

7-15-2012

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Recommended Citation

Mabry, John (2012) "*Francis and the Mouse King*," *The Mythic Circle*: Vol. 2012: Iss. 34, Article 10.
Available at: <https://dc.swosu.edu/mcircle/vol2012/iss34/10>

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Francis and the Mouse King

FRANCIS AND THE MOUSE KING

by

John Mabry

It was just a shack in the woods. The roof was falling in, half of it already open to the winds of heaven. The mortar around the door frame was cracked and falling away in chips the size of fingers. The floor was made of dirt, and, due to the rain of the past several days, was mostly just mud.

"It's a generous gift," said Brother Mark with intentional dispassion. The other brothers shivered in the autumnal morning chill and looked at Francis, their eyes betraying almost desperate hope.

Francis scowled at Brother Mark. He scowled at the shack. Then he scowled at the brothers. "It is too generous for poor brothers," he said at last, almost spitting the words to the ground.

"But Francis," one of the newer brothers protested. "Winter is coming! It is a small place...."

Francis shot the brother a glare that made him bite his tongue. "Brother Bartholomew, I understand your fear of the cold. This is why we must trust God."

"But Francis," Brother Mark interjected, "is it not possible that this is a gift from God? Provided precisely to help us weather through the winter?"

Francis smiled briefly, but the furrow did not leave his brow. Instead, he circumambulated the shack, noting almost with approval its miserable state of disrepair. "The question that I keep asking, Brother," Francis said slowly as he walked, "is this: Who does it serve? If we stay out here, we will be too far from the city to minister to the people there." He stopped and faced the brothers, who were following him around the ruin. "How can you possibly

expect me to agree to a bunch of friars living in luxury out here in the woods, pleasing no one but themselves?"

At his use of the word, "luxury," the brothers, each to a man, looked at the shack, and then back at Francis. "But—" one of them began, but Francis held up his hand to stop him. "We will sleep here tonight, Brothers, but tomorrow we will return to San Damiano."

"Ah, but Brother Francis," Mark objected, "Brother Bernardo said he would meet us here in three days' time."

Francis grunted. "Then we shall live in luxury for three days. May God forgive us." The brothers looked at each other in disbelief, but did not contradict him.

That night, Francis slept fitfully, as he often did. He was awakened by a sharp pain in his left eyelid. The moon, shining through the hole in the roof, was full and strong, and as he opened his eyes, he saw clearly a most amazing sight: a tiny mouse, the color of wet bark, stood upright on his cheek in a pose of brave defiance. On his head was a rough crown fashioned from a silver ring, and in his front paw was a sword that looked all the world like a darning needle.

"Strange beast!" the mouse exclaimed. It seemed to be addressing him, so Francis made an effort to remain still so as not to topple the tiny monarch. "State your business in my realm!"

"Um... I beg your pardon, Your Majesty," Francis began, unsure what to say. "We were not aware that we were

trespassing...but I beseech His Majesty to forgive our trespasses.”

The Mouse King cocked a tiny eyebrow at the friar, but did not lower the point of the sword from its dangerous position very near to Francis’ left eye. Francis struggled not to blink.

“Trespassers must be punished, knave!” the Mouse King pronounced. “And the punishment is death!”

“Ah, then I am comforted,” Francis tried to smile slowly so as not to upset the balance of the rodent sovereign when his cheeks moved. “I am always prepared to die. My concern tonight is whether I shall be nibbled.”

“Do you mock me, knave?” demanded the Mouse King. Francis looked about and noted that the Mouse King was not alone. He stretched his eyes to see as much as he could without moving his head. He saw that there was not one armed mouse confronting him, but scores of them, each with a fierce scowl of defiance upon his furry face.

Before Francis could answer, Brother Bartholomew tiptoed in from a visit to the bushes, and stepped on one of the armed mice, its sword piercing the bottom of his foot. “Mary’s teats!” he swore, grabbing his foot and hopping about on the other. The mice scattered from the hopping doom with squeaking shrieks of terror. In a moment, all the mice were safely hidden and Francis sat up, both relieved and concerned.

As Brother Bartholomew sat and rubbed at his foot, Francis crept on all fours to the door. His heart sank within him as he saw the lifeless body of the soldier mouse, crushed beneath the novice friar’s heavy foot. The darning needle near the little beast was smeared with blood that shone black in the moonlight. Francis made the sign of the cross over the mouse, and picked him up, carrying him to the rough table. Francis laid him out in state, his tiny blade arrayed upon his breast as befits a noble who has fallen in

battle. ***

In the morning, Francis called the brothers together, and with due solemnity, led them through the rites of burial for the fallen mouse. The brothers did not object, but watched their leader with mounting concern as the ritual proceeded.

Brother Bartholomew, still limping from his injury, leaned over and whispered to Brother Mark, “He’s mad.”

Brother Mark smirked, and whispered back, “What? You didn’t know that before? We wouldn’t be here if he were right in his head.”

Brother Bartholomew’s brows furrowed as he pondered this. After the service, when Francis had buried the creature, and had read over him the service of committal, Brother Bartholomew sought him out.

“Brother Francis, I hope you are not angry with me—”

Francis looked at him with a gravity that made the new friar stop midsentence. “Brother Bartholomew, ‘angry’ is too weak a word for what I am feeling toward you right now. I am not angry at you, Brother. I am *wroth* with you.” And at that, Francis rose and stomped off into the woods to be alone.

“Oh, dear...” Bartholomew said, fingering the front of his habit nervously. “He hates me.”

“No, brother,” said Brother Mark, who had been observing the exchange. “I told you, Francis is mad. His moods change like the weather. Be comforted, brother. The next time you see him, he will be kind to you, as if nothing had ever happened. You wait and see.” He patted the novice on the shoulder and called the brothers to prayer.

That evening, Francis only pretended to sleep. As he expected, visitors came again

by moonlight. They came great in number, each of them small and fierce and bent on vengeance. This time, Francis opened his eye to behold a mouse herald perched on his cheek. The herald unrolled a scroll and read from it in a voice both bold and solemn, “His majesty King Cornflower, sovereign of the wooded grove, and monarch of...that stream, over there...we don’t have a name for it, really, other than ‘the stream’...anyway, His Majesty calls upon the Lord of the Trespassers and Murderers to parlay with him before we commence to battle.”

Francis spoke slowly, careful not to move too much for fear of toppling the mouse herald and making the situation even worse. “Tell His majesty that I have no intention of fighting him, nor do any of my brothers. But I will talk with him, and that right gladly.” The mouse herald rolled up his scroll and hopped down from the friar’s cheek, waddling on his hind legs back to where the Mouse King and his entourage watched from the relative safety of the ruined fireplace.

By this time, many of the brothers had also awakened and were watching the proceedings with looks both surprised and amused. One of them started to rise, but Francis sat up and motioned for them to keep still. Moving slowly and deliberately, Francis poured a cup of wine from a flagon, and, fishing for a moment in a travel bag, took from it a copper thimble.

The friar moved cautiously to the middle of the room and sat cross-legged, waiting and, it seemed, praying. Warily, the Mouse King and his entourage processed towards him. As they came near, the tiny sovereign signaled for his ministers to stand back. There were squeaks of protest, but the King was resolute, and they came no further. Alone, King Cornflower met the friar. For a moment, neither of them spoke.

“I am so sorry about your noble mouse,

my Lord,” Francis began. “My brother did not see him. He meant no malice. He is large and bumblesome and incautious.”

“I am not bumblesome!” Brother Bartholomew objected, but Brother Mark shushed him. “I’m not *bumblesome!*” Brother Mark shushed him again.

“We gave him a burial as befits a noble beast, my Lord,” Francis continued. “We commended his soul to God, and we performed the appointed service with the sorrow that I truly feel and the dignity that he deserved.”

“I know nothing of that,” the Mouse King waved away Francis’ apology. “I only know that his family demands blood, his clan demands blood, and our race demands blood. You must know that I intend to avenge him.”

Francis nodded, but said nothing. Instead he dipped the thimble into the cup of wine, filling it and handing it to the rodent sovereign. Cornflower received the thimble and sniffed at it suspiciously. Francis drank from the cup, then, and seeing this, the Mouse King dipped his tiny snout into the thimble and slurped at the wine cautiously. After a moment, he lifted his head, his snout stained purple and dripping, and, not to be deterred, said, “I will have blood.” He indicated his host of warriors, about two score strong, each of them armed and angry. “They demand it.”

Francis sipped at his wine and regarded the Mouse King with sorrow. Finally, he spoke so softly that both the friars and the mice had to hold their breaths and lean in to hear. “Brother Mouse—your Majesty—as long as we both insist on being strong, we shall most certainly be enemies. But if we can be weak together, perhaps we might be friends.”

The Mouse King regarded him with a new wariness. “You speak like one who is mad.”

Francis smiled. “You are not the first to

tell me so, your Highness.”

“Weakness is not a thing to be sought, Murderer. It is favored by none in the forest. It is a thing to be scorned and a thing to be fought.”

“I beg to differ, your Majesty. Weakness is a gift, given by God, and infinitely useful to man and beast alike.”

“You talk in riddles, Trespasser.”

“Then let me speak plain. We could spend all night threatening one another, insisting on our rights, and boasting of our might, until finally we must do our best to destroy one another. Or, we could share this wine, and as we do, I could tell you about what frightens me, what worries me, the cares that fill my days, and you could tell me about your cares, your worries, your fears. Instead of boasting of our strengths, we could share our weaknesses.”

“And what would that accomplish?”

“I am not sure, your Majesty, but my hope is that it will not end in the deaths of many noble mice, nor in the punctured ankles of my bumblesome brothers.”

The Mouse King looked skeptical, so Francis simply began. He told the Mouse King about the friar’s fear for winter, their lack of faith in God’s providence, his own frustration about this. He told him about the gift of the shack, the burden it had become on his conscience, the alienation it was causing between himself and his brothers. He talked about his sorrow and his fear and his deepest concern.

Moved by the friar’s frank speech, the Mouse King thanked him, and began to enumerate his own worries—the hardness of winter, and a shortage of food set aside for it. He spoke of the cats that roamed the forest hungry for rodents of tender years, and the madness of mice in large numbers who are afraid. He spoke of the heaviness of the crown, and Francis nodded, understanding the thankless burden of leadership all too well.

When they had finished speaking, Francis filled the Mouse King’s thimble again. “Brother Mouse—your Majesty—it seems that we are more alike than we knew.” To his relief the Mouse King nodded his agreement, and reached for the thimble without hesitation.

When morning broke, the tiny sovereign drew himself up and announced, “We shall treat again tomorrow,” and withdrew with his entourage into the depths of the shack.

After the friars had prayed and eaten, they spent the day in labor. Under Francis’ guidance, some repaired the roof, some mixed mortar for the door and the brickwork. A couple gathered acorns and nuts and seeds until they had a mountain of them. They then spread them out in the afternoon sun to dry.

Francis himself went into the forest, calling to his sisters the cats, engaging in long and detailed conversations about boundaries and behaviors, extracting from them contracts and covenants quite contrary to their natures, but such were Francis’ powers of persuasion that he procured assurances from each and every one to stay clear of the wooded grove and its stream.

When the Mouse King and his entourage arrived that evening, he approached Francis alone and without hesitation, his fellows watching from the walls. The brothers, too, huddled together in silence, waiting to hear what would be said. His Majesty accepted the thimble graciously, and immediately dipped his snout into the musty wine. After slurping deeply, the Mouse King raised his face to Francis and showed his teeth. It might have been a smile.

“I have spoken to my people,” he announced. “They are still angry, but they

admit the loss of our warrior was probably an accident.”

Francis nodded and grinned—a bit thinly—his relief. “Your majesty,” Francis began, “This makes me glad. I have thought all day about your troubles and have prayed for you. I have also secured promises from the forest cats to stay clear of this grove, and with your permission I am ready to assign brothers to stay here in order to enforce it.”

The friars looked at one another in astonishment, feeling hopeful and relieved. “Furthermore, we come tonight with gifts.” He opened a bag of dried nuts and seeds, and held the opening near the tiny monarch so that he could sniff at it. The Mouse King’s voice was thick with emotion as he said, “This will be more than enough to feed us until spring.”

Distress and sadness washed over the

Mouse King’s face, and Francis asked him, “What’s wrong, my Lord?”

“I fear we have misjudged you, and I beg your pardon.”

“You have it, Brother Mouse.”

“I am also distressed, because we have no gift for you.”

“Ah, your Majesty, but that is not quite true,” Francis said. “For when we arrived at this place, I upset my brothers by saying we could not stay here. And we could not stay here because we could not be of service to anyone we know so far out in the woods. But now, we have found friends here, and here we now have someone to serve. So, if you will welcome us as friends and guests in this stately cottage—which we understand to be your property and your home—we will be content to stay.”

And that is what they did.

