

A Better Mouse Trap

by Gregory K. Carter

Some guy babbled something in Russian, and five seconds later the translation boomed over the PA. Cody Dilford thought he heard his name somewhere in all that mangled English. The rest sounded like Boris Badenov mumbling through a drive-through speaker at Burger King. Something about "*bla, bla*, International Tchaikovsky Competition...contestant from Newt Jersky...Bach's Six Cello Suite...Bad rehearsal, good performance, don't he hope?"

The feeble applause vanished with Cody still fifty feet from his chair. Twelve-thousand Muscovites, ten jurors and fifty armed KGB agents heard every knock of Cody's knees, every creak of the wooden planks beneath his feet, every labored breath, every drop of sweat that fell from lip to chin to floor. The chair wailed as Cody sat down.

He leaned the cello against his fluttering sternum, tuned briefly, then pressed his index finger on the *G* string where he hoped a perfect *D* lay waiting. He lowered the bow into position -- some bozo coughed, another blew his nose. Cody prayed and shook and prayed some more. He waited until the sickly man in

the front row had stuffed the handkerchief in his pocket, and the other man to adjust his respirator. With only a baby crying in the back row and a jurist making an origami bird from his tally sheet, Cody then launched bravely into the *Prelude*.

Two measures later, a tiny gray head popped up at the end of the cello's tailpiece. It beamed its beady eyes straight at Cody, twitched its nose like that witch on *Nick-At-Nite*, then dove from view with a piece of catgut in its mouth.

The next two measures, Cody didn't hear at all. With fingers on autopilot, his brain blocked out everything but the hungry rodent now mangling his cello. Perhaps a disgruntled contestant had planted it there. Or maybe the Fates had just decided to doom Cody's life and bring down his career with one mortifying calamity. Either way, Cody knew that if the little monster chewed through the tailgut, the cello would explode like a pipe bomb. He would not only lose the competition, they would have to ship his remains back home in a Zip-Lock sandwich bag.

Cody's conscience berated him in a voice that sounded just like his third-grade teacher's. *Had to use the gut, didn't you, Cody? Couldn't go with wire like everyone else. No, gut sounds better. Gut will give Cody an unfair advantage. Nothing but the best for Cody.*

Even against his droning strings, Cody could feel the *snip, snip, snip* of the little fiend's rodent teeth, feel the frantic scratching of its tiny feet with their tiny claws digging into three-hundred-year-old varnish.

So what to do? He thought about stopping to announce, "Pardon me, but there seems to be a furry little animal dining upon my instrument's vitals. Excuse me whilst I dispose of the poor creature and feed the dear thing a proper meal."

"Nyet," they would answer, then have a KGB agent drag Cody off the stage and back to Newt Jersky.

Forget about shaking the wretched thing off. Cody would look like the bass fiddle player in *Beach Blanket Bingo*. And he couldn't kick the beast off without toppling his axe like a capsized canoe.

The little gray head popped up again. Bits of tailgut speckled his fur like dandruff.

The stupid, vile creature! Fourteen years of eight-hour-a-day practicing, walking barefoot ten miles in the snow for lessons, the dream of a lifetime, all to have it unraveled by the teeth of a ravenous rodent.

A moment of calm then suddenly appeared, and Cody reconsidered. Perhaps he worried in vain. How long would it

take such a little thing to eat through a piece of tailgut anyway? Cody figured that surely the strand would last through the *Prelude*. Surely. Yeah. *And then I'll just pause, bop its furry head with one dramatic swipe of the bow, and then its on to the Allemande.*

There. Problem solved. Cody relaxed now. He eased his mind into the music's flow. It all fell so easily, so right, beneath his fingers. He once again saw himself with a gold medal around his neck, a record contract under his arm, chicks all around. A babe magnet, he would soon be, a cello god. Pay off most his school debts. Yeah, just bean the beast after the *Prelude*, and it would all be his.

The tragedy averted, it all seemed funny now. The irony of it, he thought: *A mouse mutilating a piece of catgut. A cat and mouse game played on a cello...* Measure sixty breezed by. *...before an audience of ex-Commies who hate you because you can afford cheese, and a mouse who loves you because of it.* Flying, joyous fingers dashed off measure sixty-four.

*Hey, Jerry, wanna know where Tom is?*

Measure sixty-eight -- bright, clean, perfect.

*Well it ain't dog gut in these strings, my little friend.*

Cody hadn't seen the mouse since measure fifty-seven. He

was beginning to think it had left to eat a viola or something, until he heard the pitch drop suddenly at measure seventy. A measure later, another drop. Then another.

Cody could hear his instrument shudder with creaks and moans and rattles. The tailgut was failing and failing quickly. Cody knew it would snap before the movement's end. Perhaps only seconds remained. He shook off the image of being decapitated by a flying tailpiece and grasped at the only solution:

One pause remained, a mere breath really, at measure eighty-three, a dotted-quarter C-sharp tied to a sixteenth, but if he timed it just right, with just the right sweeping motion, he could bash the rodent's head with his bow without missing a note and look cool doing it. Mighty Mouse would wind up in the orchestra pit, and Cody in the winner's circle.

At measure seventy-four, drops of sweat dribbled upon the fingerboard. By seventy-six, Cody's soggy tux clung to him like a wet suit. His teeth dug crimson ridges into his lip.

*Where's that head? Show your head, you wretched demon, you vile spawn of Beelzebub!* Measure eighty. No mouse head, only the sickening grind of teeth against tailgut, needle claws against maple. Measure eighty-one passed, no head. Eighty-two, still headless. Eighty-three arrived, the high C-sharp, held so

long, so *tenuto*, so desperate, Cody looking down, his bow of death ready to strike. *Come on come on come on come on...There!*

The mouse raised its furry head as if to ask if the record's stuck. Cody hurled a vicious forehand swipe. The mouse ducked, the bow slipped, and five-thousand dollars of pernambuco and horsehair went twirling into the dark. It landed amid *huhs?* and *whats?* and *crazy Americans* right into the lap of the former Miss Cabbage of 1956.

Cody peered down at the mouse. The rodent stared back with unblinking black orbs like the caviar Cody would now never taste.

"Why'd'ya do *that?*" it seemed to ask. "I was just getting into it. That's good eatin' music, man."

The mouse scampered back to the tailgut, the juicy, succulent tailgut, pale yellow in the spotlight like a really good Gouda. Aged past its prime, perhaps, the mouse thought, but the tiny strand remaining still pleased, with a slightly fruity nose, good backbone and a lingering, crisp finish. He sniffed the petite sliver, sighed, then sniffed again.

*Ah, I really shouldn't. You know how gray fur shows every calorie. But one small bite couldn't hurt, now could it? Surely not.* He indulged.

The cello detonated with a crack heard all the way to

Lenin's tomb. The tailpiece drilled Cody right between the eyes and sent the mouse skyward. The flying rodent blew out a bank of lights three-stories above, then fell smoking amid a rain of glass and glowing filaments and ancient dust with perturbed mites. It landed dead as a Beanie Baby upon the head jurist's tally sheet.

When he awoke from his coma three days later, Cody opened his eyes to see Boris Yeltsin smiling down upon him. All the jury were there, so were the KGB agents and Miss Cabbage, too.

The Moscow Coroner explained the whole thing, how that Cody's mouse had been mutilating priceless musical instruments for two years, and even the craftiest felines from the Moscow pound had failed to silence it. An autopsy of the flamed-out rodent revealed a steady diet of Steinway pianos and Stradivarius violins and Goffriller celli.

Yeltsin hung a medal around Cody's neck, proclaimed him "Geroi of Tchaikovsky Concert Hall," and gave him enough vodka to put him into another coma. The jury then arranged a whirlwind tour for Cody, promoting the fine arts, international cooperation and pest control awareness, all on one poster with Cody stabbing a giant rat with his cello's endpin. Tickets sold out within the

hour at each stop.

Cody returned to snag a ten-year recording contract. He later married a Russian actress, and they settled down to a cozy cottage in the Poconos. On most nights, warm or cold, Cody would sit in the living room and play his cello until the wee hours of morning.

And on those nights, there below the window, with their eyes wide with a wonder they could not fathom, heeding a call they could not refuse, cats would come from miles around and listen with quiet reverence and stilled awe.

"Play for us, Cello Man," they seemed to say. "Play us the one we love so well. Please, Cello Man, play us a little Bach, tonight."