

A Friend for Rachel

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by Margaret McAllister

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To Tony, Elinor, Adam, and Iain



Preface

There's a book I always loved, a beautifully written book set at Christmas in an old house where past and present wove together. It's *The Children of Green Knowe*, by Lucy Boston.

In the 1990s I was selling short stories to magazines, but at the back of my mind was a children's book where stories from the past fed into the present. Oh, and it had to have talking mice in it. I don't know why, it just did. Not any old mice, church mice, and not any old church mice either, but first, I needed the right setting.

In 1992 my husband's work took us to beautiful Corbridge on the North Tyne. The parish church there was first built in the seventh century, has been rebuilt and patched up ever since, and is full of atmosphere and history. As I stood there on an autumn evening I knew that this was the setting for my mouse book. At that point it was still just a pet project which I thought would be too churchy for anyone to publish, but after all the writing, revising and rewriting I decided to give it a chance. It was rejected four times then landed on exactly the right desk at Oxford University Press, and now, more than twenty years later, it's been found again by Purple House Press.

I discovered the joy of making a book work, choosing what to put in it and what to leave out. I chose children from the past, whose stories wove in and out of the present day story, and gave my Rachel a mystery to solve. It was my book, so I could put in an apple tree if I wanted to, but that apple tree had to earn its place in the book.

And there she was. *A Friend for Rachel*, my first book and very dear to me ever since.

Margaret McAllister

May, 2023

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Chapter One

Rachel stood perfectly still in the patchwork of broken colours from a stained-glass window. Where sunlight fell through the green and red and purple panes a bright pattern scattered like a kaleidoscope on the church flag stones. It made a warm patch, too, which was why Rachel stood in that particular corner, for grey stone churches can be chilly, even in September. She pulled her cardigan tightly about her, and watched the mouse.

She had never seen a real live mouse before. The pictures in books never told her how berry-bright his eyes would be, or how his nose would twitch, or how delicate and clever his tiny paws were. If she stayed still, he might take another peanut.

He lifted his head a little, sniffing the air and twitching his whiskers.

You will, won't you? thought Rachel, tense with watching the mouse. You will take it, won't you? All at once he darted at the peanut and sat with it in his paws, nibbling busily.

Yes! A great lift of happiness spread a smile across Rachel's face. He had accepted her presents. Ever since her father had first mentioned that there were mice in the church, Rachel had tried to tempt one to show itself.

A door banged. Rachel jumped. The mouse vanished. A clumping of boots destroyed the quiet.

‘That’s where they’re getting in. Reverend,’ said a voice. ‘There’s a nest behind the wall, right enough, probably behind the radiators. I’ll come back in the morning and put some poison down. You’ll soon be rid of mice, for this year, at any rate.’

‘I’m taking an eight o’clock service in the morning,’ said Rachel’s father, as he showed the man to the church door. ‘But I’ll be finished by half past. Come in any time after that.’

Rachel pressed her hands on the radiator. It was old, solid, and curvy and today it was cold, but it was something to clutch.

‘Think,’ she told herself. ‘Think. There must be some way around this.’

‘Come on, sweetheart,’ called her father, and his voice echoed in the stone church that was almost, but not quite, empty. He waited for her at the church door, stiffly rubbing the back of his neck where his hair curled on to the rim of his dog-collar, or clerical collar, as they were supposed to call it. ‘Time to go home.’

She left the church, walking beside him with her head down. At the door she turned for one last look at her corner—but the light was too dim to see if he was there, even before her father snapped off the lights and all was dark but for the one red lamp glowing above the altar. Dad locked the door after them, then thought again and unlocked it.

‘Mr Fellowes will be here soon,’ he said. ‘He wants to practise the organ music for tomorrow night.’ He shivered a little and put his arm round Rachel’s shoulders. ‘Are you cold?’

When they had crossed the misty churchyard and stood in the friendly light of their own vicarage hall, Dad saw her face

properly. She had been crying very quietly, knowing it would do no good.

‘Sweetheart! What’s all this about?’

‘M-m-mi-mi—’ she blurted, and she was so angry with her father for bringing the Mouse Man to church, and angry with the stupid tears that made her babyish and stopped her from speaking. ‘Mice! How could you?’

‘Oh, love,’ he said, as if her crying hurt him too. ‘Finish your cry and I’ll try to explain.’

And when she had finished he took her into the warm, bright sitting room with her mother’s paintings on the wall, and he did try to explain.

‘The mice getting into the church,’ he said, ‘are not the kind of mice in Beatrix Potter and Brambly Hedge. They don’t dress up and have neat little kitchens. They are real animals—pretty animals, perhaps, but still animals. They nibble holes in the hassocks and the curtains. They could be really dangerous if they nibbled through an electric cable and started a fire. And what if they nibbled through the bell rope? And like all animals they need to...to go to the toilet, and they aren’t fussy where they do it.’

Rachel smiled without wanting to. In her mind she could see rows of little brown mice sitting primly on flush loos waiting for something to happen. But she wouldn’t give in that easily. As Mum came into the room, Rachel insisted, ‘But that’s no reason to call in the Mouse Man to poison them.’

‘Oh, yes, it is,’ said Mum firmly. Mum always had trailing strands of hair escaping from a lopsided plait, and usually appeared in a splashy painting shirt or a splashy apron. This time it was a splashy apron, which was a good sign.

‘It’s Harvest Festival next week,’ said Mum. ‘Think of all the fruit and vegetables and the harvest loaf stacked at the

front of the church. We can't have mice poohing and peeing all over them, can we?'

'Yeuch!' said Rachel.

'And,' said Mum, kneeling down and taking Rachel's hands in hers, 'remember, mice are wild animals. If they grow ill, or old, or the weather turns icy in winter, they don't go to hospital. There are no rest homes for them. Mice have to take their chance of cold weather, hunger, old age, cats—and the Mouse Man. A bit of poisoned wheat from the Mouse Man isn't so bad. They don't suffer long.'

'It still seems so sad,' said Rachel. 'Poor little mice.'

'I know.' Mum's eyes grew soft and concerned as if she wished she could carry Rachel's sorrow for her. 'It's so hard when little helpless things die.' Then she straightened up and left the room in a hurry, and Dad said something about everything going to heaven, and went after her.

Rachel understood, of course. But you couldn't watch a mouse, feed it, and treat it as a friend and then just leave it to take its chance with the Mouse Man. When teatime came she ate very quietly, thinking all the time.

The Mouse Man was to come early in the morning. If she was to do anything, it must be tonight.

Over the rim of her teacup she looked out of the kitchen window, across the vicarage garden, to the church. Already it was growing dark, and the shape of St Michael's church rose from the mist and dimness, the curved squat end nearest to them, the tall bell tower over the font looking hazy at the far end. A warm light glowed from a single arched window.

'Dad,' said Rachel suddenly. 'Mr Fellowes must still be in church, playing the organ. The light's on.'

'He forgets the time,' said Dad. 'I'll go over later.'

'Can I go?' she asked quickly. 'Now? I like Mr Fellowes.'

In her bedroom she opened a cupboard and heaved out the

old cardboard box which held her painting and making things—paints, paper, card, felt pens, glue, old squashed models, and lumps of clay. From the junk she was keeping to make models she selected a large margarine tub, and tore off the back of an old birthday card. Those would do.

‘I’m going now!’ she shouted, and hurried out of the house. The air was cool and she ran to the church, putting her back against the heavy door and pushing with all her might. The church, as usual, was cold. A strong, red glow shone from the altar lamp. There was a warm, spreading light, too, the lamplit pool around the organ, where Mr Fellowes, unaware of Rachel, filled the high arches with music.

Rachel crept slowly down the aisle, treading on the sides of her feet to make no noise. Mr Fellowes glanced up, gave a little nod and a smile, and went on playing. Rachel smiled back. Mr Fellowes never asked embarrassing questions about your new school and your new friends, and whether you liked living in that old vicarage. He just nodded and smiled, and talked as if they had known each other for years. He was thin and white-haired and walked with a limp, but when he made music he could fill the air with sweetness, or sorrow, or power as great as thunder.

She had forgotten to say ‘hello’ to God. She looked at the altar and whispered, ‘Hello, it’s me.’ She wondered if God would nod and smile, too, and go on with what He was doing while she crossed to the corner where she had seen the mouse.

‘Please, please, let him be there. Please let him be there this time. It’s his only chance.’

She padded softly towards the mousehole beside the radiator, but before she reached it, she saw him, stony-brown and bright-eyed. He sat up on a gaily coloured kneeler, washing his paws.

‘He’s there!’ Rachel stood still, keeping all her joy inside though it grew to bursting. Holding her breath, she crept

forward so slowly, so carefully, that she hardly knew herself to be moving, and all the time her eyes were fixed on the mouse, who might scamper away at any moment. She knelt without a sound.

Silently, she counted—one, two, three, and—there! The margarine tub was over him. She raised it just enough to slide the cardboard underneath and lift it, the margarine tub on the card and the mouse scrabbling inside.

‘Ssh, now,’ she whispered. ‘It’s all right. You’ll be out of there in a minute. Quiet, now.’

Tucking the container under her jacket, she slipped across the church and stood beside the organ.

‘Daddy said to remind you it’s getting late,’ she said. ‘In case you hadn’t noticed the time or anything. Goodnight!’

He nodded and smiled and went on playing, as she knew he would. Rachel ran home.

‘Stay there!’ She put the mouse, still in the contraption, on the bookcase in her bedroom. As an afterthought she popped a book on the top, just in case his scrabbling—which was furious by now—dislodged the tub. He would have to stay there while she was busy.

Not having a mouse cage, she would have to make do, so she pulled out the doll’s house, which was getting old now. It was over thirty years since Grandpa had made it for Mum. The red-tiled paper on the roof was fading and the paint had begun to peel, but the windows and doors still closed properly, and that was the main thing. She removed the dolls, and most of the furniture, and put a pile of crumpled tissues in a corner of the sitting room.

‘Now, mouse,’ she whispered, but she hesitated with her hand on the margarine tub. Rachel wasn’t used to handling animals, and she had never picked up a mouse. Would it bite her? How

could he know that she was the one who had supplied muesli, apples, and peanuts for the past two weeks?

She kept the tub firmly over the mouse and pushed the whole assembly against the doll's house door. There were still peanuts in her pocket, and she scattered them in the little tin fireplace.

'In you go, mouse,' she said, and lifted the lid. The mouse shot out, front paws extended, raced around and made to escape. But Rachel was quick. She had already shut him in and was fastening the windows, explaining all the time that she would not hurt him, but that the Mouse Man was coming and she needed to rescue him.

'I'd love to keep you,' she continued, peeping through the windows as he darted from wall to wall. 'But I don't think you'd like it, even if Mum and Dad did say yes, which they wouldn't. I'll set you free when it's safe.'

She opened a window a crack. The mouse came and put his paws on the sill, pointing his nose upwards as he sniffed and whiskered at the air.

'Oh, you beautiful mouse,' she said. 'I wish I could keep you.' With one finger she stroked the top of his warm head, and the mouse did not run away, but only turned his head one way and another, inquisitively.

'Listen, mouse,' she said, 'I haven't brought you here to keep you forever, though I do wish you could always be my friend and be here to talk to. Just for the moment, the church isn't a safe place for mice. I'm sorry about all your friends, but I couldn't rescue all of them, if Mum and Dad find out what I've done they'll go crackers—do you know what grown-ups are like about mice? So you'll have to stay here for the moment. Be very quiet. I'll have to shut the windows.'

The mouse whisked away to explore the doll's house. Rachel

shut the window and gazed in as he scampered up and down the stairs, peeped through doorways and scratched at the walls. She was still watching him, and wishing she was small enough to play in there with him, when she was called downstairs for supper.

‘Dad,’ she said, as she munched an apple and drew patterns on the back of an old envelope, ‘why have you got extra services tomorrow, when it’s not a Sunday?’

‘Tomorrow’s Michaelmas Day.’

‘Mickle Mouse Day.’ Well, that was what it sounded like.

‘Not Mickle Mouse, Michaelmas. As our church is the church of St Michael and All Angels, it’s like a church birthday. We’ll have a little service early in the morning and a big one with music in the evening.’

Rachel knew about St Michael, the great warrior angel fighting against evil. She turned the envelope over and began to sketch an outline and Dad, looking over her shoulder, saw an angel with enormous wings. ‘Is that St Michael? And have you finished your supper?’

She had, and was unusually eager to go upstairs. The mouse had made a nest in the tissue paper and was curled up with his nose tucked in against his tummy. She watched just to make sure he was really breathing, then she opened her curtains a little so she could see the night sky, and went to bed.

Lying propped up on one elbow, she looked out and imagined great angels swooping and soaring in the night air while the church, the small town, and the church mice slept. She thought of the mouse asleep in the doll’s house. How could she smuggle him to safety? And where would safety be?

It would have helped if she knew the place better than she did. It was only a month since Rachel and her parents had moved here from South Carrick. South Carrick had a big, busy school and small, neat modern houses without garden fences

so that everyone spilled into the street together. It was a squashed up, plain sort of place, but Katie lived there, and Katie had been Rachel's best friend. Of course they still wrote to each other, but it wasn't the same.

They had moved to Shepherd's Bridge, where Dad was the new vicar. It was a good place to live, in a valley with hill farms above it, and it was fun to live in a solid stone Victorian vicarage with a garden, an old stable block and an apple tree by the gate. Just beyond the gate was the church, and Rachel could see it from her window. There were plenty of children to make friends with, and she got on well enough with most of them. But there wasn't a best friend.

She lay awake listening for any rustles, scratches, and squeaks from the doll's house. She fell asleep still listening.

The mouse was still asleep when she got up in the morning. So, it would seem, was Mum, because she hadn't come down for breakfast. Dad, with his hair unbrushed, was making toast and hunting for the marmalade.

'Your mum's a bit washed-out this morning,' he said, 'so she's not getting up yet. You might take her up a cup of tea before school.'

'Today,' she said, as she buttered her toast—then she stopped. She had meant to say, 'Today's the day the Mouse Man comes', because she still wanted him to feel bad about having the mice killed. But she looked up at his worried face with the slightly far-away expression, and thought, He already feels bad about it. I won't make it worse. So she just went on, 'Today's Michaelmas.'

'That's right, sweetheart. I'll see you after church.'

School wasn't bad. It was better than school at South Carrick. At break, some of the children, who had already been friends

long before she arrived, invited her to play. Only it wasn't like being with Katie, who thought the way she did, and shared her secrets.

But on that day, as she stood in the bright air of the playground turning a green horse-chestnut over in her hands, she did not think of Katie. She thought of Mouse, and remembered what her mother had said:

'Mice need to take their chance of cold weather, starvation, old age, cats...'

I can't leave him anywhere safe from all those things, she thought. I wish I could keep him.

She was still thinking it out when she went back into the classroom. She was still thinking it out when she went to put the autumn bulbs in the classroom cupboard. She was still thinking it out when she saw the mouse cage sticking out under a pile of old newspapers.

So the school had a mouse cage! And no school mouse!

She ran all the way home that day, picking up bright leaves and swirling them with joy. Her hands were full of yellow leaves as, pink-cheeked and breathless, she tumbled into the house. Shoes off, coat hung up—whoops, on the floor; hello. Mum, yes, I've had a lovely day. I'm going upstairs.

Throwing herself on the floor in front of the doll's house she opened a window, just enough to peep at the mouse.

'Listen to this, Mouse!' The mouse, who was scuffling about in a corner making a bed out of the tissues, sat up and looked twitchily at her.

'Listen, I've got everything worked out. They've got an empty mouse cage at school. It's a big one, with a wheel and a little box to sleep in. Tonight, I'll go to church with Dad. Afterwards, I'll slip you into a box and say I found you in the church, which is true. I'll ask if I can take you to school to live in that cage and be a school mouse. I'm sure they'll say yes. I'll still be able to

see you, and all the children will come to see you, too. Hey!' He had darted towards the window and very nearly leapt out. She shut it smartly, and went on, 'They're very nice children. Not as nice as my friend, Katie, but they're all right. And you'll have plenty of food and drink and sawdust and... and you'll be safe from cats and winter and the Mouse Man. I might even be able to bring you home in the holidays! You'll love it!'

Mum looked wretchedly tired and ill at teatime, and hardly ate anything. Rachel felt uneasy about the mouse. She had never felt bad about the little pickings of muesli and bread she had taken to feed him—most of these were saved from her own meals, anyway—but the thought that she was deceiving her parents left her feeling ill at ease.

I'll make Mum a picture, she decided. An angel, for Michaelmas Day.

'Now, Mouse,' she said, as she finished feeding him, 'I'm going to do my mum a picture. You can watch, but don't make a noise.'

It took several attempts, a lot of scrunched up pages aimed at the wastepaper basket and a bit of bad temper before the outline was right, a sideways view. The angel's head was tilted back in song, and his unfolded wings spread out behind him.

'But the wings aren't right yet,' she said. 'They need more to them. They need...'. She stared and frowned as she thought it out. 'They need layers. They need to be real. Layers of...oh, yes!'

With great care she gathered up her autumn leaves, discarding any with blackened edges, choosing only the finest and sorting them into colours—some bright yellow, some golden like syrup or just brown like a cake when it comes out of the oven. Then she spread glue carefully, evenly, on the angel's wings and, with great patience—for Rachel was good at these things—glued them on in overlapping layers, growing lighter

and brighter at the wingtips. And when she had finished her angel was fledged, glorious, and full of life.

‘Gosh, that’s good!’ said a voice in her ear. ‘I wish I could do that!’

Rachel looked to her right and found herself gazing into the bright black eyes of the mouse. Before, it had only seemed inquisitive, but now it had a particular look in its eyes. It was the look of someone who has been caught out and is in trouble.

‘Oh, fiddle,’ it said. ‘Me and my big mouth!’



Now I've done it," the mouse thought, looking straight at her. "I've really done it, this time."

It truly is happening, thought Rachel. Things that only happen in stories can happen to me. Anything can happen, because this mouse is talking.

The St. Michael's Mice are no ordinary mice, but it takes Rachel a while to find out just how wonderful they are. When Rachel's father moves to a new church, so much goes wrong that sometimes Rachel doesn't think things will ever work out. Rachel is lonely, her father is having a difficult time, and her mother is unwell. But when the mice appear, Rachel finds she has a marvelous, incredible secret to keep. Plus a mystery to solve, which only she can.

Rachel wants to do the special task that the mice have for her, and she really wants a friend. A new best friend.

A Friend for Rachel is the first book written by the author of *The Mistmantle Chronicles*.

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