

Desbarollada *The Waltzing Mouse*



By

Noel Langley

With illustrations by Edward Ardizzone

Desbarollda, The Waltzing Mouse is a story full of drama, word play and gentle satire on literary conventions, making it a delightful read for children and adults.

In the first edition, *Desbarollda, The Waltzing Mouse* was described as “Mr. Noel Langley’s epic pastiche in the grand classic heroic manner, wherein he pays glowing homage to the nice sensibility and decorous passions that are the special elixir of the artistic temperament, whether it inhabit Heathcliff, Manon Lescaut, the Mock Turtle or Desbarollda the Waltzing Mouse.”

Out of print since it was originally published by Lindsay Drummond Limited in 1947, this new edition makes Noel Langley’s “studiously and faithfully compiled” history of Desbarollda the Waltzing Mouse widely available once more.

DESBAROLLDA
THE WALTZING MOUSE

The True and Pathetic History of

DESBAROLLA
THE WALTZING MOUSE

by

Noel Langley



With illustrations by Edward Ardizzone

DURRANT PUBLISHING

Norwich, Norfolk, England

First Published by Lindsay Drummond Limited 1947

This Edition Published by Durrant Publishing 2006
www.durrantpublishing.co.uk

ISBN-10: 1-905946-02-3

ISBN-13: 978-1-905946-02-0

The publisher thanks
Antoinetta Ardizzone, Christopher Langley,
Laura Cecil, Georgia Glover,
Karen Bauer, Helen Trompeteler,
Sara Borthwick, Archana Rao
and Sally Saunders
for their assistance in producing this edition.

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To
the Rev.
QUINTON MORRIS

*This work is inscribed by his sincere and
affectionate friend*

The Author

Kingston, Surrey



Chapter I



T being the fashion of the day to present to the public divers affecting and pathetic histories, each vying with the other in veracity and profusion of incident, I am persuaded, dear reader, that the time is now propitious to recount the dramatic fortunes

of Desbarollda, the waltzing mouse.

My instruction in her history is derived from unimpeachable sources, not hitherto available; much is lost through the interception of time and natural accident; but, from that which remains, the present work has been studiously and faithfully compiled.

The conventions of literary etiquette would demand (were I not already assured in my own right as to the fitness of my procedure) that I hereby acknowledge, with profound gratitude, the inestimable assistance afforded me by Monsieur Marcel Lapin; Mademoiselle Fifi Doris Cocquetreau; the concierge of the *Pension Vive la France*; and an elderly mouse of uncertain

temper who vividly recalls many incidents of Desbarollda's declining years; but whose name, upon his own vehement insistence, may not be disclosed.

As is not unusual in the case of the child prodigy, Desbarollda's antecedents were of unspectacular origin; her mother was an ordinary field mouse who, by happy chance rather than design, married above her station; while her father, though coming of a family who had lived in the kitchen of the Duke's castle for generations, was of the *bourgeoisie*.

His claims to individuality (from which, doubtless, sprang the seeds of his daughter's subsequent aspirations) were an ability to read printed matter effortlessly, and the fact that he could, when he chose, speak with authority on seven different kinds of cheese.

When he brought his wife to live in the buttery, she found the new life strange and often terrifying at first; but, though humble, she was bright and adaptable; and by concerning herself only with her husband's best interests, soon became accepted by his family, who had been disposed to look askance at her unsophisticated ways.

She had not been married a twelveweek, however, when tragedy overtook her.

Her husband, while browsing through a volume of Voltaire in the castle library—his scholastic mind preoccupied with the philosophy

of the great savant—was observed, stalked, and subsequently eaten by the castle cat.

The sorrowful news was imparted to his widow by her mother-in-law, an imposing dowager mouse whose husband, while still in the full flower of his prime, had also been eaten by the castle cat.

The two bereaved mice wept together.

“You must display fortitude,” the dowager mouse exhorted. “It is a cruel world: only a stout heart and indestructible *savoir faire* will see one through it.”

“Ah, if it were only for myself that I were concerned,” replied the newly-widowed mouse, speaking with difficulty through her tears, “but I shall soon be a mother. I was merely awaiting a favourable opportunity to impart the joyful tidings to my husband.” Upon these unhappy reflections her tears fell anew, and the poor creature broke down completely.

“What a very different world it would be, were it not for cats,” pronounced the dowager mouse sententiously, shaking her head.

Chapter II



WHEN Desbarollda was born, it was midwinter, and the family had moved from their summer residence in the

buttery to a more imposing establishment behind the fireplace in the great banquet hall. “She is the image of her dear father,” said the dowager mouse, peering at Desbarollda short-sightedly. The infirmity of advanced age was rapidly overtaking her; she was reduced to walking with a cane, and frequently missed the point of a conversation.

“She is a great consolation to me already,” averred her mother happily, but even in the midst of her joy her mind was not free of morbid associations, and dissolving into sudden tears she added piteously: “Suppose the cat should get her too?”

“Tush, fubb, folly and fie!” exclaimed the

dowager mouse sternly. "Banish such gloomy speculation! Concern yourself instead with teaching her how cats are best avoided, and she'll live to be as ancient as I am! Glory ducketts! I shall be three in May!"

In the winter it was the Duke's pleasure to hold elaborate entertainments in the banquet hall; and a quintet of musicians occupied a small gallery high on the wall, wherein they played arduously throughout the night, while the Duke's guests danced stately measures or frivolous jigs in the hall below.

When the entertainments were over and the hall was deserted, Desbarollda's two uncles would embark upon hazardous expeditions to forage for provender among the dishes on the banquet table.

Upon these occasions, the dowager mouse was never at ease until they returned. She would stand at the door of the establishment, leaning heavily on her cane and twitching her nose, her mind a prey to misgiving.

"About what are you so concerned, Grand-mère?" asked Desbarollda innocently one night.

"Never you mind!" returned the dowager mouse with unusual asperity. "If you *must* know, I'm listening for the cat!"

"What is a cat?" asked Desbarollda. "Have I ever seen one?"

"Heaven forbid!" exclaimed her grandmother piously. "You must know, child, that

there is sorrow in the world as well as pleasure: danger as well as safety; and cats as well as mice.”

“Do the cats play those pretty waltzes?” asked Desbarollda.

“That is the work of humans,” replied her grandmother. “They are no more trustworthy than cats. When you are older you shall be told all that is good for you to know of such matters. It is sufficient for the moment that you obey your mother and strive to please her in every way. Never venture beyond this door, child, regardless of the provocation, or you may learn too soon how large and ruthless is the world!”

Much awed by this homily, Desbarollda retired to bed, where her mother was already asleep.

Of all the fanciful notions of the outside world which now preoccupied her thoughts, however, the music of the quintet intrigued her most. Even at this early stage of her development she could hum whole measures from memory.

Chapter III



UPON the return of Spring, her uncles departed for the buttery, to open up the summer residence.

“Above all else,” the dowager mouse admonished them in parting, “keep your eyes and ears alert for the you-know-to-what-I-refer!”

They assured her repeatedly that she might set her fears for their safety at rest, but it was the last that was ever seen of them. Not for some weeks did word of their fate at the hands of the castle cat reach the dowager mouse.

This last cruel blow on the part of Fate flung the venerable creature into a decline.

“I am not long for this world,” she said; and Desbarollda’s mother flung her apron over her head and sobbed: “What is to become of us all? We shall starve!”

“We shall manage,” replied the dowager mouse, rallying her invincible tenacity of spirit. “The saddest aspect of the situation is the effect upon the child. She has no male relatives: a

young child requires the presence of male relatives. Come here," she said to Desbarollda, who ran at once to her knee. "What can you do, child, in the manner of a constructive occupation? For as you can see, we are soon to depend upon our natural wit and resource for existence."

"I can dance," said Desbarollda hopefully, after giving the matter much thought.

"It is unheard of!" exclaimed the dowager mouse, much disconcerted. "To what manner of dance do you refer?"

"The waltz," said Desbarollda, timidly.

The dowager mouse tapped her cane upon the floor with authority and demanded of the room at large, in deliberate accents, who, if anybody, had ever heard of a waltzing mouse?

"I'm sure *I* never have!" said Desbarollda's mother in some bewilderment.

"Nor *I!*" said the dowager mouse imposingly. "You'll be telling me of a cat that rides to hounds next, for certain! How do you know you can waltz, child? Demonstrate the waltz to us, at your pleasure!"

Obediently, Desbarollda raised herself upon her toes and pirouetted.

It was neither so airy nor so gracefully balanced a performance as she was in later years destined to achieve, but it was charming.

The dowager mouse, concealing her gratification at the spectacle in the cause of principle, shook her head and tapped her cane severely.



“That is enough,” she said. “We will concede the fact that you can waltz. Nothing will come of it; it will serve no purpose. Your grandfather would have considered it frivolous, but I see no great harm in it, provided you attach to it no undue importance. There are other, more serious concerns, my child, to which we must apply ourselves. In a young mouse, the building of character is of first importance . . .” and she proceeded to instruct Desbarollda in many industrious matters, and upon a high moral plane. Desbarollda listened obediently and attentively, willing to be informed and eager to improve herself: her disposition was at all times amiable and affectionate.

Indeed, it was to these qualities that she owed her escape from her first dire misfortune, which might well have proved fatal, and which came about in the following manner.

Noel Langley

(1911–1980)



Noel Langley was a successful novelist, playwright, screenwriter and director. While under contract to MGM he was one of the scriptwriters for *The Wizard of Oz*. He was chosen for the job on the basis of his children's story, *The Tale of the Land of Green Ginger* — a children's classic which has seldom been out of print since it was first published in 1937. *Desbarollda*, *The Waltzing Mouse* is Noel Langley's only other book for children.

Though not primarily a children's writer, several of Noel Langley's many filmscripts were based on favourite classics: *Tom Brown's Schooldays* (1950), *Scrooge* (1951), *Pickwick Papers* (scripted & directed 1952), *Ivanhoe* (1952) and *The Prisoner of Zenda* (1952).

Edward Ardizzone

(1900–1979)



Edward Jeffrey Irving Ardizzone was born in Haiphong, Vietnam but lived most of his life in England. Whilst working as a clerk in the City of London he took evening classes at Westminster School of Art.

Edward Ardizzone became a freelance artist in 1927 and although he produced posters, illustrations for magazines, and some oil paintings, it is as a book illustrator that he is best remembered. He was a prolific book illustrator covering a wide range of publications from children's books to novels by Trollope and Thackeray.

He was also the author as well as illustrator of many books for children, including the well-loved Little Tim series, starting with *Little Tim and the Brave Sea Captain* (1936).