

The image features three blue mouse silhouettes positioned around a central rectangular frame. One mouse is at the top-left corner, another at the bottom-center, and the third at the right side. The frame contains the text 'THE EVENTFUL HISTORY OF THREE BLIND MICE' in a serif font.

THE EVENTFUL HISTORY OF  
THREE BLIND MICE



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THE EVENTFUL HISTORY OF

# Three Blind Mice



ILLUSTRATED BY

WINSLOW HOMER

Introduction by Maurice Sendak ♦ Afterword by Joseph Reed

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This introduction could have been titled “Winslow Homer: His Secret Life as a Children’s Book Illustrator.” Homer’s secret remains very well kept, even from most of his admirers. Unlike many of his fellow painters, who looked to Europe for inspiration, Homer enjoyed a sturdy career as a journeyman artist for American book publishers and weekly pictorial magazines. The full flowering of popular printing techniques in the early 1850s opened the door wide for this talented artist who was eager to learn and to earn a good living. But it was the very peculiar character of Homer’s genius that turned potentially ephemeral work into serious art.

To quote David Tatham’s *Winslow Homer and the Illustrated Book*, “Between 1855 and 1887, from ages nineteen to fifty-one, Winslow Homer made more than 160 drawings to illustrate texts of prose and poetry published in books and literary journals.” The superb illustrations that adorned such weeklies as *Ballou’s Pictorial*, *Frank Leslie’s Illustrated Newspaper*, and *Harper’s Weekly* have long been eagerly sought after by collectors and are now extremely difficult to find.



Between 1857 and 1859, Homer did forty-odd illustrations for thirteen books for children. Almost all were products of the American Sunday School movement, which had strict standards dictating their moral purpose and Christian content. These books, printed in limited numbers, are almost completely unknown, and they are of little interest except for Homer's exuberant quirkiness. Certainly, their puritanical Sunday-school texts deprive them of any literary value.

So nothing prepares us for the *Eventful History of Three Little Mice and How They Became Blind*. In 1858, Homer provided seventeen drawings for this book, and these extraordinary images spring gloriously to life, hinting not only of the Homer to come but presaging the picture book as we know it today. These drawings, typically free of sermonizing, reveal a hard new sense of humor and a fresh, confident, breezy style. The anonymous retelling of the traditional nursery rhyme is heavy-handed and flat-footed, though oddly touching, with a conclusion both shocking and wonderful. The book's interest for me was always Homer, but while preparing this introduction I fell a little in love with the story. Homer, I suspect, did too.

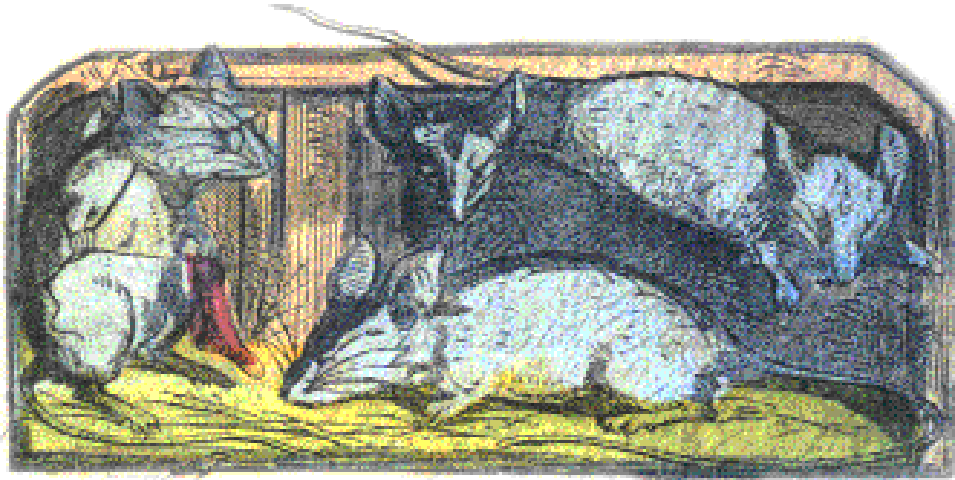
The story literally gets away with murder. Rather than making the mice vicious and deserving of punishment, Homer and the anonymous author conspire to win our sympathy for them, thus leaving us totally unprepared for the baleful ending. Here are three endearing characters, Graysy, Frisky, and Longtail (and kindly Mama makes four), who do no more than exercise their natural curiosity and then pay gruesomely for it with their lives. "They were very dutiful and loving little mice, and seldom did anything very naughty to make their mother scold them." Not at all unlike the famous little bunnies who might very well have ended up as badly (baked in Mrs. McGregor's pie!), as Beatrix Potter strongly hinted they might. Potter told her story

with infinitely more art, but I think she would have approved the rough-and-tough truthfulness of this tale. It plainly accords with her blunt view of what children could and should tolerate. It tells us there is no one to blame here and no lessons to be learned. The curious and hungry mice are doing what comes naturally and the grumpy humans are doing likewise. The fateful collision is a foregone conclusion, a fact of life that contemporary children are all too familiar with. How this subversive little story got past the Sunday School alarm system is unimaginable.

The audacity of the retelling seems to have inspired the illustrator to heights of broad comedy, keen observation of character, tenderness of heart, and even wickedness. What was he thinking when he scattered bottles of wine and spirits throughout his suite of pictures? Homer didn't care a fig, obviously, for the Sunday School movement and its Temperance bias. He is engaged in entertaining children, conveying the spirit of the story with good cheer and no punches pulled. Soon, at age twenty-six, he would begin the work of becoming one of our greatest painters. Can anyone doubt his probable bemusement at our interest in this bit of juvenilia from his apprentice years? How could he know that this tiny work had sparked his genius? He revealed his famous heart and mind in picturing the comical-tragical story of the three unlucky mice. He gave them a fitting requiem. Children, of course, will see that, and if they are kind and patient they will explain it all to their mamas and their papas.

—Maurice Sendak





“Three blind mice.

See how they run.

They all run after the farmer’s wife,

She cut off their tails with a carving knife;

Did you ever see such a sight in your life,

As three blind mice.”



# THE EVENTFUL HISTORY OF Three Blind Mice



Farmer Grumpy lived way up in the country, in a very large house. He had a barn and many horses, cows, pigs, and hens, which he fed and took care of every day.

Farmer Grumpy was a pretty severe man, but he was only cross and ugly when he found somebody on his farm who did not belong there.

Although the farmer had a very large house, he had no children. Nobody lived with him except his wife and the servant girl, Susan, so there were many rooms that were not occupied. In the walls of this house, in a snug little corner, lived Mrs. Mouse and her three children, Frisky, Graysey, and Longtail. Frisky was the most

lively and always getting into mischief; Graysey's fur was a little darker than his brothers', and Longtail had a very long tail. They were very dutiful and loving little mice and seldom did anything very naughty to make their mother scold them. Sometimes, instead of going off to play in the garret, or out in the barn, they would stay at home and help their mother by sewing (for she had taught them how). But whenever they went off to romp around and have a good time, poor little Frisky was always getting into trouble. One evening (for you know the Mouse family sleeps almost all day and runs about in the nighttime, when we are all asleep) their mother told them that if they were very careful and came home early, they might go and find something to eat.

"But," she said, "you must not go out of the house, because if I should happen to want you, I will call you."

"No, Mother," said Longtail, "we will only go down into the cellar and will come to you if we hear you call us."

So off they frisked, racing up and down the walls in high glee, and I think it would have made you laugh to see their long whiskers and funny little tails, if you had looked through a crack in the wall to see what was going on in the house.

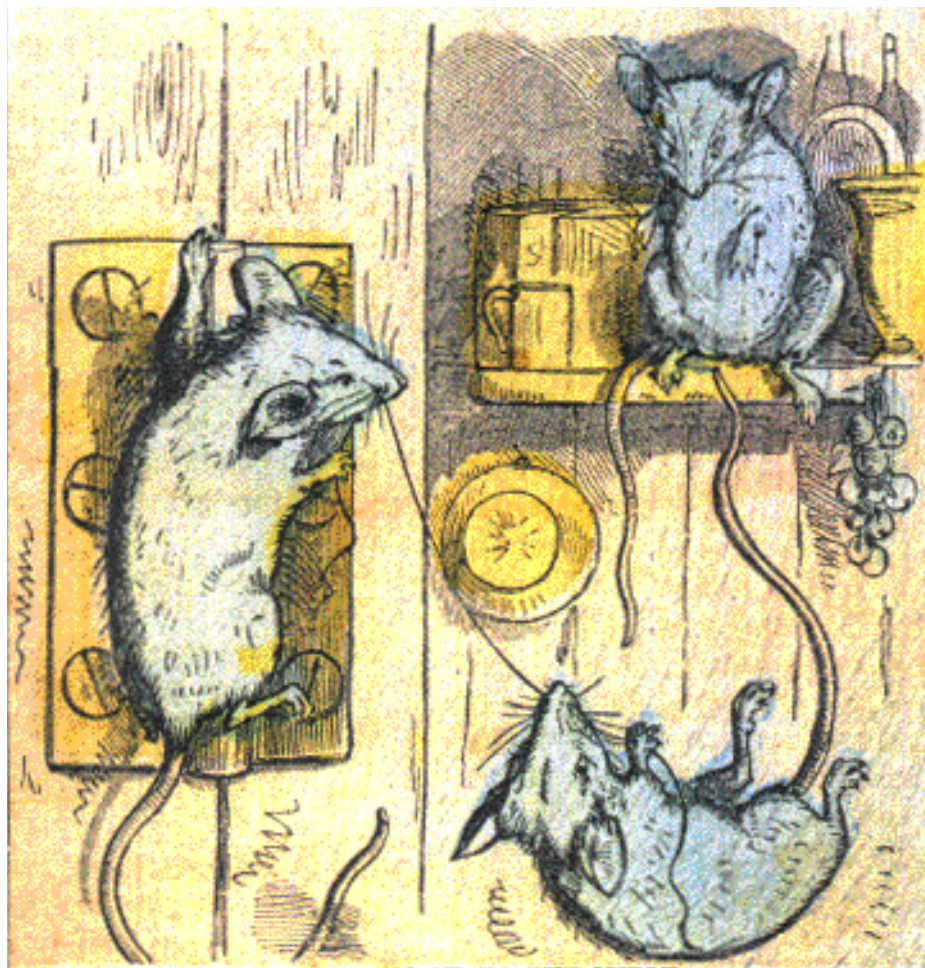
At last the three little mice reached the cellar and went straight to the closet, because they had been there so many times before that they knew the way very well. But when they got there, they found that the broom which usu-





ally leaned against the wall, and which they used to climb up to the shelf, had been taken away.

“Isn’t it too bad, Frisky?” said Graysey. “What are we going to do?” Frisky looked as sad and sorrowful as you can imagine a little mouse could. So they all set to work to think how they would get up to the shelf. At last, just as they were about to give up in despair, Frisky spied a little piece of string on the cellar floor, and he began to dance about.





“What are you going to do with that?” asked Longtail, as Frisky took the string and ran all around the cellar with it.

“I will show you,” said Frisky, “if you will only wait long enough.” So he took one end of the string in his mouth and began climbing up the edge of the closet door, where the hinges were. When he got high enough he held the string tighter between his teeth and called out to Graysey to catch hold of the other end with his claws and begin to swing.

“I am afraid, Frisky. If you let it go I shall break my head.”

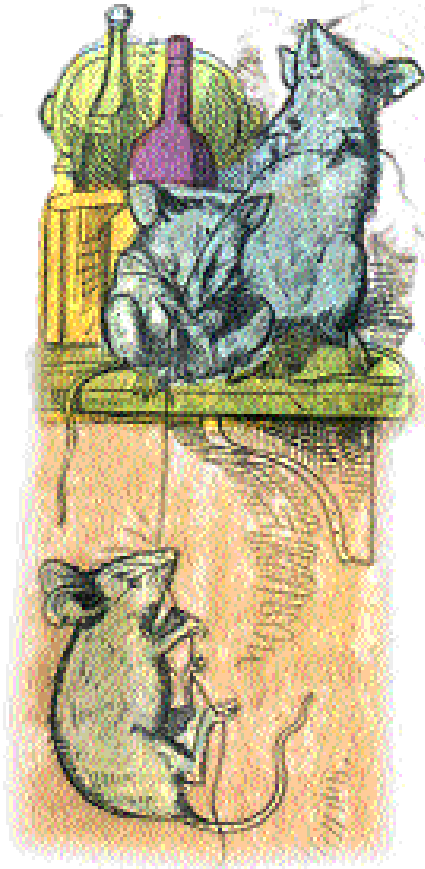
“Oh! go ahead,” said Frisky. “I’ll risk your head.”

Graysey was still afraid, but Longtail saw that it was pretty safe to try it, so he took hold of the end and began to swing. And he swung further and further each time until he landed safely on the shelf.

“Now, Gray,” said Frisky, “you must go this time, and be sure and hold on to the string after you get upon the shelf. If you let it drop, I can’t get up myself.”

So Graysey saw how nicely his brother got up to the shelf, and hearing him munching and eating the good things, he summoned all his courage and began to swing, until he swung himself up to the shelf. Then Frisky, who was still on the edge of the door, let go of his end of the string and slid down to the floor again.

“Hold on as tight as I did, Gray,” said Frisky, and he began climbing up the string that Graysey held, and he was soon with his brothers.



How the farmer's wife would have scolded, if she had seen them eating up her nice mince pies and nibbling the corners of her loaves of bread. There they ate and ate and ate, until they thought that they could eat no more; so Longtail looked at his watch (for he was older than Frisky or Graysey and his mother had given him one) and said it was time to go home. But Frisky was too full of fun and wanted to go out into the barn.

"No, no!" said Longtail, "you know we promised Mother that we would not go out of the house."

"Well, I will only be gone a little while. Besides, it's not half morning yet."

So the naughty Frisky jumped down from the shelf and ran away to the barn, while his more obedient brothers returned to their mother.

“Where is Frisky, my dear children?” she asked, when she saw them coming without their brother. She was very sad when they told her where he had gone. But you will see how he was punished.

Off went Grisky to the barn, whistling as merrily as he could; but he was not very happy, for he knew he was doing wrong.

“O-ho!” Frisky said to himself, “what a fine time I will have among the corn; and I will have it all to myself, too.” So he trotted along through the barnyard and went into the barn.

Now, the farmer’s horses were all in their stalls, asleep. Frisky thought his little feet would not make enough noise to disturb them; but just as he was passing by Peggy, the farmer’s favorite horse, Frisky happened to hit her with the end of his



tail, and Peggy lifted her foot and just grazed poor Frisky’s nose, and he rolled over and over.

“Squeek-eeke! Squeeke-eeke!” he cried, as he put his paw up to his nose. He crawled along home, feeling very sorry he had not obeyed his mother. When he got home, his mother did not scold him, because she saw he had been punished for