

THE BREADTH OF A WHISKER

By Janet McNeill

THIS WAS THE TIME that the alchemist loved best. There was no sound anywhere in the house, and the dark quiet rooms lay round him like a spell. Sometimes the goldfinch in its wicker cage at the window stirred and slept again. He heard the little flame licking the bottom of the crucible. The liquid in it seethed and steamed, and released a large single bubble that swelled on its surface and reflected the solitary lamp by which he worked before it burst, with a soft plopping noise, and another bubble rose to take its place.

During the daytime the alchemist was busy with salves and potions and draughts and unguents, for children with bruised knees and young girls with broken hearts and noblemen with black melancholy and old people with the rheumatics; but the night—the night was all his own.

Not quite his own; it was so still that he heard the small brown mouse as he scuttered from his mouse-hole in the wainscot and came across the floor like a shadow and sat down at his feet.

“You’re late,” he said, without turning to look round. He was adding single drops of rose-red liquid from a phial into the crucible. As they fell, one by one, they filled the air with perfume, like a hedge of summer honeysuckle.

“Maybe I am late,” the mouse said, panting from his exertion, “but if there were more crumbs from your supper table in the evening, I wouldn’t have to look so far afield to feed my family.”

The alchemist sighed. “I daresay,” he agreed, “but someday—someday—there will be plenty of crumbs,” and he bent over the liquid again.

The mouse’s eyes shone, and he prickled up his whiskers. “Tonight? Do you think it will be tonight?”

“It could be any night,” the alchemist told him, watching how one bubble more huge than the others had risen, sleek as steel, and with every colour from the rainbow

streaking its arching sides. The mouse watched it too, and neither of them spoke until it burst. Then the little animal shook his furry face dry from the explosion.

“That’s what I tell my wife when she grumbles,” he said, “any night, I say. And I must be there on the night when it happens.”

“I know,” said the alchemist. He told his wife the same thing. She was asleep upstairs with her golden hair spread out on the pillow and the gold wedding-ring round her finger.

The sand in the hour-glass had almost run out. As the last of the grains hurried through—it was so quiet that the alchemist fancied he heard them rubbing and grinding together in their haste—he leaned forward and with a finger and thumb outstretched he dropped into the crucible a pinch of small crystals as bright as purple violets. They fell with a hiss and a stinging green steam rose from the liquid and filled the room.

“I like that one,” the mouse said when he had stopped coughing, “I shall tell the children about it in the morning. Has anything happened?”

The alchemist wiped his streaming eyes with the long, pointed sleeve of his jacket. The liquid in the crucible was now the colour of a jay’s wing feathers and ran in a small whirling tide restlessly round the vessel’s lip.

“No,” he said, unable to hide the disappointment from his voice, “nothing.”

“But what a beautiful colour it is, even if it isn’t the one you had hoped it would be!”

The alchemist turned over the pages of his great tattered book. He lifted a quill pen and wrote in it, adorning each letter with careful flourishes. The pen squeaked and the goldfinch turned round on its perch.

The alchemist lifted a handful of flowers with spotted outthrust tongues. “You’re a good friend,” he said to the mouse, “and if there’s ever anything I can do for you—”

“There is just one thing,” the mouse told him, and his black nose-tip was lively with nervous excitement.

“Well, what is it?”

“On the night when it happens—and I shall be here, mind you, to see it happen—may I—would it be too much to ask that I—could you allow me to—just to dip one whisker into it—oh, not very deep—so that I may show it to my wife and family when I go down into my mouse-hole in the morning?”

The little animal stopped, panting. The alchemist was plucking the spotted tongues out of the flowers. When he had done this he put them into his mortar and ground them with a pestle.

“Very well,” he said, “it’s a promise. You’re very sure, aren’t you, that it will happen? After all these nights you are still sure?”

“Oh yes,” said the mouse, “aren’t you?”

The alchemist didn’t answer. From the bruised tongues of the flowers he had extracted a drop of liquid that he gathered in the bowl of a spoon. Although the tongues were purple the liquid was white and milky, like a pearl. The alchemist held the spoon over the crucible and tilted it, and the pearl fell in and was swallowed up.

As it fell they heard the sound of a deep note, like the single stroke of a bell. The whole room became dark, even the lamp went out, and the little flame below the crucible grew pale and lay flat.

The mouse cried out in terror and he ran and hid in the alchemist’s sleeve, and they waited.

Something in the crucible was shining, faintly at first, but always increasing until it grew and grew and filled the room to its furthest corner with brilliant yellow light. Then it flashed and darkened, and there was no light at all except from some small particle that lay in the bottom of the crucible, a mere trace, a grain, a drop, something bright, something —golden!

With shaking hands the alchemist lit the lamp and bent to look. The mouse crept from his sleeve. Yes, it was there, a bright bead, lying at the bottom of the crucible.

“Gold!” said the alchemist. “Gold, gold, gold!”

They stared at it together.

The mouse was the first to find his tongue. He ran round and round on the stone floor, jabbering with excitement. “You’ve done it!—I knew you’d do it!—I always told my wife you would!—you’re famous!—no one has done it before!—no more stale breadcrumbs now!—no more rinds of mouldy cheese!—fresh moist yellow cake crumbs!—mountains of them!—and a rasher of smoky bacon for the asking!—and you famous!—the whole house full of gold!—nothing all day to do!—and a golden ring on every finger of your wife’s two hands!—and every feather of the goldfinch gold!—and

his cage gold!—and nothing to do at night but sleep!—on a bed of gold!—go on now and wake your wife—tell her—what are you waiting for?”

The alchemist rose and went up the stairs. The goldfinch opened a sleepy eye at him as he passed the cage and thrust its head deeper into the shadow of its gold-barred wing. In the room aloft his wife was sleeping deeply. How thin the little ring of gold was that lay on her finger! He lifted a braid of her hair, wondering if it was as bright as the gold in the crucible. And then, without waking her, he came downstairs again to his workroom.

The mouse was still where he had left him, staring at the bead of gold with round dark eyes that reflected it, like the golden heads of twin pins.

“Did you not tell her?” he said over his shoulder, “what are you waiting for?”

“What are you waiting for yourself?” asked the alchemist, “there’s nothing more to keep you here.”

The fact grew slowly in the little beast’s mind. Excitement and pleasure ebbed. His whiskers drooped. Then the alchemist remembered. He lifted the crucible off the flame and held it out. “There isn’t very much of it,” he said, “best go ahead before it cools.”

The mouse trembled from nose-tip to tail-tip. “Do you mean it?” he asked.

“Wasn’t it a promise?”

The mouse jumped on to the alchemist’s arm. On small, excited feet he went up the alchemist’s wrist, out along his palm, down his long thumb, and there he stopped at the rim of the crucible and gently, so very gently, he tilted his head and dipped one whisker down.

When he lifted it again the whisker tip was gilded, as bright and fresh as a springing sunbeam. But the crucible—the crucible was empty, drained, dry as a dried-out well, as a frosty stone, clean as a plate that a dog has fed from.

The mouse looked up. “It has taken it all,” he said.

The alchemist nodded and smiled. “Why, so it has!”

“It was the juice from the tongues of those flowers that did it,” the mouse cried, “those curious spotted flowers—what was their name?”

The alchemist rubbed his chin. “For the moment,” he said, “I hardly remember. But I’ll remember someday, I expect. And that may not be the only way. There may be

other, better ways. Anyhow, I've been thinking—there's enough gold in this house for the time being.”

The mouse nodded slowly, because he understood.

“Go home now,” said the alchemist, “it will soon be morning.”

“And—shall I come back tonight?”

“If you're interested in joining me.”

So the mouse went off to his mouse-hole, with a proud tilt to his golden whisker.

Next day the miller called in at the alchemist's house for a potion. He had an angry thumb, swollen as big as a bap, poisoned from a fishhook that had lodged in it, for whenever the sails of his mill were idle, he was out along the river with his rod.

“And I suppose you're still at the old game yourself,” he said to the alchemist.

The alchemist said he was.

“And where's your gold, eh? I've more to show from my fishing, when all's said and done. Well, nobody can say you ever put yourself out of a job. Tell me this, though, did you ever come near to it at all?”

“I did,” said the alchemist.

“Well, well. How near?”

The alchemist smiled. “As near,” he said, “as the breadth of a mouse's whisker.”

“Ah!” said the miller, and he nodded—nodded with sympathetic appreciation, because he was a fisherman himself.