

IMAGINATION

*Stories
of Science
and Fantasy*

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The Big Cheese

By

Edward Wellen

A "rat," being synonymous with "villain," gave Brownie delusions of grandeur. For he was the Real McCoy—aspiring to rule the world! . . .

A GAIN and again the pinball machine went score-happy. And when Brownie ran up top score for the 214th time in a row I began to smell a rat. A large oily-brown rat. I watched him closely on the 215th try.

He went through the complicated procedure of earning a slug, putting it in the slot, maneuvering the plunger. And again he made a perfect score and his reward of a piece of cheese chuted out. He began to nibble, pausing once to wink at me. And that resolved my last doubt: Brownie *was* using body english.

Brownie was quite a cuss. *Rattus norvegicus*, to be exact. He was the product of selective breeding, scion of myriads of rodent martyrs to science. But breeding, though it accounted for his extra-

ordinary size, was hardly the answer to his miraculous I.Q. Brownie was a mutant. Or was he? Sometimes I think something out of space inhabited Brownie. Whatever the cause, the effect was becoming more and more apparent as the tests progressed.

"Brownie," I said reproachfully, "you tilted the machine."

Brownie looked shocked at the accusation.

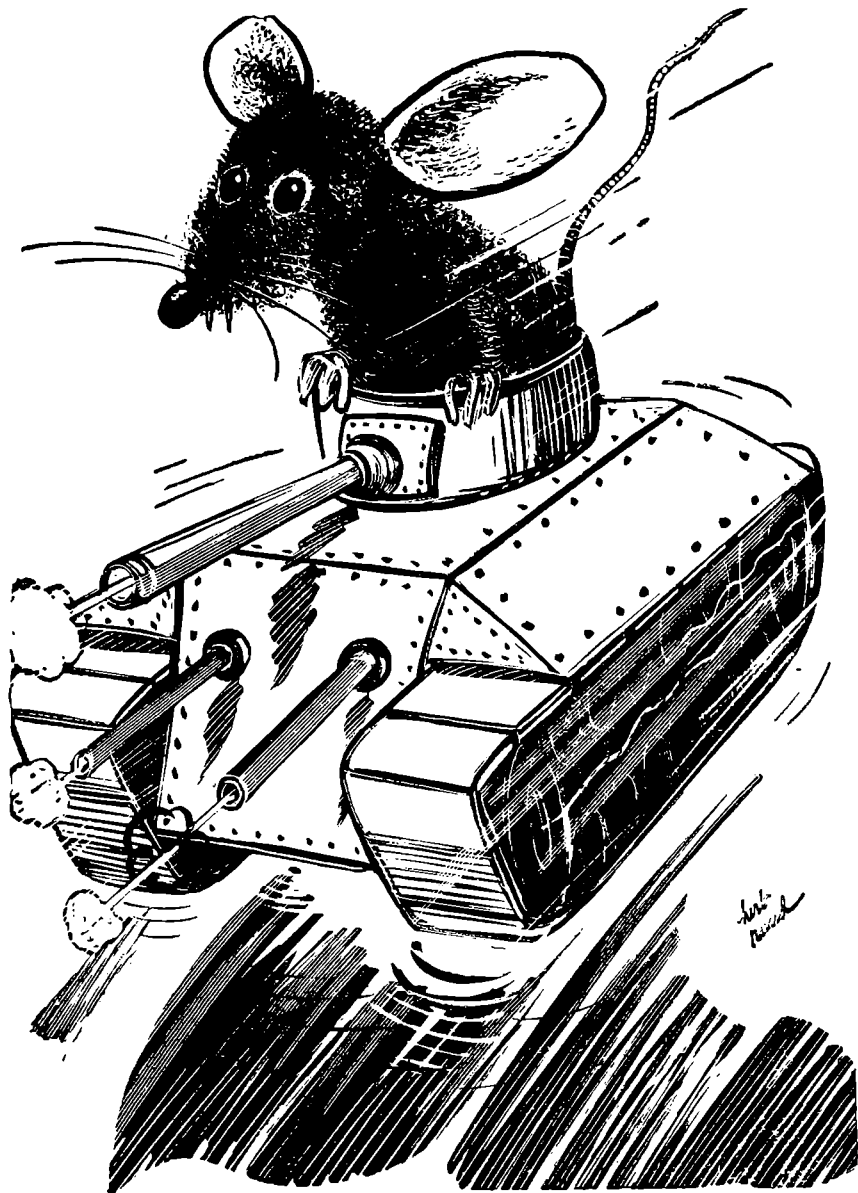
"Who, me?" he chalked on his slate.

"I don't mean the rat in Lillian Russell's hair."

The doorbell rang.

Brownie went into a boxer's crouch. He knew it always got a laugh.

But this time I said, "Save it, sport." Under my breath, as I went to open the door, I said,



Art
Pencil

"And I do mean sport. Biological sport."

"What's that you're muttering in your beard?" Isabel asked, after she'd kissed my clean-shaven face.

"It's Brownie," I said.

"What's Brother Rat been up to now?"

"He's cheating at pinball."

"Well, what do you expect when you corrupt animal morals with your gambling devices? What do you think the A.S.P.C.A. would have to say about that if they knew? By the way, dear, how much longer are you going to keep Brownie under wraps?"

"I guess I can't keep him on ice much longer, honey," I said. "As it is, I've taken a big chance keeping him here at home instead of in the school lab."

Isabel looked at Brownie. He raised his eyes from his comic book and gazed at her unblinkingly. Isabel shivered and moved closer to me.

"He scares me," she whispered. "It isn't *right* for a rat to read and write."

I looked at Brownie absorbed in his comic book again. And I had to admit that Isabel had something there.

"It is a blow to human pride," I said. "But think of what it will mean to the theory of evolution. And think of what it will

mean to get a rat's-eye view of man. And—"

"And think what it'll mean to us if we miss the ski train," Isabel said.

I looked at my watch.

"Gosh!" I said. "I'll be right with you." I walked over to Brownie's cage. "Listen, Brownie," I told him, "I'm going away on a long weekend. There's plenty of cheese in the machine and all the water you want. Okay?"

Brownie nodded and we beat it.

In the dining-car, Isabel asked, "Doesn't your Rodent Scholar rate a menu like this instead of just cheese and water?"

I watched the poles flicker past.

"To tell the truth, Isabel," I said, "I feel Brownie can get out of his cage whenever he wants to. I think he's been nipping at the Scotch I keep locked in the cabinet."

We were mostly silent until the train mounted the hills. Then the sight of snow whitewashed our minds.

BUT our minds darkened geometrically as the poles stepped off the miles back to town. In unspoken agreement we headed straight for my house.

Brownie wasn't in his cage. The cage wasn't. Brownie had dismantled the equipment and cannibalized it into something else.

A miniature tank, strangely resembling a pinball machine, rumbled toward us as we entered. And the small cannon set in the turret motioned us over against the wall.

The tank backed off. The lid lifted and Brownie popped up. He had on a battle helmet, *nee* stainless steel pot.

"Brownie," I said, "what's the big idea?"

He pointed to my left. And I noticed a message lettered on the wall.

"Your girl friend will come with me," it said. *"She'll be all right if you do as I say. Don't move. I'll be back soon."*

"Now, wait a minute, Brownie," I said.

But his head disappeared and the lid clanged shut. And the tank began to roll. The way the gun drew a bead on Isabel's heart drew beads from my forehead.

"Better humor him, honey," I said.

Brownie marched Isabel out. I started to follow. But the gun turret spun around and a slug whizzed past my head. I advanced in the other direction.

All I could do was wait until he returned. No! There were things I could do in the meantime. What? Well, if Brownie intended to use my home as his base of operations, he might soon-

er or later sample my Scotch again. I spiked the Scotch with rat poison. What else? Of course, the police!

The voice of a desk veteran answered the phone.

"Fourteenth precinct. Sergeant Martin."

"Sergeant, a rat kidnapped my girl!"

"Calm down, mister. Now give me the facts. Who, where, when. What's this guy look like?"

I told him.

"A real rat, huh? And he's in a little armored car? And he's dangerous? I see. Well, you just sit tight, mister. I'm giving the case to Detective Cann right away."

I got sore. I have cop friends and so I know "Detective Cann" is cop talk for the wastebasket. I blistered the wires.

"Calm down, mister . . ." The voice was going on but I wasn't listening.

Nosing around the door was the snout of the gun mounted on Brownie's tank. I hung up. The tank swung into the room and rolled to a stop.

When Brownie showed himself again, I asked, "What have you done with Isabel?"

BBROWNIE pointed to a stack of leaves torn from a calendar. They were face down. On

the back of the top one was the answer to my question:

"The girl is a hostage. She is in a safe place."

"What ransom do you want? Cheese? I'll give you all the cheese you want, Brownie."

The answer to that was on the second leaf: "I want you to help me raise and train an army of Rats."

The third leaf said: "The girl dies if you refuse."

The fourth leaf said: "I mean to rule the world."

Those damned comic books! Plainly, I had to scotch his plans *now*.

"Okay, Brownie," I said. "Let's drink on it." I unlocked the cabinet and took out the Scotch.

I filled a shot glass for Brownie and set it on the floor. I moved away and poured a glass for myself. Brownie waited for me to drink first.

I took a deep breath and drank. Brownie stepped out of the tank. He sipped his drink, keeping his beady eyes on me. I let him empty the glass before I spoke.

"Brownie, that drink was poisoned." And as I said the words I felt the poison work on me,

twisting my insides. Brownie got it then, too. His twitching body and whipping tail showed it. I was in agony. "Brownie, if you tell me where Isabel is I'll give you an antidote."

Giddily, Brownie found chalk and scrawled on the floor, "How do I know it's not more poison?"

"I'll take-a dose of it myself," I said.

"All right," he wrote.

Quickly I got an emetic and swallowed a dose. For a bad moment I was sick all over the place. Then I felt better.

"Now," I said weakly, "tell me where she is."

"Tied - to - tree - in - woods - behind - house - quick - the - antidote!"

I gave Brownie the emetic. I'd promised it to him.

He drank it, then scurried back to the tank. Holding me off with the gun, he chalked on the turret: "You fool! Now you die. Nothing will stop me—"

Brownie doubled up in pain.

"Rats can't vomit," I said. "This is it, you *rat*."

Brownie looked at me. "You *man*," he wrote, and died.

THE END