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The Tale of Johnny Town-Mouse

Beatrix Potter · *1918 · English original, Project Gutenberg #15284*

Johnny Town-mouse was born in a cupboard. Timmy Willie was born in a garden, and went to town by mistake in a vegetable hamper. He is welcomed with eight elegant courses and a sofa pillow that smells of cat. When Johnny later pays a visit to the country, he finds it a little damp, starts at a cow, and goes back in the very next hamper. One place suits one person, another place suits another person.

THE CENTRAL QUESTION

Can a country mouse be made into a town mouse—or a town mouse into a country one—by kindness alone?

"One place suits one person, another place suits another person."
The close

Timmy Willie is almost frightened to death by carts, a cook, a poker, and a canary that sings like a steam engine. Johnny recovers his manners at once, and the dinner is truly elegant; still the food disagrees, the noise prevents sleep, and the sofa smells of cat. Johnny later finds the garden damp, the cow fearful, and the lawn-mower a racket. Each is most kind. Each goes home. Potter prefers the country, like Timmy Willie, without scolding the mouse who does not.

KEY CHARACTERS

Timmy Willie
a little country mouse, born in a garden, who goes to town by mistake

Johnny Town-mouse
born in a cupboard; a polite host who cannot bear a quiet garden long

The cook and Sarah
upstairs danger: a chair, a poker, a tea-tray, and a cat

Grades K–3
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01
A Hamper at the Gate
THE JOURNEY
A country mouse goes to town by mistake.

- Johnny Town-mouse was born in a cupboard. Timmy Willie was born in a garden. Timmy Willie was a little country mouse who went to town by mistake in a hamper.
- The gardener left the hamper by the garden gate, so that the carrier could pick it up when he passed. Timmy Willie crept in through a hole in the wicker-work, and after eating some peas—Timmy Willie fell fast asleep.
- He awoke in a fright, while the hamper was being lifted into the carrier's cart. Then there was a jolting, and a clattering of horse's feet; for miles and miles—jolt—jolt—jolt! and Timmy Willie trembled amongst the jumbled up vegetables.

02
A Mouse! Call the Cat!
THE TOWN HOUSE
Noise upstairs, and a crash into a dinner party.

- The cook gave the carrier sixpence; the back door banged; but there was no quiet. Dogs barked; boys whistled; the cook laughed; the parlour maid ran up and down-stairs; and a canary sang like a steam engine.
- Out sprang the terrified Timmy Willie. Up jumped the cook on a chair, exclaiming "A mouse! a mouse! Call the cat! Fetch me the poker, Sarah!" He rushed along the skirting board and popped into a little hole.
- He dropped half a foot, and crashed into the middle of a mouse dinner party, breaking three glasses. "Who in the world is this?" inquired Johnny Town-mouse. But after the first exclamation of surprise he instantly recovered his manners.

03
Company Manners
THE VISIT
Eight courses, a pillow that smells of cat, and a thinning guest.

- With the utmost politeness Johnny introduced Timmy Willie to nine other mice, all with long tails and white neckties. The dinner was of eight courses; not much of anything, but truly elegant. The dishes were unknown to Timmy Willie, who would have been a little afraid of tasting them; only he was very hungry, and very anxious to behave with company manners.
- The youngsters waiting at table are being chased by the cat. Timmy Willie drops a plate. "Never mind, they don't belong to us," said Johnny. The sofa pillow, kept exclusively for visitors, smells of cat. Timmy Willie prefers a miserable night under the fender.
- The food disagreed with him; the noise prevented him from sleeping. In a few days he grew so thin that Johnny noticed it. "It sounds rather a dull place? What do you do when it rains?"

04
The Saturday Hamper
THE RETURN
A peaceful nest, and a visit half promised.

- When it rains, Timmy Willie sits in his little sandy burrow and shells corn and seeds. He peeps out at the throstles and blackbirds, and his friend Cock Robin. When the sun comes out again, there are roses and pinks and pansies—no noise except the birds and bees, and the lambs in the meadows.
- "I confess I am a little disappointed; we have endeavoured to entertain you, Timothy William." "Oh yes, yes, you have been most kind; but I do feel so ill." Perhaps it might be wiser to return in the hamper—which, Johnny adds rather huffily, goes back empty on Saturdays.
- So Timmy Willie said good-bye, and hid in the hamper with a crumb of cake and a withered cabbage leaf. Sometimes on Saturdays he went to look at the hamper lying by the gate, but he knew better than to get in again. And nobody got out, though Johnny Town-mouse had half promised a visit.

05
A Little Damp
THE CLOSE
Johnny comes spick and span, and goes back in the next hamper.

- The winter passed. Timmy Willie sat by his burrow warming his little fur coat and sniffing the smell of violets and spring grass, when up the sandy path all spick and span with a brown leather bag came Johnny Town-mouse.
- "H'm'm! it is a little damp," said Johnny, carrying his tail under his arm, out of the mud. He starts violently at a cow, and again at the lawn-mower. The family have gone to the sea-side; the cook is to clear out the mice; there are four kittens, and the cat has killed the canary.
- "I am sure you will never want to live in town again," said Timmy Willie. But he did. He went back in the very next hamper of vegetables; he said it was too quiet!! One place suits one person, another place suits another person. For my part I prefer to live in the country, like Timmy Willie.

> *"One place suits one person, another place suits another person."*
> The close

Home · Courtesy · Noise and Quiet · Belonging · Difference

What to watch for as you read

GRADES K–3

1. The book is dedicated "To Aesop in the shadows." The old fable is being retold without a scolding: each mouse is most kind, and each is still himself.
2. Johnny recovers his manners at once, will not make personal remarks about a short tail, and honestly recommends the sofa pillow. Watch how real courtesy and real unsuitability stand together.
3. The hamper goes both ways, and it goes empty on Saturdays. The same basket that frightened Timmy Willie is the door home—and, later, the door back to town.
4. The last sentences keep two judgments: "One place suits one person, another place suits another person," and then Potter's own preference, quietly, for the country.

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