these happen because humans have abandoned the Law long ago. The question we should ask is: do we want to be like them?”

Thus spoke Marcus Junius. His speech started all sorts of rumours against Napo which spread all over the mouse community in Stopford. Eventually, Napo found himself in a court charged with gross violation of the Law. He was found guilty and was given the

harshest punishment: he would be forced to eat a large dose of rodenticide and wouldn't be allowed to take the antidote. This was to be carried out in public, and it was supposed to reconcile the mice with Mother Nature and prevent further disasters.

But, as it has already happened a few times in this story, on the day of the punishment Napo got help from the most unexpected place. The cats from Oxwood Castle had learnt about all this and decided to pay the Stopford mice a visit. Needless to say, when they entered, all the mice were petrified in their places.

"The Law must be protected," declared Archbishop, the cat leader. "A creature taking the life of another for any reason, other than his own survival, is against the Law."



“Come, little mouse,” he then turned to Napo, “you do not belong in this world.”



The cats took Napo with them. Where exactly they took him, we don’t know and will never know. But a little mouse once told her parents that just outside the Shaw Fold farm she overheard three blind tailless mice talking to each other and saying:

“He said with these herbs he may be able to make drops which will gradually recover our eyesight.”

“Oooh, how I wish to see again.”

“I can’t wait to see them both with my own eyes…”

Epilogue

The book from the crawlspace, that was called *Light in the Darkness*, didn't mention the author's full name, it was only signed *J*. Some notes on the last page were added later, apparently by someone else who wrote about the story and its author in third person. But something didn't add up; the handwriting was the same...

I presented the main story above, and maybe I should have stopped there. That's what my friend Reid Morley, the rare book dealer, recommended. But, for the sake of academic integrity, I feel obliged to present the contents of the note at the end of the book.

I hereby warn you not to read the rest to your child, nor to allow them to read it.

According to the note, parts of the story – the most important parts at that – were not actually true. The original story was different, which the author later changed. The purpose of the note, it was claimed, was to make sure that the truth – even if tragic – was not lost.

The note claimed that Napo didn't have a crossbow and couldn't prevent the owl from snatching Hugh.

When Nick was trapped inside the pitcher plant, and when Napo asked him not to move, the trapped mouse wouldn't listen and kept

squirming. When they at last cut down the pitcher with Napo's knife and saw what happened to Nick, they wished they hadn't done it.

When Tom and Jo were surrounded by the cats, one of the cats immediately swallowed the blind mouse, and only after that Napo went out to Jo's aid.

None of the blind mice survived... and there was no abandoned farm near Stopford known as Shaw Fold. Later, looking back at what happened, Napo wanted to say something about the blind mice, but the only thing that came to mind was: "A merry life and a short one."

When Jo left Stopford for the woods, it wasn't because she couldn't adapt to the busy life of the town. She had hoped for something more from Napo than friendship, but when she didn't receive it, she fled to the tranquillity of the woods to be alone with her thoughts and emotions – to figure out what she truly wanted.

It's difficult to admit, but Jo didn't even say goodbye – it was too hard for her. She never returned to Stopford, but she often went to Norris Hill, where she used to stargaze with Napo and had learnt how to find the North Star. Deep down, she still cherished a grain of hope that one day Napo would appear there out of the blue – exactly when she was there – holding a stalk of wheat for her... or even just a grain of wheat.

She didn't know that she would not see him... ever again.

As for Napo, unfortunately the cats didn't come to his aid, and the evil mice carried out the execution. Later, Jo retrieved his body and buried him under the oak tree on Norris Hill near Stopford. She also buried the antidote formula with him. On the gravestone she inscribed, "Light is come into the world, and they loved darkness rather than light."

There was no mention of what became of Jo.

The note claimed that the author truly believed the falsified story.

No, dear reader, do not read this to your child. But promise, when they are a bit older and ready for this, promise that you will show this epilogue to them. Let them read this, lest they forget that life is not a fairy tale...



STOPFORD EXPRESS

MOUSE POISON WORKS AGAIN

CORNELIUS AGRIPPA'S BOOKS TO BE BURNED

STAGECOACH STRIKES GO ON

NEW TITHE BARN TO BE BUILT ON MAULDETH ROAD