

THE STAR MOUSE

By FREDRIC BROWN

MITKEY, THE MOUSE, wasn't Mitkey then.

He was just another mouse, who lived behind the floorboards and plaster of the house of the great Herr Professor Oberburger, formerly of Vienna and Heidelberg; then a refugee from the excessive admiration of the more powerful of his fellow-countrymen. The excessive admiration had concerned, not Herr Oberburger himself, but a certain gas which had been a by-product of an unsuccessful rocket fuel—which might have been a highly successful something else.

If, of course, the Professor had given them the correct formula. Which he—Well, anyway, the Professor had made good his escape and now lived in a house in Connecticut. And so did Mitkey.

A small gray mouse, and a small gray man. Nothing unusual about either of them. Particularly there was nothing unusual about Mitkey; he had a family and he liked cheese and if there were Rotarians among mice, he would have been a Rotarian.

The Herr Professor, of course, had his mild eccentricities. A confirmed bachelor, he had no one to talk to except himself, but he considered himself an excellent conversationalist and held constant verbal communion with himself while he worked. That fact, it turned out later, was important, because Mitkey had excellent ears and heard those night-long soliloquies. He didn't understand them, of course. If he thought about them at all, he merely thought of the Professor as a large and noisy super-mouse who squeaked over-much.

“Und now,” he would say to himself, “ve vill see vether this eggshaust tube vas broberly machined. It should fidt vithin vun vun-hundredth thousandth of an indtch. Ahhh, it iss berfect. Und now—“

Night after night, day after day, month after month. The gleaming thing grew, and the gleam in Herr Oberburger's eyes grew apace.

It was about three and a half feet long, with weirdly shaped vanes, and it rested on a temporary framework on a table in the center of the room that served the Herr Professor for all purposes. The house in which he and Mitkey lived was a four room structure, but the Professor hadn't yet found it out, seemingly. Originally, he had planned to use the big room as a laboratory only, but he found it more convenient to sleep on a cot in one corner of it, when he slept at all, and to do the little cooking he did over the same gas burner over which he melted down golden grains of TNT into a dangerous soup which he salted and peppered with strange condiments, but did not eat.

“Und now I shall bour it into tubes, and see vether vun tube adjacendt to another eggsploides der secondt tube vhen der virst tube iss—“

That was the night Mitkey almost decided to move himself and his family to a more stable abode, one that did not rock and sway and try to turn handsprings on its foundations. But Mitkey didn't move after all, because there were compensations. New mouse-holes all over, and—joy of joy!—a big crack in the back of the refrigerator where the Professor kept, among other things, food.

Of course the tubes had been not larger than capillary size, or the house would not have remained around the mouseholes. And of course Mitkey could not guess what was coming nor understand the Herr Professor's brand of English (nor any other brand of English, for that matter) or he would not have let even a crack in the refrigerator tempt him.

The Professor was jubilant that morning.

“Der fuel, idt vorks! Der secondt tube, idt did not eggsploide. Und der virst, in seggtions, as I had eggspectedt! Und it is more bowerful; there will be blenty of room for der combartment—“

Ah, yes, the compartment. That was where Mitkey came in, although even the Professor didn't know it yet. In fact the Professor didn't even know that Mitkey existed.

“Und now,” he was saying to his favourite listener, “idt is budt a madter of combining der fuel tubes so they work in obbosite bairs. Und then—“

That was the moment when the Herr Professor's eyes first fell on Mitkey. Rather, they fell upon a pair of gray whiskers and a black, shiny little nose protruding from a hole in the baseboards.

“Veil!” he said, “vot haff ve here! Mitkey Mouse himself! Mitkey, how would you like to go for a ride, negst veek? Ve shall see.”

That is how it came about that the next time the Professor sent into town for supplies, his order included a mousetrap—not one of the vicious kind that kills, but one of the wire-cage kind. And it had not been set, with cheese, for more than ten minutes before Mitkey's sharp little nose had smelled out that cheese and he had followed his nose into captivity.

Not, however, an unpleasant captivity. Mitkey was an honored guest. The cage reposed now on the table at which the Professor did most of his work, and cheese in indigestion-giving abundance was pushed through the bars, and the Professor didn't talk to himself any more.

“You see, Mitkey, I vas going to sendt to der laboratory in Hardtfordt for a vwhite mouse, budt vwhy should I, mit you here? I am sure you are more soundt and healthy and able to vithstand a long chourney than those laboratory mices. No? Ah, you vigggle your viskers and that means yes, no? Und being used to living in dargk holes, you should suffer less than they from glaustrophobia, no?”

And Mitkey grew fat and happy and forgot all about trying to get out of the cage. I fear that he even forgot about the family he had abandoned, but he knew, if he knew anything, that he need not worry about them in the slightest. At least not until and unless the Professor discovered and repaired the hole in the refrigerator. And the Professor's mind was most emphatically not on refrigeration.

“Und so, Mitkey, ve shall place this vane so—it iss only of assistance in der landing, in an atmosphere. It and these vwill bring you down safely and slowly enough that der shock-absorbers in der movable

compartment will keep you from bumping your head too hard, I think.” Of course, Mitkey missed the ominous note to that “I think” qualification because he missed all the rest of it. He did not, as has been explained, speak English. Not then.

But Herr Oberburger talked to him just the same. He showed him pictures. “Did you effer see der Mouse you vas named after, Mitkey? Vhat? No? Loogk, this is der original Mitkey Mouse, by Valt Dissney. Budt I think you are cuter, Mitkey.”

Probably the Professor was a bit crazy to talk that way to a little gray mouse. In fact, he must have been crazy to make a rocket that worked. For the odd thing was that the Herr Professor was not really an inventor. There was, as he carefully explained to Mitkey, not one single thing about that rocket that was new. The Herr Professor was a technician; he could take other people’s ideas and make them work. His only real invention—the rocket fuel that wasn’t one—had been turned over to the United States Government and had proved to be something already known and discarded because it was too expensive for practical use.

As he explained very carefully to Mitkey, “It iss burely a matter of absolute accuracy and mathematical correctness, Mitkey. Idt iss all here—ve merely combine—und ve achieff vhat, Mitkey?”

“Eggscape velocity, Mitkey! Chust barely, it adds up to eggscape velocity. Maybe. There are yet unknown factgors, Mitkey, in der ubper atmosphere, der troposphere, der stratosphere. Ve think ve know eggactly how much air there iss to calculate resistance against, but are ve absolutely sure? No, Mitkey, ve are not. Ve haff not been there. Und der marchin iss so narrow that so much as an air current might affect idt.”

But Mitkey cared not a whit. In the shadow of the tapering aluminum-alloy cylinder he waxed fat and happy.

“Der tag, Mitkey, der tag! Und I shall not lie to you, Mitkey. I shall not giff you valse assurances. You go on a dancherous chourney, mein little friendt.

“A vifty-vifty chance ve giff you, Mitkey. Not der moon or bust, but der moon und bust, or else maybe safely back to earth. You see, my boor little Mitkey, der moon iss not made of green cheese und if it were, you would not live to eat it because there iss not enough atmosphere to bring you down safely und vith your viskers still on.

“Und vhy then, you may veil ask, do I send you? Because der rocket may not attain eggscape velocity. Und in that case, it issstill an eggperiment, budt a different vun. Der rocket, if it goes not to der moon, falls back on der earth, no? Und in that case certain instruments shall giff us further information than ve haff yet about things up there in space. Und you shall giff us information, by vether or not you are yet alive, vether der shock absorbers und vanes are sufficient in an earth-equivalent atmosphere. You see?

“Then ladter, vhen ve send rockets to Venus maybe vhere an atmosphere eggists, ve shall haff data to calculate the needed size of vanes und shock-absorbers, no? Und in either case, und vether or not you return, Mitkey, you shall be vamous! You shall be der virst liffig greature to go oudt beyond der stratosphere of der earth, out into space.

“Mitkey, you shall be der Star-Mouse! I enfy you, Mitkey, und I only vish I vere your size, so I could go, too.”

Der tag, and the door to the compartment. “Gootbye, little Mitkey Mouse.” Darkness. Silence. Noise!

“Der rocket—if it goes not to der moon—falls back on der earth, no?” That was what the Herr Professor thought. But the best-laid plans of mice and men gang aft agley. Even star-mice.

All because of Prxl.

The Herr Professor found himself very lonely. After having had Mitkey to talk to, soliloquies were somehow empty and inadequate.

There may be some who say that the company of a small gray mouse is a poor substitute for a wife; but others may disagree. And, anyway, the Professor had never had a wife, and he had a mouse to talk to, so he missed one and, if he missed the other, he didn't know it.

During the long night after the launching of the rocket, he had been very busy with his telescope, a sweet little eight-inch reflector, checking its course as it gathered momentum. The exhaust explosions made a tiny fluctuating point of light that was possible to follow, if one knew where to look.

But the following day there seemed to be nothing to do, and he was too excited to sleep, although he tried. So he compromised by doing a spot of housekeeping, cleaning the pots and pans. It was while he was so engaged that he heard a series of frantic little squeaks and discovered that another small gray mouse, with shorter whiskers and a shorter tail than Mitkey, had walked into the wire-cage mousetrap.

“Veil, yell,” said the Professor, “vot haff ve here? Minnie? Iss it Minnie come to look for her Mitkey?”

The Professor was not a biologist, but he happened to be right. It was Minnie. Rather, it was Mitkey's mate, so the name was appropriate. What strange vagary of mind had induced her to walk into an unbaited trap, the Professor neither knew nor cared, but he was delighted. He promptly remedied the lack of bait by pushing a sizable piece of cheese through the bars.

Thus it was that Minnie came to fill the place of her far-traveling spouse as repository for the Professor's confidences. Whether she worried about her family or not there is no way of knowing, but she need not have done so. They were now large enough to fend for themselves, particularly in a house that offered abundant cover and easy access to the refrigerator.

“Ah, and now it iss dargk enough, Minnie, that ve can loogk for that husband of yours. His viery trail across the sky. True, Minnie, it iss a very small viery trail and der astronomers vill not notice it, because they do not know vhere to loogk. But ve do.

“He iss going to be a very vamous mouse, Minnie, this Mitkey of ours, vhen ve tell der vorld about him and about mein rocket. You see, Minnie ve haff not told them yet. Ve shall vait and gill der gocomplete story all at vunce. By dawn of tomorrow yell

“Ah, there he iss, Minnie! Vaint, but there. I'd hold you up to der scope and let you loogk, but it vould not be vocused right for your eyes, and I do not know how to

“Almost vun hundred thousand miles, Minnie, and still agceler-ating, but not for much longer. Our Mitkey iss on schedule; in fagt he iss going vaster than ve had vigured, no? It iss sure now that he vill eggscap the gravitation of der earth, and fall upon der moon!”

Of course, it was purely coincidental that Minnie squeaked.

“Ah, yess, Minnie, little Minnie. I know, I know. Ve shall neffer see our Mitkey again, and I almost vish our eggssperiment hadt vailed. Budt there are gompensations, Minnie. He shall be der most vamous of all mites. Der Star-Mouse! Virst lifting greature effer to go beyond der gravitational bull of earth!”

The night was long. Occasionally high clouds obscured vision.

“Minnie, I shall make you more gomfortable than in that so-small vire cage. You vould like to seem to be vree, vould you not, vithout bars, like der animals at modern zoos, vith moats insteadt?”

And so, to fill in an hour when a cloud obscured the sky, the Herr Professor made Minnie her new home. It was the end of a wooden crate, about half an inch thick and a foot square, laid flat on the table, and with no visible barrier around it.

But he covered the top with metal foil at the edges, and he placed the board on another larger board which also had a strip of metal foil surrounding the island of Minnie’s home. And wires from the two areas of metal foil to opposite terminals of a small transformer which he placed near by.

“Und now, Minnie, I shall blace you on your island, vich shall be liberally supplied mitt cheese and vater, and you shall vind it iss an eggcelent blace to liff. But you vill get a mild shock ‘or two when you try to step off der edge of der island. It vill not hurt much, but you vill not like it, and after a few tries you vill learn not to try again, no? Und—“

And night again.

Minnie happy on her island, her lesson well learned. She would no longer so much as step on the inner strip of metal foil. It was a mouse-paradise of an island, though. There was a cliff of cheese bigger than Minnie herself. It kept her busy. Mouse and cheese; soon one would be a transmutation of the other.

But Professor Oberburger wasn’t thinking about that. The Pro-fessor was worried. When he had calculated and recalculated and aimed his eight-inch reflector through the hole in the roof and turned out the lights

Yes, there are advantages to being a bachelor after all. If one wants a hole in the roof, one simply knocks a hole in the roof and there is nobody to tell one that one is crazy. If winter comes, or if it rains, one can always call a carpenter or use a tarpaulin.

But the faint trail of light wasn’t there. The Professor frowned and re-calculated and re-re-calculated and shifted his telescope three-tenths of a minute and still the rocket wasn’t there.

“Minnie, something “iss wrong. Either der tubes haff stopped vir-ing, or—“

Or the rocket was no longer traversing a straight line relative to its point of departure. By straight, of course, is meant parabolically curved relative to everything other than velocity.

So the Herr Professor did the only thing remaining for him to do, and began to search, with the telescope, in widening circles. It was two hours before he found it, five degrees off course already and veering more and more into a— Well, there was only one thing you could call it. A tailspin.

The darned thing was going in circles, circles which appeared to constitute an orbit about something that couldn’t possibly be there. Then narrowing into a concentric spiral.

Then—out. Gone. Darkness. No rocket flares.

The Professor's face was pale as he turned to Minnie.

“It iss imbossible, Minnie. Mein own eyes, but it could not be. Even if vun side stopped viring, it could not haff gone into such sudden circles.” His pencil verified a suspicion. “Und, Minnie, it decelerated vaster than bossible. Even mitt no tubes viring, its momentum would haff been more—“

The rest of the night—telescope and calculus—yielded no clue. That is, no believable clue. Some force not inherent in the rocket itself, and not accountable by gravitation—even of a hypothetical body—had acted.

“Mein poor Mitkey.”

The gray, inscrutable dawn. “Mein Minnie, it vill haff to be a secret. Ve dare not publish vhat ve saw, for it would not be believed. I am not sure I believe it myself, Minnie. Berhaps because I vas offertired vrom not sleeping, I chust imachined that I saw—“

Later. “But, Minnie, ve shall hope. Vun hundred vifty thousand miles out, it vas. It vill fall back upon der earth. But I gannot tell vhere! I thought that if it did, I would be able to galculate its course, und— But after those goncentric circles—Minnie, not even Einstein could galculate vhere it vill land. Not effen me. All ve can do iss hope that ve shall hear of vhere it falls.”

Cloudy day. Black night jealous of its mysteries.

“Minnie, our poor Mitkey. There is nothing could have gauzed—“ But something had.

Prxl.

Prxl is an asteroid. It isn't called that by earthly astronomers, because—for excellent reasons—they have not discovered it. So we will call it by the nearest possible transliteration of the name its inhabitants use. Yes, it's inhabited.

Come to think of it, Professor Oberburger's attempt to send a rocket to the moon had some strange results. Or rather, Prxl did.

You wouldn't think that an asteroid could reform a drunk, would you? But one Charles Winslow, a besotted citizen of Bridgeport, Connecticut, never took a drink when—right on Grove Street—a mouse asked him the road to Hartford. The mouse was wearing bright red pants and vivid yellow gloves.

But that was fifteen months after the Professor lost his rocket. We'd better start over again.

Prxl is an asteroid. One of those despised celestial bodies which terrestrial astronomers call vermin of the sky, because the darned things leave trails across the plates that clutter up the more important observations of novae and nebulae. Fifty thousand fleas on the dark dog of night.

Tiny things, most of them. Astronomers have been discovering recently that some of them come close to Earth. Amazingly close. There was excitement in 1932 when Amor came within ten million miles; astronomically, a mere mashie shot. Then Apollo cut that almost in half, and in 1936 Adonis came within less than one and a half million miles.

In 1937, Hermes, less than half a million but the astronomers got really excited when they calculated its orbit and found that the little mile-long asteroid can come within a mere 220,000 miles, closer than Earth's own moon.

Some day they may be still more excited, if and when they spot the 3/8-mile asteroid Prxl, that obstacle of space, making a transit across the moon and discover that it frequently comes within a mere hundred thousand miles of our rapidly whirling world.

Only in event of a transit will they ever discover it, though, for Prxl does not reflect light. It hasn't, anyway, for several million years since its inhabitants coated it with a black, light-absorbing pigment derived from its interior. Monumental task, painting a world, for creatures half an inch tall. But worth it, at the time. When they'd shifted its orbit, they were safe from their enemies. There were giants in those days—eight-inch tall marauding pirates from Diemos. Got to Earth a couple of times too, before they faded out of the picture, Pleasant little giants who killed because they enjoyed it. Records in now-buried cities on Diemos might explain what happened to the dinosaurs. And why the promising Cro-Magnons disappeared at the height of their promise only a cosmic few minutes after the dinosaurs went west.

But Prxl survived. Tiny world no longer reflecting the sun's rays, lost to the cosmic killers when its orbit was shifted.

Prxl. Still civilized, with a civilization millions of years old. Its coat of blackness preserved and renewed regularly, more through tradition than fear of enemies in these later degenerate days. Mighty but stagnant civilization, standing still on a world that whizzes like a bullet.

And Mitkey Mouse.

Klarloth, head scientist of a race of scientists, tapped his assistant Bemj on what would have been Bemj's shoulder if he had had one. "Look," he said, "what approaches Prxl. Obviously artificial pro-pulsion."

Bemj looked into the wall-plate and then directed a thought-wave at the mechanism that jumped the magnification of a thousand-fold through an alteration of the electronic field.

The image leaped, blurred, then steadied. "Fabricated," said Bemj. "Extremely crude, I must say. Primitive explosive-powered rocket. Wait, I'll check where it came from."

He took the readings from the dials about the viewplate, and hurled them as thoughts against the psychocoil of the computer, then waited while that most complicated of machines digested all the factors and prepared the answer. Then, eagerly, he slid his mind into rapport with its projector. Klarloth likewise listened in to the silent broadcast.

Exact point on Earth and exact time of departure. Untranslatable expression of curve of trajectory, and point on that curve where deflected by gravitational pull of Prxl. The destination—or rather the original intended destination—of the rocket was obvious, Earth's moon. Time and place of arrival on Prxl if present course of rocket was unchanged.

"Earth," said Klarloth meditatively. "They were a long way from rocket travel the last time we checked them. Some sort of a crusade, or battle of beliefs, going on, wasn't there?"

Bemj nodded. "Catapults. Bows and arrows. They've taken a long stride since, even if this is only an early experimental thing of a rocket. Shall we destroy it before it gets here?"

Klarloth shook his head thoughtfully. "Let's look it over. May save us a trip to Earth; we can judge their present state of development pretty well from the rocket itself."

"But then we'll have to—"

"Of course. Call the Station. Tell them to train their attracto-repulsors on it and to swing it into a temporary orbit until they prepare a landing-cradle. And not forget to damp out the explosive before they bring it down."

"Temporary force-field around point of landing—in case?"

"Naturally."

So despite the almost complete absence of atmosphere in which the vanes could have functioned, the rocket came down safely and so softly that Mitkey, in the dark compartment, knew only that the awful noise had stopped.

Mitkey felt better. He ate some more of the cheese with which the compartment was liberally provided. Then he resumed trying to gnaw a hole in the inch-thick wood with which the compartment was lined. That wooden lining was a kind thought of the Herr Professor for Mitkey's mental well-being. He knew that trying to gnaw his way out would give Mitkey something to do en route which would keep him from getting the screaming meemies. The idea had worked; being busy, Mitkey hadn't suffered mentally from his dark confinement. And now that things were quiet, he chewed away more industriously and more happily than ever, sublimely unaware that when he got through the wood, he'd find only metal which he couldn't chew. But better people than Mitkey have found things they couldn't chew.

Meanwhile, Klarloth and Bemj and several thousand other Prxlians stood gazing up at the huge rocket which, even lying on its side, towered high over their heads. Some of the younger ones, forgetting the invisible field of force, walked too close and came back, ruefully rubbing bumped heads.

Klarloth himself was at the psychograph.

"There is life inside the rocket," he told Bemj. "But the impressions are confused. One creature, but I cannot follow its thought processes. At the moment it seems to be doing something with its teeth."

"It could not be an Earthling, one of the dominant race. One of them is much larger than this huge rocket. Gigantic creatures. Perhaps, unable to construct a rocket large enough to hold one of themselves, they sent an experimental creature, such as our wooraths."

"I believe you've guessed right, Bemj. Well, when we have explored its mind thoroughly, we may still learn enough to save us a check-up trip to Earth. I am going to open the door."

"But air—creatures of Earth would need a heavy, almost a dense atmosphere. It could not live."

"We retain the force-field, of course. It will keep the air in. Obviously there is a source of supply of air within the rocket or the creature would not have survived the trip."

Klarloth operated controls, and the force-field itself put forth invisible pseudo-pods and turned the outer screw-door, then reached within and unlatched the inner door to the compartment itself.

All Prxl watched breathlessly as a monstrous gray head pushed out of the huge aperture yawning overhead. Thick whiskers, each as long as the body of a Prxlian—

Mitkey jumped down, and took a forward step that bumped his black nose hard—into something that wasn't there. He squeaked, and jumped backward against the rocket.

There was disgust in Bemj's face as he looked up at the monster. "Obviously much less intelligent than a woorath. Might just as well turn on the ray."

"Not at all," interrupted Klarloth. "You forget certain very obvious facts. The creature is unintelligent, of course, but the subconscious of every animal holds in itself every memory, every impression, every sense-image, to which it has ever been subjected. If this creature has ever heard the speech of the Earthlings, or seen any of their works—besides this rocket—every word and every picture is indelibly graven. You see now what I mean?"

"Naturally. How stupid of me, Klarloth. Well, one thing is obvious from the rocket itself: we have nothing to fear from the science of Earth for at least a few millennia. So there is no hurry, which is fortunate. For to send back the creature's memory to the time of its birth, and to follow each sensory impression in the psychograph will require—well, a time at least equivalent to the age of the creature, whatever that is, plus the time necessary for us to interpret and assimilate each."

"But that will not be necessary, Bemj."

"No? Oh, you mean the X-19 waves?"

"Exactly. Focused upon this creature's brain-center, they can, without disturbing his memories, be so delicately adjusted as to increase his intelligence—now probably about .0001 in the scale—to the point where he is a reasoning creature. Almost automatically, during the process, he will assimilate his own memories, and understand them just as he would if he had been intelligent at the time he received those impressions.

"See, Bemj? He will automatically sort out irrelevant data, and will be able to answer our questions."

"But would you make him as intelligent as—?"

"As we? No, the X-19 waves would not work so far. I would say to about .2 on the scale. That, judging from the rocket, coupled with what we remember of Earthlings from our last trip there, is about their present place on the intelligence scale."

"Ummm, yes. At that level, he would comprehend his experiences on Earth just sufficiently that he would not be dangerous to us, too. Equal to an intelligent Earthling. Just about right for our purpose. Then, shall we teach him our language?"

"Wait," said Klarloth. He studied the psychograph closely for a while. "No, I do not think so. He will have a language of his own. I see in his subconscious, memories of many long conversations. Strangely, they all seem to be monologues by one person. But he will have a language—a simple one. It would take him a long time, even under treatment, to grasp the concepts of our own method of communication. But we can learn his, while he is under the X-19 machine, in a few minutes."

"Does he understand, now, any of that language?"

Klarloth studied the psychograph again. “No, I do not believe he— Wait, there is one word that seems to mean something to him. The word ‘Mitkey.’ It seems to be his name, and I believe that, from hearing it many times, he vaguely associates it with himself.”

“And quarters for him—with air-locks and such?”

“Of course. Order them built.”

To say it was a strange experience for Mitkey is understatement. Knowledge is a strange thing, even when it is acquired gradually. To have it thrust upon one—

And there were little things that had to be straightened out. Like the matter of vocal chords. His weren’t adapted to the language he now found he knew. Bemj fixed that; you would hardly call it an operation because Mitkey—even with his new awareness—did know what was going on, and he was wide awake at the time. And they didn’t explain to Mitkey about the J-dimension with which one can get at the inwardness of things without penetrating the outside.

They figured things like that weren’t in Mitkey’s line, and anyway they were more interested in learning from him than teaching him. Bemj and Klarloth, and a dozen others deemed worthy of the privilege. If one of them wasn’t talking to him, another was.

Their questioning helped his own growing understanding. He would not, usually, know that he knew the answer to a question until it was asked. Then he’d piece together, without knowing just how he did it (any more than you or I know how we know things) and give them the answer.

Bemj: “Iss this language vchich you sbeak a universal vun?”

And Mitkey, even though he’d never thought about it before, had the answer ready: “No, it iss nodt. It iss Englitch, but I remember der Herr Brofessor sbeaking of other tongues. I belief he sboke another himself originally, budt in America he always sboke Englitch to become more vamiliar mitt it. It iss a beaudiful sbeech, is it nodt?”

“HmMMM,” said Bemj.

Klarloth: “Und your race, the mices. Are they treated veil?”

“Nodt by most people,” Mitkey told him. And explained. “I vould like to do something for them,” he added. “Loogk, could I nodt take back mitt me this brocess vchich you used upon me? Abbly it to other mices, and greate a race of super-mices?”

“Vhy not?” asked Bemj.

He saw Klarloth looking at him strangely, and threw his mind into rapport with the chief scientist’s, with Mitkey left out of the silent communion.

“Yes, of course,” Bemj told Klarloth, “it will lead to trouble on Earth, grave trouble. Two equal classes of beings so dissimilar as mice and men cannot live together in amity. But why should that concern us, other than favorably? The resultant mess will slow down progress on Earth—give us a few more millennia of peace before Earthlings discover we are here, and trouble starts. You know these Earthlings.”

“But you would give them the X-19 waves? They might—“

“No, of course not. But we can explain to Mitkey here how to make a very crude and limited machine for them. A primitive one which would suffice for nothing more than the specific task of converting mouse mentality from .0001 to .2, Mitkey’s own level and that of the bifurcated Earthlings.”

“It is possible,” communicated Klarloth. “It is certain that for aeons to come they will be incapable of understanding its basic principle.”

“But could they not use even a crude machine to raise their own level of intelligence?”

“You forget, Bemj, the basic limitation of the X-19 rays; that no one can possibly design a projector capable of raising any mentality to a point on the scale higher than his own. Not even we.” All this, of course, over Mitkey’s head, in silent Prxlian. More interviews, and more.

Klarloth again: “Mitkey, ve varn you of vun thing. Avoid care-lessness vith electricity. Der new molecular rearranchement of your brain center—it iss unstable, and—“

Bemj: “Mitkey, are you sure your Herr Brofessor iss der most advanced of all who eggspexperiment vith der rockets?”

“In cheneral, yess, Bemj. There are others who on vun specific boint, such as eggsplosives, mathematics, astrovisics, may know more, but not much more. Und for combining these knowledges, he iss ahead.”

“It iss veil,” said Bemj.

Small gray mouse towering like a dinosaur over tinier half-inch Prxlians. Meek, herbivorous creature though he was, Mitkey could have killed any one of them with a single bite. But, of course, it never occurred to him to do so, nor to them to fear that he might.

They turned him inside out mentally. They did a pretty good job of study on him physically, too, but that was through the J-dimension, and Mitkey didn’t even know about it.

They found out what made him tick, and they found out everything he knew and some things he didn’t even know he knew. And they grew quite fond of him.

“Mitkey,” said Klarloth one day, “all der civilized races on Earth year glothing, do they nodt? Vell, if you are to raise der level of mices to men, vould it not be vitting that you year clothes, too?”

“An eggcelent idea, Herr Klarloth. Und I know chust vhat kind I should like. Der Herr Brofessor vunce showed me a bicture of a mouse bainted by der artist Dissney, and der mouse yore glothing. Der mouse vas not a real-life vun, budt an imachinary mouse in a barable, and der Brofessor named me after der Dissney mouse.”

“Vot kind of glothing vas it, Mitkey?”

“Bright red bants mitt two big yellow buttons in frondt and two in back, and yellow shoes for der back feet and a pair of yellow gloves for der front. A hole in der seat of der bants to aggomodate der tail.”

“Ogay, Mitkey. Such shall be ready for you in fife minutes.”

That was on the eve of Mitkey’s departure. Originally Bemj had suggested awaiting the moment when

Prxl's eccentric orbit would again take it within a hundred and fifty thousand miles of Earth. But, as Klarloth pointed out, that would be fifty-five Earth-years ahead, and Mitkey wouldn't last that long. Not unless they—And Bemj agreed that they had better not risk sending a secret like that back to Earth.

So they compromised by refueling Mitkey's rocket with something that would cancel out the million and a quarter odd miles he would have to travel. That secret they didn't have to worry about, because the fuel would be gone by the time the rocket landed.

Day of departure.

“Ve haff done our best, Mitkey, to set and time der rocket so it vill land on or near der spot from which you left Earth. But you gannot eggspect agguracy in a voyach so long as this. But you vill land near. The rest iss up to you. Ve haff equipped the rocket ship for effery contingency.”

“Thank you, Herr Klarloth, Herr Bemj. Gootbye.”

“Gootbye, Mitkey. Ve hate to loose you.”

“Gootbye, Mitkey.”

“Gootbye, gootbye ...”

For a million and a quarter miles, the aim was really excellent. The rocket landed in Long Island Sound, ten miles out from Bridgeport, about sixty miles from the house of Professor Oberburger near Hartford.

They had prepared for a water landing, of course. The rocket went down to the bottom, but before it was more than a few dozen feet under the surface, Mitkey opened the door—especially re-equipped to open from the inside—and stepped out.

Over his regular clothes he wore a neat little diving suit that would have protected him at any reasonable depth, and which, being lighter than water, brought him to the surface quickly where he was able to open his helmet.

He had enough synthetic food to last him for a week, but it wasn't necessary, as things turned out. The night-boat from Boston carried him in to Bridgeport on its anchor chain, and once in sight of land he was able to divest himself of the diving suit and let it sink to the bottom after he'd punctured the tiny compartments that made it float, as he'd promised Klarloth he would do.

Almost instinctively, Mitkey knew that he'd do well to avoid human beings until he'd reached Professor Oberburger and told his story. His worst danger proved to be the rats at the wharf where he swam ashore. They were ten times Mitkey's size and had teeth that could have taken him apart in two bites.

But mind has always triumphed over matter. Mitkey pointed an imperious yellow glove and said, “Scram,” and the rats scrambled. They'd never seen anything like Mitkey before, and they were impressed.

So for that matter, was the drunk of whom Mitkey inquired the way to Hartford. We mentioned that episode before. That was the only time Mitkey tried direct communication with strange human beings. He took, of course, every precaution. He addressed his remarks from a strategic position only inches away

from a hole into which he could have popped. But it was the drunk who did the popping, without even waiting to answer Mitkey's question.

But he got there, finally. He made his way afoot to the north side of town and hid out behind a gas station until he heard a motorist who had pulled in for gasoline inquire the way to Hartford. And Mitkey was a stowaway when the car started up.

The rest wasn't hard. The calculations of the Prxlians showed that the starting point of the rocket was five Earth miles north-west of what showed on their telescopomaps as a city, and which from the Professor's conversation Mitkey knew would be Hartford.

He got there.

"Hello, Professor."

The Herr Professor Oberburger looked up, startled. There was no one in sight. "Vot?" he asked, of the air. "Who iss?"

"It iss I, Professor. Mitkey, der mouse whom you sent to der moon. But I vas not there. Insteadt, I—"

"Vot?? It iss imbossible. Somebody blays der choke. Budt—budt nobody knows about that rocket. When it vailed, I didn't told nobody. Nobody budt me knows—"

"And me, Professor."

The Herr Professor sighed heavily. "Offervork. I am going vhat they call battly in der bel—"

"No, Professor. This is really me, Mitkey. I can talk now. Chust like you."

"You say you can— I do not belief it. Vhy can I not see you, then. Where are you? Vhy don't you—"

"I am hiding, Professor, in der vall chust behind der big hole. I wanted to be sure efferything vas ogay before I showed myself.

Then you would not get eggcited und throw something at me maybe."

"Vot? Vhy, Mitkey, if it iss really you und I am nodt asleep or going— Vhy, Mitkey, you know better than to think I might do something like that!"

"Ogay, Professor."

Mitkey stepped out of the hole in the wall, and the Professor looked at him and rubbed his eyes and looked again and rubbed his eyes and

"I am grazy," he said finally. "Red bants he years yet, und yel-low— It gannot be. I am grazy."

"No, Professor. Listen, I'll tell you all aboutt."

And Mitkey told him.

Gray dawn, and a small gray mouse still talking earnestly.

“Yess, Brofessor. I see your boint, that you think an intelligent race of mices und an intelligent race of men couldt nodt get along side by sides. But it vould not be side by sides; as I said, there are only a ferry few beople in the smallest continent of Australia. Und it vould cost little to bring them back und turn offer that continent to us mices. Ve vould call it Moustralia instead Australia, und ve vould instead of Sydney call der capital Dissney, in honor of—“

“But, Mitkey—“

“But, Brofessor, look vot we offer for that continent. All mices vould go there. Ve civilize a few und the few help us catch others und bring them in to put them under red ray machine, und the others help catch more und build more machines und it grows like a snowball rolling down hill Und ve sign a nonaggression pact mitt humans und stay on Moustralia und raise our own food und—“

“But, Mitkey—“

“Und look vot ve offer you in eggschange, Her Brofessor! Ve vill eggsterminate your vorst enemy—der rats. Ve do not like them either. Und vun battalion of vun thousand mices, armed mitt gas masks und small gas bombs, could go right in effery hole after der rats und could eggsterminate effery rat in a city in vun day or two. In der whole world ve could eggsterminate effery last rat in a year, und at the same time catch und civilize effery mouse und ship him to Moustralia, und—“

“But, Mitkey—“

“Vot, Brofessor?”

“It vould vork, but it vould not work. You could eggsterminate der rats, yess. But how long vould it be before conflicts of interests vould lead to der mices trying to eggsterminate de people or der people trying to eggsterminate der—“

“They vould not dare, Brofessor! Ve could make weapons that vould—“

“You see, Mitkey?”

“But it vould not habben. If men vill honor our rights, ve vill honor—“

The Herr Professor sighed.

“I—I vill act as your intermediary, Mitkey, und offer your bropo-sition, und— Veil, it iss true that getting rid of rats vould be a greadt boon to der human race. Budt—“

“Thank you, Brofessor.”

“By der vay, Mitkey. I haff Minnie. Your vife, I guess it iss, un-less there vas other mices around. She iss in der other room; I put her there chust before you ariffed, so she vould be in der dark und could sleep. You vant to see her?”

“Vife?” said Mitkey. It had been so long that he had really forgotten the family he had perforce abandoned. The memory returned slowly.

“Veil,” he said “—ummm, yess. Ve vill get her und I shall con-struct quvick a small X-19 prochector

und—Yess, it vill help you in your negotiations mitt der governments if there are sefferal of us already so they can see I am not chust a freak like they might otherwise suspegt.”

It wasn't deliberate. It couldn't have been, because the Profes-sor didn't know about Klarloth's warning to Mitkey about careless-ness with electricity—“Der new molecular rearranchement of your brain center—it iss unstable, und—“

And the Professor was still back in the lighted room when Mitkey ran into the room where Minnie was in her barless cage. She was asleep, and the sight of her— Memory of his earlier days came back like a flash and suddenly Mitkey knew how lonesome he had been.

“Minnie!” he called, forgetting that she could not understand.

And stepped up on the board where she lay. “Squeak!” The mild electrical current between the two strips of tinfoil got him.

There was silence for a while.

Then: “Mitkey,” called the Herr Professor. “Come on back und ve vill discuss this—“

He stepped through the doorway and saw them, there in the gray light of dawn, two small gray mice cuddled happily together. He couldn't tell which was which, because Mitkey's teeth had torn off the red and yellow garments which had suddenly been strange, confining and obnoxious things.

“Vot on earth?” asked Professor Oberburger. Then he remem-bered the current, and guessed.

“Mitkey! Can you no longer talk? Iss der—“

Silence.

Then the Professor smiled. “Mitkey,” he said, “my little star-mouse. I think you are more happier now.”

He watched them a moment, fondly, then reached down and flipped the switch that broke the electrical barrier. Of course they didn't know they were free, but when the Professor picked them up and placed them carefully on the floor, one ran immediately for the hole in the wall. The other followed, but turned around and looked back—still a trace of puzzlement in the little black eyes, a puzzlement that faded.

“Gootbye, Mitkey. You vill be happier this vay. Und there vill always be cheese.”

“Squeak,” said the little gray mouse, and it popped into the hole.

“Gootbye—“ it might, or might not, have meant.